



Fun, Fearless, Feminist?:  
An Exploration of *Cosmopolitan*  
Magazine's Ongoing Fight for  
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# Fun, Fearless, Feminist?: An Exploration of *Cosmopolitan* Magazine's Ongoing Fight for Feminist Legitimacy Within the Changing Landscape of American Feminisms

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**Abstract:** This paper examines *Cosmopolitan* magazine content about feminism and sexuality from 1996 to 2017, and how the magazine has reflected, contrasted with, or ignored prominent ideas in the history of American feminisms. Specifically focusing on *Cosmopolitan*'s framing of feminism in the 2010s, excerpts from content containing the search terms 'feminism' or 'feminist' from 1996 to 2017 are contextualized within historical background and reflect upon the historical moments that preceded and created them. Primary source text is considered in conversation with sex-positive feminism(s), as well as intersectional and queer feminisms. In the nuanced context of mainstream American feminisms over the last several decades, the conflict between *Cosmopolitan* and its critics can be understood as a reflection of the tensions between sex-positive feminists and other feminists from a variety of theoretical backgrounds. Regardless, women worldwide turn to *Cosmopolitan*, making it a critical locus for the study of women's sexuality and their engagement with feminism.

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Cosmopolitan, Women's Magazine, Sex Positive, Sexuality*

## Introduction

Since 1965, both *Cosmopolitan* and the state of American feminisms have undergone significant changes regarding women in the workforce, gender roles and expectations, sexuality, and romantic relationships. By 2018, *Cosmopolitan* has expanded globally and cemented its place in women's lives. As mainstream American feminism has slowly become more class-conscious and intersectional,[1] *Cosmopolitan* has adapted by publishing articles on a wider variety of social and political issues.

The intentionally self-made and socially-imposed branding of *Cosmopolitan* magazine as “all about sex” still dominates public perception of the magazine. In reality, *Cosmopolitan* magazine's historically unprecedented candor in addressing women's sexuality is undoubtedly a feminist achievement. However, the validity of the magazine's approach (or non-approach) to feminism is still debated by feminists and cultural critics. Whether the status of *Cosmopolitan*'s feminist credentials can be objectively assessed, the clear cultural importance of the brand—*Cosmopolitan* is the most-circulated women's magazine in the world—makes it a compelling site for study. Following former editor-in-chief Joanna Coles' 2013 statement about *Cosmopolitan* as a “deeply” feminist magazine,[2] an online journalist appraised the reality:

*Cosmopolitan* is the most famous women's magazine in America. It has an enormous global reach as well: 64 international editions and is published in 100 countries. It's far more likely that the average American woman will pick up *Cosmo* and read about equal pay or how to find her clitoris while she's getting her nails done than [that] she will read a book by bell hooks or Judith Butler.[3]

*Cosmopolitan* has established itself as the leading commercial and social voice of sex-positivity, and this paper explores how the American edition of *Cosmopolitan* has framed, implied, or left inexplicit its own brand of feminism between 1996 and 2017.

## Terms Used in This Paper

This section defines the following terms for their use in the remainder of this paper:

### *Feminism(s)*

“Feminism” is a deceptively complex term. For the purposes of this paper, when the term “feminism” or “feminist” is used alone, it refers to the ideology or action of promoting women to a place of political, economic and social equality with men. This is the most common definition of feminism, and the addition of political stances or deeper critique into that simple model of feminism are often part of other, more specific types or brands of feminism. Because there are many variations on this basic idea of feminism, this paper also uses the terms “feminisms” and “feminism(s)” to acknowledge the multiplicity of belief systems lodged under the umbrella of feminism. When referring to specific brands of feminism, this paper uses those specific terms as appropriate. Additionally, this paper acknowledges that while brands of feminism may be separated by name or by some key tenets, many beliefs are shared among them. References to “feminists” are usually general, though feminists are a heterogeneous group politically. As Cobble, Gordon, and Henry’s *Feminism Unfinished* notes, “the plural word ‘feminisms’...[emphasizes] that there have always been a variety of approaches to advancing women’s well-being. This is true whether we are discussing the women’s movements within a particular era or comparing feminisms across time.”[4]

### *Intersectionality & “Intersectional Feminism” vs. “White Feminism”*

“Intersectionality” is a term coined by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1989, a leading voice in critical race theory. Intersectional feminism accounts for many forms of difference as factors in how people from different identity groups may experience oppression and discrimination differently. The most-often referenced axes of identity in intersectional discussions are

race, class, and gender—though there are many, including, but not limited to, disability/ableism, sexual orientation/homophobia and citizenship status. For the purposes of this discussion it should suffice to say that comparatively, “intersectional” feminism accounts for a variety of identity-based experiences while non-intersectional forms of feminism are narrow and do not account for a wide range of experiences. Currently, most academics and activists agree that intersectionality is a necessary framework for approaching feminist issues.

