

Selling feminist stories: Popular feminism, authenticity and happiness

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Abstract

By interviewing Swedish feminist activists who sell commodities to serve feminist purposes, this study focuses on how they articulate their engagement and make it intelligible. To untangle how articulations about feminist businesses may stabilise, reshape and challenge feminist values and engagement, we use theories of popular feminism alongside discourse theory to capture its contingencies. The analysis shows that, rather than enhancing sales by the use of feminism, the interviewees articulate an interest in spreading feminism through the sale of commodities. They understand their commodities to be ‘authentic’ and ‘truly’ feminist, thereby distancing themselves from corporations that use feminism to brand their products. However, this aligns precisely with the dominant contemporary corporate branding discourse of authenticity, understood as untainted by capitalism. The interviewees want to provide their customers with confidence, a dominant trait of popular feminism, through the display of feminist expression. A quest for visibility tends to absorb political aspects, which is further illustrated in the expressed wish to avoid an aggressive, provocative or explicitly political address. Understanding popular feminism as a discursive struggle, we conclude that the domination of a happy, confidence-building feminism will render more confrontational and radical versions of feminism less visible.

Keywords

Authentic, branding, discourse, feminist business, popular feminism

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Introduction

Popular feminism is a term that captures the popularity of feminism on social media, where celebrities, influencers and users endorse feminism and reiterate empowering quotes. The term also captures how commodities with a feminist message, such as t-shirts, jewellery and art, can now be found as staples in department store chains. It seems that we are confronted with a 'frenetic landscape of feminist discourse' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 44), which urges us to explore how those who produce feminist commodities articulate such forms of engagement and make it intelligible.

Several feminist scholars have argued that the entanglement of neoliberal capitalism with feminism has 'co-opted' feminism (Eisenstein, 2009; Fraser, 2013). An associated seam of research has explored how media feminism has aided women's internalising of neoliberal norms through values such as empowerment, confidence and responsibility (Douglas, 2010; Gill and Orgad, 2015, 2022; McRobbie, 2020). So-called commodity activism, the conscious consumption of commodities for political reasons, has been argued to commodify feminist expressions (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012), thereby undermining feminist critique, incorporating it into the mainstream and ignoring the need for structural change. It has also been viewed as individualising the feminist movement, making buying a feminist commodity a way to achieve absolution and the go-to practice for social change (Lauri 2021). Analysis of online feminism suggests that it not only relies heavily on self-branding but also provides a space that allows feminism to be more inclusive and reach a wider audience (Crepax, 2020; Mahoney, 2020).

While the above examples show that different studies have analysed how large corporations, media conglomerates and celebrities express popular feminism, and affect feminism and feminist movements, there is far less research examining how feminist activists utilise the market to serve feminist purposes. By interviewing Swedish feminists who run small-scale businesses, the aim of this article is to explore how such feminist business owners make their engagement intelligible, both to themselves and to others. How do they articulate and express feminism in their business endeavours? Who is their target audience? What kinds of change do they want to contribute to, and how? By answering these questions, we hope to shed light on some of the political implications of activists merging feminism with business.

Feminist commodities and feminist business

Making a case for feminism, the environment or the Global South through the use of commodities or brands is a common activity nowadays. From huge corporations like Nike, Coca-Cola and Gillette, down to small do-it-yourself businesses on Etsy (a global online marketplace for small-scale businesses), it seems that everyone has incorporated feminist or other political values into their brands or commodities. This phenomenon has been researched using different approaches within different disciplines: political consumption and consumer power (Micheletti and Stolle, 2008), ethical consumption and identity (Hearn, 2012), radical consumption (Littler, 2009), commodity activism (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012) and brand activism (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In the early 1990s, Goldman et al. (1991) explored how corporations assimilated feminist

critiques of their commercial material by using feminist values in their marketing. The authors argued that feminist engagement thereby became commodified, hence coining the term ‘commodity feminism’. Repo (2020) argued that the contemporary trend of marketing feminist commodities is best understood through the concept of ‘feminist commodity activism’ which arguably captures the entanglement of commodification processes with feminist activism. Such feminist commodity activism risks making consumption the go-to act of activism and, above all, a question of self-branding. Due to its inevitable entanglement with market relations, commodity activism also risks veiling the extent of exploitation in capitalist mass production (Lauri and Bäckström, 2019; Tornhill, 2019).

