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Is our feminism bullshit? The importance of intersectionality in adopting a feminist identity

Rhea Ashley Hoskin¹, Kay E. Jenson² and Karen L. Blair^{3*}

Abstract: For nearly 50 years, social researchers have chronicled the continued stigmatization of feminism. Past research has evidenced the reluctance of individuals to adopt a feminist identity, despite their agreement with feminist ideals—otherwise known as the Feminist Paradox. The current study drew from a diverse sample ($N = 355$) and asked participants to provide their definition of feminism. Using a mixed methods approach, the current study aimed to understand how thematic differences in participants' definitions of feminism were associated with adopting a feminist identity. Participants who emphasized the importance of integrating intersectionality in defining feminism were more likely to identify as a feminist. Conversely, those who defined feminism as exclusively attending to the needs of women were less likely to identify as feminists. The current study found very little negativity towards feminism, by feminists and non-feminists alike. As such, the current study may be indicative of a new Feminist Paradox: one that is more heavily influenced by the incorporation of intersectional politics in addition to negativity or stigmatization. Implications for the broader context of feminist identity and how feminist objectives are represented within mainstream perceptions are discussed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The KLB Research lab at St. Francis Xavier University brings together researchers from psychology, gender studies, health studies and sociology to tackle questions of relevance to understanding human connections, LGBTQ experiences, social determinants of health, and predictors and consequences of multiple forms of prejudice. Within the lab, we apply a variety of research methodologies, including daily diaries, online surveys, qualitative interviews, auto ethnographies, psychophysiological measurement, hormone analysis, experimental designs and longitudinal approaches.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Misunderstandings about feminism circulate within dominant culture. While individuals may subscribe to anti-oppressive politics, many are hesitant to adopt a feminist identity; a phenomena known as the Feminist Paradox. Some suggest that this hesitation may be rooted in the fear of the dreaded “F” word. Campaigns such as “This is what a Feminist Looks Like” have attempted to break these taboos and remove the stigma associated with the “F” word. The question of stigmatization and negativity toward feminism is particularly intriguing given what has seemed to be a surge in celebrities proclaiming their feminist politics. Perhaps this heightened visibility has allowed feminism to break away from this paradox. To examine contemporary understandings of feminism, the current study compared definitions of feminism offered by feminists vs. non-feminist identified individuals. We found that feminist definitions understood feminism to be concerned with more than just “women’s equality,” whereas non-feminists largely saw feminism as being only about women, or in other words, lacking an intersectional approach to combatting oppression.

Subjects: Social Sciences; Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Sociology & Social Policy; Feminist Theory; Women's Studies; Feminist Psychology; Social Psychology; Gender; Feminism; Popular Culture

Keywords: feminism; intersectionality; feminist identity; feminist paradox; feminist stigma

1. Introduction

For nearly 50 years, social researchers have chronicled the phrase “I’m not a feminist, but ...,” as iterated by participants who then go on to eschew a feminist position (Jacobson & Koch, 1978). Several studies have demonstrated that, despite agreeing with feminist ideologies, many individuals do not self-identify as feminists. Explanations of this Feminist Paradox range from post-feminism as a cultural outlook, to fear of stigmatization for espousing a feminist identity resulting from the negative media images and stereotypes associated with the term “feminist.” Through an examination and comparison of feminist and non-feminist definitions of feminism, the current study sought to answer two research questions: (1) How do definitions differ based on feminist identity (2) Does feminism continue to be seen as something inherently negative? The question of whether or not feminism is still stigmatized and viewed negatively is particularly intriguing given what has seemed to be a surge in high profile figures and celebrities proclaiming their feminist politics. Perhaps this heightened visibility has allowed feminism to break away from this paradox.

1.1. Western feminist histories and identity politics

The history of Western feminism is complex, heterogeneous, and, oftentimes, fractured (Grande, 2003; Hannam, 2012; Hooks, 1981; Mishali, 2014; Serano, 2007; Wini, 1996). Feminism has been referred to as fractured due to its history of exclusionary practices and the overlooking of spaces as a result of hegemonic normativity (i.e. heteronormativity, cisnormativity, normative whiteness, etc. (Hoskin, 2017)). Fractures transpire when those whose identities have been marginalized within a specific movement begin to carve out space that is reflective of their experiences. In particular, the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated the marginalizing effects of centering a movement around the uncritical category of “woman” and the subsequent cost of racial and sexual silences within feminist movements (Wini, 1996). A key slogan of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, “Sisterhood is powerful,” brought forth fractures across intersections of nationality, class, religion and racial differences, proving the difficulty in organizing a politic around the complex category of “woman” (Hannam, 2012). Although many feminists throughout history saw these fractures as undermining the solidarity of the movement, these fractures in fact gave way to modern feminist critiques of “global sisterhood” (Mohanty, 2003). Importantly, many of these critiques provided the foundation for intersectionality, a theoretical framework that incorporates intersecting axes of identity to understand social phenomenon. Considering the complex nature of feminism, how do individuals, self-identified feminists or otherwise, define and understand feminism?

1.2. Research on feminist identification: “I’m not a feminist, but ...”

Paralleling the history of feminist movements, literature on feminist identification has equally chronicled the shifting complexities of feminist identity. Since the 1970s, psychosocial research has examined various components of feminist identity, with a particular focus on the stigmatization and political paradoxes within feminist movements. Despite being a political and social movement over a hundred years in age, feminism itself remains unclear and feminist self-identification remains paradoxical.

