A Conflicted Image:
Contemporary Western Feminism in *Teen Vogue*

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SUMMARY

The way narratives about (Western) feminism are constructed changes with time and depends on the party which is doing the storytelling (Hemmings 2011, 13). Within feminist historiography these narratives are often built around the wave metaphor—even if its use remains contested (Evans and Chamberlain 2015, 396). In this thesis I look at how the contemporary image of Western feminism is constructed in the online magazine *Teen Vogue*. Contrary to traditional historiography which tends to look at past narratives, I will focus on a present one. Via a discourse analysis of ten articles I research how feminism in the magazine is characterised and where its image fits within a wider feminist historiography. By focussing on three different recurring themes (*inclusivity and intersectionality, community and solidarity* and *individuality and self-empowerment*) associated with feminism, I argue that the image of contemporary feminism in *Teen Vogue* is ultimately an ambiguous and at times even acontradictory one. This is a consequence of the fact that the current feminist landscape is both made up of political (third wave) feminisms and what Angela McRobbie calls "*faux*-feminism[s]" (2009, 1, italics in original) such as popular feminism and postfeminism. Since both of these share certain elements within their discourses (albeit with different intentions), it can cause difficulties and confusion for feminist critics, feminists, as well as other observers to distinguish between them. That is also why I advocate a critical reading of the magazine rather than simply accept its content at face value.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism has gone through significant changes since its emergence. This means that the movement today is profoundly different from what it was in earlier decades and/or centuries (Henry 2004, 7). Not only feminism itself has changed over time, the narratives surrounding it have done so too. In her book *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), Professor of Feminist Theory Clare Hemmings studies different narratives pertaining to Western feminism and how they developed over the last couple of decades. According to Hemmings, such study is important because it informs us on how feminism intersects with other forms of social change (2011, 1) or tells us something about the "politics of the present" and who gains by representing feminism in a certain way (2011, 16).

Using Hemmings as an example, I analyse the contemporary image of feminism represented in the online magazine *Teen Vogue*. I have chosen *Teen Vogue* because, as a magazine characterising itself as a "guide to saving the world" by "educat[ing], enlighten[ing] and empower[ing] our audience to create a more inclusive environment" (Condé Nast), it also speaks out in favour of feminism. While there exists much research on the representation of the (emancipated) woman in women's magazines and connections between this image and various (post)feminist discourses —which dictates that political feminist critique and action are no longer relevant since women and men have reached equality— have been exposed (Budgeon & Currie 1995, Machin & Thornborrow 2003, Brown et al. 2020, Coulter and Moruzi 2020), there is still virtually no research done on how feminism itself is portrayed in women's magazines. Since *Teen Vogue* is a "conversation-starting cultural hit known for its social activism [and] progressive politics" (Fernandez 2017), the magazine can be said to play a part in how the current narrative about feminism is constructed.

By analysing the image of feminism in the magazine, I seek an answer to the research question: "How is the image of contemporary Western feminism constructed in the online magazine *Teen Vogue*?". My subquestions are: "How do the articles' texts help create the image of what is considered feminism?", "How is feminism characterised in *Teen Vogue*?" and finally, "Is the magazine's image of feminism influenced by popular and/or postfeminism and if so, with what outcome?".

The structure of this thesis is as follows: I begin with outlining my theoretical framework, explaining concepts such as popular feminism and postfeminism which I use as analytical lenses for my research analysis. Then I set out my methodology, in which I describe what discourse analysis is and how I apply it in order to position the image of feminism in *Teen Vogue* within a wider feminist historiography and, for instance, discern the characteristics attached to it. Afterwards I bring these two chapters together with my own research and present my research analysis. I end my thesis with the conclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Even if *Teen Vogue* mentions specific kinds of feminism which contemporary observers distinguish between (e.g. socialist feminism or ecofeminism), I see no need to define those here. This is because I do not use these as analytical lenses through which I conduct my research. I will, however, elaborate on concepts and theories from the fields of feminist historiography, popular feminism and postfeminism in order to explain how the current narrative about feminism in *Teen Vogue* is constructed and what its political use is.

Feminist waves

Because I analyse the image of Western feminism as it is constructed in *Teen Vogue* today, I believe it necessary to have a preliminary look at what is known as the third wave of feminism. Evidently this wave is preceded by two earlier waves and, in turn, is succeeded by a fourth (even if this one is still nascent and not commonly acknowledged yet). However, since my research material is published within the last three years —and since the defining characteristics and influence of the fourth wave are still being analysed and, thus far, very little has been published about it— I believe the third wave has the most bearing on *Teen Vogue*'s content and is therefore the most relevant to my purpose.[1]