Intersectional feminism is sometimes discussed as oppositional to “white feminism.” Unlike “intersectional feminism,” the expression “white feminism” is generally used as a pejorative term for feminism that focuses on the experiences of white women, particularly middle and upper middle class white women. White feminism, whether maliciously or ignorantly, dismisses the ways that women of color experience injustices differently due to the intersection of their race and gender.[5] “White feminism” is often extrapolated to mean any feminism that ignores a variety of intersectional experiences including, but not limited to, race. That is, a colloquial meaning of white feminism is narrow-minded feminism that can only be accessed by the most socially privileged women.

#### *Heterocentrism & Heteronormativity*

“Heterocentrism” & “heteronormativity” are similar terms that refer to a social expectation that people are normally heterosexual. Thus, social structures—such as dating, marriage, and sexual scripts—are built on the expectation that people will romantically and sexually pair in couples consisting of one man and one woman. The expectation of monogamy is often implied in heteronormative social structures.

#### *Cisgender, Transgender, & Cisnormativity*

“Transgender” and “cisgender” are adjectives that describe the relationship between a person’s gender identity and their gender assignment. The adjective “transgender” describes a person whose gender identity is different from the one they were assigned at birth, while “cisgender” describes a person whose gender identity

is not in conflict with their assigned gender.

“Cisnormativity” is a term that has emerged from modern discourse around gender and sexuality. A “cisnormative” expectation is that all people are cisgender (including denying the existence of transgender people or ignoring their needs and experiences). *Cosmopolitan* magazine reflects cisnormativity by assuming that all women-identified readers have a vulva/vagina and other related anatomy, and that male-identified partners have external genitals (penis, testicles/scrotum, etc.). These assumptions exclude potential transgender or gender-nonconforming readers from reading information about the physical interactions of sex that apply to them.

#### *Sex Positivity vs. Sex-Positive Feminism*

The term sex-positive feminism describes feminism(s) that supports consenting sexual activity and expression in all its forms as positive and valuable, including a belief in the status of women as sexual actors with desires and needs. Lynn Comella, author of *Vibrator Nation: How Feminist Sex Toy Stores Changed the Business of Pleasure* notes that “being sex positive [is] not the same thing as being enthusiastic about sex or having a lot of it; nor was it simply the equivalent of identifying as queer, or kinky, or polyamorous. Rather, a sex-positive person appreciates that human sexuality is endlessly diverse—there is no right way to have sex and no singular definition of normal.”[6] Ideally, sex-positive feminism would include acknowledgement and support of sexual diversity (a wide range of sexual identities and sexual practices that may go against heterocentric or monogamous norms). Sex positive feminism, sometimes called “pro-sex” feminism,[7] first emerged during the 1980s based on the concept that sexual freedom is a fundamental aspect of women’s freedom. At the time, sex positive feminism was a response to radical feminist theories that saw women as oppressed and sexually exploited figures for whom sex with men was inherently coerced by social, political, and economic means.[8] Feminists of the 1980s debated whether to condemn heterosexual sex and pornography as roots of women’s oppression, or to embrace them within a diverse range

of sexual experiences and as a component, when consensual, of sex work.[9] It is sometimes difficult to differentiate a distinct “sex positive feminism” from other feminisms because sex positivity may be taken for granted as an aspect of today’s feminisms, whereas in the 1980s, feminists were more divided over women’s sexual engagements with men. American feminists today are generally more likely to voice support for women’s sexual freedom, though slut-shaming (shaming others for their sexual behaviors or, in some cases, abstinence) is persistent among men and women alike.

As Elisa Glick points out in “Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression,” not all people who consider themselves “sex positive” label themselves as feminists. Glick approaches this problem by “conceptualizing pro-sex feminism [...] [as a face] of ‘sex positivity’ in order to investigate the politics that emerge from various kinds of pro-sex arguments.” Glick discusses the challenge in deciding whether feminist sexuality should be tied to an overall ideological movement (e.g. sex positive feminism) or whether it should be seen as a subset of individual sexual practices,[10] ultimately suggesting that sex positivity may function as a facet of some feminisms and vice versa, rather than being separate.