Since the second wave of feminism, researchers have sought to examine the negative stereotypes and stigma associated with feminism and feminist identity and how these negative connotations function as a barrier to self-identifying as a feminist (Eisele & Stake, 2008; Roy, Weibust, & Miller, 2007). Goldberg, Gottesdiener, and Abramson (1975) found that men and women, regardless of their own views towards Feminism, held negative stereotypes about feminists, including the belief that feminists are less physically attractive than non-feminists. Many other studies have supported these findings, demonstrating the various negative attributions associated with feminism (Jacobson

& Koch, 1978). For example, the term feminism is often associated with connotations of “communism” and/or “radicalism,” and the feminist subject is often seen as an unattractive, humourless, “man-hating,” militant lesbian zealot (Female Science Professor, 2013; Huddy, Neely, & LaFay, 2000; Jacobson & Koch, 1978; Kelly, 2015). Other research has debunked this myth of the man-hating feminist showing that, contrary to popular belief, “feminists [report] lower levels of hostility toward men than ... non-feminists” (Anderson, Kanner, & Elsayegh, 2009, p. 216). Despite efforts to reduce the stigma surrounding feminism and to debunk the various myths in circulation, several scholars have noted this stigmatization and demonization of feminism has turned the word into an insult (Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008; Huddy et al., 2000).

The negative connotations of feminism run deep, as demonstrated by research that has identified implicit biases towards feminist identities (Jenen, Winqvist, Arkelin, & Schuster, 2009; Moradi, Martin, & Brewster, 2012). Gender differences have been reported in implicit biases, such that some researchers have found women to be more likely to hold positive implicit views of feminism while men are likely to show negative biases (Breen & Karpinski, 2008). Along a similar vein, men who identify as feminists are often evaluated positively, while women who identify as feminist are perceived more negatively (Anderson, 2009).

Some suggest that the negative connotations of feminism have convinced people that they “are not, and would never want to be” a feminist (Female Science Professor, 2013). This argument is supported by research that has found associations between not endorsing common stereotypes of feminism and willingness to adopt a feminist identity (Leaper & Arias, 2011). Other scholars view this stigmatization as stemming from a lack of exposure, education, and a “misunderstanding of feminism” itself (Female Science Professor, 2013). To this end, several studies have demonstrated the role of exposure to feminist ideals in predicting whether participants adopt feminism as part of their identity (Aronson, 2003; Bargad & Hyde, 1991; Cowan, Mestlin, & Masek, 1992; Leaper & Arias, 2011; Moradi et al., 2012; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997). McCabe (2005) found that feminists were more likely to be highly educated, with this effect being particularly pronounced as students progress throughout their university studies (Renzetti, 1987). Further evidence that exposure to feminist ideals is associated with adopting a feminist identity comes from research that has identified positive correlations between exposure and holding positive stereotypes towards feminism, or “profeminist attitudes,” with those holding positive attitudes being more likely to identify as feminist (Cowan et al., 1992; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Roy et al., 2007).

1.3. Examining contemporary feminist identities: Current study

In 1997, Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997) sought to understand women’s reluctance to adopt a feminist identity. Two decades later, Feminism continues to face the same discrepancy, stigmatization, and paradoxical reluctance of its supporters. In response, the current study draws from a large and diverse sample, examining who dis/identifies as a feminist and how this identity is conceptualized in a “post-modern” and a paradoxical “postfeminist” era. While previous research has measured the reasons for dis/identifying as a feminist (Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008), to our knowledge, little research has explored how understandings of feminism, as expressed by participants’ definitions of feminism, systematically and thematically differ as a function of feminist identification.

Previous research on feminist identification has relied almost exclusively on female and undergraduate samples (e.g. Anastosopoulos & Desmarais, 2015; Anderson et al., 2009; Breen & Karpinski, 2008; Fitz & Zucker, 2014). Given that exposure to feminism and levels of education are both noted as factors determining acceptance of feminism, these samples may not be truly representative of current (or past) feminist contexts (Dabrowski, 1985). Furthermore, as age plays a role in feminist self-identification, drawing exclusively from samples of university female students may also impact conclusions (Fitzpatrick Bettencourt, Vacha-Haase, & Byrne, 2011; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997). The majority of this research has been conducted using university samples, which may be problematic for making broader generalizations.

Consequently, the current study had three objectives: to investigate whether definitions of feminism differ as a function of feminist identification; to update previous literature on the Feminist Paradox; and to determine the extent to which feminism continues to be seen as something negative and whether such views contribute to identifying as a feminist. By examining participants' definitions of feminism across feminist identification, the current study offers insight into how feminism itself is understood. We cannot completely understand the reasons why people may or may not identify as a feminist if we do not have a complete understanding of how people conceptualize and define feminism in the first place. Consequently, the current study sought to shed light on precisely this issue by examining lay persons' definitions of feminism.

2. Method

2.1. Participants & procedure

Participants were recruited through online advertisements, flyers, and email Listservs to participate in a study about perceptions of gender. In order to participate, individuals needed to be 18 years of age or older and be able to complete an online survey in English. All recruitment materials directed participants to the study's website, which provided a brief description of the study and provided a link to complete the survey. All participants were entered into a prize draw for a \$100 gift card.

From a sample of 385 participants, 355 provided open-ended responses when asked to provide a definition of feminism. In order to assess whether feminists were more likely to answer this question, a chi-square test for association was conducted. The analysis indicated that there was no association between these variables $\chi^2(1) = 1.632, p = .201$.

The mean age of the participants was 28 years ($N = 355$). The majority of participants were from the United States (55.8%) or Canada (35.2%). Participants predominantly reported identifying as women ($n = 236$ women, including trans women), followed by men ($n = 94$, including trans men), with the remaining identifying as Gender Queer ($n = 14$) or chose not to answer ($n = 11$). The majority of participants identified as White (81.7%), followed by Mixed-Race (7.3%), Asian (5.4%), Black (.8%), or listed as Other (4.2%). Complete demographics, broken down by feminist identification, can be seen in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

Participants were asked to provide answers to various, personal demographics, including their gender identity (male, female trans woman, trans man, genderqueer), sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, other), age, education level, ethnicity, nationality, and age. Finally, participants were asked, "What is your definition of feminism" and were given the opportunity to indicate whether or not they themselves identified as a feminist (see Appendix A). In order to assess how individual definitions of feminism differ based on feminist and non-feminist identification, participants were not provided with a prior definition of feminism.