Thus, corporations making profit from feminism or branding themselves with feminist values have been researched via a range of different approaches revealing several negative implications. Meanwhile, research focusing on feminist activists starting a business to ‘do feminism’ is more scarce. Mahoney (2020) showed how social media, and Instagram in particular, enables the creation of a space for mutual support between feminist activists. Crepax (2020) argued that feminism on Instagram diminishes feminist expressions into postfeminist ideals, but can hold potential by offering spaces for marginalised topics and identities. By interviewing feminist online writers, Pruchniewska (2018) showcased an ongoing renegotiation of feminist values and ideals. Mendes et al. (2019) explore women’s engagement in and experience of online feminism, concluding that the engagement in digital feminism changes the feminist activists’ lives, that there is a huge proportion of affective labour involved and that the use of coping strategies is central to sustaining their online activity.

In one of our previous studies, Lauri (2021) showed, by interviewing feminist business owners, that women’s ownership was frequently in itself understood as feminism; that profit from selling feminist commodities was understood through a gender-equality discourse of equal pay; and that the notion of sisterhood took the shape of support between feminist businesses. While research discussed above has highlighted some of the entanglements of capitalism and feminism, and its effects, we are yet to learn how activists who sell commodities themselves articulate their engagement.

Analytical framework: popular feminism and discourse theory

In attempts to analyse contemporary expressions of feminism, a variety of terms and lenses are used. The term *neoliberal feminism* (Rottenberg, 2018) largely focuses on ‘leaning in’ to balance career and family; and *postfeminism* (Gill, 2007) on repudiations of feminism, as gender equality is understood as something already accomplished. *Popular feminism* (Banet-Weiser, 2018) tends to acknowledge, from a range of political positions, that gender inequalities still exist and thus explicitly espouse feminist values and ideals.

In order to explore how feminist business owners make their feminism intelligible and articulate themselves and their business as feminist, we turn here to Banet-Weiser’s (2018) theorisation of popular feminism and discourse theory. Popular feminism is both

a theory and a description that aims to capture the state of affairs in contemporary ‘popular culture feminism’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In a similar dual manner, discourse theory serves as both an ontological premise and analytical guidance that aims to capture the contingencies of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Together, we use them to untangle how articulations of feminist businesses may stabilise, reshape and challenge feminist values and engagement. The ‘popular’ in popular feminism originates from three different understandings of the word. It is popular in the sense of being visual and circulated in popular media, such as Instagram, blogs and traditional media. It is popular in the sense of having popularity, as in being respected and liked by peers and compatible groups. And finally, it is popular as part of a discursive struggle over power, suggesting that when some versions of feminism become more visible and are placed in the spotlight, other versions and understandings will be less visible (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

We also use Banet-Weiser’s (2018) conceptualisations of the ‘economy of visibility’ and the ‘politics of visibility’ to understand representations of popular feminism (pp. 22–23). Political visibility is an important component for movements and activists in the process of communicating and challenging dominant discourses and is considered essential for social change. Banet-Weiser argues that expressions of popular feminism are highly visible, for instance on social media; but that it is often the visibility in itself that is essential, and consequently she labels it an ‘economy of visibility’. This suggests that the visibility itself is the end goal, rather than being a means towards social change (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In an economy of visibility, the political becomes absorbed and contained in the quest for visibility (see also Mahoney, 2020); in other words, ‘Visual representation becomes the beginning and the end of political action’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 23).

From a discourse theory perspective, we follow Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) understanding of the entire social field as discursive, embracing both linguistic expressions and behavioural practices. We use the concept of articulation (Hall, 1986; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105) to capture how our interviewees articulate their feminist business endeavours and how this articulatory practice positions signs in relation to each other. This reveals how they understand feminism, as well as what other possible understandings are subsequently excluded. Articulation is useful in understanding how different meanings are connected, how new meanings can be ascribed to certain concepts and how such a reshaping of meaning may have different political and social implications. Nodal points constitute central signs in a discourse, from which other signs acquire meaning in a chain of equivalence. Paying attention to nodal points helps us to understand the meaning-making processes and to untangle the constituents of the discourse in focus. Articulation creates meaning by connecting concepts, words and phenomena in chains of equivalence, connecting them in new ways that both create and dislocate meaning (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 93).

The analysis started by localising ‘feminism’ as a nodal point, which in our reading of the empirical material then branches out into two themes that appear to be central to feminist businesses: (1) selling authenticity and (2) providing confidence.

Empirical material

The empirical material in this article consists of nine individual in-depth interviews with owners of small, self-labelled feminist businesses. Inclusion criteria were (1) that the

owners label their business ‘feminist’; (2) that they articulate an ambition to produce social change; (3) that they sell material objects such as clothing, art and jewellery (rather than some kind of service); and (4) that they run a small-scale operation, that is, are sole traders or have only a few employees. The first five participants were selected through an Instagram account promoting feminist businesses in Sweden and the last four through snowball selection, that is, by suggestions from the first five. It was no surprise to learn that all the interviewees used social media (mostly Instagram) and their websites to sell their goods. Seven of the nine interviewees could not live solely off their business, and consequently also had other daytime occupations. The interviewees produce and sell jewellery (4), prints (1), clothes (2), and prints and clothes (2), with feminist symbols or empowering slogans. Six of them designed and crafted their products; two designed their products and outsourced their production; and one came up with the idea of their product and had someone else design and produce it.