Before going deeper into the particulars of the third wave however, a brief explanation of what is generally called the 'wave metaphor' within feminist historiography is, I find, pertinent. There is not one feminism that is the same for everyone who identifies with the movement, nor did it remain static over time. Instead, the movement grows and develops in accordance with the emergence of changing social inequities (Gill 2017, 2). The most common metaphor used to denote this development is the 'wave metaphor'. As Doctors Elizabeth Evans and Prudence Chamberlain note however, not all scholars agree on the aptitude of the metaphor (2015, 396). On the one hand, proponents believe that it signals a continuity within the feminist movement in which new feminists both build upon earlier theories and are also

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[1] This does imply that the feminist waves are completely distinct from each other, nor that only one wave can exist at a time (Evans and Chamberlain 2005, 399). Quite the contrary, throughout my research it has been clear that elements from one wave are carried over into the next and that there is often a significant overlap of multiple aspects among supposedly different waves.

able to construct their own (Baumgardner 2011, final chap., iBooks). Here, the wave metaphor is "liberating for emerging feminists," Evans and Chamberlain state, because it enables "them to 'place' themselves in an ongoing women's movement whilst also (…) engaging with [the] important strategy of differentiation" (2015, 404). Opponents, on the other hand, argue that the metaphor creates a division between different "generations" of feminists which implies a discontinuity and a feeling of "superiority of their own movement" (Henry 2004, 24). The wave metaphor, opponents say, constitutes the belief that different feminisms cannot exist simultaneously and that older ideas become irrelevant as new theories and insights arise. While it is thus obvious that the use of the 'wave metaphor' remains contested, I will nonetheless use it as it facilitates discussing the third wave on its own, whilst also preserving a coherency and continuity between the waves.

Following Gender Studies Professor Astrid Henry, the third wave began approximately in the 1990s after a decade in which feminism seemed dormant (2004, 16). Feminism's resurfacing was a reaction against the "complacent attitude" held by society at large which resulted from the belief that "feminism was no longer needed (…) that women had achieved full equality" (Henry 2004, 17). It was "feminism's success" which "indicated its obsolescence" (Henry 2004, 20). Put differently, third wave feminism arose "simultaneously (…) and in contention with a widespread and well-articulated postfeminist climate" (Kinser 2004, 131).

What causes third wave feminism to be distinguished from the second wave, is the profoundly different political and cultural climate during which it arose. Nevertheless, the third wave does incorporate issues already put forth by second wave feminisms (such as queer theory and being attentive to racism within the movement) (Kinser 2004, 141). According to associate Professor of Communication Amber E. Kinser, these issues received increased attention with the third wave because it "openly advocate[s] and affirm[s] pluralism" and "is even more welcoming of difference and contradictions" (2004, 139). So, whereas the second wave is believed to have mainly focused on gender inequalities, the "third wave (…) does not privilege gender or sexual difference as its key site of struggle nor does it limit itself to any single issue" (Budgeon 2011, 280). Consequently, third wave feminism is perceived as being more inclusive, pluralistic and intersectional than its predecessors. Or, as feminist scholar Shelley Budgeon argues: "[t]he aim [of third wave feminism] is not to develop a feminism

which makes representational claims on behalf of women but to advance a politics based upon *self-definition* and the need for women to define their personal relationship to feminism" (2011, 283, italics in original). Instead of advertising general goals which need accomplishment, third wave feminists "stress individuality and individual definitions of feminism" (Henry 2004, 43).

Yet, Kinser also points out that "[f]eminism is false when it is confused with resistance *per se*. In this form, anything that looks like one is casting off any cultural restriction whatsoever, and in particular if the one doing so is female, counts as feminism" (2004, 144, italics in original). Both Budgeon and Kinser emphasise it is imperative that feminists continue to critically engage with what is defined as feminism instead of lumping everything together as "pluralistic thinking" (Kinser 2004, 145). Kinser's concerns are also amplified in the work of Professor of Media and Communications Sarah Banet-Weiser and feminist cultural theorist Angela McRobbie, particularly where it deals with 'popular feminism' and 'postfeminism' respectively.

Popular feminism

In her book *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018), Banet-Weiser talks about how, on the one hand, popular feminism recognises that gender inequalities play a role in the organisation of society, while on the other, it does not actually challenge or make a stand against the structures which keep that inequality in place. This makes popular feminism a "safely affirmative feminism (…) [which] often eclipses a feminist critique of structure" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 4). Indeed, popular feminism receives more positive attention than critical feminisms do in the media. It is more widely accepted precisely because it does not carry any political weight. Popular feminism is, as Banet-Weiser writes, "not disruptive to capitalism or mainstream politics" and since it does not upset the existing social fabric, it is prone to "render other feminisms invisible" (2018, 11; 13).

