The Effect of Third Wave Feminism in the Beauty Industry for American Adolescent Girls: The Social Media Aspect

Mrithika Gunasekaran

Introduction:

Appearing around the 1990s-2000s, third wave feminism promoted female choice and empowerment. But as Claire Snyder-Hall, an associate professor of political theory and director of interdisciplinary studies at George Mason University states, third wave feminism has become increasingly controversial by promoting choice feminism, "third-wave feminism insists that each woman must decide for herself how to negotiate the often contradictory desires for both gender equality and sexual liberation, it sometimes seems to uncritically endorse behaviors that appear problematic" (Snyder-Hall 2010). Suggesting that instead of promoting feminism, third wave feminists actually support patriarchal ideals, Evans and Riley extend Snyder-Hall's argument by showing how these ideals are reinforced by being commercialized under the facade of choice. "Being 'hot' is sold to women as any other feminine product or feature, embedded in individualism, empowerment, and choice" (Evans & Riley, 2014). And because "The use of social media is widespread among adolescents, with 63% of 13- to 18-year-olds in the United States reporting they use social media everyday" (Papageorgiou 2022), this is important to address, because American teenage girls are most affected by commercialized messages of sexualizing oneself as a part of feminism causing negative health and social effects.

Influencers and Trends:

Influencers control what narrative they can send about feminism through social media. Thorpe uses the example of Alana Blanchard, a female surfing athlete, who markets herself and her business on

social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook in bikini pictures,"women are increasingly required to be 'aesthetic entrepreneurs' maintaining a constant state of vigilance about their appearance. Thus, from a critical neoliberal perspective, a hyper-sexual surfing body (her own and others) is a product Blanchard is selling" (Thorpe 2017). Not only are professional women like Blanchard using social media to promote commodification through beauty, but influencers create seemingly harmless trends that subtly encourage gender roles. Karasik of Vanderbilt University argues that recent trends like girl math, girl dinner, clean girl, etc. are examples of female targeted trends that promote this. "On the phrase, Maher explains that 'it feels like such a girl dinner because we do it when our boyfriends` aren't around, and we don't have to have what's a 'typical dinner.''Thus 'girl dinner' enthusiasts view the concept as a liberating force from the restrictive gender norms placed on women to cook and consume well-rounded, nutritious meals". (Karasik 2024). Because both ordinary women and professional women push the same message and are rewarded through increased social media reaction and support, Papageorgiu's study with teen girls argues that it causes them to also follow this behavior. "Participants described how seeing other girls they knew endorsed and rewarded with 'likes' and comments when posting sexualized images of themselves contributed to how girls believed they should portray themselves similarly on Instagram" (Papageorgiou 2022). Karasik then explains that when teens and women portray themselves similarly, they are indirectly promoting commodification of themselves. "By repro-ducing and interpolating key 'clean girl' principles in the form of hyper-specific aesthetics, these sub-genres present as individual expressions of femininity when, in reality, they all promote women's constant self-fashioning via con-sumerism" (Karasik 2024).

Company Marketing:

American teen-centric brands have also employed and used trends produced by third wave feminism to their advantage in order to promote their clothes. For example, Brandy Melville is a growing fast fashion company that uses social media marketing strategies to keep consumers interested. A "Huffington Post article in 2014 called out Brandy Melville's labeling of their aesthetic as 'young, white, skinny, and long-legged'" (Lin 2023). Kushwaha agrees with Lin in that this aesthetic is now being normalized, but he also argues that companies have been trying to diversify their models and promote empowerment ."[T]here is also a growing movement within the media to challenge these norms and promote body positivity, diversity, and empowerment. Some media outlets are actively showcasing a wider range of body sizes, shapes, and ages, and engaging in feminist activism to challenge societal beauty standards" (Kushwaha 2024). But Taylor's study uses the example of Dove's real beauty campaign, where Dove used diverse women in advertising like Kushwaha mentioned, and most participants did not think it was uplifting women but that it instead promoted regressive beauty standards. "Most participants found Dove's central message – that women should prioritize being beautiful -- incompatible with this objective. The campaign does not challenge the imperative of what we call 'compulsory beauty' – the ideology that beauty is not only a priority for women, but is a necessary component of a woman's self-worth and social value" (Taylor et al 2014). Taylor's study suggests that fashion and beauty brands like Dove who try to combat messages sent by brands like Brandy Melville actually suggest the same thing: women must be beautiful in order to be valued.

Sexualization:

These messages from influencers and companies in social media have one common problem: sexualization of women. Third wave feminists support the sexualization of women because they argue that it allows women to reclaim their body. "A third-wave take on the kinds of images that second wave

feminists most often categorize as 'sexualization' (i.e., focus on a sportswoman's body rather than her athletic competence), can lead to quite different interpretations that disrupt the standard focus on (hetero)sexual objectification, reframing such images as an 'active self-present sexuality of a body that signifies power and achievement'" (Thorpe 2017). While Thorpe presents the argument that sexualized images in social media can liberate women, Papageorgiu disagrees and argues that it reinforces gender roles and stereotypes."The normalization of sexualized images on social media was perceived by participants as exacerbating broader sociocultural gendered norms of how girls should behave" (Papageorgiou 2022).

Teen Self perception:

"A prominent source in which adolescent girls are subjected to the sexualization of females, as described in the APA's definition, is within their use of social media" (Papageorgiou 2022). This means that social media further exposes female teens to these images and even normalizes this. Kushwaha expands to this by explaining the types of images social media can expose them to. "It often involves objectification, promotion of unrealistic beauty standards, and the use of image manipulation techniques" (Kushwaha 2024). Kushwaha points out that these images promote unattainable standards for adolescent girls. Papageorgiu connects the sexualized and objectified images to the negative health effects it can cause "Adolescent girls' internalization of sexualization, that is, their belief of the importance of being sexually attractive, has been associated with mental health difficulties including increased depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, and negative body image" (Papageorgiou 2022). Together both sources show that this reinforcement of beauty standards on social media has detrimental effects on the way teens view themselves.

Potential Solution:

Based on the social media aspect, it is necessary to solve this problem because third wave feminism in social media can create harmful standards for teens leading to a change in their self perception. Papageorgiu supports this, "(11–12 years of age) was identified by the girls as an optimal range for this to occur, when girls are starting to use social media and many are experiencing pubertal changes and becoming more aware of their bodies and appearance" (Papageorgiou et al 2022). Based on this conclusion a recommended solution is to provide media literacy training for students in schools."It is important for women to navigate social media consciously, critically evaluate content, and practice self-care to maintain a healthy online presence" (Kushwaha 2024). Kushawa argues that it is necessary for women to be able to discern what message social media sends and to stop it from affecting them. Papageorgiu agrees and adds that "A form of awareness and education commonly identified by girls included critiquing images on social media within the school curriculum, to improve 'social media literacy'" (Papageorgiou et al 2022). Both studies together suggest that providing media literacy training for adolescent girls can help combat the messages sent by third wave feminists.

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