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# Politics, Pop-culture, and Patriarchy: What does feminism mean in Generation Z?

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## **Abstract**

Inter-wave conflicts and generational divides have previously separated the feminist movement into four distinct “waves.” Labor, sexuality, and individual choice have created paradoxical views that splintered the movement into niche and radical sub-movements. The connotation of the word “feminist” has expanded and changed since the early suffrage movement, with the introduction of mass media, like pornography and social media. This paper examines the four waves of feminism and the major division of each wave, starting with a very brief introduction to the first wave, then focusing heavily on the second, third, and fourth wave. The second wave of the 1960s brought radical movements like anti-pornography feminists and male-separatist groups, leading to an extreme shift within the third and fourth wave. The latter portions of the paper will analyze the Mother-daughter relationship of the second and third waves, delving into the stark differences between the two waves in sexuality, femininity, and race. Then, the paper will evaluate the distinction of the fourth wave, detailing Generation Z’s contributions to the feminist movement.

**Keywords:** American history, American politics, feminism, gender studies, women’s history

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Prior to the twentieth century, feminism existed as a social thought, but the idea failed to gain mass traction. In the early twentieth century, the unification of feminism with political organization led to a mass suffragette movement. In this first wave of feminism, the suffragettes created the Woman's Party in 1916. The introduction of feminism into the political sphere led to the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, giving women the right to vote, as well as labor laws for women's "protection." Thus, feminism in the twentieth century became inextricably intertwined with mass politics, whether it be abortion laws or political polarization.

The real birth of contemporary feminism came during the 1960s, a time of widespread activism and social change. During the second wave, feminists radicalized the movement by challenging gender norms and inequality.<sup>1</sup> The movement continued to grow, with the third wave in the 1980s, which aimed to fix the racial divide left behind by the second wave. The fourth wave, consisting primarily of Generation Z, navigates their own branch of feminism. With unlimited access to social media and the Internet, they are constantly facing the double-edged sword of limitless online knowledge and virtual mobbing. Absorbing the feminism that came before, Gen Z uses social media, bringing individualistic choice feminism and Cancel Culture to the forefront. Along with media influences, fourth-wave feminism is impacted heavily by celebrities, self-identifying activists, and sexuality. This paper will explore how the current definition of feminism established by Gen Z is framed by a social justice warrior complex and the rapidly changing pop culture of the 2010s.

Modern feminism begins with the suffrage movement. After the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, many women, especially those in the National Woman's Party (NWP), saw the push for suffrage as complete. The NWP represented a particular subset of women, mostly white and upper/middle class. However, the disenfranchisement of women of color created a divide among the suffragette-era feminists, and this led to the rise of "social-justice feminists."<sup>2</sup> The NWP continued to make strides in political advancement, earning credibility from President Herbert Hoover. Rapidly gaining support from the Republican party, the NWP was seen as the lesser of two evils between the divided feminists.<sup>3</sup> Ignored and deemed less important, the social-justice feminists continuously fell short of their goals. The NWP continued to create political change for women by pushing for the passage of labor and equal rights acts. Through the 1930s, mainstream feminists were at the forefront. However, there was a decline in feminism's popularity during the 1940s.<sup>4</sup>

The emergence of World War II shifted the feminist movement; Rosie the Riveter had become an iconic symbol of women during this time, working a "man's" job and saving America from despair during the war. However, after the war was over, "Rosie the Riveter morphed into Rosie the Stay-at-Home Mom, surrounded by her children in a suburban dream home, cheerfully wielding a vacuum cleaner, not a rivet gun."<sup>5</sup> Most traditional-minded men expected women to birth children and tend to motherly duties. Yet, some women were accustomed to a

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<sup>1</sup> Cobble, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Cobble, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Cobble, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Cobble, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Cobble, 36.

life full of better opportunities and liberation.<sup>6</sup> With financial independence, these proto-feminist women were enjoying their newfound freedom and sought to create a social change.

Modeled upon the NWP experience, before the 1960s, mainstream feminists hewed to the political middle. During the sixties, however, mainstream feminism became radicalized. The radical feminists of the second wave found women's private lives were the basis of political theory and discussion; the term "the personal is political," coined by Carol Hanisch encapsulates the structural issues women encountered. To them, the oppression and sexism women faced at home, in the workplace, and in their daily lives, were products of the patriarchy; this patriarchal power restrained women, preventing them from moving forward. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* captured the American Dream Nightmare for many wives and mothers at home. To Friedan, women sought more out of life than hearth and home. The book spread through the nation, as it challenged women to seek fulfillment in their lives for themselves, not as a wife or a mother, but instead as an economically and politically equal woman. The women of the second wave saw themselves as a sisterhood united against the American patriarchal structure and pushed their radical views into the new mainstream. However, these "radical" feminists often overlooked major differences in race, sexuality, and class.<sup>7</sup>

As the young, second-wave feminist movement of the sixties grew, older feminists worried about the future of the movement itself. Miscommunication and different priorities between the generations of women continued, and young feminists carried the belief that first wavers had already won women's rights on a political and legal level; the second wave radicalized feminism and brought "women's" issues into the spotlight. Feminists became focused on directing political change for their gender first as opposed to a labor-focused movement.<sup>8</sup>

In order to generate a social movement, there must be national attention and active voices making themselves heard. However, blissful ignorance was women's enemy during the 1960s. Women's problems were not openly discussed, often their personal lives and struggles were deemed unspeakable or inappropriate for public discussion. Women were experiencing their own domestic turmoil, but they had no way of sharing these experiences with each other. In 1968, feminists across the United States began forming groups based on "consciousness raising."<sup>9</sup> These groups consisted of small circles of women, ranging in age and race, who opened up with one another about their personal issues. The group leaders would pose questions, allowing the women to deconstruct their thoughts and open a dialogue. Listed are some examples of these questions: "Are you a 'nice' girl? Have you ever faked an orgasm? Do you feel guilty if your house is dirty or messy? Do you worry about being truly feminine? How do you think men see you? Do you feel competitive with other women?"<sup>10</sup> Women were

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<sup>6</sup> Cobble, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Cobble, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Sarachild, 86.

experiencing, many for the first time, personal liberation—an inkling of a more radicalized second wave movement.