One way in which it does this is by resisting intersectionality (Banet-Weiser 2018, 14). According to popular feminism, there is only "a universal gender identity [that] must be the central category of analysis" (ibid.). Other categories which cause social disenfranchisement, such as skin colour, sexuality, disability or class, are not taken into account. Consequently, because "friendly [and] safe" popular feminism is never disruptive nor critical towards the way

society profits from institutionalised social injustice, it "consents to heteronormativity, to the universality of whiteness, to dominant economic formations [and] to a trajectory of capitalist 'success'" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 15-6). Furthermore, the way popular feminism suggests gender inequality be solved, is by simply including more women and equate their increased presence with successful feminist action (Banet-Weiser 2018, 12). According to Banet-Weiser this is one of popular feminism's major failures: it limits itself to mere visual representation as a way of doing political action and foregoes taking a critical look at systemic injustice (Banet-Weiser 2018, 23).

In addition, Banet-Weiser writes that popular feminism also includes a discourse of self-empowerment which sends out the message that in order for girls and women to feel empowered and/or confident, they simply have to choose to "be" those things (2018, 30). Popular feminism thus places the full responsibility for self-realisation on women themselves without questioning, let alone trying to dismantle, the established socio-political structures and the media which systematically keep pressuring women to be, look and act a certain way (ibid.).

Banet-Weiser further points out that popular feminism and postfeminism actually share many similarities and sustain each other, even if popular feminism says that feminism is still necessary (in whatever watered-down version that may be), while postfeminism does not (2018, 20).

Postfeminism

Seemingly intertwined with the current feminist landscape, is what Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis Rosalind Gill calls a "postfeminist sensibility" (2017, 254). Since the end of the 20th century, feminist scholars such as Gill and McRobbie have noted the emergence of a postfeminist discourse (see also Orr 1997, Pozner 2003, Tasker and Negra 2005, 2007, Butler 2013). In her book *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), McRobbie describes postfeminism as the "undoing" of feminism stimulated by popular culture while that same popular culture seems to embrace and even promote (a certain kind of) feminism (2009, 11). In other words, while popular media include feminist elements in their content and thus may appear to endorse feminist ideas, a closer analysis of the specific way in which feminism is represented might uncover influences of postfeminism.

While different scholars all have a slightly different take on what postfeminism entails exactly, the main idea I take away from them, is that the discourse of postfeminism "suggests that it is the very success of feminism that produces its irrelevance for contemporary culture" (Tasker and Negra 2007, 8) and "emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary routes to women's independence and freedom" (Butler 2013, 44). While someone's individuality and empowerment are definitely important, McRobbie argues that the focus on these terms is wielded in such a way that it "ensure[s] that a new women's movement will not re-emerge" (2009, 1). What is so problematic about postfeminism, is its predisposition to ignore the fact that society today still needs collective feminism to fight against social injustice in favour of conveying the idea that "feminism (…) is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without" (McRobbie 2009, 8).

The fact that the elements of individualism and choice are so central in both postfeminism and third wave feminism is potentially confusing. That is why, as Kinser has argued, feminists need to remain critical of what is labelled as feminist; not to exclude people from the movement, but to steer clear of feminism becoming everything and thus also becoming nothing (2004, 145). It is important to make this distinction because postfeminism —just like popular feminism— thrives in capitalism and is therefore part of the very system which politically active feminism wants to dismantle.

In sum, postfeminism and popular feminism are not actually specific types of feminism as such, like for example socialist feminism is, but more kinds of ways in which feminism is assimilated, represented and exploited in society (and the media in particular). A better understanding of popular feminism and postfeminism is necessary to analyse the contemporary image of feminism in *Teen Vogue*.

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I explain my research method and the way in which I apply it.

I use a discourse analysis to see how the image of contemporary feminism is produced in *Teen Vogue*. Explained briefly, a discourse analysis is a particular way of studying texts which dismisses the belief that "language is (…) neutral" and agrees with the idea that discourses "[construct] social life" (Gill 2000, 172). Adhering to the Foucauldian conception of the term, discourse is defined as "a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it" (Rose 2001, 136). Within the context of this thesis, the discourse of feminism represented in *Teen Vogue* is understood as how the magazine creates its singular image of what feminism entails and how *Teen Vogue* (subliminally and/or invisibly) instructs its readers on how to behave according to that image. Through words, *Teen Vogue* chooses to represent feminism in a certain kind of way. In his book on representation, Stuart Hall, a widely respected name in the field of cultural studies, describes the term as "the production of meaning (…) through language" (2013, 3). An analysis of the particular representation of feminism in *Teen Vogue*, can thus reveal something about the "embedded, underlying meanings" ascribed to it (Webb 2009, 1). The way something is represented, is built on already existing meanings given to it, while at the same time, the representation creates and adds new meanings to it as well (Milestone and Meyer 2012, 7). Applied to this thesis' topic, the specific representation of feminism in *Teen Vogue* is both constructed on preconceived ideas of what feminism is, while the way in which feminism is portrayed might (slightly) alter these pre-existing meanings too.