2.2.1. Data analysis strategy

As our research question sought to not only illuminate a deeper understanding of the research question but to also measure and analyze relationships between variables, a mixed methods approach was utilized (Golafshani, 2003). To help systematize the large amounts of textual data, we relied on thematic analysis and thematic networks. Thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative analysis as it helps to identify, analyze, and report themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This style of analysis requires looking through the data-set to find repeated patterns of meaning as a way to delve deeper to unravel the "surface reality" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). To perform the thematic analysis, we made use of the six phases as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generate initial codes; (3) search for themes; (4) review themes; (5) define and name themes; (6) produce the report. An inductive approach was taken, such that themes were driven by the data and evolved through the coding process, rather than a theoretical or analytical interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). The analysis was conducted at the

Table 1. Demographics by feminist identification

Demographic	All participants n (%)	Feminists n (%)	Not a feminist n (%)
Average age in years		28.11	28.86
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
White	290 (81.7%)	218 (82.9%)	72 (78.3%)
Black	3 (.8%)	2 (.8%)	1 (1.1%)
Mixed-race	26 (7.3%)	18 (6.8%)	8 (8.6%)
Asian	19 (5.4%)	12 (4.6%)	7 (7.6%)
Other	17 (4.8%)	13 (4.9%)	4 (4.4%)
<i>Nationality</i>			
American	198 (55.9%)	147 (56.1%)	51 (55.4%)
Canadian	125 (35.3%)	90 (34.4%)	35 (38%)
Other	31 (8.8%)	25 (9.5%)	6 (6.6%)
<i>Highest education level</i>			
High school	124 (35.4%)	87 (35.4%)	37 (35.6%)
Associate's degree	55 (15.7%)	28 (11.4%)	27 (26%)
Bachelor's degree	113 (32.3%)	85 (34.5%)	28 (26.9%)
Graduate degree	58 (16.6%)	46 (18.7%)	12 (11.5%)
<i>Personal annual gross income</i>			
Less than \$9,999	134 (38.5%)	101 (41.4%)	33 (31.7%)
\$10,000–\$24,999	96 (27.6%)	66 (27.1%)	30 (28.8%)
\$25,000–\$49,999	62 (17.8%)	40 (16.4%)	22 (21.2%)
\$50,000–\$74,999	35 (10.1%)	26 (10.7%)	9 (8.7%)
\$75,000 or more	21 (6%)	11 (4.4%)	10 (9.6%)
<i>Gender/sex</i>			
Male	92 (25.9%)	51 (19.3%)	41 (45.1%)
Female	234 (65.9%)	187 (70.8%)	47 (51.6%)
Trans man (ftm)	2 (.6%)	2 (.8%)	0 (0%)
Trans woman (mtf)	2 (.6%)	2 (.8%)	0 (0%)
Gender queer	14 (3.9%)	12 (4.6%)	2 (2.2%)
Other	11 (3.1%)	10 (3.8%)	1 (1.1%)
<i>Sexual identity</i>			
Lesbian	16 (4.5%)	13 (5.2%)	3 (2.9%)
Gay	21 (5.9%)	13 (5.2%)	8 (7.6%)
Queer	39 (11%)	36 (14.5%)	3 (2.9%)
Straight	215 (60.7%)	136 (54.6%)	79 (75.2%)
Bisexual	41 (11.7%)	30 (12%)	11 (10.5%)
Other	22 (6.2%)	21 (8.4%)	1 (.9%)

Notes: For the purpose of this study, sexual orientation was defined as a clinical term that describes a person's consistent sexual attractions over time. Sexual identity was defined as the label a person uses to describe their sexual orientation or personal identity.

latent level, which examines the underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies that are “theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). After discussing initial themes and obtaining theoretical saturation, the authors devised a coding scheme. Two coders were trained to independently code each of the responses and had high inter-rater

reliability, $r = .90$. After all responses had been coded, the authors reviewed each response together and further defined and reduced the number of relevant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After conducting a thematic analysis it became apparent that there was some broader overarching themes. We therefore used a modified approach to Thematic Networks, such that mixed methods were adopted to test the relationship between themes. While thematic analysis in itself seeks to “unearth the themes salient in a text,” thematic networks focus on the organization of themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 387). Thematic networks aid in the summary and organization of textual data and assist in exploring the overt structures and underlying patterns (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Our use of thematic networks was conducted by extracting the “lowest-order premises evident in the text,” otherwise known as basic themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 388). Basic themes were then grouped together to create organizing themes. Organizing themes are classifications of basic themes, which tell an underlying story. Finally, organizing themes were then “reinterpreted in light of their basic themes,” and were brought together to “illustrate a single conclusion or super-ordinate theme” or “global theme” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389). Quantitative methods were used to determine whether themes were more or less prevalent among those identifying as feminist or not, and to predict whether or not an individual would identify as feminist based on the themes associated with their definition of feminism.

3. Results and discussion

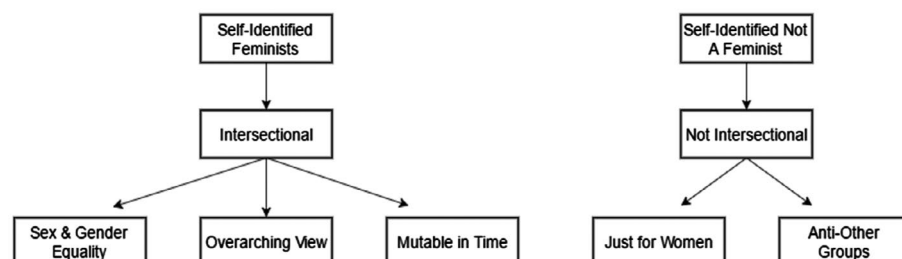
3.1. Thematic results

Five basic themes were identified within the participants’ definition of feminism: Mutable in time and space; Overarching way of viewing the world; Not just for women; Just for women; and Anti-other groups. Definitions were also coded for being negative. As “negative” itself was not a theme, it was not included within the Thematic Networks but instead treated as an additional variable. These basic themes were then categorized into organizational themes: intersectional vs. not-intersectional. Quantitative methods were then used to examine the relationship between organizational themes (intersectional vs. not-intersectional) and global themes (feminists vs. non-feminists), while also attending to variables of ethnicity, gender and negative coding (see Figure 1).