Prior to each interview, the interviewee was informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality and their right to terminate their participation at any time; and a request was made to record the interview. To ensure confidentiality, the interviewees are referred to by fictitious names and there are no specific references to what goods they sell. In excerpts where they mention their product, the product name is substituted with ‘the commodity’. They were also informed about the overarching themes contained in the interview schedule: why they started their business, their dreams and goals, feminism and social change, business ethics and competition. In accordance with each interviewee’s preferences, seven interviews were conducted over the phone and two face to face, with an average duration of 50 minutes (31–92 minutes), all in Swedish, recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some quotes have been edited slightly to improve readability, and omissions are marked with [. . .].

Selling authentic feminism

While all the interviews express an ambition to generate change, their understanding of feminism differs. On several of the websites, feminism was described with terms like ‘equality’, ‘empowerment’, ‘love and sisterhood’ and other similar (positive) affirmations. When asked what feminism ‘means to them’ in the interviews, a more nuanced picture emerges. Irene talks about ‘gender hierarchies’, ‘patriarchal structures’ and ‘unfair distribution of power’ and that feminism is a ‘movement or ideological force against that’. Katrina talks about feminism in terms of intersections with other axes of power. Jessica adheres to Swedish gender equality policy when declaring that ‘women and men are to have the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities in all areas of life’ and for Lilly feminism is about ‘human rights’. All of the above connects to different feminist discourses, ranging from radical feminism (‘patriarchy’) and intersectional feminism to liberal feminism (equal ‘opportunities, rights and responsibilities’ and ‘human rights’). The term (creating) ‘empowerment’ was also frequent in several of the interviews, similar to the websites, which we understand as connected to building confidence, further explored below. Perhaps most striking however is that feminism, according to Agnes, Billie and Jessica, is simply being a female business owner, promoting women’s businesses or inspiring other women to start a business. In this understanding, feminism

is not merely a ‘women’s business’, but rather that, as concluded by Lauri (2021), women’s business *is* feminism.

When asked if they considered themselves primarily ‘a feminist or a business owner’, the interviewees are very definite about their feminist identity. Some state that, if they had not been feminists, there would be no business. Agnes argues that ‘no one else could have started a business with this idea’, because it grew out of her activism. Similar thoughts are expressed by Lilly; Irene responds that she ‘has always been politically engaged’ and involved in different feminist organisations, and that her business was ‘born out of being in feminist environments’. Susanne and Billie both declare that they consider themselves far more a feminist than a business owner, and Billie says that feminism ‘always trumps business’. Jessica explains that she has ‘been passionate about gender equality all my life’ and Katrina states that she has ‘always been interested’ in these questions. What can be discerned from these excerpts is that feminist engagement is commonly expressed as being a *precondition* for their business.

Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that large corporations, such as H&M and Dior, add feminism to their brand or a specific commodity, such as t-shirts with ‘Feminist’ or ‘We should all be feminists’ prints, to infuse their brand with cultural or political value to enhance sales. This is quite different from the approach of the small-scale feminist businesses interviewed here, who primarily start at the other end. Rather than enhancing sales by using feminism, they articulate an interest in *spreading feminism* through the aid of a commodity. Katrina formulates it as: ‘It started from the other end: this statement is what I want to do and show – and then someone wanted to buy it’. Lilly says, ‘Gender equality is the goal, not selling commodities’. Simply put, rather than adding feminism to commodities, they are adding commodities to feminism.

One aspect of such a strategy is the close connection between their feminist selves and their commodities. Agnes explains that her business becomes more ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ because it is connected to her as a person, since *real* engagement springs out of the person running the business. She says this makes the business more ‘trustworthy’. Jessica explains that her feminism makes her company more ‘grounded and genuine’ and that she must be ‘genuine in what I do, and not just sell stuff’. This is juxtaposed with her ambiguous feelings about selling commodities and earning profit, which clearly makes her uncomfortable. She also says that she does not want to be misunderstood as inauthentic. Katrina expresses similar thoughts: ‘that it [the feminism] makes it meaningful despite it being about selling stuff’, and Lilly says,

I don’t want anyone to think I’m talking about gender equality to sell my stuff, if you know what I mean? Gender equality is my foundation, and then I just happen to sell commodities.