Consciousness-raising was intended to create an environment for women to come together and, as the men of the time called it, “bitch.” The feminists took this offensive language in stride, often answering each other in session with cheers or cries of, “Yes, bitch, sisters, bitch.”<sup>11</sup> These sessions allowed women to share their experiences, swapping advice, or even offering validation. Most men, especially those with traditional values, were concerned with the idea of women seeking personal liberation, a marker of a radical diagnosis of society’s gender problem; societal expectations forced women to submit and serve others, setting aside their own personal happiness. In a first-hand journal Kathie Sarachild,<sup>12</sup> noted how these “bitch sessions” were led. The topics discussed in these programs ranged from “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” to “The Politics of Housework,” one was even titled “Man-hating.” However, the main area of interest remained consciousness raising. Sarachild outlined specific goals to lead the bitch session, starting with the term “ongoing consciousness expansion.”<sup>13</sup> As the women slowly became more consciously aware of their experiences and gave their testimony, they found a common link among the group as a whole.

Unity amongst all women was the central idea of consciousness raising groups. When the women could understand one another on a deep level, then they would be united in a sororal bond. Sarachild defended the importance of encouraging all women to participate in consciousness raising, even so-called ‘apolitical’ women. She claimed apolitical women—today’s comparison being self-described non-feminists—offered criticism of the process.<sup>14</sup> Instead of focusing on political “distinctions” among women, Sarachild attempted to welcome them. Having apolitical women join groups was the first step, and the second step was to focus on aligning values.<sup>15</sup>

To Sarachild, when women have one another to confide in when a man invalidates emotions, or negates women’s experiences, then they have the courage to demand respect. Susan Sutherland, a 2nd wave feminist poet and writer, wrote “For Witches” after her consciousness empowerment:

today i found my temper  
i said,  
you step on my head  
for 27 years you step on my head  
and though i have been trained  
to excuse you for your inevitable clumsiness  
today i think’  
i prefer my head to your clumsiness.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gordon, 85.

<sup>12</sup> Radical feminist and conscious “raiser,” member of the New York Radical Women.

<sup>13</sup> Sarachild, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Sarachild, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Sarachild, 78.

<sup>16</sup> Sutherland.

The poem alludes to women accepting and bearing the heavy toll of abuse and oppression because they were taught to remain submissive. With the term “inevitable clumsiness,” Sutheim alludes to women’s perceived societal role as caretakers and the generational cycle stemming from mother to daughter, the learned behavior of giving into the patriarchy. Not only is Sutheim validating her anger, but she is also standing up to her patriarchal oppressor. The act of simply challenging the patriarchy, an everyday occurrence for feminists, reinforced the motto, the personal is political. These “conscious” women, now aware of men’s “inevitable clumsiness,” coined distinctions between themselves and other mainstream feminists.<sup>17</sup>

As feminists became even more radicalized through the 1970s liberation, many reclaimed the term “bitch.” Feminists defined the term “bitch,” creating a distinction between “apolitical” women and the liberated feminists.<sup>18</sup> “The Bitch Manifesto,” written by Joreen Freeman, defined, and valorized what a *bitch* is, then separated “bitches” from “true women.”<sup>19</sup> Freeman defined a bitch as aggressive, overbearing, manipulative, and even uses the word “masculine.” Bitches saw themselves as an outlier from the normal set of “true women,” even compared to other so-called feminists. Freeman writes, “Bitches are not only oppressed as women, they are oppressed for not being like women.” However, Freeman rarely describes attributes of the true woman, aside from labeling her as “passive.” Bitches are notably awkward in the presence of passive people, for a bitch is confrontational and lacking sensitivity, according to Freeman. “The Bitch Manifesto” blamed women for their faults of femininity, as they should have gone through consciousness raising to rid themselves of their womanly nature.<sup>20</sup> While the manifesto was radical for the time, there were other groups with a subversive message.

“The Bitch Manifesto” was only a harbinger of more radical movements to come. “The Bitch Manifesto,” though radical, held little intent of violence and offered no calls for anarchist action. However, Valerie Solanas, created the Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM).<sup>21</sup> This extremist manifesto circulated as a parody, although that was not Solanas’ original intent. SCUM mirrored Freud, labeling men as biological accidents with incomplete hormone sets. The Manifesto blamed men for allegedly ruining the world, saying they created all evils: war, violence, and prejudice. As much of an outlier as SCUM theory was in comparison to mainstream feminism, it provided insight into the movement on what the end goal of liberation would be.<sup>22</sup> SCUM took the brunt of criticism, allowing other women’s movement organizations to possess more validity in the mainstream. However, Solanas warped how many understand feminism, and split supporters of the movement. Amongst the radicals of the time, the anti-pornography feminists also tainted the idea of mainstream feminism while they fought to gain momentum at the height of the “sexual liberation.”

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<sup>17</sup> Sutheim.

<sup>18</sup> Freeman, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Freeman, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Freeman, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Solanis, 515.

<sup>22</sup> Solanis, 515.

One of the loudest *and* crudest voices of the anti-pornography movement was Andrea Dworkin. In Dworkin's book *Manhating*, she located the source of sexual inequality in the changing "counterculture" and "allied" leftist men and women. Dworkin categorized women as either the "passive princess" or the "wicked witch." While men feared the witch, women feared the witch so much they opted for the "passive, innocent, and helpless" to avoid being "actively evil."<sup>23</sup> To Dworkin, the antifeminist *Playboy* and the "feminist" porn in *Suck* were one and the same. The token female editor of *Suck*, Germaine Greer, aimed to revolutionize female sexuality, yet in her work, she aligned herself with male chauvinism. In doing so, Greer expressed that sexually liberated women would "fuck as freely as men." She enabled the hypersexualization of women; pornography entailed women being viewed only through the lens of masochistic fantasies, where women become an object for male consumers. Dworkin described a culture where women are used for two things: childbearing and sex. She made the claim these two "womanly" abilities are the sole reasons that men have not yet "exterminated" women because men "prefer to fuck cunts who are nominally alive."<sup>24</sup> Dworkin's critique, though containing some helpful ideas, was far too vulgar and extreme for the mainstream. Women's sexual liberation and the anti-porn movement faltered due to its perceived radicalism and rhetorical excess.

