Feminism Means Business: Business Feminism, Sisterhood and Visibility

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ABSTRACT

By interviewing self-proclaimed feminists with small-scale businesses who sell feminist commodities, the aim of this article is to understand why and how the market has become an arena for doing feminism and what this can tell us about contemporary feminism. Using theories of postfeminism and popular feminism in combination with Lacanian discourse theory, the analysis shows that feminism is renegotiated into ownership by reshaping the feminist discourse of sisterhood into business support and advice. Furthermore, competition is reshaped into a positive value of expanding the feminist community, and making profit is reshaped into a feminist discourse of equal pay. Business feminism produces an individual, visible, affluent and entrepreneurial feminist subject who does not challenge economic structures or ownership conditions.

Introduction

The reason I started my business is that I wanted to make something beautiful that you can wear and be proud of and at the same time to contribute and take a stand.

The quote above is from Sarah, a self-proclaimed feminist and small-scale business owner in Sweden, in response to the question of why she started her feminist business. Her response illustrates that it is possible to turn to the market to do feminism. Wherever I roam, I get the feeling that I am invited to buy something infused with feminism. Such offers range from large corporations utilizing feminist values in their branding and advertising (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Littler, 2009) to independent businesses selling feminist t-shirts or jewellery. Many of these “offers” are displayed on social media, which has arguably played an important role in the rise and visibility of feminist commodities as it is readily available to individuals and facilitates reaching a wide audience (Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2018a). I find it intriguing that feminists turn to the market to do feminism and decided to explore how this feminism is carried out. Why do feminism and business seem to blend together so easily?

This study focuses on self-proclaimed feminists who run small-scale businesses in order to generate feminist change through selling feminist commodities. By interviewing such business feminists, the aim is to explore why and how the market has become an arena for doing feminism and what this can tell us about contemporary feminism. Why do these feminist business owners see business as a good strategy for feminist action? How do they use the market as an arena for feminist action? What role does social media play in their pursuit of business feminism? What feminist subjects are produced in this nexus of feminism and business? Meeting this aim will thus address the political implications of a fusion between feminism and business, as well as broaden the scope of theories of popular feminism.
Feminism’s relationship to markets has been studied in various ways. Feminism has been described as both co-opted and de-politicized by contemporary neoliberal capitalism (Eisenstein, 2009; Fraser, 2013), rendering feminism as such unnecessary (McRobbie, 2009). Such processes have been discussed in terms of postfeminism (Gill, 2007, 2017) or popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018b), indicating that these versions of feminism are difficult to distinguish from conventional popular culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018a) or branding strategies (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Other aspects of such processes of neoliberalization include the individualization of the feminist subject (Rottenberg, 2014), who has become highly independent and self-interested (Oksala, 2011). This is understood as a form of governing through the internalization of a neoliberal version of ideals such as empowerment, individual responsibility and self-esteem (McRobbie, 2009). Roberts (2015, 2016) coined the term “transnational business feminism” to describe how feminism and feminist values are deployed in the financial business to generate profit (2016, p. 69). With a specific focus on “gender lens investing”, she discusses its potential and warns that these initiatives may enhance the view of the market as the go-to cure for gender inequalities, which also strengthens the hegemonic position of neoliberal, finance-led capitalism and in turn hinders the work of grassroots feminists. She raises concerns that this tendency turns businesses into gender experts and principal knowledge producers, whilst also (re)producing an essentialist understanding of gender (Roberts, 2015). While I share some concerns with Roberts, I use the term “business feminism” to denote self-proclaimed feminists who run small-scale businesses and sell commodities with the ambition to produce feminist change.

Self-proclaimed feminists turning to the market have not been studied to the same extent as large corporations utilizing feminist values. In one of such studies, Pruchniewska (2018) reveals a constant need for the feminist online writers she interviewed to negotiate between work and feminist ideals. In an adjacent study, Favaro and Gill (2018) interviewed producers of women’s online magazines and found that producing popular feminist content accompanies a rebranding of feminism, centring on individualism and personal choice that can incorporate anything, with no demands for action. Duffy and Hund (2015) show how the online craft workforce heavily relies on self-branding, which may conceal both the labour and monetary prerequisites for such an endeavour. Crepax (2020) explores “Instagram forms of feminism” and argues that digitalization reduces feminism to postfeminist expressions but at the same time creates new spaces for renegotiating marginalized identities and issues. Mahoney (2020) contends that Instagram holds both potential and limitations when it comes to feminist activism. Feminism on Instagram is compelled by factors of a visual economy such as algorithms that promote pictures within the prevalent norm. However, it also offers a space for sharing and support between feminists.

