

Feminism: When the Label 'White' Gets Attached in Pop Music Industry

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Abstract

This paper describes a qualitative study that investigates the pop music genre starting from the 2000s, relating it to feminism. The investigation focuses on understanding when female artists are considered feminist, and when the label 'white feminist' is applied to specific female artists. Based on media press and public perspective, the research hopes to find key characteristics that separates the moment when the label feminism and white feminism are applied, especially in relation to other attributes such as gender orientation, sexual orientation, and race. The purpose of the research is to provide more insight into understanding feminism in the context of today, and to how navigate complex spaces such as media image and personal identity, labels that come with the public status of their profession.

1 Introduction

MTV, The GRAMMYS, Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, KIIS FM - Popular music aka 'Pop Music' is an industry that is in a constant flurry of activity and publicity, through television, radio, news, and videos. When referencing popular music, the paper is defining Pop Music as any popular music produced after the 2000s. With such a public identity, artists in the pop music industry are expected to navigate the complexities of the business that exist, including image, policies, and activism.

In the current generation where technology and communication can occur in an instant, female artists are expected to adjust to a multi-faceted industry that, at many times, can seem paradoxical in nature. Many female artists are forced to find the right balance between outgoing and timid when portraying their public personas. Attitudes in pop culture dictate that they can't be too sexy, too modest, too masculine, too feminine, too submissive, too dominant, too feminist, too apathetic. These unfeasible expectations prohibit many female artists from expressing themselves authentically.

The current music industry has created a box into which women artists must mold. Any indication of actions or beliefs that occur outside of this box cause them to face controversy and be "canceled." This "Cancel Culture" prohibits freedom of expression. According to Meredith Clark, a professor at the University of Virginia, "Canceling is an act of withdrawing from someone whose expression – whether political, artistic or otherwise – was once welcome or at least tolerated, but no longer is" (Bromwich, 2018). Many women experience cancel culture where they are forced to keep their beliefs on feminism silent, eventually leading to incorrect conclusions made by the public and media

In today's controversial society, feminism and music has intertwined to create a powerful form of activism, but many female pop artists are criticized by both feminists and non-feminists for their contributions to the feminist movement. Female Pop artists are placed in a double standard that forces them to carefully analyze their every move. When a female pop artist does express her beliefs, the media could automatically criticize her. Not only does this cause extreme controversy, but it also causes a trending and dividing line between the public and artists in the music industry. The media, along with the MeToo Movement has been the ultimate catalyst for the continuous dividing line.

While many female pop artists, including prominent musicians Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Taylor Swift, vocally identify as feminists, ultimately, it is the media that establishes each female music

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artist's image. This paper will explore the identities of feminism versus white feminism, and female artists' place in the context of these identities.

2 Defining Feminism, Popular Music, Media

Feminism is framed around the principle that women and men should be treated equally. While this technical definition holds true, feminism within itself has evolved over the years. After the passing of the 19th Amendment of the United States Constitution, which gave women the right to vote, advocacy of women's rights has changed in "waves." During the second wave of feminism during the 1960's through the 1970's, feminism was defined as "equal opportunities in employment and education, access to child care and abortion, the eradication of violence against women, and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment" (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003).

Within the last decade, the third wave of feminism was formed as a backlash against the prior movement, which was said to framed feminism around the white, middle-class, heterosexual subjective woman. Rather, the third wave became focused upon the identity of females as multifaceted and diversified (Dicker Piepmeier, 2003). Kimberlé Crenshaw, a law professor at Columbia University and University of California, Los Angeles coined these identities that create varying inequalities as 'intersectional feminism' (UN Women, 2020). Activists such as the Riot Grrrls came out through the punk scene in Washington DC, making it evident that activism through the form of pop culture became a defining characteristic in the early to mid 1990s (Trier-Bieniek, 2015).

There have been several declarations from scholars of fourth (2012-2018) and fifth (2018-present) waves of feminism (Clarke). The fourth wave of feminism is defined as a perspective around the limits of materialistic things and personal identity that feminism's focus should be shifted to the well-being of the world and all of its beings by scholars. Other scholars state that the fourth wave of feminism is grounded by the use of technology and in the digital age (Trier-Bieniek, 2015). However, some contend that most of the current generation, including pop culture, can be encapsulated in the context of the third wave of feminism (Baumgardner Richards, 2000).