3.1.1. Negative definitions

A chi-square test for association was conducted to assess for an association between providing a negative definition of feminism and identifying as a feminist. There was a statistically significant association between not identifying as a feminist and providing a negative definition of feminism in the current sample $\chi^2(1) = 53.033, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = .387, p < .001$. In other words, participants who did not identify as a feminist were more likely to provide a negative definition than those who did identify as feminist. An overwhelming majority of those who identified as feminists (96.6%) provided a positive definition. Nearly one third of those who *did not* identify as a feminist provided a negative definition of feminism. However, 69.6% of non-feminists provided positive definitions of feminism, and yet still did not identify as feminists. Only 10.5% of our sample mentioned something negative within their definition of feminism. Definitions that expressed a negative connotation associated with feminism were coded as negative. Examples of definitions coded as negative discussed feminism as having “missed the mark” or a movement that “morphed” into a “crazy” and

Figure 1. Organization of Themes. This figure illustrates the organization of the global and basic themes.



“extreme” politic “against men all together.” Overall, participants described feminism as being positive, yet were still reluctant to identify as feminists.

Previous research notes the feminist paradox as those who agree with feminist objectives, but are reluctant to adopt a feminist identity (Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008; Huddy et al., 2000; Leaper & Arias, 2011; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997). However, previous literature has attributed this reluctance to adopt a feminist identity to stigmatization and peoples’ negative understandings of feminism. Overall, the majority of non-feminists within the current sample did not describe feminism in a negative way. As we will discuss, this may be indicative of a shift in the cultural understanding and stigmatization of feminism.

3.1.2. Sex/gender equality

Feminisms role in sex/gender equality and ability to create a platform for the discussion of sexism and sexual harassment was commonly mentioned within participants’ definitions of feminism. Approximately 70.4% ($n = 250$) of the overall sample noted sex/gender equality as central to their definition of feminism. Along with equality, the concept of unlearning what and how society tells people to behave and think based on their sex or gender was commonly discussed. The notion of “unlearning” was exemplified by participants who understood feminism as rejecting essentialist and biological determinist claims that sex and gender govern a person’s characteristics or abilities. As one participant described:

[Feminism is] the belief that nothing about you (role in society, preconceived notions about your personality, acceptable gender expressions, etc.) should be determined by biological sex or self-determined gender. (Feminist, age 19, female, white)

In defining feminism as sex or gender equality, participants largely drew from concepts of social conditioning and the valuation of gender within society that inherently create stereotypes. One participant summed it up by stating feminism is:

the view that people should never be limited, excluded, stereotyped, mistreated, or oppressed on the basis of their perceived or real sex, or on the basis of their gender identity, presentation, or behaviour. (Feminist, female, white)

Participants within this theme predominantly incorporated equality between men and women as a component within their definition of feminism. Even those who did not identify as a feminist (42.4%) were able to identify feminism as a “social movement that promotes equal rights for all people.” Despite this, individuals identifying as feminists were still significantly more likely to provide a definition that incorporated sex/gender equality, $\chi^2(1) = 52.408, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = .393, p < .001$.

3.1.3. Overarching way of viewing the world

Feminism was described as an overarching way of viewing the world (e.g. a belief system, an ideology/theory, or a political/social movement) by 39.2% ($n = 139$) of the sample. This theme was evidenced by 43% of those who identify as a feminist compared to 28.3% non-feminists, a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(1) = 6.312, p < .05$, Cramer’s $V = .134, p < .05$. Many participants framed feminism as a theory of knowledge and an ideological system that drove activism. Similarly, other participants viewed feminism as not only a political movement but also a theoretical paradigm through which to view and understand society. To this end, feminism was described as a multifocal tool that informs political agendas, moral ethos, and theoretical perspectives.

Participants commonly viewed feminism as a “belief system” that promotes the “financial, legal and social equality” (feminist, 18 years old, white, female) of all genders. The understanding of feminism as a belief system was also offered by the participants in Houvouras and Scott Carter’s (2008) qualitative study on college students’ definitions of feminism. Similar to the current study, Houvouras

and Scott Carter (2008) asked participants “what is a feminist?” While Houvouras and Scott Carter’s (2008) study noted 54.8% of participants defined a feminist as someone who upholds particular attitudes and beliefs, none of the common beliefs included feminism as a moral compass. In contrast, for some participants in the current study, feminist identification moved beyond a simple label, and transcended into an ethos.

In speaking to the contextualities and multiplicities of feminisms, participants tapped into the idea that feminism is not simply a belief about equality, but also a moral and ethical dedication to changing society. As argued by Held (1993), feminism contributes to the development of a feminist morality by promoting practices of reflexivity that drive individuals to remain accountable and cognizant of power shifts. Some argue that this necessary personal shift should not remain on a micro level, but should turn into a morally grounded commitment to advocate for others (Held, 1993).

3.1.4. *Mutable in time and space*

The theme of feminism being mutable in time and space reflects participants’ understanding of feminism as shifting, contextually, and being historically contingent. Very few of the participants recognized that there have been multiple types or “waves” of Feminism, and that feminism has shifted over time. Within the current sample, only 31 occurrences (8.7%) were coded as having used the multiplicities of feminism within their definition of feminism. When distinguishing feminists from non-feminists, 19 feminists and 12 non-feminists fell into the thematic category of defining feminism as being mutable in time and space, however the difference was not statistically significant. Mainstream western Feminism is typically categorized in four waves, each with its own distinct events, goals, level of inclusiveness, and theories. Considering the commonly referenced “waves” of Feminism, it is notable that the majority of participants did not comment that feminism has changed over time, or that it is contextual in nature. However, some described the difficulty in defining feminism, as it was dependent on context. For example, when asked to define feminism, one participant noted the multiple waves of Feminism and how each is “markedly different from the other.” This participant continued to then used this fluidity of feminism to hone her definition as “a set” of multiple theories.