She continues, ‘Feminism is part of who I am, but business owner is something fun to be’, thus expressing her belief that feminism is connected to the core of her being. Susanne says that her designs always have a deeper purpose and Billie wants her buyers to feel ‘the kinship’, which means that ‘it [the commodity] must come from the heart’. She argues that, the more feminist she is, the better the business will be, and that ‘I feel more genuine, when I do something, and then it shows’ – which she claims also makes people buy more.

By emphasising the ‘true’ and ‘genuine’ aspects of their feminist businesses, and making use of their selves in their businesses, the interviewees are adhering to a dominant contemporary branding discourse of authenticity. Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that contemporary branding is part of a cultural context, a ‘brand culture’ which merges identity, everyday life and affective relationships, underlining that brands are as much about culture as they are about economics (p. 4). We argue that this is even more the case when it comes to small-scale feminist businesses, due to the fact that most of them cannot live off their profits. These small-scale feminist businesses are not trying to sell commodities by means of feminism in the same way as can be found in corporate commodity activism (Littler, 2009; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). Rather, they are largely trying to sell feminism with their commodities. However, they are not positioned *outside* contemporary branding discourse, not least because they are active in the commercial arena, selling similar commodities and utilising similar empowering slogans as the bigger brands. They argue that, by being a feminist and being explicit about it, they make the business more ‘real’ and something that they think their target audience explicitly wants. By describing their business as real, genuine and trustworthy, we argue that they are adhering to a branding discourse of authenticity. Spaces that are commonly and historically perceived as authentic are those that are understood as not commercialised, such as politics (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 10) in general, and, in our case, feminism in particular.

When the small-scale feminist business owners are making their case for authenticity in this context, they are simultaneously aligning with a binary understanding that there can be ‘true’ and unaffected spaces outside the realm of consumer capitalism. Following Banet-Weiser (2012), we understand branding in terms of ‘brand culture’, where culture is understood as harbouring ‘competing power relations and individual production and practice’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 13) and brand culture as something that infuses identity and everyday life and that we are all part of creating and sustaining. However, even when the false binary of in/authenticity is unveiled, subjects still invest in the idea of authenticity, and first and foremost in the authentic self (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 10), since the subject needs to hold onto a belief in authentic spaces ‘driven by genuine affect and emotion’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 5) and unaffected by consumerism.

Thus, the feminist business owners are making a case for ‘authentic feminism’: a sort of feminism in the marketplace that is not contaminated by the market. When adhering to a narrative of ‘authentic feminism’, the contradictions of profiting from feminism seem to make more sense and become coherent. As we try to make the interviewees’ articulations intelligible, it is important to pay attention to the specifics of this cultural space concerning small-scale business feminists. For one thing, there is the previously mentioned notion of trying to sell feminism through commodities, instead of the other way around, which is linked to their economic prerequisites of not making (as much) profit or not (always) being forced/able to make a living out of their business. Even so, it is important to explore what is at stake for feminism when it becomes entangled with market practices in a cultural moment so heavily imbued with a branding discourse of authenticity; a discourse that prioritises the selling of ‘feelings and affects, personalities and values – rather than actual goods’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 7).

Feminist self-branding

Prior to the interviews, we explored the feminist business websites in search of cues to help formulate questions for the interview guide. In this process, it became evident that the business owners were not only describing their products but were in fact committed to describing their own backgrounds as well. These websites include information about their previous work-life, education, history of activism and how they became feminists, and suggest that the business websites are part of branding their business through their personalities and values (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 7). Consequently, we asked the informants about this during the interviews. On this topic, Irene explains that it is important to show that there is a person working with feminist questions behind the brand, and ‘not only selling’ merchandise. Agnes says,

Speaking of culture, it’s very much connected to who runs the business. If I were just a random person without any experience, I think it would be much harder to take it seriously.

Billie thinks it makes the brand more ‘honest’ and that is why ‘me as a person is important to the website, that we present us and the brand’. Molly reflects on the topic in a similar way:

It may sound really self-centred to say this, but I think it sells so well because it’s me. People like to have something from me, you know . . . or I think. [. . .]. If people have been following me [on social media] and like what I write, then they want to have something I created.

Interviewer: Like you have a relationship with them or . . . ?

Molly: Exactly, yes. That I’m already a name to them. [. . .] I’m completely convinced of that.

Agnes moves on to talk about her network and what her personal engagement means for the business:

The people I’m surrounding myself with make everything much easier. I’m a pretty likeable person. If I’d been more of a ‘square’ and harder to like, maybe people wouldn’t like my idea as much. But now I also have the idea so there’s a lot that’s connected to me as a person, which makes everything easier. [. . .] I think it’s very connected to me, it’s hard to think that just anyone could pull this off. [. . .] I know about these things and that’s why it’s important to front me as a person on the website, that we present us and the brand.