Regardless of the circumstances, it is evident that pop culture, including pop music, is important to analyze within the context of feminism. Pop Music is relevant to any music that has the most "hits" or popularity. The genre of music can range in style, including RB, soul, rap, band, gospel, funk, and country music (Errey).

It is also important to include the significance of the media's role in the influence of feminism, pop culture, and music. Media is defined as any form of mass communication, whether in the form of articles, news, videos and social platforms. There is significant research that has shown the impact that media has on the image of people, including influencing large feminist movements (Powell Guest Blogger for Women Around the World, 2017). In particular, the MeToo Movement, which originated from a social activist named Tarana Burke, was a grass-roots movement to reach out to sexual assault survivors in underprivileged communities (Vagianos, 2017; Evans, 2018). In October 2017, it had transformed into a worldwide movement, in which the hashtag MeToo brought awareness to the public about how prevalent sexual harassment and assault has become (Evans, 2018).

3 Feminism Pop Music

The pop music industry is heavily dominated by males. A study led by Stacy L. Smith (2018), associate professor at the University of Southern California and the founder of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative analyzed the pop music industry based on the top 600 songs from 2012 through 2017 (according to Billboard's year-end Hot 100 chart). The study found that out of the 1,239 performing artists, 22.4 percent were female artists. Additionally, only 12.3 percent of the 2,767 songwriters.

These dismal numbers hint at the difficulties that female artists face in the pop music industry. While Smith's research reflects the current state of the entertainment industry, it is also true

that, historically, the entertainment industry has been dominated by males too. Women are marginalized in the spaces of music (USC Annenberg - Communication and Marketing Staff, 2018; Gray, 2019), especially when they are used as props in music videos (Fitts, 2008), sexualized in music lyrics (Hall, West, Hill, 2012), and survive sexual assault (Associated Press, 2019; Sanchez, 2018; Hogan, 2018). It becomes more evident there is a driving force of masculinity that exists in music; as said in a study done by Bretthauer et. al. (2007), lyrics in popular music are dominated by six themes: men and power, sex and objectification of women being the top priority for males.

Laura Mulvey (1975) provides a theory known as the “male gaze,” which states that males often perceive females as passive and as sexual objects. Much of the psychoanalysis that Mulvey digs into is based on three themes: active / passive heterosexual construct, power dynamics, and eroticism. These themes that support Mulvey’s theory show strong parallels to the production, lyrics, and videos that represent much of the songs produced by the pop music industry.

(1) The active / passive heterosexual construct, the oppressive master-submissive ideal that has been perpetuated by society, can clearly be seen in pop music lyrics. In a study by Mako Fitts (2008), Fitts found that out of 15 songs, 12.5 percent of the sample in the study found males assuming the “boss” role while females as “subordinates.” Her research consisted of several interviews that discussed and analyzed the links between audience reception, creative control, and artistic freedom with sexual objectification. In her paper, Fitts states that women are forced to “negotiate a hostile working environment where their physical traits are assessed for employment purposes and... sexual favors are [traded] for upward social mobility.” (2008) This objectification is glorified through many pop music lyrics ultimately sustaining the toxic commodification of women.

(2) The power dynamics between males and females can be seen in music videos and lyrics, particularly in rap and RB. In a previous study, researchers analyzed music videos featuring songs by Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Eminem, and Lil Wayne to understand how violence against women occurs. Researchers found that male artist’s have more music videos portraying violence against women than female artists do. Eminem’s music videos displayed 78 instances of violent content (most of which were between a heterosexual couple), and Lil Wayne’s had 214 instances of violence (group fighting accounting for more than half of the sample videos). On the other hand, Nicki Minaj’s music videos had only 3 instances of violent content and Rihanna’s had 5 instances of violent content (involving drugs) (Kubrin Weitzer, 2010; Clark et. al., 2016).