Given that a large percentage of participants (91.3%) in the current study did not mention the multiplicities of feminism, it begs the question of whether or not Feminism is perceived as the complicated and political movement that it strives to be. Like others coded within this theme, one feminist expressed hesitation in providing a definition, explaining that “there is no single ‘Feminism’ but rather there are multiple feminisms” that are each rooted in the “desire for equal treatment.” While feminism is fundamentally rooted in the belief of equality, it is precisely the malleability and mutability of feminism that has allowed feminism to shift and serve the needs of those facing marginalization or oppression.

The mutability of feminism was also understood as a type of “learning process.” Participants emphasized the elements of learning involved in developing their personal feminism, describing their own concept of feminism as “constantly evolving” throughout this process. For this reason, some participants did not find the notion of a singular definition to be useful – or, as other participants would argue, accurate. In other words, no singular definition can serve to represent the entire movement, or those who identify as feminists. This is especially important when considering why some individuals continue to disidentify as a feminist despite agreeing with feminist ideals (Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008; Huddy et al., 2000; Leaper & Arias, 2011; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997). If some individuals view feminism as not changing and adapting to the current needs and values of society, they may not feel there is a space for them within the movement.

3.1.5. *Not just for women*

The theme of “not just for women” included definitions of feminism that either directly or indirectly spoke to the notion of intersectionality. Participants whose definitions were coded as being “not just for women” expanded their definition of feminism to incorporate intersecting elements of identity

and oppression, such as race and racism. Of the overall sample, 35.5% defined feminism as equality and acceptance for all people, beyond dimensions of sex and gender. Some participants limited their inclusion of intersectionality exclusively as it applies to women; others expanded their definition to include any “marginalized peoples, on the basis of gender, gender identity, sexuality, race [or] class,” while remaining cognizant of people’s ability to occupy multiple categories of identity and oppression. Within the current sample, 45.2% of feminists were coded as recognizing feminism as “not just for women,” while only 7.6% of non-feminists defined feminism as a movement including all types of genders, a difference which was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 42.465, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = .35, p < .001$.

A key element within many definitions that highlighted the importance of intersectionality was the role of privilege. Privilege refers to the advantage(s) available to particular groups based on normative aspects of identity (Rothenberg, 2005). Intersecting aspects of identity (such as their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) mediate an individual’s access to privilege (Rothenberg, 2005). As one participant in our sample noted, feminism is “about recognizing one’s own privilege, and not using it to put others down. True feminism is intersectional” (feminist, 24 years old, white, female). In addition, other participants not only addressed intersections of privilege, but also spoke to the importance of advocating for those for whom access or privilege is not equal. Many definitions coded within this theme noted that one cannot be a feminist without “adopting an intersectional approach that considers the power dynamics within the feminist movement” as a method of dismantling those systems of power to give equal access to all people.

Some feminist theorists argue that feminism has to remain intersectional in order to have a relevant purpose and impact (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013; Hoskin, in press; Mohanty, 2003). When the majority of participants in the current study center their definition of feminism on issues that solely affect white, able-bodied, middle-class, educated women, the question must be raised as to whether the general population perceives feminist movements as attending to intersecting issues of oppression. Given that mainstream feminist campaigns, such as “He For She” and organizations like “Ms. Foundation,” are consciously adopting an intersectional perspective (He For She, 2016; Ms. Foundation, 2016), why are mainstream feminist movements continuously perceived as being only for women?

3.1.6. *Only for women*

The thematic category of “only for women” reflected participants’ view that feminism was only for women, often at the expense of either unintentionally or purposefully excluding other social groups and identities. Of the overall sample, roughly 21% ($n = 76$) were coded as defining feminism as being “only for women.” Non-feminists (40.2%) were more likely to define feminism as only for women, compared to feminists (14.8%), $\chi^2(1) = 25.916, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = .271, p < .001$. Those whose definitions fell into the “only for women” thematic category expressed that feminism exclusively addresses the needs of women, and ignores men’s issues, while elevating the concerns of women over men. For example, one participant stated:

Feminism in my opinion is too concerned about equality ... as much as feminists try to say feminism is for both sexes, it is not. It is blatantly for women. (Non-feminist, age 20, female, white)

This participant went on to describe some of the problems faced by men, such as rape, elevated likelihood of imprisonment over women, and maintaining standards of masculinity. They then further concluded that feminism is “supposed to be” for both men and women but “clearly it is not.” Within this theme, participants commonly adopted an intersectional lens to justify why they do not identify as a feminist and, more specifically, indicated their reason for not identifying as a feminist as this perceived failure to attend to intersecting identities.

Some individuals may not feel there is a place for them within the feminist movement if they view feminism as only women fighting for women's rights. For example, even if a man agrees with the ideals of feminism, he may not identify as a feminist because, in his mind, feminism can only be for women. This belief was echoed by the participants in Jackson, Fleury, and Lewandowski's (1996), where undergraduate women and men were asked to define feminism and answer whether or not they identify as a feminist. Jackson et al. (1996) found that men were less likely to identify as a feminist despite defining feminism almost as favorably as women. They further argued that this disparity between men and women wanting to identify as feminist could be in part due to women having a greater interest in feminism than men.

In part, this view that feminism can only be for women may be due to a sense of frustration that feminism is complacent with a hegemonic and cissexist gender binary. For example, one feminist participant, who identified as genderqueer, defined feminism as "A belief in equality between [women] and men (unfortunately often very exclusionary towards trans people)" (Gender Queer, feminist, 19 years old, white). This participant's definition exemplifies that the feminist movement struggles with consistently providing spaces that advocate for rights beyond cisgender women.