The quotes above from Irene, Agnes, Billie and Molly show that they put great trust in themselves as individuals, as well as expressing the idea of themselves as highly significant to their customers. We understand the contemporary branding discourse of authenticity being expressed here as resting on the notion of an authentic and affective relationship with the consumer. Such a relationship shares commonalities with relationships between two people in that they both express personal narratives and emotions (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 8). In a brand culture, working on one’s self-brand is very

important and includes transparency and self-disclosure, especially when it is a feminist self-brand (Pruchniewska, 2018). As Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, practices of transparency are a moral obligation when it comes to authenticity (p. 60). Being true, genuine and transparent about one's feminist history becomes a way to make one's authentic feminism trustworthy and, consequently, sellable.

This idea aligns with Pruchniewska's (2018) findings, who after interviewing feminist online writers about their feminist views concluded that their feminist self-brand needs constant monitoring in order to appear genuine; and to remain sellable, it also needs to be linked to their personal feminist values. The writers who participated in her study declared feminism to be an integral part of their being, similar to how the business owners in our study describe feminism as something that has been with them for a long time. As Pruchniewska (2018) argues, by doing so they are also legitimising their use of feminist values in their self-brand. Thinking with this, we argue that this claim of authentic feminism helps to legitimise our interviewees' ambiguous feelings about selling commodities. As Billie contends, 'It can't just be sell, sell, sell, it has to have some meaning behind it'.

Pruchniewska (2018) further argues that her participants were clear that feminism as such was only to be used in branding by an 'actual feminist', because feminist values are connected to them as individuals. In our case, since the feminist business owners so clearly state their feminism as being a precondition for their businesses, by association, their commodity becomes 'authentic' and true.

Storytelling, authenticity and deeper meaning

When talking about other businesses – in their view non-feminist ones – that use feminism to sell commodities, a differentiation surfaces. Katrina says that feminism brings meaning to her business and that 'it would be difficult and would feel uncomfortable' if it did not. Billie explains that, when it comes to her business: 'There must be some kind of meaning behind [the commodities]'. She continues,

It must give something, like, I've named all my commodities after historical feminists so that you'll learn something. Just a short description, which you might remember. I'm trying to attach meaning to it, not just '199' or something, it will have a story connected to it.

Jessica works in a similar manner:

I've written stories to go with every piece, like everything has a story behind it. It's not just like 'woohoo, girl power!' Every statement has some kind of history that made me do it. Which I hope will help or empower. That's the whole point of this brand.

Hence, they argue that, by telling stories about their commodities, they are adding feminist value to their products. At the same time, they juxtapose both their businesses and their commodities against corporations, which they argue use feminism 'to sell'. Branding as such is commonly understood as attaching extra value, a social or cultural meaning, to a commodity – to create an affective relationship with the consumer. The

extra value in these feminist businesses works to distinguish their products from other commodities by infusing them with *authentic* feminist values. Katrina, Billie and Jessica articulate an understanding that they are giving their consumer something more. As Jessica says, 'This is something more than just selling stuff'. Instead, it is about 'showing what a role model is', and:

Actually, the products are secondary, which is not so economically viable. But still, it's important to me not to capitalise on feminism and instead to try and contribute to something better. That it will amount to something good.

Adding cultural, or in this case political, connotations to a commodity makes it more personally significant to the individual buyer, and it could be argued that a brand is in and of itself 'a story told to the consumer' (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 4). A brand facilitates identification with the product, making it more personal and intimate. Furthermore, brands become a setting for buyers to subjectify themselves as essential to the stories of the specific brand (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The feminist stories they connect to their commodities become part of their claim to authentic feminism: that they are not just taking advantage of it in order to increase their sales. The claim to authenticity is even more evident in statements such as Jessica's above: 'actually the products are secondary', or when Robin says that she is 'very critical towards consumption as such'; while Billie states, 'I'm not actually making these for people to buy'. Katrina says it is 'meaningful despite it being about selling stuff', which puts feminism in the front seat (thus veiling the commercial part, the part that has traditionally been linked to the inauthentic). Lilly, on the other hand, stands out when she says that setting a high price for her commodities raises their value.