Mainstream feminism continued to gain momentum into the 1970s. Even with the notoriety of extremist groups fading, feminists made progress toward greater legal equality. Efforts of radical feminists were smothered by various social changes of the late 1960s such as "free love" and the Counterculture. Women's movements were politically centered; the National Organization for Women (NOW) focused its goals on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). As NOW became the primary focus of a majority of feminists, they demonstrated this unified front with protests, strikes, and newsletters. In 1973, after years of advocacy from NOW, first-trimester abortions and reproductive health were protected by the legalization of *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>25</sup> NOW continued to fight for the ratification of the ERA, which fell short. However, as NOW focused on women's healthcare and lesbian rights, mainstream feminism continued to move forward without black women.<sup>26</sup>

As the racial divide between feminists grew, the women's liberation movement had achieved its primary goals and now began to falter. Even with the various advancements to women's rights and the rise of radical social change, by 1980, conservatism had won, and Ronald Reagan, a decided foe of the ERA and abortion rights, was in the White House. The weary feeling of being beaten down spread to feminists across the nation. The next decade rattled by with a watered-down version of mainstream feminism, especially among the older generation who had been the creators of the second wave. The women from the women's movement became mothers and passed down a feminist ideology, "...the most visible spokeswomen of this new feminism were the daughters' of 1970s feminists..."<sup>27</sup> For example, third-wave feminist standout, Rebecca Walker, was the daughter of second-wave icon, Alice

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<sup>23</sup> Dworkin, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Dworkin, 93.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon, 90.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon, 90.

<sup>27</sup> Henry, 144.

Walker.<sup>28</sup> A generational divide amongst feminists grew in the 1990s, as feminists of the third wave sought to fix what they saw second wavers had missed: women's sexual freedom and the inclusion of women of color into the movement.

The news media titled 1992 "The Year of the Woman," as it brought a feminist awakening across the nation. Anita Hill had rekindled the dormant flame of feminism with her sexual assault allegation against then-Supreme Court nominee, Clarence Thomas. Although Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court, the impact of Hill's testimony was seen clearly in the country's Capitol. In the 1992 election, women increased their numbers in the Senate by four, and an additional nineteen in the House, and Carol Moseley Braun became the first Black woman elected to the U.S. Senate. Third-wave 'spokeswoman,' Rebecca Walker credited Hill as her inspiration when she wrote in her iconic essay, "I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave."<sup>29</sup>

Walker had selected these words with intent; she cemented her spot in history and aimed to call the next generation of women into action, creating a generational distinction between Rebecca Walker's third wave and Alice Walker's second wave. By the turn of the 1990s, mainstream feminism had become common ground for women across America. Girls were raised with less patriarchal influence, women's studies education spread and feminist media emerged. Young women of color, many raised under the assumption that feminism was for white women, joined the movement. Critics claimed third-wave feminism was a mindset rather than a political movement, "...younger feminists were all style, no substance; all they had to offer was an aesthetic sensibility rather than a political perspective."<sup>30</sup> The second-wave generation had stereotyped the third-wave women as vain, media-obsessed, and unserious. Third-wave feminists ignored the critiques and pushed past boundaries they perceived as set by the second wave.

Third-wave women lived in a "half-changed world" with access to opportunities the older generation had fought for, like sex education, legal birth control/ abortion access, and workforce protection.<sup>31</sup> A feminist author, Shannon Liss, said "I grew up thinking that women's problems had been solved. I'm starting to see now that women are actually moving backwards."<sup>32</sup> Women were raised with the ideology of girls being able to do and be anything, now in the real world they had to learn the realities of gender bias and discrimination. Trailblazing was not over yet, women still had to fight tooth and nail for every opportunity they could. The women of the third wave were raised under the dutiful mother of feminism, having the struggles and successes of the second wave handed down to them. However, now at the forefront of their own era, young women critiqued the methods and ideology of the second wave, especially women's sexuality and gender performance; these critiques furthered the negative stereotype that second-wave women were unfeminine and uninterested in sex.

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<sup>28</sup> Henry, 145.

<sup>29</sup> Henry, 144.

<sup>30</sup> Henry, 160.

<sup>31</sup> Henry, 160.

<sup>32</sup> Henry, 147.



After the 1990s, the rise in Internet accessibility brought an increase in the global presence of online feminism. Statistics of the time showed that women were equally, if not more likely, online at the same rates as men.<sup>33</sup> Social networks, email chains, and blogs became hotspots for third-wave feminism. Women shed their grunge and androgynous clothes and traded them in for hyper-feminine styles, often oversexualized; “girlie” feminists embraced makeup, pink, and other things stereotyped as inherently feminine.<sup>34</sup> Third wave women “reclaimed” not only the aesthetics of femininity but also the usage of the word “girl” itself. However, as the “girlie” movement continued, it fell prey to consumerism and the male gaze. Women bought into the beauty standards and men profited off this new “feminism,” where girls sought advice on sexuality, womanhood, and fashion from magazines/blogs marketed toward young feminists.

Third wavers turned to technology like the women of the 1960s had turned to consciousness raising groups. Television, magazines, and computers could be found in every home across America. The mass affluence in technological progress brought a standard of beauty for women directly into their homes. Published in 1990, *The Beauty Myth*, written by Naomi Wolf, exposed the connection between mass consumerism and women, showing how the patriarchy had infiltrated women’s liberation and redirected it toward the beauty industry. In mass culture, women were depicted as small, vulnerable, and hyper-sexualized. Paired with the rise of girl-based feminism, women were manipulated into upholding a certain look and demeanor that was supposedly liberating.<sup>35</sup>

In the past, women fought for economic autonomy and financial independence; modern women would attempt to gain their freedom in the form of femininity and sexual appeal. The beauty industry and pornography connect as “beauty pornography” which creates unrealistic standards, capitalizes off women’s insecurities, and ultimately commodifies women’s sexuality.<sup>36</sup> The sexualization of brutal acts on women had a significant impact. Due to this, many women started to believe sexual submission was the key to being desired, which gave them “power.” As third-wave feminists fought to maintain the power balance with men, they had an inner wave divide.<sup>37</sup> While some women adhered to the beauty and former purity standards, others believed that in order to fully achieve equality with men they must begin to act like men. With the upswing of rape culture and video pornography coming into the third wave, sexual justice was far out of reach. Without proper sexual justice for women as a collective, there could never be sexual freedom, leaving women unable to truly be sexually liberated.<sup>38</sup> Technology allowed for advances in porn media, people could easily view pornography anywhere with Internet access.