## **Historical Background**

In 1965, when Helen Gurley Brown became the Hearst magazine company’s first editor-in-chief of what we now know as *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the magazine opened an unprecedented space for women in the magazine industry. *Cosmopolitan* represented a new era of possibility not just for female writers and editors, but for the young, single women who were ignored in the marketplace due to their perceived insignificance and lack of purchasing power.

*Cosmopolitan* had been a struggling, general-interest women’s magazine prior to Brown’s takeover in 1965. When Brown joined Hearst, she brought along an emerging consumer class of young, working, single white women. As loyal fans of her popular 1962 book, *Sex and the Single Girl*, readers looked



to Brown as the foremost authority on navigating sex, dating, and relationships. Brown's celebrity status brought increased visibility not only to herself and her magazine, but also to the legions of young, independent single women in need of guidance. In doing so, she ushered young women's sexuality out of the marital bedroom and into the public sphere.

Brown's *Cosmopolitan* contained advice for women about boyfriends, affairs, workplace drama, married men, and of course, sex. Its explosive popularity led to a legacy of controversy against the historical backdrop of "second-wave" feminism and women's liberation. Through *Cosmopolitan*, Brown pushed her undoubtedly feminist vision of women's financial and sexual independence, even at a time when the word feminism "did not even exist in the American political vocabulary." [11] The magazine was instantly successful in the United States, no undoubtedly bolstered by the earlier success of Brown's similarly candid *Sex and the Single Girl*. *Cosmopolitan* led the way for an enduring American, and eventually global, franchise that celebrated women's sexual and romantic lives, careers, and interests. Around the same time that Brown revived *Cosmopolitan*, another landmark in American feminism emerged—Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, just one year after Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* and two years prior to her takeover at *Cosmopolitan*. Friedan's vision of feminism would soon be pitted against the feminism of Helen Gurley Brown while the two fought for ideological prominence in the mainstream feminism of white American women.

Drawing on the great success of *Sex and the Single Girl*, Helen Gurley Brown created a women's publication that, scandalously, wasn't about home economics or being a proper wife. Brooke Hauser's biography *Enter, Helen* notes, "At a time when women's magazines taught housewives how to make the perfect casserole, Helen spoke directly to the single girl next door, cheekily advising her on how to pursue men, money, power, pleasure, and, most of all, personal happiness." [12] Brown believed in working hard to achieve what she wanted from life, but she was not against using her sexuality to her advantage. Brown considered and wrote about sexual and romantic relationships with men as

both physically satisfying and financially advantageous. Though over time *Cosmopolitan* shifted to emphasize women's financial independence and depoliticize sex in favor of a pleasure-based, rather than power-based perspective, the innovative Brown had her own ideas on the economic power women held despite their disadvantages in the sexist workplace. Her economic philosophy on the position of women in relationships was revealed in some of her iconic dating rules, such as "If a man comes to your apartment, he should bring more liquor than he drinks." [13] While some saw a rule like this as antiquated, Brown knew that at the heart of the dating game there was an inescapable economic value to women's sexuality. Given the economic disadvantages women already faced, if they received economic benefits (in the form of dates, gifts, etc.) from dating men or for allowing access to their sexuality, Brown thought it was only right. In exchange for women's comparatively more valuable time, men could even the score by providing women with gifts in exchange for their sexual and romantic assets.

Brown's viewpoints—and accordingly, her magazine—provoked backlash from some of her feminist contemporaries. Opponents to the magazine could generally be classified as either feminists or "family values"-type conservatives, all of whom varyingly found *Cosmopolitan* crass, inappropriate, or exploitative of women for its emphasis on illuminating and encouraging women's sexual freedom. Although conservative criticism hasn't changed much over time, the vast ideological diversity within feminism has continued to find feminists themselves divided on whether or not to support the controversial magazine.