Power dynamics regarding trust and violence continue to arise in song lyrics. Previous researchers analyzed rap music by male artists containing misogynistic language and found that “distrusting women” is a common theme occurring in 47 percent of the rap songs analyzed. The songs touch on topics such as general distrust of women, false rape accusations by women, femme fatale (women using beauty and sexuality to exploit innocent men), and women lying to men to become pregnant. Furthermore, misogynistic language regarding violence towards women was found in 18 percent of the songs analyzed (Weitzer, 2009).

(3) Eroticism is evident in much of the pop music scene, especially in the diction used in lyrics and how women are portrayed in music videos. In an aforementioned study by Clark, Glover, et. al., music videos featuring Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Eminem, and Lil Wayne were analyzed to show the disparity in the number of scenes displaying sexual content. In regards to male artists, Eminem’s music videos displayed 119 instances of sexual content, whereas Lil Wayne’s videos had 0 instances of sexual content. On the other hand, Nicki Minaj’s music videos had 376 instances of sexual content while Rihanna had 351 instances of sexual content (Kubrin Weitzer, 2010; Clark et. al., 2016). In this study, “sexual content” usually refers to the presence of revealing clothing on women.

This trend becomes further evident when analyzing lyrics. In a research done by Weitzer and Kubrin, they coded the amount of naming-and-shaming of women in lyrics that were unambiguously derogatory. They found that it occurred in 49 percent of the songs analyzed. A common rap term that came up was “chickenhead,” which commodifies a woman to a bobbing head giving oral sex (Weitzer, 2009).

The themes that arise in the pop music industry reinforces the male gaze theory that Mulvey provided. It is evident that the masculine-dominated pop music industry only makes it more difficult for women artists to coexist with the feminist space. Angela McRobbie (2007) describes this dilemma best when she stated that women today, particularly young women, are governed by new sexual contracts. These sexual contracts provide potential career and meritocratic success with a catch – that they must abandon feminist critique of the patriarchy and other power imbalances.

While this may be the case, female artists such as Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Taylor Swift, in particular, have come up via media as feminist. This raises the question as to how they occupy the space of feminism in a very public status, and in what ways has the label of feminism been used to positively or negatively impact the public image that they have.

4 Case Study of Feminism

In this study, we will be examining Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Taylor Swift's artistic work and activism in order to fully understand how they occupy the sphere of feminism. In addition, this paper will explore how the public and media interpret these female pop artists' works.

BEYONCÉ

Beyoncé has been one of the most influential music artists in pop culture. As a consequence of her immense popularity, every action she makes is judged heavily by the public. Knowing that she could get a lot of criticism for the way that she presents her beliefs, Beyoncé has, in the past, made sure to make her stance on feminism clear and to-the-point. In an ELLE interview held in 2014, Beyoncé clarified that “[she] put the definition of feminist in my song and on my tour, not for propaganda or to proclaim to the world that [she’s] a feminist, but to give clarity to the true meaning. . . . equal rights for all men and women” (Callegari, 2016). She clearly establishes her stance as an intersectional feminist, especially emphasizing the fact that feminism needs to be inclusive of everyone, regardless of an individual's background.

Beyoncé, as a widely followed musician, is no stranger to making change in her society. Beyoncé portrays through her music and lyrics a very clear stance on feminism. Through her first and second solo albums released in 2003 and 2006, respectively, she displays a girl-power feminist viewpoint that could be sexy, powerful, smart, and beautiful, and she continues to portray that today. As a hypersexualized Black woman in the music industry, Beyoncé has consistently been criticized for her skin color and the way that she acts. Her feminist actions were clear during this fetishization and remained strong (Pinto, 2020; Rogo, 2016; Witt, 2017). Although she did not claim the word “feminist” until recently, Beyoncé advocates and outwardly states her stance so that the media does not misinterpret her intentions.

In fact, the public views her as the “embodiment of modern feminism for a generation that has been reluctant to claim the word” (Dockterman, 2013). Beyoncé is a female music artist that is admired by many women living through third and fourth wave feminism, even receiving the moniker “Queen Bey” (Petridis et. al., 2016). She has defined it and been critiqued a few times for it, but has nonetheless come out of her experience as the biggest female popstar and a well-admired feminist influencer.