As porn became readily available and culturally acceptable, a new form emerged in which male domination was ubiquitous, and young men were *over*-exposed to it. This

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<sup>33</sup> Barroso.

<sup>34</sup> Harris.

<sup>35</sup> Wolf.

<sup>36</sup> Wolf, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Wolf, 146.

<sup>38</sup> Stoltenberg, 67.

domination porn made male supremacy erotic.<sup>39</sup> Pornography established a link between sexuality and misogyny in a male narrative: “your penis is your weapon, her body is your target...men are real, women are objects; men are sex machines, women are sluts.”<sup>40</sup> As this pornography became mainstream, the objectification of women became even more concertized as a social norm and made the sexual abuse of women statistically more likely.

Previous research found that about 30% of college-aged men admitted they would rape a woman if they could get away with it.<sup>41</sup> A study done by the University of California found that when the word *rape* was replaced with a description of a brutal sexual act, 53% said they would likely behave in the same manner if they knew they would get away with it.<sup>42</sup> These statistics were used to promote the anti-porn movement, with second-wave Andrea Dworkin still fighting alongside third-wave feminists. Dworkin aligned the “so-called feminists” who support porn with male privilege; women who support the porn industry are token female voices within male-dominated fields like law, journalism, and academia.<sup>43</sup> The third-wave feminists followed the history of the second-wave and remained divided on pornography, with the 2000s bringing a pro-porn chauvinism to the cultural forefront.

The 2005 book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* by Ariel Levy, explored the divide among women and the “sexual freedom” of third-wave feminism. Levy coined the term Female Chauvinist Pig (FCP) to describe this subculture of women.<sup>44</sup> Man-oriented media continued to sexualize women, and FCPs joined in. In an allusion to Rebecca Walker, Levy says of an FCP, “She is post-feminist. She is funny. She *gets it*.”<sup>45</sup> An FCP is neither pro nor anti feminism, instead, they believe that they had no need for feminism because they found a superior way around the patriarchy. In the early 2000s culture continued to grow more dehumanizing, especially with franchises like *Girls Gone Wild (GGW)* which contained women that Levy herself refers to as “bimbos.” The women in this take off their clothes and even perform sex acts on camera, often in exchange for additional camera time from the production team. The crew and production team were predominantly young men; however, Levy made note of several women who worked on the show and encouraged other women to take their tops off. Many mainstream men and women contributed to the popularity of hyper-sexualization and “bimbofication” of women, while FCPs cheered behind screens.

FCPs were typically conventionally attractive women, but they held themselves as too moral to flash the camera, but amoral enough to enjoy others doing it. Some of the FCPs may have genuinely enjoyed the provocative material, while others used their support to gain better social standing within the patriarchy in the form of male validation. However, participating in the rampant sexism was not the only way women fought to gain credibility from men, Levy refers to a second extension of this revolution, what she calls the “loophole” women, who had tremendous success in a male-dominated industry, often at the cost of their femininity and

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<sup>39</sup> Stoltenberg, 68.

<sup>40</sup> Stoltenberg, 69.

<sup>41</sup> Russel, 121.

<sup>42</sup> Malamuth, Haber, & Feshback (Russel), 121.

<sup>43</sup> Dworkin and Mckinnen, 90.

<sup>44</sup> Levy.

<sup>45</sup> Levy, 93.

sisterhood.<sup>46</sup> Loophole women were similar to FCPs, as they aligned with men and felt superior to “girly-girls,” becoming complicit in misogyny. Although, unlike the FCPs, loophole women took on masculine traits and sacrificed conventional appeal to men’s sexuality.<sup>47</sup>

As the new millennia began, there was decline in feminism and the recognition of sexism as a collective issue. The newcomers of this feminism are not the stereotype of previous waves, radical activists, or movements with well-defined manifestos; they are women who have just begun to see the inequalities of society, many of whom did not even use the term feminist to describe themselves. This became known as the “postfeminist” generation, who held the assumption that gender inequality had been primarily solved and there is no need for a current feminist movement.<sup>48</sup> Instead, women understood daily misogyny as an individual issue, thinking that sexism had been fixed by the waves before them.

A variety of North American young women, aged about 12-16, were interviewed to calculate feminism’s decline and the incoming fourth wavers’ refusal to align themselves with the movement. Through the study, girls were asked if they experienced sexism, and if they considered themselves a feminist. Although a vast majority of girls in North America endure sexual assault, harassment, and violence during their high school years, most reject the idea of modern sexism, passing it off as an archaic experience.<sup>49</sup> Yet, when the questions were rephrased, without ‘sexism’ or ‘feminism,’ answers wavered. Many viewed sexism as a normal and personal problem, not the result of systemic misogyny. The issues they faced were rooted in chauvinism, as girls explained their pressure to be educated, well-behaved, and above all, beautiful. One twelve-year-old said, “Girls have to be pretty and skinny and smart.”<sup>50</sup> The expectation that women owe the world attractiveness, combined with the average media coverage of feminists as unwomanly, ugly, man-hating, and “feminazis,” connotated feminism with a negative representation.<sup>51</sup> As model and feminist Emily Ratajkowski claims, contemporary women are expected to be “sexy,” valued for their bodies, and compete with other women over these categories. Ratajkowski writes, “I want to calculate my beauty to protect myself, to understand exactly how much power and lovability I have.”<sup>52</sup> Akin to the girl power of the third wave, this new generation of women present themselves in hypersexualized, “feminine” ways in order to receive power from men.