Feminists who were concerned with Helen Gurley Brown's take on women's liberation regarded her with suspicion, often because of her individualist and approving approach to the capitalist system that had been a springboard for her massive success. Brown disagreed with some of her contemporaries, who generally critiqued capitalism. Brown was often frustrated that they denounced capitalism for its support of patriarchy even while hoping they would advance women's status through increased corporate success. [14] Gloria Steinem, though sympathetic to Brown's work, critiqued her for not advocating on behalf of women

as a group and focusing too heavily on the individual woman,[15] a strategy that would be retained by *Cosmopolitan* well past the end of Brown's role as editor-in-chief. Brown, however, made no apologies for her individualist approach to women's liberation. Instead, she asserted that women feeling good about their bodies, themselves, and their lives on an individual level would be, not the undoing, but rather the basis for the larger-scale feminist movement.[16] Accordingly, she believed that if she could lift women up through *Cosmopolitan*, that was the beginning of the work.

It is still unclear which 'feminists' were wholly against *Cosmopolitan* and Helen Gurley Brown. One possibility is that the viewpoint of feminists overall was extrapolated from the negative comments made on occasion by vocal women's movement spokeswomen, such as Betty Friedan. Indicatively, Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs' 1986 book *Re-Making Love: The Feminization of Sex* commented that Helen Gurley Brown was "a woman who many feminists would be loath to claim as one of their own, but of the two best-sellers on women's condition"—*Sex and the Single Girl*, 1962, and *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963—"Brown's was in many ways the more radical." [17] Brown perhaps was more radical than Friedan, namely in that Brown boldly announced that marriage was not necessary to women's lives. Rather, a new alternative already existed in "the life of the single, urban, working 'girl.'" [18] In contrast, *The Feminine Mystique* described the "malaise" of post-marriage housewifery and unsatisfying marital sex. Thus, there was a sense of competition between the two authors' philosophies: while Friedan critiqued marriage from within the institution itself, Helen Gurley Brown continually dispelled the notion that a woman was fated to marriage after all.[19]

Therefore, Brown's work—released one year earlier and certainly much more appealing to many readers than *Mystique*—potentially rendered Friedan's theoretically irrelevant to a new class of young, sexy, single women who were free to pursue careers instead of marriage in the first place. Despite her own ideas about the disappointment of marital sex, Betty Friedan later criticized Brown's *Cosmopolitan* for embracing "the idea

that a woman is nothing but a sex object.”[20] Brown remained unapologetic, repeatedly reiterating versions of her famous quip, “If you’re not a sex object, you’re in trouble,”[21] as if to say that it is better to be a happy and desirable sex object than a stuffy and unsatisfied housewife.

With Brown and Friedan’s issues aside, not every well-known feminist during this time disagreed with Brown’s vision. Among her allies was Gloria Steinem, a leading voice in American feminism and journalist who penned articles for *Cosmopolitan*. Though she critiqued Brown, Steinem was a self-described “girlfriend” of Helen and said that the two “had each other’s back.”[22] When asked about Helen Gurley Brown in a 2015 interview, Steinem reflected positively on Brown’s work and influence:

Helen Gurley Brown did something very interesting and important, which is she made it OK to be sexual in a women’s magazine,” Steinem said. “Up to then, there was a formula—literally a formula—that said that if you had sex, even in fiction, in a story—you had to come to a bad end... [By reversing this,] She was very important in liberating *Cosmo*, and therefore women’s magazines.[23]

In another interview, Steinem noted that “[In that time] it was dangerous not to be seen as a good girl,”[24] and this was the problem for Helen Gurley Brown. The problem of being bad—which often seemed to mean simply liking sex—plagued sexually active women of the so-called “second-wave” of white American feminism. As Brown’s *Cosmopolitan* emerged and flourished, unmarried, sexually active women were criticized contradictory enemies. Conservative critics thought women should not have sex outside of marriage for moralistic reasons. Challengingly, women who had sex with men were also critiqued by radical feminists who believed that having sex with men was inherently damaging to women as a result of patriarchal systems surrounding sexuality. Helen Gurley Brown provoked her detractors with a magazine

that boldly celebrated women having sex whenever and with whomever they wanted.

Though Brown was neither against lesbian sexual relationships nor in denial of the existence of patriarchal elements in straight sexual relationships, the heterocentrism of *Cosmopolitan* magazine would eventually draw intersectional feminist criticism and would never be fully addressed or resolved from an editorial perspective. Helen Gurley Brown was comfortable simply preaching that women were entitled to satisfying sex. By flipping the script on traditional “family values” and ideas about the right time and place for women to have sex, as well as by resisting the radical feminist-separatist notion that men were bad for women, Brown was an important voice in women’s sexual liberation.