Nor surprisingly, participants that defined feminism as being only for women were also more likely to provide a negative definition of feminism, $\chi^2(1) = 11.619, p < .005$, Cramer's $V = .181, p < .005$. In total, 43.2% of participants who defined feminism as being only for women also provided a definition that was coded as expressing negativity towards feminism. As one non-feminist exemplified:

Sadly feminism has moved far beyond the idea of equal rights and is now an excuse for misandry. Too much of feminism is white women complaining that some guy on the street looked at them, and ignores the real issues women face in the world. (Non-feminist, Age 45, non-binary, white)

This participant continued to explain why they do not identify as a feminist, instead opting to identify as a "humanist." They believe that "no matter [the] gender or sexual identity [of a person, they] deserve the same rights and protections." This participant provides another example of how adopting an intersectional lens is used to reject a feminist identity. Additionally, these responses stress how some participants in the current study did not feel there was space for them in the movement given that they felt feminism was only about and *for* women.

3.1.7. *Anti-other groups/identities*

Definitions of feminism that were coded as "anti-other groups" described feminists as pushing their agenda at the expense of other social groups. A small percentage (5.4%, $n = 19$) of our sample defined feminism as being "anti-particular groups" or self-serving at the "expense of others." Of those who did not identify as feminists, 18.5% fell into this thematic category, versus .8% of those who identified as feminists, a difference which was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 42.07, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .345, p < .001$. Within the theme of "anti-other groups," participants largely drew on stereotypes of feminists, describing feminism as "misandry" or hostility directed towards men. For example, one non-feminist stated that feminism is for "women with daddy issues trying to get attention and blaming men for their own issues" (non-feminist, 22 years old, female, white). The participant went on to explain that feminism is for "weak men trying to please domineering women." This reaction is perhaps an extreme example, but was echoed to an extent in the majority of those who described feminism as being anti-other groups of people. The theme of anti-other groups highlighted by this participant is what we expected to find more of in the current sample. In line with previous research, we expected to find a larger percentage of people who not only rejected a feminist identity, but also were anti-feminist and thought of feminists as "man-haters" (Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008; Jackson et al., 1996). This was especially the case in Houvouras and Carter's study in 2008 where they found that non-feminists were more likely to define a feminist as someone who supports female superiority, dislikes men, and has negative personal characteristics. Only 37 people (10.4%) in our entire sample were coded as having expressed negativity toward feminism. Of the individuals who had their

definitions coded as negative, 45.9% also fell into the “anti-other groups” category. Moreover, 89.5% of those who said that feminism was anti-others were also coded as being negative.

3.2. Intersections of race and feminist identity

For each of the themes discussed, chi-square tests of association were performed to determine whether the likelihood of providing a definition adhering to each of the themes differed as a function of ethnicity. Analyses revealed that the definitions of feminism provided by white vs. non-white participants did not differ significantly on any of the major themes. Additionally, the proportion of white and non-white participants identifying as feminist or providing a negative definition did not differ significantly. Although there were no significant group differences based on ethnicity, the main emerging themes did appear to be associated with the overall notion of whether feminism is an intersectional framework.

3.3. Logistic regression predicting feminist identity

Born out of Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory, the term intersectionality refers to the various axes of power and oppression, which operate along social identities and designations. “Intersectionality” was introduced as a means of critiquing “single-axis frameworks” (Carbado et al., 2013, pp. 303–304). Intersectionality has since expanded from the initial “two-pronged” analysis (of gender and race), to a multifaceted analytical approach, demonstrating how systems of oppression are inextricably linked, thereby requiring an intersecting approach in order to elicit social change.

In an attempt to more clearly understand how viewing feminism as being intersectional or not may be associated with an individual’s likelihood of identifying as a feminist, a binomial logistic regression was performed. This analysis examined the likelihood of identifying as a feminist as a function of gender, ethnicity, and two qualities of participants’ definitions of feminism: defining feminism in a negative manner and defining feminism as either intersectional or not intersectional.¹ There were 18 cases with a studentized residual with a values ranging from 2.712 to 3.374 standard deviations. After inspecting for data entry errors and all were kept in the analysis. The logistic regression model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(4) = 76.41, p < .001$. The model explained 35.4% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance identifying as a feminist and correctly classified 84.6% of cases. Sensitivity was 95%, specificity was 50.7%, positive predictive value was 86.3% and negative predictive value was 75.5%.

Three of the predictor variables were statistically significant (as shown in Table 2). Women had 3.08 times higher odds of identifying as a feminist compared to men; individuals who did not define feminism in a negative manner had 11.61 higher odds of identifying as feminists; and individuals whose definitions of feminism were coded as intersectional (see Figure 1 that shows what codes were condensed as intersectional vs. not intersectional) had 4.24 higher odds of identifying as feminists compared to those whose definitions were not coded as being intersectional. Ethnicity (dichotomized as white vs. non-white) was not a significant predictor of identifying as a feminist.

Table 2. Logistic regression predicting likelihood of identifying as a feminist based on gender and qualities of feminism definition

	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds ratio	95% CI for odds ratio	
							Lower	Upper
Ethnicity	-.437	.414	1.113	1	.291	.646	.287	1.455
Gender	1.125	.340	10.953	1	.001	3.080	1.582	5.996
Negative	2.452	.551	19.780	1	.000	11.608	3.940	34.197
Intersectional	1.445	.345	17.543	1	.000	4.240	2.157	8.335
Constant	-2.687	.584	21.146	1	.000	.068		

Notes: Ethnicity is for non-white compared to white; Gender is for females compared to males; negative is for those who were not coded as negative definitions compared to those who did have a negative definition, Intersectional is for those who were coded as having an intersectional definition compared to those who did not have an intersectional definition of Feminism.