Struggling with power dynamics, the girls described their method of “controlling” boys via innocent flirting and sexual innuendos. However, when asked if there are sexual double standards, the girls explained, “Some girls will sleep around and they will get called sluts and guys will sleep around and be called cool and studs.”<sup>53</sup> This muddled idea of female sexuality followed from the “sexual liberation” movement, where feminists grappled with the idea of liberation versus exploitation. Emma Watson, and other self-identified celebrity *spokeswomen*,

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<sup>46</sup> Levy, 114.

<sup>47</sup> Levy, 90.

<sup>48</sup> Pomerantz, 186.

<sup>49</sup> Pomerantz, 190.

<sup>50</sup> Pomerantz, 199.

<sup>51</sup> Hall, 880.

<sup>52</sup> Ratajkowski, 22.

<sup>53</sup> Pomerantz, 198.

claim that the choice to bare all is inherently feminist because the woman is consciously making the choice. However, not all personal choices are feminist.<sup>54</sup> The power women gain from “being sexy,” beautiful, and desired is not *their* power. It is a power bestowed upon women, who become “indebted” to men who remain the ultimate arbiter of women’s sexual “power.”<sup>55</sup> The reality of this power is that it’s limited and relies solely on men’s approval that can be revoked instantly. The third- and fourth-wave women continued to present themselves as overly sexual beings, yet they claim to be fully liberated and in control of their own sexuality. Therefore, the questioning of sexual presentation of third/fourth wave women is often met with claims of “slut-shaming.”<sup>56</sup>

Through the third and fourth waves’ individualistic approach to feminism, most criticism is interpreted as a personal attack. Social media promptly weaponizes most critiques of sexualization as slut-shaming. Singer and self-described “activist,” Sinead O’Conner had a publicized debate with Miley Cyrus. O’Conner criticized Cyrus’s oversexualized music video for “Wrecking Ball.” Ironically, Cyrus credited O’Conner’s punk aesthetic as inspiration, but O’Conner’s critique was met with vast amounts of online hate, pointing at her mental sanity. Not only did O’Conner get accused of slut-shaming, but also racism, for not being concerned with black women in the industry.<sup>57</sup> O’Conner was not the only high-profile voice questioning whether the state of women’s objectification was hidden under the guise of taking their power back. bell hooks, established black feminist and theorist, critiqued this new feminism. hooks intended to raise awareness of the sexualized media of African American women today, using Beyonce as an example. However, Beyonce’s fans took to Twitter and reduced hooks to little more than an out-of-touch, prudish “monster.”<sup>58</sup> The “sex-positive approach” was popularized, as women joined topless movements paired with the “reclaimant” of their naked bodies.

As the feminist movement of the 2000s grew, leftist men joined. Not only did men join the movement, but unsurprisingly, many came to dominate it. The popular, “Topless” feminist movement was exposed for being led by a man, who handpicked his activists based on their appearance.<sup>59</sup> However, men continued to “take their place” within the feminist movement. Men had joined the movement and slowly created a male-centric feminism that hyper-sexualized women and framed it as liberation.<sup>60</sup> In *Beware of the Male Feminist*, Nian Hu calls out “male allies” who align themselves with feminists, but remain ignorant to their benefit of a patriarchal society, writing, “Feminism is not supposed to be palatable to men; it is supposed to be threatening.”<sup>61</sup> While the word “threatening” may sound harsh, Hu expands that men should not be comfortable with feminism, they should feel the loss of unchecked power. Women will never escape subordination if they allow men to reinforce gender stereotypes within the feminist movement. Men shaped and commodified women’s sexuality, along with

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<sup>54</sup> Rivers, 72.

<sup>55</sup> Ratajkowski, 47.

<sup>56</sup> Rivers, 34.

<sup>57</sup> Rivers, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Rivers, 36.

<sup>59</sup> Rivers, 84.

<sup>60</sup> Fain.

<sup>61</sup> Hu.

the purity standards, rape culture, and mass media consumption. Then, Gen Z, as a product of the time, formed a highly commercialized and individualistic sense of feminism.

In *the purity myth*, Jessica Valenti outlined the Westernized idea of virginity and its impact on women's sexuality. Trying to settle on a universal definition of virginity has brought a number of issues to the surface. Each definition is "almost always synonymous with women,"<sup>62</sup> as virginity is a concept created and defined by men. The very notion that a woman's resistance to sex is akin to her morality indicates that a woman's value is in her vagina, and that women who choose sex have lesser inner strength than their virgin counterparts.<sup>63</sup> Society's damning rhetoric ranges from religious purity to other societal "dangers," like shame, embarrassment, and suicide.<sup>64</sup> However, these abstinence-focused teachings omit those who create this stigma and why there are no equal expectations for men. Instead, women remain "sexual gatekeepers" who must work to maintain their virtue.<sup>65</sup>

There are several lessons taught to young girls to demonstrate why virginity is important: the rope, Scotch tape, and cup methods. Taught by parents, church, and even public schools, many girls' minds are warped into believing their value is placed in their vagina, or that they exist as a sexual object for their future husband. In these examples, girls are compared to items, inferring that once they have been knotted or used, they lose their "worth."<sup>66</sup> One abstinence book had girls ask themselves, "... are you a 'trashable' Styrofoam cup, an everyday ceramic mug that is easily replaceable, or a valuable priceless teacup?"<sup>67</sup> This rhetoric reduces women to objects, ultimately at the will of man's use or inevitable disposal when they are no longer considered pure or passive.<sup>68</sup> Men are encouraged to objectify women and correlate their worth in their sexual activity, whether it is consensual or not.<sup>69</sup> With the "porning of America," women are sorted into two categories: sluts or not sluts.<sup>70</sup> Even though it is displayed as women's choice, she often has no say in which category she is placed. Women's sexuality is at the will of man, who may rape, assault, and objectify her, all while villainizing her for her unconsenting involvement.

Women are expected to take precautions to avoid rape, receiving blame for being victimized by an assailant. Instead of seeking justice, women all too often fail to report rape to avoid blame and attention. In addition to this, rape culture has become so prevalent that *Cosmopolitan* introduced the term "gray rape"<sup>71</sup> to downplay violent assaults on women.<sup>72</sup> *Cosmopolitan* defined gray rape as "sex that falls somewhere between consent and denial because often both parties are unsure of who wanted what." With terms like gray rape, these

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<sup>62</sup> Valenti, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Valenti, 25.