To a large extent, the claim of small-scale authentic feminism is expressed by distancing oneself from other, bigger brands. By contrasting themselves against other businesses selling feminist commodities, they are at the same time creating themselves as different and something else. Irene says that she feels provoked by a 'commercial chain store which uses political or feminist statements' because it does not have a transparent or fair production system, and that she wants to be a fair alternative in relation to such companies. She contrasts her type of branding from the bigger companies, because she does not want her Instagram account to look like theirs, 'with perfect pictures'. Jessica also distances her business from bigger companies by saying 'H&M, I would never . . . or Gina Tricot, I would never let them sell my things in their stores'. Since discourse is constituted through exclusion, here we are unveiling a chain of difference (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 127) connected to non-feminist businesses that uses phrases like: non-transparent, unfair production and perfect pictures. In this way, 'authentic feminism' is connected to notions of transparency, fairness and imperfection. Additionally, Agnes says that her specific commodity 'mustn't be too vulgar, but at the same time not too bland' and Billie says that

There was so much plastic or fake material and, you know, as an artisan I want to have authentic materials, recyclable materials, which are much more environmentally friendly than these obscure materials.

The chain of difference is fuelled by notions of the vulgar, the bland, the fake and the obscure. At the same time, their own small-scale business or commodity is represented as a pure, authentic feminist object, and themselves as authentic feminist subjects, hence drawing boundaries around what counts as a real feminist commodity and a real feminist.

The small-scale feminist business owners were ambivalent about making a profit from their feminism and, in some cases, they had ambivalent feelings towards consumption as a whole. In ascribing negative values to other companies which, to their minds, are non-feminist, they are boosting themselves by stressing their own authenticity, thus negotiating their ambiguity and making the illogical unity between authenticity and the market appear logical.

Providing confidence and happiness to all

In this section, we ask: what contribution do these producers and sellers envision their commodities as bringing to feminism; what approaches and strategies do they favour in this endeavour; and who is their target audience? Phrased differently: we are interested in understanding what kind of feminism they say they want to produce by selling their commodities.

Building women's confidence to achieve social change

One of the questions we asked is whether, and if so how, they believe their commodity may contribute to social change. Molly believes that business in itself does not bring about change, but that feminist commodities can 'pep up and give strength to other women'. Katrina similarly argues that by wearing her own commodity she is reminded that she is a feminist and that 'makes her stronger'. Billie states that it 'makes you feel stronger by wearing it' and Susanne says that wearing her commodity contributes to stopping being ashamed of our bodies, which thereby 'strengthens you'. When she meets a customer who is wearing her commodity, she 'can see what it does to them', that they are proud of wearing it. Irene says that she wants her Instagram account to 'endorse girls who do good stuff' and thereby provide 'pep and support'. Agnes says that her commodity is aimed at encouraging feminist discussions and 'creating empowerment for women and girls', and Jessica expresses the hope that those who wear her commodity can find some kind of empowerment through wearing it because 'that's how I feel about it myself [. . .] I feel empowered by it'.

From the excerpts above, we can see that the interviewees expect their commodities to provide pep, support, pride, strength and empowerment for those who purchase/wear them, and some also try to convey such messages via their social media accounts. Both Banet-Weiser (2018) and Gill and Orgad (2022) have argued that a common theme in popular feminist iterations is inspirational messages for building confidence, and we understand the interviewees' talk of pep, support, pride, strength and empowerment as expressions of such confidence-building. Popular feminism discourse expresses the understanding that confidence is an attribute that women and girls often lack but must learn to acquire in order to be successful (Gill and Orgad, 2022). Gill and Orgad (2015,

2022) suggest that the imperative of confidence in western culture, where women and girls are addressed in a seemingly feminist language, is a gendered technology of self-governance inciting women to improve their bodies and selves individually. Promoting confidence, argue the authors, locates the blame for inequality with individual women rather than patriarchal culture. Furthermore, the above examples illustrate a desire to make individuals who follow these accounts and/or purchase these commodities stronger and more confident *in themselves*. The project of confidence-building is rarely articulated in connection to any endeavour or method of going beyond the confidence-building itself. Therefore, it seems as if it is the *display* of feminism that provides the confidence. It should thus be noted that, while the visibility of feminist articulations may be important for encouraging confidence among women in a society that subordinates them, 'it often stops there, as if seeing or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 4; see also Pruchniewska, 2018).

The interviewees articulate an understanding that, because they are true and authentic feminists, their commodities are truly feminist as well, and are thus expected to produce social change. The commodities become 'charged' with feminism by association. In relation to this, one potentially central aspect of what the commodities may produce is confidence through visibility. How are such *representative effects* articulated by the interviewees? Agnes argues that wearing her commodity is 'a statement', something that provides 'a social symbol, to show you've taken a stand'. Jessica says that her commodity enables her to 'clearly show' that 'this is what I stand for!' Lilly started to produce her commodity to 'show who I am'; wearing Billie's commodity, she says, will make you feel you are part of a community. Irene says that she wants her commodities to 'symbolise the struggle for gender equality, sisterhood and feminism' and explains that she has friends who were wearing her commodity when they bumped into other random people wearing the same thing. This 'becomes something that ties you together', like actually saying: 'Hi! I'm a feminist'. According to Irene, this 'may harbour a potential for change'.