Next, I will present the analytical framework used for understanding business feminism, including theories of post- and popular feminism and psychoanalytical discourse theory. Then, follows a section of method and empirical material before the analysis: “The fantasy of feminism as business” starts. This section is divided into five themes. The article ends with a concluding section, where I sum up the analysis by returning to the aim as well as discuss implications of business feminism.

**Towards an analytical framework for understanding business feminism**

How feminism and feminist actions are regarded in a specific time and place is shaped by the contemporary discourses that provide a framework for understanding them. This also works the other way around: how feminism and feminist actions are performed shapes the norms and discourses of feminism. Therefore, the hegemonic understanding of feminism constitutes feminist subjectivity and actions. I take my starting point in the assumption that feminist actions affect and possibly re-articulate the meaning of social change and, thus, the doing of feminism. The term “doing feminism” captures the practices and strategies feminists use in order to achieve the desired change in society and everyday life. Because I focus on business feminism—the why and how of feminists choosing the market for doing social change—I use theories of popular feminism and
postfeminism in combination with psychoanalytical discourse theory, where the former helps me approach the how, and the latter, the why. I argue that this combination will serve as a productive analytical tool for unravelling the entangled discourses of feminism and business and to better understand the hold of contemporary popular feminism.

Postfeminism (Gill, 2007, 2017) and popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018a) are two somewhat different but adjacent analytical concepts that attempt to describe and capture processes of contemporary neoliberal feminism.

Gill (2007, 2017) understands postfeminism as a “sensibility”, both a critical object and an analytical tool which helps render visible the gendered dependencies of neoliberalism. Postfeminism as a sensibility encapsulates not only the way in which it is “created, expressed and circulated, but also received and reproduced” (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2019, p. 2). Gill (2007) argued in 2007 that postfeminism entails a shift from objectification to subjectification and a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment. Ten years later, Gill (2017) claims postfeminist ideals to be hegemonic, further elaborating upon the “psychic and affective life” (2017, p. 618) of postfeminism and the postfeminist subject. From these cues, my study focuses on the “structure of feelings” of postfeminism (Gill, 2017, p. 620): expressions of self-confidence, self-esteem, insecurity and positive sentiments, and the regulation of feelings.

Following Gill and her understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility, Banet-Weiser contends that contemporary postfeminism has endorsed and paved the way for popular feminism, a feminism that is connected to “media visibility, circulation and affective embrace” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 2). Banet-Weiser distinguishes between postfeminism and popular feminism, arguing that the latter does not simply replace the former; rather, they exist alongside each other and mutually constitute one another (2018a, p. 18–20). The popular in popular feminism stems from three different meanings of popular: media visibility, its attractiveness to a lot of people, and as a struggle over meaning (Banet-Weiser 2018a, p. 6). Where postfeminism is marked by its repudiation of feminist politics, popular feminism “explicitly embraces feminist values and ideologies and is dedicated to recognizing that gender inequality still exists” (Banet-Weiser 2018a, p. 20). However, both postfeminism and popular feminism are shaped by the same affective politics: “entrepreneurial values, resilience, gumption” (Banet-Weiser, 2018a, p. 20). Particularly vital for my analysis is Banet-Weiser (2018a) argument that popular feminism is structured by an “economy of visibility”. Political visibility is essential for political movements since it makes possible the rendering of productive social change, what Banet-Weiser calls “a politics of visibility” (2018a, p. 22). However, popular feminism is structured by an economy of visibility, where “visibility becomes the end rather than a means to an end” (Banet-Weiser, 2018a, p. 23). Both Gill (2017) notion of postfeminism as a sensibility and Banet-Weiser (2018a) elaboration of popular feminism structured by an economy of visibility provide analytical insights to disentangle the discourse of feminist business. Gill argues that the use of sensibility offers something more than discourse or ideology since it goes beyond a focus on language and offers a way to capture the affective (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019). However, I argue that psychoanalytical discourse theory offers a more productive way to capture the affective since it offers analytical tools and language to disentangle affective elements such as desire and enjoyment. This, I contend, is crucial in order to understand why a turn to the market seems so appealing to the feminists in this study. “The market” should be understood as a hegemonic discourse built on the idea of supply and demand as something naturally regulating itself. Such idea of the market includes not only private business but also the state, social entrepreneurs, NGOs, organizations, etc. (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2013).