<sup>64</sup> Gish, 7.

<sup>65</sup> Klement, 2074.

<sup>66</sup> Valenti, 33.

<sup>67</sup> Gish, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Gish, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Gish, 17.

<sup>70</sup> Valenti, 83.

<sup>71</sup> "Colloquial description of sexual intercourse for which consent is *ambiguous*."

<sup>72</sup> Valenti, 162.

violent crimes seem accidental or like miscommunications. However, sexual assault is not a gray area; if someone is unable to consent, then it is rape. Purity and rape culture coexist; if a woman is raped, she is no longer pure, or sexually abstinent, therefore she must be punished.<sup>73</sup> The niche porn category, “humilitainment,” entails women being coerced into sex, who spits, hits, or leaves them stranded and embarrassed as ‘punishment’ for their “deviance.”<sup>74</sup> Not all porn is not aimed at humiliating women, but “in an industry that is constantly looking for the next, bigger, most extreme thing it’s near impossible to argue that porn culture isn’t affecting American society detrimentally.”<sup>75</sup>

Gen Z was born into an era in which the consumption of online media exponentially increased with the most consumed media being pornography. A 2021 study showed that porn sites had more website traffic than most major social media sites and streaming services; porn was more popular than Twitter, Instagram, and Netflix combined.<sup>76</sup> As the porn industry grew, many companies saw profit. “Feminist” porn sites and production companies emerged across the Internet. These sites promoted all kinds of porn, claiming to portray sex acts as mutually beneficial and “female-friendly.”<sup>77</sup> The struggle between pro-porn and anti-porn feminists isn’t new; prominent second-wave, anti-pornography feminist Andrea Dworkin once declared, “If we give up now, younger generations will be told porn is good for them and they will believe it.”<sup>78</sup> Her statement is prophetic as the consumption of porn further catalyzes the objectification of women. This leaves many women today questioning: can porn be feminist?

When a new user scrolls through a porn site, 1 in every 8 suggested videos display sexual violence against women.<sup>79</sup> Even “feminist” porn sites push these videos onto their audience. One feminist porn site declares, “Feminist porn does not eradicate violent fantasy...” and claims that there is a “feminist way” to punch a woman.<sup>80</sup> The effect this has on male consumers is clear. One study found that about 70% of men admitted to committing acts of violence against women during sexual intercourse. Of that percentage, one-third said it was non-consensual, and over half admitted to being influenced by watching pornography.<sup>81</sup> The National Violence Against Women Survey indicated that 64% of reported rape, stalking, and assault were from men in the victims’ lives: dates, cohabitating partners, and even husbands.<sup>82</sup> Porn does not simply inspire violence against women, as pursuit of profitability, the industry has pushed the boundaries of morality.

Blurring the lines between both technology and morality, the porn industry has led to the creation of hyper realistic sex dolls with “anatomically correct positioning” and three openings allowing men to replace real women with “Real Dolls.” For \$6000, men can own their

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<sup>73</sup> Klement, 2074.

<sup>74</sup> Valenti, 86.

<sup>75</sup> Valenti, 86.

<sup>76</sup> Fight the New Drug.

<sup>77</sup> Levine.

<sup>78</sup> Bindel.

<sup>79</sup> Fight the New Drug.

<sup>80</sup> Price.

<sup>81</sup> Price.

<sup>82</sup> Buchwald, 8.

own passive fucktoy to do with what they please.<sup>83</sup> Referring to these dolls as “girlfriends,” men enjoy sex without those “unenjoyable” traits of human women, like opinions, intelligent conversation, and the ability to say no. And how do men treat these ideal, passive women? A Real Doll<sup>84</sup> repairman claims that many dolls sent to him are, “badly mutilated...with breasts hanging off, their hands and fingers severed.”<sup>85</sup> Although these men, who call themselves iDollars, are a small, alternative group, we see that the objectification of women has reached a point where rape culture thrives.<sup>86</sup> By 2010, mainstream female pornographers went through a major change. The *Playboy* bunnies were gone; consumers craved more graphic, violent pornography, leaving behind “wholesome girl next door” for “insatiable fuck objects who appear to crave bondage, anal sex, multiple penetration, and outright abuse.”<sup>87</sup> The continuing spread of brutal sex fantasy and its normalization has turned women into objects of the patriarchy with a rapidly growing rape culture.

A recently published survey by RAINN shows that 1 in 6 American women have been the victims of rape or attempted rape, the most targeted demographic being girls of ages 16-19.<sup>88</sup> Many women feel guilt or embarrassment after sexual assault and force themselves to try to rationalize it. Describing her first sexual encounter, which tragically was rape, Emily Ratajkowski details her own experience. Too scared to speak up, but too young to know any better, she faked her way through the act, writing, “Why did I whimper and moan softly instead? Who had taught me not to scream?”<sup>89</sup> Women too often have been forced to blur the lines between sexual abuse and consensual intimacy. Without validation, many women never speak up about their experiences. Instead of reporting, many women take to social media to share their experiences.

Online hashtag movements like #WhyIDidntReport and #YesAllWomen grew in popularity, allowing survivors to unify and in some cases seek justice.<sup>90</sup> Feminist author Ariel Levy details this rise of rape culture paired with social media in an article, “Trial by Twitter” for *The New Yorker*, which is centered around an underage victim in West Virginia. In 2013, a 16-year-old girl had her gangrape broadcasted across Twitter and YouTube. Embarrassed and ashamed, she waited three days to tell her parents, by then it was far too late for a rape kit.<sup>91</sup> In the era of social media, these three days allowed for a digital footprint to be established. However, the victim also began to resent her online infamy; in a series of tweets, she begged people to let it go and forget it all ever happened.<sup>92</sup> Young boys are recreating the violent scenes they see on sites like Pornhub, furthering the casual objectification of women not only

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<sup>83</sup> Valenti, 87.

<sup>84</sup> The product is called RealDoll and there is an online presence of owners referring to themselves as “iDollars.”

<sup>85</sup> Valenti, 88.

<sup>86</sup> Valenti, 89.

<sup>87</sup> Dines, 110.