Since I research the contemporary image of feminism, I chose to work with a wider sample of articles and to not analyse each individual article at length. To be able to construct this overall image, I believe it sufficient to concentrate on the most prevalent elements from the articles in combination with a deeper analysis of a few direct quotes. The main criterion for whether an article qualifies as a meaningful object of analysis or not, is if it is explicitly tagged with the keyword 'feminism' by *Teen Vogue* itself. The reasoning behind this, is that when articles are specifically tagged in this way —even if they do not put forward a clear

definition of feminism— it is easier to discuss the kind of feminism reproduced by them. I do not wish to label an article as 'feminist' when it is not explicitly tagged as such, so as to avoid projecting my own ideas onto the research material.

The way I went about it, was making a selection from the articles which *Teen Vogue* presented to me as being the most relevant to my search term 'feminism' (date of publication or other aspects, such as the article category, were not taken into account). From these suggestions I made a selection which seemed to me the most useful. Several articles were discarded on the basis of their pronounced 'Americanness' which struck me as lacking a wide enough perspective for my objective. Obviously, *Teen Vogue*, an American magazine, focusses mostly on American issues and people, yet the ten articles I have chosen discuss feminism in such a way that they also encompass a broader Western view. Three articles focus on public figures and/or celebrities talking about feminism and related topics, two articles give a more personal account of how feminism has affected the authors' lives, the content of three others consists of discussions about feminism in relation to socialism, environmentalism and fashion (consumerism and production), the ninth article is an op-ed about the Equal Rights Amendment but also places itself within Western feminist history,and the final article is an interview with the author of a recently published anthology of female inventors.

Using a discourse analysis, I looked at words, characteristics and values linked to 'feminism' and analysed how they construct its representation, both by what is made explicit and what is not. Processing this, I found that feminism in the magazine is predominantly centred around the three themes *inclusivity and intersectionality, community and solidarity* and *individuality and self-empowerment*. Later on, I will link these not only to elements I found in *Teen Vogue*, but also to the academic work I described and referred to in my theoretical framework. In fact, those theories and concepts guided me during my research. By applying them as analytical lenses, I was able to stay close to my research questions and keep my analysis focused. As such I do believe that, even though texts are "polysemic" (Gill 2017, 4), meaning that they may hold different meanings and trigger different interpretations at the same time, my research analysis and interpretation of the feminist narrative in *Teen Vogue*, holds value. It positions itself within an established academic context and feminist historiography, while also contributing new information to it.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

In the previous chapters I have outlined my theoretical framework and explained how I will conduct my research. Now I turn to the analysis of the *Teen Vogue* articles. This chapter is structured according to the three themes which my research has revealed as being the main threads of the magazine's feminist narrative: *inclusivity and intersectionality, community and solidarity* and *individuality and self-empowerment*. At the end of this chapter, *Teen Vogue* is placed within the larger capitalist system and an explanation is offered as to why the feminism in *Teen Vogue* is constructed the way it is.

Theme: inclusivity and intersectionality

The importance of inclusivity is suggested in almost every article I have analysed. Authors continuously point out how important it is for contemporary feminists —and other activists— to take the voices of non-binary and queer people, people of colour and people from the lower classes into account.[2] As activist P Brown, for example, has said in the article "4 Climate Activists Explain Why the Climate-Justice Movement Needs Feminism"[3], "[i]f we're [ecofeminists] rooted in Black, Brown, and Indigenous queer feminisms, we must acknowledge those on the margins of society [who] are already tackling the problems we face." (qtd. in Dolan 2019). Here, the importance of grass-roots activism —which is practised (more regularly) by less visible bodies— for feminism is highlighted. Furthermore, the presence of the word "already" in this quote hints at the fact that (queer) people of colour

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[2] This inclusivity of *Teen Vogue* however is not all-comprehensive. Men for example, at least white, heterosexual, cis-gender men, are all but absent from the magazine's feminist discourse. Maybe because the magazine is not perused as much by (young) men or perhaps because of the perception that feminism has an anti-male slant and that is why men cannot be 'real' feminists. Additionally, even though some articles point out that the LGBTQ+ community is part of the feminist movement (Dolan 2019, Roem and Kelly 2020) and feminism, in its broadest sense, is about addressing unequal power disparities of marginalised groups (Wikler 2019, La Jeunesse 2020, Leonard 2020), it is ultimately the dichotomy between man–woman and an almost exclusive focus on specifically cis-women's issues that receive attention.

[3] This article focuses on people of colour who talk about their environmental activism and why it is important that environmentalism takes feminist ideas and insights into account. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/climate-activists-explain-why-climate-justice-movement-needs-feminism.