Utilizing the discourse theory concept of fantasmatic logics (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) offers a way to capture why certain norms and practices attract and grip subjects, as well as understanding the force that renders those practices self-evident (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 145). In other words, it may provide answers to why starting a feminist business seems so alluring and the ways the subject becomes drawn into such business logics (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 134). Fantasmatic logics build on the Lacanian understanding of fantasy and the subject as a subject of lack due to the intrinsic limitations of language. Language can never fully capture our identity, and this gives rise to
the sense of a lacking subject and of lost enjoyment, which in turn produces a desire for wholeness (Lacan, 1977). The subject tries to conceal this constitutional lack by identification with different object causes of desire, such as political ideologies and subject positions (Stavrakakis, 2011, p. 69). Building on the premise that desire is insatiable, the object of desire will never fulfil the lacking subject. In turn, fantasy structures desire and aids in covering this constitutive lack, thus helping to sustain the promise and pursuit of wholeness (Glynos, 2011, p. 72). Fantasy is not to be understood as false consciousness or an illusion, but rather as something that conceals or subjugates the political characteristics of a practice (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 145) and presents conflicting elements in ways that make them seem logical, and thus difficult to reveal (Howarth, 2010). From this perspective, an analytical focus on fantasies is relevant when it comes to understanding political identity since it plays a substantial part in collective mobilization and political desire (Glynos, 2011; Stavrakakis, 2007). Psychoanalytical theory rejects a binary division between society and the individual and does not favour structure over agency. Instead, it works on the supposition that the subject cannot be viewed as separate from the social (Healy, 2010). Hence, psychoanalytical concepts are helpful in teasing out the entangled relationship both between subjects and social fantasy and between language and desire.

To approach fantasy in my empirical material, I will focus on fantasmatic narratives, which can be distinguished by two main strands. Firstly, the occurrence of unity between conflicting elements (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 147). One example in my material is the demand for both business growth and ethical production, which are not mentioned as conflicting elements but to me seem to strive in two different directions. Secondly, if this tension in the narrative escapes scrutinization by the public eye (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 148).

**Method and empirical material**

I conducted in-depth interviews with 10 business owners aged from their mid-20s up to 40 who label themselves and their businesses “feminist”. The selection of interviewees was based on the criteria that the business was started from a feminist standpoint and with an ambition to generate social change. They were also chosen on the basis that they sell a material product rather than their expertise (e.g. gender consultants). The interviewees sell jewellery, art/prints or clothes, some only one commodity, and others a variety. Jewellery is commonly designed in the shapes of various feminist symbols, the female body or female-related activities. The art/prints consist of feminist icons, body-positive themes and/or feminist statements. The clothes are printed with feminist statements.

I found five of my interviewees through an Instagram account promoting small independent feminist businesses in Sweden. I contacted them via email or direct messages on Instagram. I ended my interviews by asking for suggestions for additional informants, so the other five came from snowball selection. Most were eager to participate but a few were hesitant and wanted to reflect on the questions and themes of the interview before they accepted. A common reaction from the more hesitant was that their business was too small to be of any interest or that the business was merely a part-time endeavour. Three of the 10 worked full time with their business, of whom two said they were able to make a living out of it; one had an employee and the other was in the process of hiring. The third got by through a stipend. Seven had other daytime occupations, either waged labour or studying, and ran the business as a side job. All of them sold most of their commodities through their own websites; however, two sold through other avenues (stores or websites). The first two interviews were conducted face to face, the rest over the phone. Switching to phone interviews was done because the participants preferred it, due to flexibility and time issues. Before the interviews, I emailed the participants about the study, explaining what types of question I was going to ask and requesting permission to record the interview. The interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes and centred on questions about why they started their business, their dreams and goals, feminism and social change, business ethics and competition. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and
recorded and transcribed verbatim. Feminist business is a small niche, and to avoid identification I have given them fictitious names, avoided explicit descriptions of their commodities and details on who sells what or own a shop. In quotes where a specific commodity is mentioned, I have replaced it with [the piece].

The transcribed interviews were carefully read through numerous times together with the analytical tools, searching for recurrent expressions. This crystallized five overarching themes. Every theme was then processed in an iterative mode between theory, using the analytical tools of post- and popular feminism as well as fantasmatic narratives, and the research questions before they reached their final form.