<sup>88</sup> RAINN.

<sup>89</sup> Ratajkowski, 54.

<sup>90</sup> Klement, 2076.

<sup>91</sup> Levy.

<sup>92</sup> Levy.

online, but also in real life. Although violent pornography and rape culture are threats to women's sexual liberation, women even lack equality within consensual sex and relationships.

The *guidelines* for being a sexually liberated woman have changed over the years, the new normal becoming heavily "pornified." Research finds that 38% of women, and 13% of teenage girls had experienced being choked during sex.<sup>93</sup> Research shows an intimate partner who attempts nonfatal strangulation is 750% more likely to murder their victimized partner in the future.<sup>94</sup> Perverted fantasy has become acceptable *kink* and formerly "taboo" forms of sex have become mainstream. *Teen Vogue* even ran an issue with a guide on how to have anal sex.<sup>95</sup> In a "if-you-can't-beat-them-join-them" mentality, many women think that having casual sex, similar to men, is breaking the chains of sexual exploitation.<sup>96</sup> However, when many women start to perform and behave sexually like men and forsake emotional intimacy in pursuit of male approval, they lose the meaning of women's liberation. To be fully liberated, women should not have to succumb to men's level, or objectify themselves for male enjoyment. Although many women may get pleasure from casual sex, men largely control women's sexuality, turning women into commodities rather than humans. In order to win male approval, women are stuck trying not to cross the line between slutty and prudish. Being "the chill girl," the one who fucks without feelings, means embracing an individualistic rejection of intimacy. And this individualism has become perceived as feminism itself.

In the last 4 million years there have been two major changes in heterosexual culture. Sex, Gender, and Reproduction researcher Justin Garcia credits the agricultural revolution and the rise of the Internet as the source of these transformations.<sup>97</sup> Technology has brought material advancements but has sown the seeds for more insecurity within relationships. We now have the ability to carefully watch Snapchat scores rise, view read receipts on a text exchange, and stalk using iPhone location sharing and SnapMaps.<sup>98</sup> Labeling it the "dating apocalypse," *Vanity Fair* writer Nancy Jo Sales provides insight into the dating world and dating apps. With seemingly endless options at the tip of a finger, people continuously swipe and enjoy the instant gratification of a new match. As the interviewees explain their experiences, many men enjoy hookups,<sup>99</sup> while the women tell a different story.

While the women keep talking, they share the opening messages commonly received from men on dating apps; most of the messages were extremely sexual immediately with one opening message saying, "Do you think you would like to get choke-fucked, tied up, slapped, throat-fucked and cummed on?" and a standard starting message being "Send nudes."<sup>100</sup> As vulgar as some of the messages are, many of the men proudly hype up their "texting game" and their ability to pull women in as few messages as possible. It's not only men using dating apps

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<sup>93</sup> Emba, 151.

<sup>94</sup> Ketchmark.

<sup>95</sup> Emba, 23.

<sup>96</sup> Emba, 57.

<sup>97</sup> Trupiano.

<sup>98</sup> Trupiano. "SnapMaps" is a virtual map, displaying active users, on the Snapchat app that is visible to other users, unless "ghost" mode is on to disable location services.

<sup>99</sup> Trupiano.

<sup>100</sup> Trupiano.



to have no-strings-attached sex, but many women also explain their tread into hookup culture, and some enjoy the benefits of casual sex. Many women even join in the common male dialogue, such as *Rethinking Sex* where one woman refers to it as “Tinder delivery,” describing how you can pick through the vast amounts of profiles to select the one you end up messaging.<sup>101</sup> She does go on to admit that viewing people as nothing more than profiles becomes dehumanizing and makes the sexual encounter less intimate.<sup>102</sup>

The popularity of choice feminism introduces anti-feminism behavior. The intense pressure of social norms force women into joining the hookup culture, rather than actually having the choice to pick. Attempting to change this normalization without alienating the women who do willingly adhere to hookup culture proves to be difficult.<sup>103</sup> Mapping out a balance of sexuality and feminism, *Rethinking Sex* rejects the notion that hookup culture is truly good for anyone, man, or woman.<sup>104</sup> The increased levels of online dating have given a warped view of freedom. Casual sex without thinking or feeling may be a good idea in the moment, giving in to the instant gratification rather than trying to find emotional intimacy; “We may want liberation today, but we want meaning tomorrow...”<sup>105</sup> The increased usage of social media and the internet has provided wide access to pornography and advanced hookup culture, but it has also created an online platform for women to digitally connect.

The age of social media has paved way for online social movements, like the prolific #EverydaySexism, a Twitter campaign.<sup>106</sup> Many well-known celebrities can be seen using this form of “hashtag feminism” in order to draw public attention to women’s issues, like #bringbackourgirls, tweeted by Hillary Clinton, Kerry Washington, and others, referencing the abduction of Nigerian girls in 2014.<sup>107</sup> These examples of virtual activism have moved to the forefront of the feminist movement. As more and more celebrities focus on their feminist identity as a brand, they use their social influence on spreading awareness without direct involvement. Social media can act as a modern version of consciousness-raising, with women coming from various walks of life all meeting together to discuss personal interactions with misogyny. But social media can also bring an onslaught of harassment, hate speech, and even rape threats into public discourse for women.<sup>108</sup> The online world creates a distinction from reality, enabling people to remain anonymous and post without worry about real-life ramifications.

The prevalence of online misogyny in mainstream media is seen especially with high-profile women, like political figures or activists.<sup>109</sup> As online abuse becomes the daily norm for many women, they begin to use social media as a form for public discourse less and less. A study from 2016 shows that around 80% of feminist advocates using Twitter had been victims

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<sup>101</sup> Emba, 121.

<sup>102</sup> Emba, 122.

<sup>103</sup> Trupiano.

<sup>104</sup> Emba, 61.

<sup>105</sup> Emba, 63.

<sup>106</sup> Rivers, 7.

<sup>107</sup> Dixon, 35.

<sup>108</sup> Dixon, 34.