4. General discussion

The current study was an exploratory examination of predictors of Feminist identity as well as an examination of the current state of the chronic feminist paradox. We found that, overall, our sample defined feminism as something positive. Nevertheless, even those who defined feminism as positive did not necessarily adopt a feminist identity. This differs from much of the previous research that attributes the feminist paradox to negative stereotypes and the stigmatization of feminism. In previous decades, the stigmatization and negativity with which feminism was associated was used to explain individuals' reasons for not adopting a feminist identity, even if their political views were in line with feminist goals. Although our results are partially in line with this past finding, such that having a definition coded as negative was a predictor of not identifying as a feminist, the overall pattern within this sample evidenced very little negativity across both feminist and non-feminist identification. As such, the current study is suggestive of a new Feminist Paradox, or a new trend in feminist identification that is more heavily influenced by intersectionality in concert with negative views.

Arguably, the current cultural climate seems to be shifting the view of feminism from a stigmatized identity to what some have called the “mainstreaming” of Feminism (Zeisler, 2016). Mainstream Feminism refers to the commodification of the feminist movement in a way that solely focuses on the needs of middle class, white, women, rather than an intersectional political movement that aims to revolutionize structures of oppression in their entirety (Zeisler, 2016).

Where once we had Suffragists hesitant with the term (Hannam, 2012), we now have highly visible public figures vowing to keep using the word Feminist until its shock value has dissipated (Gray, 2016). Indeed, the question of feminist identification is particularly intriguing given the emergence of public figure feminists. Public figures like Lena Dunham, Claire Danes, Ellen Page, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Emma Watson, Mark Ruffalo, John Legend, Matt McGorry, Jennifer Lawrence, Justin Trudeau, Kesha, Laverne Cox and Beyoncé have publically advocated for feminist politics (Hamad & Taylor, 2015), in part by publicly self-identifying as feminists (Dixon, 2014). Some of these individuals have begun calling-out those who reject a feminist identification (Cobb, 2015). Previous scholars have commented on the media's ability to profoundly shape our ideas, identities, and public opinion (Bordo, 1993; Denis, 2007; Kilbourne, 1979, 2010). Has this shift given way to a new political climate for Feminism? Have these emerging public figure feminists finally lifted the stigma surrounding what scholars have termed the dreaded “F” word (Dunlap, 1989; Rowe-Finkbeiner & Wilson, 2004) and brought cohesion to a formerly paradoxical feminism?

In its attempt to gain mainstream recognition and acceptance, Feminism has had to carve out a place within the current capitalist, patriarchal society—and, some would argue, has become complicit with the very structures the movement seeks to disengage (Hoskin, 2013). Consequently, the goals of feminism have been oversimplified and whitewashed in an attempt to make Feminism more palatable for the general public's consumption (Cobb, 2015; Zeisler, 2016). Given Western society's construction of celebrities as “cultural authorities” (Bell, 2013), it is important to discuss how these cultural authorities contribute to the oversimplification of feminist goals. Celebrity representations of feminism largely whitewash feminist movements and fail to stress the importance of recognizing privilege and intersectionality (Taylor, 2014; Zeisler, 2016). Mainstream representations of “what a feminist looks like” do not have to talk about the importance and uncomfortable intersections of oppression because they continue to benefit from a privilege-based, white, heteropatriarchal society. Instead, these projects appear more preoccupied with demonstrating the banality and normalcy of self-identified feminists as a means of destigmatizing the term.

Perhaps these efforts are misguided. As the current study suggests, perhaps it would be more beneficial to focus on the complex and accountable politic into which feminism has grown. As mainstream “pop” Feminism continues to acquire heightened visibility by celebrities hailing peace signs and shouting girl power or showing off their “squads” as a symbol of female solidarity (Filipovic, 2015; Simpson, 2016), women continue to have their reproductive rights taken away (NARAL Pro-Choice America, 2016), people of color are subjected to police brutality and higher rates of

incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Clarence Taylor, 2013; Pettit, 2012), cis and trans women endure living in fear of sexual and domestic violence (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; Stotzer, 2009), economic inequality persists (Charles, 2011; DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015), transgender women of color are disproportionately targets of violence and murder (Stryker & Whittle, 2006), and people of color are not given equal access to education and employment (Dipboye & Colella, 2012; Epps, 1995).

The take home message of this study emphasizes the importance of intersectionality. Overall, feminists within our sample illustrate the importance of intersectionality, while non-feminists exemplify how a perceived lack of intersectionality contributes to misunderstandings about feminism—i.e. only for women. Not only was intersectionality demonstrated as important within our qualitative data, it was also shown to be a predictor of feminist identification, along with gender and defining feminism in a negative terms.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

Although the current study is strengthened by not relying on an undergraduate sample, this study is not without its limitations. While we made a conscientious effort to consider the role of intersectional identities in how individuals may define feminism, our sample lacked the true representativeness of the various complexities of intersecting identities required to truly present an understanding of how intersecting identities influence definitions of feminism. To address this, future studies should make a conscious effort to recruit a diverse sample with respect to race, gender, social class, education, and sexual orientation. As noted, the current study found participants had less negative views of feminism as compared to past research findings (Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008). While this may be indicative of a general trend towards a more positive view of feminism, it could also be due to self-selection, given that participants were recruited for a study on the “perceptions of gender.” Perhaps those with more negative feelings towards feminism would have avoided the survey in the first place, given the study’s focus on questions of gender. Future studies may wish to specifically target participants in such a way as to ensure they are drawing the attention of those who hold both positive and negative views of feminism.