The fantasy of feminism as business

Made by the market

To my straightforward question: “Why did you start your business?” Emma replied: “I made a [piece] for my own use, because I wanted one […] and then it began to spread”, and Veronica said: “It got bigger, and when there was more money involved I started a business, not because I wanted to but because I had to”. This was a commonly striking story told throughout the interviews, that starting a business was not intentional or, as Marie phrased it: “It was very much something that happened by chance”. After they created a feminist t-shirt, jewellery or art for themselves and made it visible on Instagram, friends and followers wanted to buy their products and interest increased. Reactions like “I want one too! Where can I get hold of that? Can I have one too?” (Sarah) were common. Their visibility on Instagram seems to have started a powerful chain reaction. Being accessible through likes, re-posts and followers is key to the popularity of products (Banet-Weiser, 2018a). The interviewees met the growth in followers and their desire to buy the products either with a positive response: “Damn, I should sell this!” (Sarah), thus viewing it as an opportunity, or in a more hesitant way, regarding it instead as a constraint or necessity: “I need to start a business because the Swedish Tax Agency believe I should have one” (Erica). Contemporary neoliberal society values and embraces ideals of individuality, entrepreneurship and empowerment through economic prosperity (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014), and seizing the opportunity to create a business fits with such values. It may also be argued that, within contemporary neoliberal logic, the boundaries that separate business from social change have become blurred. This is well illustrated in the growth of ethical consumption (Littler, 2009), commodity activism (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012) and social entrepreneurship (Augustinsson, 2016). The language, tools and public acceptance of merging business with social change are already in place in public discourse, which helps us to understand the interviewees’ responses. The fact that individual engagement seems to have topped collective political engagement in social movements further helps to understand the interviewees’ “automatic” engagement in a business (Gilbert, 2013).

Understanding starting a feminist business as an opportunity or a “possibility too good to pass up” (Sarah) thus tells us something about the proximity between a popular feminist subjectivity and an entrepreneurial one, and how smoothly the two can merge. Despite the hesitation of some interviewees about starting, running and learning the know-how of business, expressed as: “I was very hesitant, and really scared and sceptical about the idea of starting a business” (Marie), none of them seemed to have considered the possibility of opting out. It should be noted that the interviewees were chosen because they had in fact started a business, but in the interviews, none of them reflected on the possibility of not doing so.

As Banet-Weiser (2018a, p. 9–11) argues, popular feminism commonly materializes as visual media on social media sites like Instagram, providing an accessible platform for its circulation, and thus incorporating it into an economy of visibility (see also Mahoney, 2020). In this way, popular feminism is absorbed into a feedback loop; the more visible it is, the more popular it becomes, building on the logic of constant growth. The economy of visibility builds upon a “specific kind of
visibility, one that is easily economized and bounded up by corporate logics and desires” (Banet-Weiser, 2018a, p. 25), where the visible often becomes the easily commodified, which helps to explain how their personal feminist pieces effortlessly turn into commodities. At some point, the interviewees felt the urge to make their products visible to their friends and followers on Instagram. Driven by a desire for visibility, to “make a visible statement” (Emma) and to “dare to show feminism” (Hanna), they arguably become absorbed into an economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018a), which simultaneously both feeds off and produces a desire for (more) visibility. Being visible and getting positive responses in the form of likes, encouraging comments and re-posts on Instagram, I argue, produces enjoyment and a sense of wholeness which helps to understand what grips the feminist subject into the discourse of business.

The interviewees were very definite about their feminist position and stated that, without their feminism, there would not be a business. Sarah says that no one but her could have come up with this idea, since it grew out of her activism. She continues: “It would not exist otherwise. Feminism is the idea. The business is this”, stating that the business is feminism. Feminist engagement is thus expressed as a precondition for the business, but at the same time, feminism and business merge into one.

The politics and economy of visibility

During the interviews, I asked about their political engagement besides running a feminist business. Emma, Sarah, and Jennie were currently involved in non-profit organizations, while Veronica, Marie, and Erica had been engaged in the past. The others had never engaged with a political organization. When asked why she thinks feminist commodities are so popular, Anne reasons:

With the current backlash and everything that’s happening in the world, with an ever-growing right-wing movement it’s important to show, like “this is what I stand for”. Not just sitting in a group or getting engaged in a political community, or whatever, like marching on a demonstration with a placard. You want to make it visible in everyday life.

Anne argues that “showing it” and taking a visible stand in everyday life is more important than being engaged with a political community. She continues by describing her own feelings about wearing feminist commodities, and says “I feel empowered by it […] I can clearly display what I stand for”, once again pointing to the importance of visibility. Veronica explains: “It’s become important to show that you identify as a feminist. To take an active stand, not just talk about it but to actively make your feminism visible”. Veronica is highlighting the fact that visibility trumps talk and that visibility in itself is regarded as taking action. Likewise, Hanna says: “feminist commodities are important, so that people dare to show they’re feminists, and not just saying it”. Visibility is also regarded by Hanna as taking action and is expressed as doing more than just talking. During our interview, Hanna repeatedly accentuates the importance of feminist visibility through her motto: “Visibility is key to being heard”, and thus efficiently summarizes the popular feminist desire for visibility.