—because of their identity?— are ahead in tackling climate change when compared to their white colleagues and that the latter need to acknowledge that. It underlines the fact that feminism is not just a white, heterosexual, middle-class movement, but a much more diverse one. The link between feminism and grass-roots activism is also made by former Irish president Mary Robinson in the article "Roxane Gay and Mary Robinson Explain Why Feminism Is Key to Achieving Climate Justice"[4] (Wikler 2019). Robinson stresses the importance of listening to grass-roots activists and women because they tell "truth to power" (Robinson qtd. in Wikler 2019). Feminism is portrayed here not as a mere academic exercise or cluster of abstract theories, but rather as a day-to-day reality and commitment for many people, built from the ground up and benefitting from the inclusion of (the most) marginalised voices.[5]

The focus on the need to include 'common' and disenfranchised people in the feminist movement, suggests that the authors and/or the voices heard in the articles, know about intersectionality and take it into account when they discuss feminism. The diversity of people given an opportunity in *Teen Vogue* to speak about feminism (i.e. people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, both professionals and dilettantes, …) also exemplifies this. The multitude of perspectives, stories and experiences present within *Teen Vogue* illustrates how inclusive and intersectional the magazine wants feminism to be represented. This positions the feminism in *Teen Vogue* firmly within third wave feminism and connects with what I have described in chapter 2, namely that third wave feminism "does not privilege gender or sexual difference as its key site of struggle nor does it limit itself to any single issue" (Budgeon 2011, 280).

Being aware of intersectionality and including it in feminist theory and activism, is thus a key element of third wave feminism. Reading the articles, however, a

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[4] The central topic of this article revolves around the need for environmental activism and feminism to be combined, in order to change the way humanity treats the planet and dismantles the patriarchal system. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/roxane-gay-feminism-climate-change.

[5] While I obviously do not reject the importance of listening to the most marginalised people, it is crucial to keep in mind that, as feminist philosopher Donna Haraway points out, "there (…) lies a serious danger of romanticizing and or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions (…) The positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical reexamination" (1988, 583-4). What this means is that, while marginalised people can and do contribute great things to the feminist movement, accepting these contributions as unbiased and/or 'unembodied' is unwise and their input should be met with the same scrutiny as more established voices are.

distinct difference between the treatment of inclusivity and intersectionality emerges. As I have explained, the former is mentioned or referenced multiple times, whereas the latter only occurs twice. Intersectionality seems to be understood as a presumed insight. But, and this could be said to expose an innate problem in *Teen Vogue*'s feminism, the desire to include a wide range of people in the feminist movement is not the same as being aware of the intersecting social categorisations which differ from one person to the next. This point relates to Banet-Weiser's characterisation of popular feminism: it "denounc[es] specificity" and "frequently refuses intersectionality" (2018, 14). In *Teen Vogue*, the feminism represented shares these similarities with popular feminism. I do not know if this is intentional or not, but it does tie in with the predicament of the magazine as a product of the capitalist system (see chapter 2 and the final section of this chapter). By not (openly) acknowledging and doing something (more) with intersectionality, by not explaining and analysing how it operates and simply assuming it is self-evident, the feminism in *Teen Vogue* is 'flattened' and risks becoming disingenuous, in that the "visual representation becomes the beginning and the end of the political action" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 23). In the interview with Gay and Robinson for example, Robinson mentions that she is "glad that (…) we hear these intersections of race, poverty and gender consistently" (Wikler 2019). Robinson thus points to the importance of intersectionality, yet she does not elaborate further on this. It is not explained why intersectionality is important, how feminists can take an intersectional approach, nor what intersectionality entails exactly. In other articles too, the focus remains on gender as the sole parameter of social stratification. Even though perspectives from (queer) people of colour are heard, it is never explained how their skin colour, sexuality, class, … influences the discrimination they face. As such, their presence in *Teen Vogue* and the scant presence of the term 'intersectionality' "[become] the beginning and the end of the political action".

Theme: community and solidarity

The second theme takes its cue from the first one and develops it into a more multi-facetted matter. Analysing the articles, the frequent repetition of words like 'support', 'community'

and 'solidarity' is evident.[6] This results in the image of feminism becoming one of co-operation where feminists stand together and help each other in their struggle against the common enemy, i.e. the patriarchal (capitalist) system. In the *Teen Vogue* article "Socialist Feminism: What Is It and How Can It Replace Corporate 'Girl Boss' Feminism?"[7], the author writes: "our specific sites of oppression become sites of strength through our alliances" and "[transform] our understanding of what solidarity can and should look like" (Leonard 2020). In other words, the oppression that women experience is also the force that unites them and causes the solidarity among them to grow and be fruitful.

There are, however, different opinions on how far that solidarity should reach. This can for instance be gleaned from the question, explicitly or implicitly formulated, of whether intergenerational dialogue is actually useful or not (see the similar debate on the use of the wave metaphor as I have described it in chapter 2). Some of the *Teen Vogue* authors/ feminists consider intergenerational dialogue to be beneficial and advantageous (Dolan 2019, Radin 2019), while others prefer to make a clear distinction between an 'us', i.e. contemporary feminists, and a 'them', i.e. older feminists (Leonard 2020, Roem and Kelly 2020). Let us, by way of example, take a closer look at the quote "[m]odern feminists know we can't win our rights by throwing the most vulnerable people under the bus" from the article "The Equal Rights Amendment Can't Be Defeated by Anti-Trans Scare Tactics"[8] (Roem and Kelly 2020). Brief though this quote is, it offers multiple points that deserve attention. In terms of intergenerational conflict, there is the obvious juxtaposition between 'modern' feminists and 'past' feminists. According to the authors, contemporary feminists are more solidary with "the most vulnerable people" than feminists of earlier generations were. This suggests that feminism today is more inclusive and somehow 'better' than feminism from the past. It also corresponds

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[6] Spread over the ten articles, the word 'support' is mentioned 11 times, the word 'community' 13 times and the word 'solidarity' 7 times.