Though *Cosmopolitan* has changed in over five decades of publishing, *Cosmopolitan* has never compromised its unashamed encouragement of women’s sexual freedom.

### **Notes Regarding Conducting Research on *Cosmopolitan***

Despite its historical importance and its more serious efforts in relevant journalism, many still perceive *Cosmopolitan* as a trivial magazine. As Tara Goldshan noted, *Cosmopolitan* is not alone in this regard—in general, “Women’s media often faces the obstacle of not being taken seriously in the political landscape,” especially media that involves fashion and beauty (such as Condé Nast’s *Teen Vogue*, which has received backlash as it has published increasingly political content in recent years).[25] A quick survey of *Cosmopolitan* covers will reveal that while sex is obviously a prominent topic of the magazine, it regularly features cover stories on career success, health issues, style, and a variety of other topics. Still, the fact that *Cosmopolitan* is subject to sexist criticism certainly does not make it immune to its own internal sexism, racism, classism, ableism, or any number of privileged viewpoints reflected in its content. Thus, given the magazine’s massive national and global popularity, intersectional feminist critiques of *Cosmopolitan*’s privatized and personalized brand of feminism are essential in moving forward in the discussion about mainstream American feminism.

To consider either the intent or the impact of text excerpts in *Cosmopolitan*, it is necessary to examine the social context. This means considering the general body of content published in the magazine, as well as situating the magazine's content socially and historically. Where does *Cosmopolitan* stand within both the spectrum of current American feminisms and the rich history of such feminisms? A research approach that focused on separately evaluating individual articles would disallow such considerations and preclude a comprehensive understanding of the magazine's goals.

A further complication is how to consider the magazine's feminism from an intersectional lens, which accounts for a variety of identity-based factors in how people from different backgrounds experience intersecting forms of oppression. It is difficult to assess the intersectionality of a magazine, not solely because *Cosmopolitan* is a corporate venture, but because the magazine speaks directly to the reader. *Cosmopolitan* speaks to a reader who is a part of a generalized 'you,' so it is unlikely that the magazine will make specific assertions about the reader's race, for example, within the text. Being inclusive of a variety of perspectives and experiences could either be an explicit or implicit pursuit for a popular magazine. However, the cisnormativity and heteronormativity of *Cosmopolitan* is relatively easy to provide evidence for, such as *Cosmopolitan*'s frequent use of the phrase 'your vagina' in sex advice or sexual health articles. In doing so, *Cosmopolitan* reveals its assumption that most or all of its readers are cisgender women.

## Research Methods

*Cosmopolitan* is read by an estimated 14,551,000 women worldwide monthly—the highest global readership volume of any women's publication.[26] Considering the massive reach of the *Cosmopolitan* franchise, surprisingly little academic scholarship examines the magazine's content. Only one contemporary scholar thus far has published a significant study of *Cosmopolitan* based on primary source material. Kathryn McMahon, PhD., published "The *Cosmopolitan* Ideology and the Management of Desire"

in 1990, surveying cover stories from thirty-eight issues across twelve years of *Cosmopolitan* magazine from 1976-1988.[27] Her groundbreaking study is the basis for much of the existing research on women's magazines. McMahon's 1990 study produced compelling suggestions about the ways that the *Cosmopolitan* franchise developed a body of knowledge about readers' lives. Her work has become a solid foundation for other scholars to undertake smaller and similar studies. However, McMahon's research design was less suitable for this project. Initial research design was experimentally modeled after Medley-Rath's published study called "Am I Still a Virgin?: What Counts as Sex in 20 years of *Seventeen*." [28] Medley-Rath's work examined a column in *Seventeen* magazine over a period of 20 years to examine the magazine's treatment of the topic of virginity and how it may have changed over the two decades studied. This paper, in comparison, could be aptly subtitled "What Counts as Feminism in 20 Years of *Cosmopolitan*." The present goal to contextualize *Cosmopolitan*'s interpretation of feminism within a wider social and historical context was best-served by a research design informed by interpretive discourse analysis. Interpretive discourse analysis allowed for exploration of the ways in which *Cosmopolitan* magazine's approach to feminism has evolved to reflect the changing times. This approach allowed authentic consideration of *Cosmopolitan* by placing articles in the social and historical context in which they were published and, thus, meant to be read.