In digitalized neoliberal capitalism and culture, “the demand for a visibility politics competes with an economization of visibility” (Banet-Weiser, 2018a, p. 24). From such a theoretical cue, it can be argued that, in an economy of visibility, feminist action and community activism (the politics) becomes absorbed into the quest for visibility in itself, and thus the commodity and its visibility become the politics. In an economy of visibility, visibility as such is not the bearer of politics; instead, the commodity becomes the politics, “the politics are contained within the visibility—visual representation becomes the beginning and the end of political action” (Banet-Weiser, 2018a, p. 23). From this perspective, we can understand the claim that visibility is action since the commodity itself incorporates the feminist politics.
The enjoyment of feminist belonging and sisterhood

The enjoyment of visibility is not only visibility per se but enjoyment of feminist visibility. Emma describes wearing feminist commodities like armour: “You’re not just shouting it out, instead you somehow wear it like armour”. A feeling of protection through making your feminism visible is a recurring topic in the interviews. Anne also refers to wearing the commodities as “armour” and Hanna says that she “arms people with weapons, but kind, feminist weapons”. During our interview, Veronica is more hesitant about the potential change that feminist commodities can bring about and says: “I don’t think commodities lead to social change”. However, the day after our interview, she published a statement on Instagram clarifying that she does truly believe in the power of feminist commodities:

They are feminist weapons. Looking down at my pretty silver pieces with the female symbol, I feel happy and empowered, it is a symbol of what I stand for and a reminder of the struggle and of sisterhood. It is a clear statement to society, a signal of my opinion, a conversation starter and creates feelings of belonging and safety for those who see you.

These commodities, according to Veronica, bring about feelings of happiness and empowerment but also strengthen the notion of sisterhood, as well as feelings of belonging and safety. Like Veronica, Emma also refers to “a spirit of sisterhood and belonging” when talking about wearing and creating feminist commodities. Apart from empowerment and doing something for the feminist cause, which are mentioned by all the interviewees as enjoyable elements of feminist business, popular feminist visibility seems to be imbued with the enjoyment of protection, belonging and sisterhood.

Popular feminism, absorbed into an economy of visibility, produces a desire for visibility which in turn gives rise to feminist enjoyment: feelings of community, of taking a stand—confirming a feminist subjectivity. The visibility of popular feminism arguably creates and paves the way for business feminism as a logical path towards social change and as a way to become incorporated into feminist sisterhood. How does this work?

As mentioned earlier, fantasy is what structures desire (Glynos, 2011) and is sustained by fantasmatic narratives. The popular feminist desire for visibility, inherent in popular feminism, is thus arguably structured by the fantasy of feminism as business. Feminism as such, by embracing the values of community, sisterhood and political struggle, is united with the business values of growth, competition, individuality and entrepreneurship. Due to the overwhelming public popularity and acceptance of feminist businesses, as well as governmental support for social entrepreneurship and social innovation, it clearly resists official public disclosure.

In sum, the fantasy of feminism as business is fuelled by the enjoyment of feminist belonging and sisterhood. In order to sustain the fantasy, feminist values of sisterhood need to be united with the business values of individuality, competition and profiteering from feminism. As the following analysis will show, the fantasy of feminism as business is sustained by a fantasmatc narrative of sisterhood as well as a (re)negotiation of feminist values.

Competition, feminism and sisterhood

Beginning with the fact that business entails an element of competition, I asked whether competition occurs and, if so, how it is experienced and handled.

“I’m the only one doing [this piece], so I have no competition, no one is doing exactly this”, Sarah explains, echoing the answers of Hanna and Tina. Erica claims that “it’s zero competition” and Joanna that “there is no competition, at least not from our side”. In answer to the direct question about competition, it seemed to be a non-existent phenomenon and was explained either by the uniqueness of their product or as something they did not engage in. Although they sell similar products to one another, they each refer to the uniqueness of their particular t-shirts, jewellery or art to explain the absence of competition.
Despite their claims of its absence, narratives of competition surface later in several of the interviews. Sarah expresses concerns that another feminist business owner “would steal my idea” when she found out about it and she explicitly told her “you can’t do this, I’m just getting started, so you just back off”. Hanna tells a similar story, saying: “it’s a bit sad, they should do their own design”. Anne told me that an established feminist business created a design that, in her understanding, was too similar to hers: “yeah, ok, but do you really have to do it exactly the same? I felt, you know, like a sting”.