While Katrina argues in a similar way to the previous interviewees, she also identifies such visual representations of feminism as a general trend:

It's become important to publicly show that you identify as a feminist. To make a stand that isn't just about talking, but something you show by wearing your feminist [commodities] or feminist symbols and, like, displaying your feminism. That's a kind of trend.

In the quote above, not only does Katrina see the representation of feminism as a trend, she also seems to understand such forms of representation as more valued than 'talking', that is, that visibility trumps verbal arguments. Jessica makes a similar observation regarding the desire to use feminist representations as a marker of identity, saying that people in her social community 'have a really strong need for publicly and explicitly expressing themselves, like, to distinguish who you are'. Agnes argues in a similar way in terms of trends: 'There's a positive meaning in being a bit of an activist, which I don't think was the case a few years ago'. She adds that, if this had not been the case, 'if there was no demand', she would not have started her business. On the same note, Lilly says that

Gender equality has come more into focus over the last few years [. . .], which is positive, for me as well, not just emotionally, and in terms of living conditions, but obviously also for my commodities.

Susanne says that there is a certain target group for her commodity that just keeps on growing and that ‘all those who wear my [commodity], we’re part of a movement [. . .] you buy into a movement’.

The excerpts above illustrate a desire to use feminist symbols and statements to publicly show identification as a feminist. To some, this appears to be a way to distinguish who they are – it provides a basis for identity – and to connect with others of a similar persuasion. Thus, it provides a sense of feminist community. While a desire to buy into a readily available feminist identity is understandable, considering the attraction that popular feminism has developed in recent years, it is unclear, however, whether this carries any transformative potential. If the visibility is spurred by profit, as Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) argue, the visibility itself holds no guarantee of change, such as challenging identity categories or power relations. Picking up on this last cue, the next and final section will focus on how the interviewees talk about their commodities, their social media followers and potential customers.

Producing a non-confrontational, happy and inclusive feminism

In answer to the question: ‘Who buys your commodities?’ Susanne responds, ‘A lot of people buy my commodities. I’ve sold over two thousand and I want to take a welcoming approach where everyone can join in’. On a similar note, Agnes says,

My idea was that my commodity wasn’t just for the ingrained feminist [. . .]. I wanted to reach like . . . posh ladies, and I had, like, this idea that the royal princesses would wear it.

It seems that both Susanne and Agnes envision a wide audience for their commodities. What such an approach means for Lilly’s social media account is phrased like this:

I began thinking I was going to talk a lot about gender equality in my feed for my commodities, and I see a positive response when I do, but at the same time, I don’t want it to be too aggressive.

While Lilly avoids being aggressive, Jessica avoids provocation in order to target a wide audience:

My target audience is not the one who wants to provoke [. . .] It’s rather about pep and empowering [. . .] and I’d rather reach a wide audience who dares to wear it and parade what they believe in, rather than walking around provoking others.

Susanne, Agnes and Jessica express an explicit desire to reach a wide audience. While that may have its benefits, such as providing a broader base for a feminist movement (Crepax, 2020) and offering a supportive space (Mahoney, 2020), it can also silence

radical content. In fact, when trying to persuade a store to sell her commodity, Lilly was denied shelf space because it was perceived as ‘too political’. Lilly claims that this invoked her desire to raise hell, and she responded that feminist symbols ‘aren’t at all political, it’s, like, human rights we’re talking about!’ On the last note, Irene says that she is ‘not that active in debating on Instagram in my company name’ and prefers to ‘push the positive’, and Jessica describes her commodity as ‘rather kind, not like: “I hate all men!”’ and she doubts that anyone becomes ‘particularly provoked’ by her commodity. Agnes argues that you need a combination of what’s ‘positive and what’s serious’ because gender equality is often ‘portrayed in mere black and white’. And also, because ‘who wants to buy sad stuff?’

On the topic of debate and conflicts, Molly says,

I have nothing against conflicts per se [. . .] anger can be a good driving force sometimes [. . .], but I need to be confident that I know what I’m writing about.