LADY GAGA

Known for her outlandish and bold moves as a female pop artist, Lady Gaga is constantly in the spotlight, receiving affirmations and critiques. As a white woman, she doesn't receive the same oppressions that many women of color in the media get on a day to day basis. Despite not being a victim of racism, Lady Gaga continues to fight for intersectional feminism.

As a teenager, Lady Gaga was raped. In her song “Swine,” Lady Gaga emphasizes the continuous impact that the act of sexual assault left on her. She said in a radio interview that she felt “didn't know how to think about it, didn't know how to accept it, didn't know how not to blame [her]self, or think it was [her] fault. It was something that really changed [her] life. It changed who [she] was completely” (Handler, 2015). She expresses many of her beliefs towards feminism through

red carpet appearances such as the 2018 Marc Jacobs suit to prove that “today, [she] wear[s] the pants” (Weinberg, 2018) and the infamous and unforgettable “Meat Dress,” (Mapes, 2010) a political statement made to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights in the military. In the 2010 MTV Music Video Awards, Lady Gaga wore a dress made of meat onto the red carpet to symbolize the consistent oppression that all women face saying that if we don’t take a stand now, we will “have as many rights as the meat on our bones.” (Cochrane Freeman, 2010). In fighting for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, her fight for intersectionality becomes apparent.

Lady Gaga has continuously been an active intersectional feminist all while maintaining her positive figure in the music industry. Although she doesn’t face the same oppressions as women of color in the music industry, she continues to be deemed as an intersectional feminist by the public due to her actions towards making change. She not only publically advocates but also utilizes her platform to advocate behind-the-scenes and actually initiate change despite not identifying with all intersectionalities.

TAYLOR SWIFT

Throughout her career, Taylor Swift has transitioned from a girl-next-door country star to a mainstream pop star. Her drastic transition not only gave her the spotlight that she deserved but also increased the amount of public criticism she would receive. As another white female artist, Taylor Swift isn’t as publically vocal about her position as a feminist and is only public with her beliefs in select circumstances.

Swift has been spoken about her position as a feminist a few times during her earlier stages of her career, but only has recently made clear stances on her perspective in politics. Through media portrayal, Taylor Swift is often deemed to only express her feminist beliefs when it seems to benefit her. During her 2016 Grammy Album-of-the-Year Acceptance Speech, Swift spoke to all young women saying “There are going to be people along the way who are going to try to undercut your success or take credit for your accomplishments or your fame.” While a number of media outlets proclaimed this speech to seem empowering but others refute that the statement was directed towards Kanye West’s rap line, a continuation of a public dispute between Swift and West (Lupica, 2016; Noisey Staff, 2016; THR staff, 2016).

The media and general public puts Taylor Swift in a difficult position by labeling her as a white feminist. Due to her lack of explanation on her beliefs during her younger years, the media draws to conclusions and immediately puts her under fire. Granted, Swift has not clarified her views and clearly stated her position, but nonetheless, her stance on feminism should not be assumed. In a 2015 interview with Maxim, Swift points out the oppressive nature of media and how it has affected her career saying “a man writing about his feelings from a vulnerable place is brave; a woman writing about her feelings from a vulnerable place is over sharing or whining” (Roy, 2015). It is evident that the media’s quick-to-judge perspective can be critical and oppressive to women.

5 Intersectional Identities That Exist

In a world where privilege plays a huge role in a person’s daily life, talking about intersectionalities is controversial. Intersectionality is often “weaponized” in the polarity world, a word that is equivocal to negative political jargon and misconstrued due to its complex nature (Perlman, 2018). Many women are subjected to a social symbol of perfection: a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman (Oxnevad, 2018). Elizabeth Spelman has argued against the idea of gender realism – that gender is constructed independently from other characteristics such as race, class, and ethnicity (Mikkola, 2019). Spelman states that if gender was isolated from these characteristics, then all women would experience womanhood in the same way, which is a false pretense (Mikkola, 2019). In modern day, the stigmatization of the discussion of the ongoing female struggle in this patriarchal society prevents women from being able to freely discuss their specific hardships as women of color, gay women, and trans women. In various political spheres, it seems that discussing women’s rights and bodily autonomy is a controversial topic. Media portrayal of women doesn’t help. Women in media are photoshopped to fit this stereotypical, “perfect” vision of a woman.