These contradictory stories about competition are interesting. Apparently, competition gives rise to feelings of sadness, resentment and disappointment. What can such feelings of discontent say about their expectations of feminist business? On the one hand, a reasonable interpretation is that they hold feminist business to a higher standard than regular businesses. Against such a standard, there is no room for competition, expressed in their stories as something that is both unexpected and unwanted. On the other hand, it can also be understood as a negotiation of what competition means.

Hanna elaborates upon the matter of competition and the stealing of her design: “you can’t claim to own the feminist symbol” and also that: “it’s all good, it contributes to the struggle, so that’s just great!” It seems that Hanna is expressing an understanding of “the more the merrier” when it comes to the feminist struggle. Since feminist businesses are perceived by the interviewees as part of the feminist struggle, it becomes expected to welcome competition, because it is an enlargement of this struggle. Anne argues:

at the same time, you know when I felt “what the fuck?”, I don’t want to feel that way. Because, you know, she has to be able to do her thing. I mean, I don’t have any patent on those things. It can also be a compliment.

Both Hanna and Anne make it clear that they cannot own or trademark feminist slogans or symbols, which reveals yet another issue when it comes to merging feminism with business. Where more traditional businesses can protect their designs, feminist businesses have to rely on trust. Marie believes that it is best to be open about negative feelings concerning competition, and tells me about a situation where:

we were selling on a market recently, and me and a friend started comparing what we’d earned during the day. Afterwards, we decided not to talk about money anymore, since it’s no good. We shouldn’t compare profits, we should support each other. It felt good when we took the decision not to talk about it. At least we talk openly about the risk of being competitors, and we don’t want that, we want to support one another.

Marie’s statement expresses unease about combining the feminist value of support with the inherent competition of a commercial business. The justifications and negative feelings concerning competition are handled with ambivalence. A competitive mode seems incompatible with their feminist position (cf. Gill, 2016). Even so, competition can be perceived as a good thing, as contributing to the feminist struggle because it adds yet another business to the feminist cause. In more theoretical terms, in order to sustain the fantasy of feminism as business, the incompatible values of business and feminism are veiled by a reframing of competition. In order to render feminist business intelligible, the inherent mode of competition in business needs to be concealed to sustain the feminist notion of sisterhood.

The sisterhood of business

Emma tells me that running a feminist business is “more about sisterhood than competition” and that the feminist business culture is infused with “a spirit of sisterhood” which brings about feelings of “belonging and community”. Joanna calls it plain and simple “togetherness”. Veronica explains:

it’s a very supportive climate, my experience is that you support one another. There’s a lot of positive comments when someone launches a new product or publishes something new, yeah, it’s, like, supportive.
Comments and likes regarding products and posts on Instagram, and getting positive attention are read by Veronica as support. Getting positive comments and likes can be understood as being absorbed into an economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018a), which produces a desire for more visibility. Anne elaborates upon the culture of feminist business:

I mean, it’s like … sisterhood. You help each other and move away from competition between women and shaming women who claim their space. Everything’s about, you know, sisterhood. To feel safe with your sisters.

Sisterhood, in Anne’s quote, signifies a safe space for women, a space without shame or competition (cf. Mahoney, 2020). Sisterhood as such is understood as visibility and support, a non-competing environment, and help which, I argue, bring about the enjoyment of belonging, community and safety.

Veronica takes part in different networks of feminist business owners: “we have contact all the time” and “we give each other tips”. Marie takes part in a feminist business network that “meets regularly” and discusses “different things regarding running a business and [we] support and pep each other”. Emma says that she was “very positively surprised” by all the help she has received from other feminist business owners and explains that this support:

contributes to a stronger identification with being a feminist business owner. It’s a strong, like pep spirit, between those I’ve met. Where you support each other, believe in one another, see each other’s strengths, in this forum you lift each other up. Despite the fact that you’re actually competitors.

According to Emma, being part of these feminist business networks confirms the identity of being a feminist business owner. From my interviews, it is clear that business feminism offers a space for sisterhood in the business arena. Turning to the logics of fantasy, the focal point of feelings of discontent sprang from competition in the interviews, rendering a fantasmatic narrative of sisterhood. The fantasmatic narrative of business sisterhood can be understood as veiling the negative feelings of competition, while at the same time enabling the enjoyment of feminist sisterhood. The fantasmatic elements cover the inherent clash between business and feminism through the enjoyment of belonging, community and safety and thus shape and sustain their feminist subjectivity.