[7] This article is about what socialist feminism is, what its beliefs and goals are and also demonstrates its relevance to changing our current society. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-socialist-feminism.

[8] In this article the authors discuss the U.S. Equal Rights Amendment document and how it can help queer and gender non-conforming people get equal constitutional rights.
https://www.teenvogue.com/story/equal-rights-amendment-anti-trans-scare-tactics-op-ed.

to what Henry has described, namely that the wave metaphor can cause intergenerational conflict because it leads to a feeling of "superiority of their own movement" with some feminists (2004, 24). By using the word 'modern'—a word which carries a positive connotation in the West— the authors of the article suggest exactly that. Furthermore, this quote also hints at the implication that feminists of today cannot be considered 'true' feminists if they are prepared to throw people under the bus. Put differently, a prerequisite for calling yourself a feminist these days, is being solidary with one another and actively including "the most vulnerable people" in the movement (which connects with the previous theme).

Within this inclusive feminist community however, authors do recognise that different types of oppression require differently attuned types of feminism and that, as Magdalena Del Valle has said in her article "Founding the Feminist Organization KidsForShe at Age 14 Taught Me What Feminism Means"[9], "there [is] no 'one size fits all' feminism that could dare apply to all women" (2019).

These viewpoints create a paradox where feminism is both a collective built on unity and also an abstract idea which individual people with varying experiences and (feminist) strategies and beliefs can get behind. The single aspect that unites all these people, is that they want to reach gender equality by dismantling the patriarchal system. But how they strive towards that, how far their activism goes, whether they take an intersectional approach or not, how wide their solidarity stretches and if it includes gender non-conforming people or not, … all of this ultimately differs from one feminist to the next (I will return to this in the next theme). The ubiquitous presence of words like 'solidarity' and 'community' does not correspond so much with the focus that third wave feminists put on individualism and plurality, as I have explained in my theoretical framework. The idea of a common goal requiring collective action and engagement unseats the third wave principle of "stressing individuality and individual definitions of feminism" as one of the wave's governing principles (Henry 2004, 43). Phrases like "[w]omen — cis and trans alike — stand together to demand our fundamental constitutional rights" (Roem and Kelly 2020) and women

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[9] Del Valle talks in this article about her own feminist organisation and the importance of more internationally oriented feminist action. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/founding-feminist-organization-kidsforshe-age-14-taught-me-feminism.

have to "support each other in the spaces [in which] they are fighting with the patriarchy" (Roxane Gay qtd. in Wikler 2019), further indicate this.

Moreover, the all-pervasive use of the pronoun 'we' in the articles, not only aims to include feminists as a group, but also acts as a virtual connector between the author and the readers. It implies that the issues addressed in the articles concern the readers too (even if those issues might not yet have been experienced first-hand by those readers) and consequently emphasises even more the 'shoulder-to-shoulder' spirit which thrives in a collective that has a strong sense of solidarity. In other words, in the articles of *Teen Vogue* the feminist movement is represented as a collective movement in which all women need to join forces to achieve their goals.

Having said that, excerpts like the one from the article written by Del Valle, reveal that the individualistic angle has not disappeared altogether from the magazine. Articles such as this one keep offering support for this more individualistic path as well, stating that feminism should not even attempt to analyse problems and offer solutions in a generalised way for all women.[10] This view, which mirrors third wave feminism, popular feminism and postfeminism, continues in the third theme.

Theme: individuality and self-empowerment

The presence of this theme complicates that of the previous two as even its name alone points to the paradox I have defined above.

Within *Teen Vogue*, individuality is most pronounced in those articles which have (white) celebrity actresses as their focal point. According to Banet-Weiser this is not surprising since celebrity feminism[11] is a form of popular feminism and popular feminism "often

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[10] While this might sound like intersectionality, that is not always the case. Different types of feminism —whether personally defined or involving a larger 'membership' such as socialist feminism— may all revolve around one issue, without automatically being intersectional as well. It is not because there are different viewpoints and ideas in play about feminism or how this may translate into action, that they take intersectionality into account as well. One does not necessarily imply the other.