<sup>109</sup> Lewis, 1.

of online threats or abuse.<sup>110</sup> The imbalance of feminist “advocate” influencers versus average consumers is heightened. There are more followers consuming information from the few, high-profile accounts.<sup>111</sup> The consumers began to rely on the influencer for their activism, of which typically focuses on minor issues within the feminist narrative.<sup>112</sup> In turn, this contributes to the issues of fourth wave feminism: the idea that social awareness is equal effort to direct action, the individualistic approach to feminism, and the illusion of choice feminism.

The global popularity of feminism does not bring about widespread change. Instead, the word becoming commonplace can negate the meaning of the word. As feminism continued to become more prevalent, it became vastly more marketable, with a focus on individual empowerment and professional success becoming a burgeoning form of choice feminism.<sup>113</sup> Gen Z enacts a “call out” or “cancel” culture on social media, brands and celebrities have become increasingly aware of their online presence and have tactfully rebranded.<sup>114</sup> The rebranding of feminism to generate profit can be seen in a variety of examples, like “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” t-shirts or celebrities using the term to gain online popularity. As the fourth-wave women continually contribute to the capitalistic culture and focus on individual acts of sexism, feminism ceases to have a direct impact on patriarchal society and its structural oppression.<sup>115</sup> The era of self-care, body positivity, and consumerism has led to women believing that their ability to make individual choices is inherently feminist. Feeding into the Beauty Myth, the new wave of feminist discourse holds femininity and the female body as a part of their power, instead of reinforcing the idea that women can exist without having to “look the part” of a feminist.<sup>116</sup> On the other side of modern feminism, many Gen Z feminists fight to override the value placed on gender identity that comes from choice feminism, aiming for a trans-inclusionary feminism that rejects the rebranding to avoid past stereotypes.<sup>117</sup> Not all tension is negative, as it provides the ability to critically look at the current wave, and create a unique voice for the generation. But with so many contrasting sectors, and online “activists” becoming the marker for feminist discussion, can the movement create meaningful, direct action?

Amongst the roughly 60% of women who claim to be feminists to some degree, about 43% of them say that feminism has become polarizing.<sup>118</sup> The polarization of the movement is thought to be a production of online harassment, however, it’s not just sexist men. In a study from 2016 around 50% of tweets using “misogynistic language” came from other women.<sup>119</sup> The inner conflict between feminists has been made more prevalent by the increased usage of social media to evoke movements and the instilled fear in women that comes from backlash to online activism. The example of the volatile response from major feminists is the response to

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<sup>110</sup> Lewis, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Dixon, 37.

<sup>112</sup> Day, 6.

<sup>113</sup> McIntyre, 1060.

<sup>114</sup> Day, 6.

<sup>115</sup> Day, 9.

<sup>116</sup> Day, 10.

<sup>117</sup> Day, 11.

<sup>118</sup> Barroso.

<sup>119</sup> Jack Dale / Rivers, 117.

the #FemFuture<sup>120</sup> movement, declared as too white, classist, and city-centric.<sup>121</sup> The lack of intersectionality in current movements is not a rare complaint. Many feminists, advocates, and theorists ignore American-based issues, claiming they “pale in comparison to the obstacles confronting women in many other parts of the world.”<sup>122</sup> The viewpoint that only some women can verbalize their experienced misogyny splits the movement, highlighting the distinctions between women instead of working toward their collective oppression.

With the current climate of online harassment, “radical” feminism aligned with cancel culture, and identity politics, Gen Z becomes “so splintered and lacking in any clear universally agreed goals” that there is no coherent identity for feminists to rally around.<sup>123</sup> Gen Z has experienced vast amounts of trauma before they’ve hit the age of 30; according to research from the American Psychological Association, Gen Z faces more stress than other generations. The list of stressors ranges from immigration to environmental issues, as well as 75% of Gen Z reporting high stress over mass shootings.<sup>124</sup> Through Gen Z’s fight for inclusivity, they also have the added pressure of these political issues; feminism isn’t on the forefront anymore. The feminist movement was trending years ago, with celebrities reclaiming the word and the #Girlboss fad.<sup>125</sup> A “girlboss” refers to a woman who contributes to capitalism, she is the CEO of a company, a Depop reseller, or typically works in the business sphere; instead of ridding women of the patriarchal inequalities worsened by capitalism, being a girlboss encourages women to participate in male-dominated industries. Rather than change the system from the inside, women become a part of the systemic oppression and discrimination, but support is expected because it’s a woman with capitalistic greed rather than a man. But the problem with trends is that they eventually fall off their peak. The new generation is tired and numb, even desensitized, to other major issues.

In order to create social and political transformation, Gen Z feminists need to become a collective, focusing on our big-button issues, like reproductive rights, the wage gap, and the systematic oppression of women. Projecting feminism as a mindset, rather than a movement, allows for casual feminism with no direct action. Instead of resisting feminism due to backlash of previous waves, Gen Z needs to take back the meaning of the word feminist and make it their own. Using social media and technology as a tool, the fourth wave women have access to more than just their own peers, they can communicate with prior feminist theorists, and work toward the revival of the movement. The feminist movement trying to tackle every issue, as well as widening the movement to include men, and fighting on behalf of nonwoman issues, reduces the impact of the movement. For Gen Z to legitimize the fourth wave, they need interconnection amongst all women; cancel culture within the movement and feminism “purity” need to be put on pause. Similarly to the previous waves, Gen Z allows trivial differences to splinter the movement, as well as putting emphasis on non-woman based issues. To revert back to a strong front within the feminist movement, Gen Z needs to work across

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<sup>120</sup> An online movement that attempted to bring the advocacy into reality.

<sup>121</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>122</sup> Henry, 197.

<sup>123</sup> Day, 9.

<sup>124</sup> Bethune.

<sup>125</sup> Goldberg.

issues, like race and sexuality. Instead of breaking off into separate sanctions, like radical feminism, intersectional feminism, inclusionary feminism, anti-porn feminism, ecofeminism, and even Marxist feminism, there needs to be a universal movement. Critique of sisterhood can only be beneficial once there is a true sisterhood, until then it only divides women and allows men to dominate their freedom: personal, political, and sexual. Patriarchal society influences women's choices, commodifies the movement, and controls women's sexual liberation. Women must first liberate themselves before they can focus on the rest of the world.

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