Running an ethical business
Being feminists, producing their commodities in an ethical way is extremely important, they all explain to me since none of them want to be part of exploiting either women or the environment. Some of the practices described as ethical entailed locating the production in Sweden (Sarah, Jennie, Hanna, Veronica), using recycled materials (Hanna, Jennie, Erica) and being transparent and knowing all the steps of production (Tina, Emma). Furthermore, using eco-labelled packaging (Tina), Fairtrade materials (Emma), and producing on-demand (Anne) are other practices they find important. Emma argues that “a feminist commodity produced by exploited people, or maybe children, would be awful”, and Anne says:

It would be a disaster if you, like: “I’m empowering women but I don’t care about the women in India at all, the ones working for minimum pay, or have really bad working conditions,” like “so it’s only the women of the west who’re important?” I mean, that part is super important. […] It’s really important that you don’t do stuff on others’ behalf, that would go against the whole purpose.

Both Emma and Anne connect the terms of production to a feminist purpose. In this way, ethical and/or environmentally friendly production is understood as a way of doing feminism. The effort put into ethical production also seems to be a way of negotiating the sense of discomfort around profiting from consumption. Erica says: “actually, I’m very critical of consumption. Which makes it damn hard to run a business and produce stuff”. She says that, instead: “I like to contribute by recycling and not selling anything newly-produced”, which I interpret as a way of handling the feelings of discomfort about consumption. Emma thinks it is a problem that “you’re encouraging consumption” and deals with it by “trying to redirect the focus towards sustainable consumption”.

Ethical production becomes attached to feminism, and putting effort into this aspect becomes a way to stay true to one’s feminist values. There seems to be no room for compromise in this area, it almost becomes a prerequisite for pursuing a feminist business. Adhering to ethical production can also be understood as a way to distance oneself from the dirty side of business and to manage feelings of discomfort about running one, as well as clarifying what feminist business means.

**Feminism means business**

In addition to competition, another inherent premise of business is making profit. Even though most of the interviewees are not making any big profits in their business, the feelings attached to profiting from feminism are expressed with ambiguity. On the one hand, most of them are proud of their business and emphasize the joy of doing it, as well as expressing it as an economical privilege to be able to engage in business. Hanna says: “I think it’s awesome and you just have to believe in yourself”. Emma explains that running a business has been “worth-while” and makes her “believe in herself”, and Anne that it makes her “feel empowered”. Read through Gill’s understanding of postfeminism as a “structure of feeling” (2017, p. 620), these feelings about running a feminist business are closely connected to postfeminist ideals of empowerment and self-confidence, which connect ownership with feminist sentiments and emotions (see also Crepax, 2020).

On the other hand, a more complicated relationship towards running a business emerged when interviewees were asked questions about profiting from feminism. When summarizing the best thing about running a business, Veronica says: “the best thing is that it feels meaningful, despite it being about selling products”. Sarah seems compelled to comment on profiting from feminism: “it doesn’t have to be wrong” and continues: “of course, you can run a business at the same time as you work for social change”. Merging feminism with business is not self-evident, but needs to be vindicated. Anne points out that it is important to:

not just make personal profit. […] To be really genuine about what you do, and not just flog stuff. It’s important to me, so it’s not about profiting from feminism, but about contributing to something better.

Running a feminist business is expressed as contributing to something better and generating social change without gaining personal profit. Making profit is counterposed with contributing to something better. Jennie can see no “downside of doing business feminism at all”, however, “I don’t want anyone to believe that I talk about gender equality to enhance my sales”. The tension between making profit and doing good constantly recurs, even though, simultaneously, business feminism is expressed as immaculate and contributing to feminist visibility and change.

One way to handle the ambivalent feelings about profiting from feminism is to donate some percentage of the profits to non-profit organizations. Sarah explains that:

a portion of my profits go back to non-profit organisations to re-invest in social interventions, so it’s not just to us. […] It’s about giving something to the ones who actually make a difference.

Sarah’s choice of words to describe donating part of her profits as something that “goes back” and is “re-invested” evokes (1) an economically oriented approach to social change and (2) the impression that profit in feminist business is considered to have been taken from non-profit organizations, “the ones who actually make a difference”. Anne frames donating money to non-profit organizations as “doing business the right way”. When for-profit business and non-profit organizations are counterposed, a perception of the right way of doing feminism surfaces, which further adds to the ambiguity of how they understand their role in making feminist change. Thus, donating to non-profit feminist organizations can be read as a way of negotiating feminist values.
Ownership as feminism
To gain a better understanding of how feminism is understood in relation to the unease caused by profiting from feminism, I asked questions about how they understand the feminist part of feminist business. Sarah elaborates:

For one, it’s the ownership, that we who own the businesses are women and that we have the opportunity to pursue our dreams and what we want to do with our lives. Second, making money and being able to live on the business. That’s feminist business to me. […] And, like, to empower more women into ownership and starting businesses.