The current paper evidenced very little negativity toward feminism, begging the question of whether feminism itself remains stigmatized (Anderson, 2009; Goldberg et al., 1975; Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008; Moradi et al., 2012). Future research should incorporate feminist identity development measures, in addition to measures of perceived stigmatization, to provide a comparative assessment of the Feminist Paradox and whether feminist movements continue to be a source of stigmatization. Future research should also attend to the dynamic, shifting and socially constructed nature of identity formation. In addition, future research would benefit from more in-depth interviews with participants to allow for prodding of where participants get their ideas about feminism. The current study took an exploratory approach in allowing participants to define feminism in their own words. Future research would benefit from using standardized measures of feminist identity with the recognition that not all feminists and nonfeminists define feminism the same way. Furthermore, future research is needed to examine the possible shifts in cultural climates that may be contributing to how feminism is perceived, with a specific focus on the role of media, pop culture, and celebrities in moulding these perceptions. Having the integration of intersectionality in Feminism as the focal point of the movement could result in an increased likelihood of individuals choosing to identify as feminists. Finally, the results of the current study suggest that feminist movements could benefit from having more media representations and initiatives that provide authentic portrayals of the diversity of self-identified feminists and intersectional goals.

5. Conclusion

After a protester’s sign that stated “woman is the Ni**er of the world” was showcased on the Slutwalk’s website, Dzodan (2011) expressed her outrage in her seminal essay, “*My Feminism Will Be Intersectional Or It Will Be Bullshit!*” Echoing the cries for inclusion that resonate across feminist history, Dzodan questioned Slutwalk’s failure to address systemic racism within their movement, further probing why she and other women of colour are not seen as part of Slutwalk’s feminist

agenda—to borrow from Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a woman?” (as cited in Hooks, 1981). Dzodan (2011) used the statement “my feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit” as a rallying call to critique any trajectory of feminism that does not directly advocate for, and recognize the experiences of, people of color. Although feminism is a common cultural and theoretical heritage, which cannot be possessed, current invocations of feminist identity use possessive expressions of feminism to illustrate the individuality and diversity of feminism (Cardona & Colbert, 1997; Ms. Foundation, 2016). Moreover, this mantra has become the catchphrase for modern feminists who refuse to remain complicit within systems of oppression and who ardently struggle to break away from normative whiteness embedded within the homogenized invocations of “womanhood.”

The importance of intersectionality, demonstrated within our findings, is well established within contemporary western Feminist literature. Smith (1990) notes that intersecting issues, such as racism, are not people of colours’ burden to bear alone, and that sources of oppression distort the lives of all people, regardless of race (Smith, 1990). Notions of universality, and the homogenized experiences of “women” are mostly based on the experiences of white middle class women and subsequently prevent a “full understanding of gender and society” (Zinn, Cannon, Higginbotham, & Dill, 1986). In failing to explore or integrate the interplay of race, class, and gender, many mainstream feminists homogenize feminist issues and thereby fail to provide a “truly complex analysis of women’s lives and social organization” (Zinn et al., 1986). As Zinn et al. (1986) argue, such an approach renders feminism “incomplete and incorrect” (p. 295). When we understand feminism as exclusively “equality for women” feminist teachings are lost and the struggles of minoritized populations are diminished. Indeed, the objective claim of “Women’s Equality” begs the question, which women? This question resonates across feminist histories, echoing the words of Sojourner Truth (as cited in Hooks, 1981) and the screams of Dzodan (2011) that demand we look critically at who represents women and how we have constituted womanhood within mainstream perceptions. If mainstream Feminism has deemed such oversights permissible, has our feminism, indeed, become bullshit?

Feminist scholars have attributed the difficulty of defining feminism to the very nature of shifting political climates and the requirement of responding to current social contexts and issues (Denis, 2007). Some argue that it is precisely the historically multifaceted and mercurial nature of Feminism that explains how the movement survived, despite the continued and ongoing discomfort with the term and despite hostile political climates (Denis, 2007). This history has established Feminism as a politic of growth, which is continuously redefined to address mutating forms of social oppression (Denis, 2007; Yamato, 1990). Will we scream with Flavia in outrage? Or will we passively allow the social injustices we perceive as being at arms-length from our own to remain the burden of our socially constructed Other? Will Feminism feel satisfied by closing the wage gap and argue that “All Lives Matter” (Orbe, 2015) or will we continue to evolve as a politic to address the cries of the Voices from the Margins (Herising, 2005)?

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Note

1. In the event that a definition was coded as both intersectional and negative, it was categorized as negative.

Cover image

Source: McIntosh, J. (2008). *Feminist Power Poster*. Retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jonathanmcintosh/3299626045/in/photolist-62zrSe-a1uFaG-nVhxWe-apRLxP-4QUd4o-4RSA4L-ahMuDX-7Z7izM-4wVp1E-9JMSHJ-5ujqmL-8memmR-abx8NS->

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Appendix A

Perceptions of gender questionnaire

What is your age?

Dropdown menu with answers available from 18 to 100 in years

What is your gender?

Male
Female
Not listed

If participants selected “not listed”: What is your gender?

Trans man (ftm)
Trans woman (mtf)
Gender queer
Intersex
Not listed (open text)

What is your ethnicity?

White
Black
Mixed-race
Asian
Native American
Other (open text)

What is your nationality?

American
Canadian
British
Other (open text)

What is your highest level of education?

Elementary school
Middle/junior high school
High school
Associate’s degree
Bachelor’s degree
Master’s degree
Law degree
MD
PhD

What is your personal annual gross income?

Less than \$9,999
\$10,000–\$24,999
\$25,000–\$49,999
\$50,000–\$74,999
\$75,000 or more

What is your sexual orientation? (For the purpose of this survey, “sexual orientation” is a clinical term that describes a person’s consistent sexual attractions over time.)

- Homosexual
- Heterosexual
- Bisexual
- Queer
- Asexual
- Pansexual
- Omnisexual
- Not listed (open text)

What is your sexual identity? (For the purposes of this survey, “sexual identity” refers to the label a person uses to describe their sexual orientation or personal identity.)

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Queer
- Straight
- Bisexual
- Not listed (open text)

Do you identify as a feminist?

- Yes
- No

How do you define feminism?

(Open text answer)



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