[11] In her book *Celebrity and the Feminist Blockbuster* (2016), Professor in Gender and Cultural Studies Anthea Taylor, distinguishes between celebrities who have acquired fame as a result of their feminism (Taylor focuses in her book on feminist authors like Roxane Gay) and women who became famous as, for example, actresses and later proclaim themselves feminist (e.g. Emma Watson) (2016, 38). I focus here on the latter group.

restructures the politics of feminism to focus on the individual empowered woman" (2018, 4; 17). Similar to postfeminism, it celebrates an individually focused feminism, rather than a collectively-based feminist movement. This, as I have shown above, resonates with third wave feminism as well and ultimately makes the image of feminism in *Teen Vogue* a rather equivocal one; it is a mix of both politically activist, third wave feminist principles and liberal popular and postfeminist elements.

In the article "Ariel Winter Said You Don't 'Have to Look a Certain Way to Be a Feminist'"[12] it says "there is no identifiable role or look for feminists because the bottom line is this: Feminists want equality for everyone" (Scott 2018). This quote proposes a very individualistic take on what feminism is, since there is not even an "identifiable role". In other words, everyone can be a feminist as long as they want equality. But how that equality is defined or achieved is left completely unanswered. Feminism here is thus little more than an empty label which anyone can choose to use in any way they see fit. As such, it has lost all of its political fervour in favour of becoming a "weak feminism" (which Kinser regards as part of postfeminism) (Kinser 2004, 144).

> Weak feminism results in minimal feminist movement, the kind that the patriarchy can still get a handle on, the kind that, from the standpoint of patriarchy, probably is acceptable anyway since it placates feminists and is so negligible as to be wholly unthreatening to the status quo. (Kinser 2004, 144-5).

That is why, as I have pointed out in my theoretical framework, feminists need to remain critical of what gets labelled as feminism instead of just equating it with being allowed to do as you wish as long as you wish for social equality.

The problems related to the theme of individuality in *Teen Vogue*'s feminism, can be further demonstrated when we take a look at the quote "feminism is all about choice"

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[12] This article discusses a statement by actress Ariel Winter about how feminism is everything you want it to be, provided you want equality for everyone (with which the author wholeheartedly agrees). https://www.teenvogue.com/story/ariel-winter-said-you-dont-have-to-look-a-certain-way-to-be-a-feminist.

from the article "Bella Thorne Posted a Photo of Her Breasts on Twitter for Feminism" [13] (McNamara 2018). It is clear that this quote falls into the same category as the previous one. What is so problematic about it, is the fact that it not only implies that feminism amounts to little more than 'doing and being what you want to do and be', but that it also suggests, in a carefully disguised manner, that a feminist engagement is entirely determined by choice. This implies that the opposite, a disavowal of feminism, is also a choice. The element of choice that is so central in third wave feminism (chapter 2), and which is also taken up by postfeminism, has been warped and manipulated to such an extent by the latter that within a postfeminist discourse (and in a 'lighter' form within popular feminism as well), it has come to mean that experiencing (gender) discrimination is somehow a choice that people make on an individual basis rather than it being an institutionalised ordeal (Gill 2017, 259-60). Consequently, because facing discrimination stemming from social inequality is no longer seen as a general/group experience, feminism as a collective movement is no longer deemed necessary. This postfeminist furtiveness is clearly illustrated by a statement made by Robinson too: "I didn't find too much personal discrimination because I was wired to resist it" (qtd. in Wikler 2019). Not unlike popular feminism, which tells women that empowerment is theirs if only they choose to pursue it, with statements such as these, women (and people in general) are told that they too can avoid discrimination and subjugation provided they choose to resist it. [14]

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[13] This article links a semi-nude photo that actress Bella Thorne posted on Twitter as a way to criticise sexism, with the idea that feminism is about choice and should not be used to prevent women from showing their (partially) nude bodies in public. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bella-thorne-posted-a-photo-of-her-breasts-on-twitter-for-feminism.

[14] Without being representative for *Teen Vogue* in its entirety, the fact that these actresses and Robinson are white, is not without importance. Popular feminism, as Banet-Weiser has described, refutes intersectionality and takes gender as "the central category of analysis" (2018, 14). As such, their whiteness places these women in a more privileged social position where they never even have to consider skin colour as a cause of discrimination. It is their skin colour, their wealth and success which fits so well in the "dominant culture of popular feminism" (2018, 13) and affirms its objectives. Their position, and the privileges that come with it, makes it easier for them to claim and preach 'individual empowerment' (and the choices which, supposedly, make it become a reality) than it is for more disenfranchised people and/or readers of *Teen Vogue*.