Jessica has a similar view: ‘The hard part is to avoid “putting one’s foot in it” [laughter]. It’s quite a narrow path [. . .] so it’s easy to get it wrong’. Katrina says, ‘It’s hard being a good feminist for all and fulfilling everyone’s expectations’. Susanne says she does not ‘write any political posts [. . .] in part because it’s time consuming’, but also because when ‘you take an explicit stand, who do you exclude?’ Lilly, on the other hand, avoids writing about gender equality because she does not want ‘anyone to believe I’m talking about gender equality to sell my commodities’. Similarly, Jessica says, ‘You have a lot of eyes on you . . . like, a feminism that capitalises on it’. Robin says she avoids all political discussion and anything that might be controversial because ‘feminism is really difficult, at least on Instagram’, so she has ‘backed away’ from it because it ‘may affect my business’. She continues,

If you get into any deeper kind of an analysis than ‘Patriarchy sucks!’ [laughter] then there are so many different groups . . . and then you can offend people, so you lose out on it. [. . .] You have to stay on good terms with as many people as possible.

From the above excerpts, we can see a general approach among feminist businesses that seeks to avoid an aggressive, provocative or explicitly political form of address. To Susanne, this is because it is time consuming and risks exclusion, and to Lilly and Jessica it is about avoiding being understood as a sell-out. Jessica, Katrina and Molly also seem to fear appearing unknowledgeable. Susanne, Agnes, Jessica and Robin state that they choose this non-confrontational and positive approach in order to reach a wide audience; as Agnes puts it, to reach beyond the ‘ingrained feminist’, while Robin says it is to optimise sales.

Regardless of their explanations for the soft and non-confrontational approach, it is safe to say that all of the interviewees (except Molly) share an unwillingness to express radical views via their commodities or to become involved in feminist debates or challenge others through their business channels on social media. While Crepax (2020) argues that social media transforms pressing feminist issues into superficial aesthetic play, this analysis suggests that selling feminism through commodities and social media shapes it

into something that focuses on confidence and empowerment with a primarily unprovocative and happy approach. While happiness and confidence are not unwanted per se, this suggests that women and girls need to engage in a project of choosing happiness and self-improvement. There is nothing in the material, however, to suggest that this unprovocative and happy approach also challenges power relations or identity categories.

While the ambition to be inclusive is admirable and understandable, articulating feminism in ways that interpellate a broad range of women and girls seems to require producing a feminism that is 'easy to digest'. Several scholars have argued for precisely the opposite, suggesting that challenging the social order requires highlighting conflict, engaging in protest and becoming 'unpleasant' (Mouffe, 2005). Producing a happy and non-confrontational feminism does not resonate well with such a way of understanding what may bring about social change. Speaking with Sara Ahmed (2017), and her *Killjoy Manifesto*: 'To be involved in political activism is thus to be involved in a struggle against happiness' (p. 255). Picking up Banet-Weiser's (2018) cue on popular feminism as being a discursive struggle, it is not farfetched to suggest that the domination of the form of non-confrontational, happy, confidence-building feminism that is central to these feminist businesses will render other versions of feminism less visible.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how our interviewees articulate feminism in their small-scale businesses. The analysis shows that, rather than seeking to enhance sales by the use of feminism, they articulate an interest in spreading feminism with the aid of a commodity. The interviewees articulate that their commodities are 'authentic' and 'truly feminist' due to the association with their feminist selves, thereby distancing themselves from corporations that use feminism to brand their products. In the process of distinguishing between authentic and corporate feminism, they connect signs such as vulgar, fake, non-transparent and unfair production to corporations, whereas their own authentic and true feminism is attached to notions of transparency and fairness. Such articulations, however, illustrate and adhere precisely to one form of branding; namely, the contemporary branding discourse of authenticity, understood as spaces that are not tainted by capitalism. Consequently, they are making a case for authentic feminism by using commodities that are sold in the marketplace, but not tainted by the market.

The interviewees articulate an interest in providing their customers with confidence, a dominant trait in popular feminism. Such confidence-building relies on visibility, that is, the display of feminist expressions. Our interviews suggest that, as in Banet-Weiser's account, popular feminism's confidence-building is caught up in an economy of visibility, which, in combination with commercial aspects, tends to absorb the political aspects, that is, visibility becomes the end in itself, and not a means to an end.

While the reasons articulated are different to that posed by large corporations, we identify a general approach within feminist businesses that seeks to avoid an aggressive, provocative or explicitly political form of address. One of the reasons articulated is the desire for inclusiveness, to reach a wide audience. However, it seems that articulating a feminism that interpellates a broad range of women and girls requires the production of a feminism that is happy and 'easy to digest'. There is nothing in the material to suggest

that this approach also challenges power relations or identity categories. Understanding popular feminism as a discursive struggle, then, we conclude that the domination of a happy, confidence-building feminism will render other, more confrontational and radical, versions of feminism less visible.

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