Feminist business in Sarah’s understanding includes ownership, pursuing one’s dreams, making money and empowering other women to take up ownership, which clearly adheres to postfeminist ideals (Gill, 2007). Hanna also emphasizes the importance of “empowering others to start a business”, and Anne says:

it’s very important to me to be able to run a business as a woman of today. It’s thanks to feminism and all the women who fought for everything from the right to vote to … and so on, running a business, you know, taking on the big fight. […] For me, feminism is clearly about being able to run a business.

Anne acknowledges that previous feminist struggles have made it possible for her as a woman to run a business. By doing this, she positions her business within a larger feminist history of struggle. In sum, the feminism in feminist business is formulated as ownership and empowering other women to start a business. The doing of business equates with feminism, and the merging of business and feminism gives rise to a (re)negotiation of feminist values (cf. Pruchniewska, 2018), and how feminism ought to be understood.

Getting paid as feminism
Another aspect of how feminism is understood is the renegotiation of activism. Hanna elaborates upon feminist activism versus paid work:

There’s so much that’s non-profit. Everyone is supposed to work for free. A lot of people don’t dare to charge for what they do, whether it’s handicrafts or their time. A lot of people expect you to work for free. So I try to push others to have the courage to demand to get paid and believe in what they do.

Non-profit work is formulated in negative terms, and getting paid appears to be an important issue. Anne asserts that “men aren’t doing stuff for free just to support a movement. You know? It’s important to be able to, actually, get paid”. Jennie argues that getting paid “enhances the value” of the work and that “everything is better for-profit than non-profit, since then you can also make demands”.

In my understanding, the well-known feminist discourse on equal pay, women’s unpaid work and a liberal history of feminism echoes through the quotes above. By counterposing non-profit engagement with feminism, the more traditional feminist activist becomes represented as the exploited woman, since the feminism in feminist business requires profit. The strong connection in second-wave feminism between waged labour and liberation has been argued to play an important role in the strengthening of neoliberal capitalism since women’s liberation is easily absorbed into a capitalist logic of growth (Fraser, 2013). Like an echo, the feminist discourses iterate and bounce back in a slightly different form (Scott, 2011, p. 46), where equal pay and women’s unpaid work are reshaped into a narrative of getting paid for doing feminism. In this way, the unease about making profit is transformed into a feminist narrative of equal pay.

In the interviews, there is an ongoing (re)negotiation between postfeminist ideals of individuality, entrepreneurship and individual empowerment (Gill, 2007) and the desire to embrace feminist ideals of collectivism and sisterhood (cf. Pruchniewska, 2018). The business sisterhood is confined and ultimately shaped by business logics. It may also be argued that performing sisterhood within the business arena may broaden the traditional business logic, making it more supportive and less competitive. In many respects, feminism has evolved into an individual endeavour, and presumably
even more so in the business arena (cf. Favaro and Gill 2018), which makes it fertile ground for competition. Such competition is commonly met with discomfort and subsequently veiled by a fantasmatic narrative of business sisterhood, involving collective strategies of networking and supporting each other in the business arena.

Conclusions

The reader should keep in mind that this is an exploratory study based on a limited empirical material. My aim has not been to draw general conclusions about feminist business but rather to explore why and how the market has become an arena for doing feminism. I have shown that the fantasy of feminism as business needs to find a way to reconcile between feminism and the values inherent in business, such as ownership, competition and making profit. The how is done by renegotiating feminism as ownership, empowering other women into ownership and reshaping the feminist discourse of sisterhood into business support and advice. The why can be explained by the fantasmatic narrative of business sisterhood which veils the competition and simultaneously enables the enjoyment of feminist sisterhood. This reconciliation is also expressed through a renegotiation of business as feminism: competition is reshaped into a positive value for expanding the feminist struggle, and making profit is reshaped into a feminist discourse of equal pay. This produces a feminist subject who is individual, visible, affluent and entrepreneurial and does not challenge economic structures or ownership conditions.

Adding to the above, business feminism relies upon and is part of sustaining capitalist social media platforms through an “economy of visibility”, and as such entails the struggle over visibility and thus over space and power (Banet-Weiser, 2018a). As business feminism becomes increasingly visible, other versions of feminism will find it more difficult to flourish. The implications of this needs further research but may undermine collective, capital-critical efforts within feminism.

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Notes on contributor

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