Today, feminists, other activists, and those involved in the professions of law and social work use the term intersectionality to describe our complex awareness that we inhabit – and are inhabited by – multiple categories of identity and that our experience of several identities taken together may be emotionally, culturally, and materially different than the experience of any one particular identity category by itself (Gibson, Meem, Alexander, 2013). Intersectionality strengthens the connection between all women and the feminist movement. Audre Lorde, a Black, lesbian, feminist poet who has experienced her fair share of exclusive feminism first hand, said, “there is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Blackpast, 2012). White feminism restricts not only the way that women are viewed but also how they view themselves, a type of image that can severely impact an artists’ reputation in a negative aspect.

6 When It Becomes White Feminism - In The Context Of Media

The term “White Feminism” is a feminist terminology that is based on the struggles of white women without addressing the distinct forms of oppression that happens to other ethnic minorities and other intersectional identities (Frankenberg, 1993). This term came around after the second wave of feminism, as feminism was no longer purely in the context of white, heterosexual objective women. Especially in the contemporary context of feminism and media, white feminism has been used as a negative connotation towards individuals. It usually alludes to the idea of self-serving and disregard to marginalized identities (sexual orientation, race, religious beliefs) in favor of the white, heterosexual objective women. This label has been extended to pop artists, especially when feminist critics want to voice their disappointment or anger and make it known to the artists through a public medium.

There are specifically three criteria that we have identified when the media labels an individual a white feminist:

- (1) **APOLITICAL:** The artist does not clarify their stance on specific topics, particularly sensitive topics.
- (2) **PERSONAL BENEFIT:** The individual claims the title of feminism for her personal gain while ignoring the plight of others facing similar difficulties.
- (3) **HISTORICAL WORK:** The individual does not have any prior work to support the rights of women, or only recently started having works of feminism.

Based off of these three main points along with the three artists that we have done a case study on (Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift), we will explain the distinctions that have them labelled as either non-feminist, feminist, and / or white feminist.

It becomes apparent early in their careers that Beyoncé and Lady Gaga have made clear statements and stances on their perspectives in much of the political sphere, and have done a substantial amount of advocacy on behalf of others.

Beyoncé is politically vocal, fundraising for Obama’s campaign in 2012 (Daunt, 2012), publicly endorsed same-sex marriage in 2013 (VIBE staff, 2013), claimed to be a “modern day feminist in 2013 (O’Connor, 2013), headlined for Hillary Clinton for a concert in 2016 (Schwartz, 2015), spoke out against the withdrawals for the protection of transgender children in public schools in 2017 (Hazel, 2017), and presented Colin Kaepernick with Sports Illustrated Muhammed Ali Award in 2017 (Mullan, 2017). It is important to note that while she did voice her political views, she also responded to critics who questioned her feminism. Both times when there was controversy around her work - 2014 MTV Video Awards where she did a backdrop of the word “FEMINIST” and 2016 World Tour of her album Formation that showed the images of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, she clearly made her stance for her perspective on feminism and against police brutality (Bennett, 2014; Gottesman, 2016).

In regards to Lady Gaga, the work she has done to promote intersectional feminism included donating substantial amounts of money to aid with the Haiti earthquake in 2010 (Vena, 2010), Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011 (Vena, 2011), joining the Artists Against Fracking campaign in 2012 (Navarro, 2012), fighting against HIV and AIDS by educating young women about

the disease (Mundell), and joining Vice President Biden to support his “It’s On Us” campaign against sexual assault in 2016 (Gonzalez Whitaker, 2016). Furthermore, she also runs a non-profit organization called Born This Way Foundation, which is dedicated to empowering young people through compassion, acceptance, and inclusivity. Lady Gaga has been a gay activist and icon, spoke at the 2009 National Equality March in support of LGBT movement (Kane, 2010), and has condemned Trump for his military transgender ban in 2016 (Bell, 2017).

From this information, one can be sure that both Beyoncé and Lady Gaga have long histories of not only advocating for marginalized communities, but also making their stances clear on the political landscape that exists.