Teen Vogue as part of the capitalist system

A bird's-eye view at the different articles tagged with the keyword 'feminism' reveals that the magazine seems to describe two different sides of feminism, one being more political and the other more 'commercial'. For example, *Teen Vogue* contains articles on the intersection of feminism and environmental activism (Dolan 2019, Wikler 2019), but also publishes 'feminism'-tagged articles about books or (fashion in) anime TV-series (La Jeunesse 2020, Johnson 2020). This combination indicates that *Teen Vogue*, on the one hand, encourages its readers, as self-identified feminists, to be both politically active (or at the very least politically aware) and speak out against the injustices they encounter, while, on the other hand, the magazine also says that its readers can still fully partake in consumer culture (especially when the products they consume are considered to be 'feminist' and empowering). This latter aspect of the feminism represented in *Teen Vogue* actually fits with the concept of "consumer feminism" —which in turn is part of postfeminism (Kinser 2004, 144)— that is defined as "a temptation to substitute buying stuff for political action" (Hogeland 2001, 113). Feminism in *Teen Vogue* thus often equals, as it was so succinctly put in one of its articles, "living (…) life exactly as [you see] fit" (Scott 2018). Assistant Professor Natalie Coulter and author Kristine Moruzi argue something similar when they state that *Teen Vogue* "produce[s] and reimagine[s] girls as political activistswho *[sic]* are also engaged with traditional expectations of femininity informed by domesticity, consumption and beauty" (2020, 2). Feminism according to *Teen Vogue* can thus be both politically charged and 'recreational'—which, in fact, makes it more a popular kind of feminism than a political type of feminism (see chapter 2).

The reason why the feminism in the magazine resonates so clearly with both popular feminism and postfeminism, most likely derives from the fact that, as a commercial product, the magazine needs to reign in enough funds to make a profit and thus secure its future. As Coulter and Moruzi have pointed out:

> *Teen Vogue*, despite its progressive politics, is still part of the Condé Nast empire and is beholden to the institutional structures and capitalist logics of the company. (…) *Teen Vogue* is tied to remaking the ideal girl within the constraints of the political and economic realities of the magazine industry. (2020, 10)

This double entanglement is for instance demonstrated in the article "How The Wing Has Created a Retail Environment That Actually Helps Women"[15] which promotes a conscious fashion brand while it also goes into the historic use of fashion as a part of feminist activism and the capitalist appropriation of the movement (Radin 2019). It does come across as somewhat ironic that a disguised advertisement for a fashion brand which makes use of feminist slogans on its products, also argues that the commodification of feminism is not okay (since it does exactly that). However, the inclusion of more educational information than just the advertisement does indicate that *Teen Vogue* tries to break through the limitations imposed on the magazine by this framework of commercialism and capitalism in order to create a space for young people to learn about and discuss feminism openly and freely (Coulter and Moruzi 2020, 10). This space made available for (more) radical feminism however, cannot undo the fact that the magazine is embedded in a capitalist structure which is intertwined with the patriarchal system (Eisenstein 1999, 196). This does not necessarily imply that the feminist image in *Teen Vogue* needs to be understood solely and unequivocally as a popular feminist or postfeminist one, but it does mean that it remains important for any reader to be critical about how feminism is presented in the magazine.

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[15] https://www.teenvogue.com/story/how-the-wing-has-created-retail-space-that-helps-women.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I have analysed how the image of contemporary Western feminism is represented in the online magazine *Teen Vogue*. I have done this by looking at ten of the magazine's articles tagged with the keyword 'feminism'. Processing the articles using a discourse analysis, I was able to distinguish three separate themes: *inclusivity and intersectionality, community and solidarity* and *individuality and self-empowerment*. Together, these thematic strands present a narrative of what Western feminism entails today.

During my research analysis it became clear how ambiguous the image of feminism as projected in *Teen Vogue* is. This is largely due to the fact that the magazine's feminist message not only draws on ideas from third wave feminism, but that it is also steered by popular feminist and postfeminist views (many of which do not challenge but rather support the capitalist and patriarchal society). Consequently, some aspects of the feminism which *Teen Vogue* propagates come across as being paradoxical.

That being said, the image of Western feminism as represented in *Teen Vogue* is one where feelings of unity and solidary amongst feminists stand central and where the need to be inclusive towards all marginalised people is deemed a prerequisite. On the downside, intersectionality is hardly taken into account, illustrating how strongly popular feminism and postfeminism have infiltrated the current feminist landscape. The elements of choice and individuality as part of third wave feminism are also taken up in *Teen Vogue*, yet this seems to be the most problematic theme; it is precisely this aspect of feminism which has been completely turned upside down by popular feminism and postfeminism to such an extent that it has led to a disavowal of discrimination and social injustice as being institutionalised in favour of it being considered a personal choice.

The limited space afforded by the thesis format has prevented that a more detailed image of *Teen Vogue*'s feminist narrative could be formulated. I had to leave out some less visible aspects of the feminist narrative and was also forced to skim over secondary aspects of the themes which, I feel, deserve more attention in future, lengthier research. As such, I encourage other researchers (and readers) to look into how magazines like *Teen Vogue*

inform their readers on what feminism is, and how it can (re)shape our lives and our societies, but also to remain ever critical about its representation in the media and never confuse socio-political activism with pragmatic opportunism.

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