When analyzing Taylor Swift, media portrayal contrasted. Taylor Swift has done large amounts of philanthropic work, donating to help with the flood in Iowa in 2008 (Lee, 2008), performed at a charity relief at Sydney’s Sound Relief concert in 2008 (Moran, 2009), did a benefit concert for victims of recent tornadoes in United States in 2011 (The LA Times, 2011), and made a donation to the Houston Food Bank after Hurricane Harvey in 2017 (Blair, 2017). Taylor has done some advocacy work also, where she launched a campaign to protect children from online predators in 2007 (Nash Country Weekly, 2007) and participated in the Stand Up to Cancer telethon in 2012. It becomes apparent that while she did donate quite a bit to different causes, none have been explicitly for a political purpose or to support marginalized communities. Swift’s tendency to avoid making positions on political issues became apparent during the 2008 presidential campaign, where she promoted the Every Woman Counts campaign. During that time, she stated that “I don’t think it’s my job to try and influence people which way they should vote” (ACM Awards, 2008).

The label of white feminism came about when feminists noticed that Taylor Swift was silent on many of the issues that exist, as Salon writer Rachel Leah (2017) pointed out that Swift is “known to wave the feminist banner only when it directly benefits her.” In particular, there has been criticism towards Taylor Swift’s music videos, ranging from cultural appropriation to trivializing dating violence, all factors that exemplify the toxic characteristics of white feminism (Fabello, 2015; Caceda, 2015).

Initially, it may seem that Taylor Swift’s stance during the 2008 presidential campaign shows her full stance on the political landscape, but Swift’s perspective has been constantly shifting and evolving. Swift’s statement during the presidential campaign was made when she was 19 years old, and it is evident that over the years, Swift has become more clear with her stance on particular issues. Taylor Swift collaborated with women to set up an initiative to protect women from harassment and discrimination (Littleton, 2018) and started making stances in the political landscape with her endorsement of candidates for public office (Zimmerman, 2018). Furthermore, her recent music video published in 2020, “The Man,” has shown the double-standard that exists in society between males and females. It criticizes the construct of masculinity that exists in society along with how the public and media perpetuate these stereotypes (Shepherd Chiu, 2020).

Yet, it is not to state that Taylor Swift has completely removed the label of being a white feminist according to the media. Critics of her music video “The Man” have stated that the video’s message excludes the realities that women of color face, while others have stated that Swift portrays her form of feminism as comprehensive, while, in truth, is not (Sinke, 2020; Petch, 2020).

7 Conclusion

In the modern day where there has been an increased push towards achieving equal rights for women, there has been a large amount of contention that exists in the political space of feminism. Women’s rights movements such as MeToo may have initiated a potential backlash wave of feminism, in which the definition of feminism has started to become a list of expectations that individuals have to follow or else they are not considered “feminist,” or are portrayed as “white feminist.” MeToo

The restrictive nature that the MeToo movement has now forced artists in the pop music industry

to navigate and define feminism in their own context. Many artists have avoided talking or claiming the title of feminism due to its nature of labelling individuals with a narrow definition, disregarding the other intersectional identities that exist. Beyoncé states this concern succinctly:

“I don’t like or embrace any label. I don’t want calling myself a feminist to make it feel like that’s my one priority, over racism or sexism or anything else. I’m just exhausted by labels and tired of being boxed in. If you believe in equal rights, the same way society allows a man to express his darkness, to express his pain, to express his sexuality, to express his opinion – I feel that women have the same rights.”

It is evident that there is conflict in the contemporary form of feminism, making it evident that there is the existence of a fourth wave feminism, one that is more inclusive of more identities in the space of technological innovation, while pushing even harder against the white, heterosexual subjective woman – a limited form of feminism, or “White Feminism.”

What becomes apparent that the label “White Feminism” is applied from the media based on specific conditions that exist. We argue that while the label “White Feminism” does come around from media based on specific criteria (stance, personal gain, historical work), it is toxic to start denouncing women purely based on these parameters and to recognize that women that are once labelled white feminist are able to improve to be strong advocates of feminism. There needs to be further discussion done to build a stronger coalition of feminists that all have the common goal of bringing equality for all, regardless of individuals’ identity markers rather than denouncing those who do not fit the requirements of what is considered feminist.

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