EBSCOHost, a searchable academic database, contains over two decades of plain-text *Cosmopolitan* material. EBSCOHost was used to locate thirty-five articles published between January 1996 and January 2016, a twenty-year sample, containing the word "feminism" or "feminist." The search term "feminism" appeared in seven articles after January 2016, suggesting that between January 2016 and mid-2017, half of all *Cosmopolitan* issues contained an article that discussed or mentioned feminism. This paper uses these "feminism" articles to see what markers *Cosmopolitan* editors connected with feminism over time. The articles in which *Cosmopolitan* named feminism explicitly revealed how the magazine conceptualized it as a

political or social ideology.

The most striking observation of this sample was that explicit mentions of feminists or feminism were almost entirely absent from *Cosmopolitan* magazine during the time period leading from the early 1990s until the 2010s. This is notable primarily because this time period in American history is commonly known for the development of “third wave feminism”, which emphasizes inclusion of diverse groups of people (racially, sexually, socioeconomically) and their various feminisms. Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality had begun to gain traction, and more mainstream (white) American feminism was beginning to acknowledge that its racially and socioeconomically homogenous visions of women were insufficient in tackling larger-scale feminist issues. Meanwhile *Cosmopolitan*, a national brand that had effectively cornered the market on claiming women’s sexual freedom, seemed to intentionally distance itself from “feminist” branding. It was not until 2013 that *Cosmopolitan* pivoted into explicitly discussing feminism and positioning itself as a feminist publication.

Because *Cosmopolitan* did not publish any material discussing feminism over nearly two decades, however, it is difficult to draw conclusions about its motivation for this choice. To do so it is necessary to consider what *Cosmopolitan* had to say about feminism once it did start saying something. Thus, though this project began with looking at a sample of articles from 1996 to 2016, it ultimately came to focus on two separate time periods: *Cosmopolitan*’s apparent period of silence on feminism from the early nineties to the early 2010s, and the period from 2013 to present wherein *Cosmopolitan* has frequently published articles referring to feminism. This paper considers a) how *Cosmopolitan* has or has not aligned with specific brands of feminism across these periods and b) the framing *Cosmopolitan* has used when explicitly discussing feminism, as well as what implications *Cosmopolitan*’s complex engagement with feminism may have for American women.

### **Seeking *Cosmopolitan*’s Feminist Potential**

The type(s) of feminism that aligns most obviously with



*Cosmopolitan's* attitude toward women and sexuality is sex-positive feminism (see "Terms" for discussion). *Cosmopolitan* suggests that women should be sexual, or perhaps nonsexual, in whatever way appeals to them most. But does *Cosmopolitan* merely represent sex positivity (if so, to what degree?), or does it reflect sex-positive feminism—which ideally carries deeper awareness of feminist issues beyond freedom of sexual activity? This could be an unanswerable question. First, while *Cosmopolitan* certainly reflects a positive attitude about women's sexuality overall, and particularly the sexual behaviors it publishes about (and in doing so, promotes), many variations of sexual expression are functionally erased by the heteronormative and cisnormative characteristics of the magazine. Second, as many feminists have realized, it is a deeply complicated personal challenge to decide what kind of sex counts as feminist sex. This complexity periodically surfaces in *Cosmopolitan* from time to time as the magazine grapples with what it means for women to balance personal feminist beliefs and individual sexual desires.

A variety of articles published in *Cosmopolitan* discussed both feminism and sexuality. Interesting challenges arose when *Cosmopolitan* writers tried to make sense of which sexual or romantic choices were feminist and which, if any, were unfeminist. The earliest full-text articles in my sample that included the terms "feminist" or "feminism" asked whether feminism necessitated denouncing men or giving up love and sex. For example, a 1997 article by Maxine Paetro soothed this common anxiety by reassuring readers that women could be feminists and still love men or want relationships.[29] *Cosmopolitan* and readers in the late 20th century may have seen "feminists" as a distinct group of women whose lifestyles were incongruent to having relationships with men.

Almost no articles containing the terms "feminism" or "feminist" appeared between the mid-1990s and the late 2010s. However, articles about specific sex acts and their feminist implications have become common in more recent years. One online article from 2015 titled "I'm a Feminist, But I Like It When He Comes on My Face" gives an example of the ideological dilemmas sexually active feminist women face when they have

sex, especially with men. The author, Mary Stampoulos writes,

It baffles me when women who identify themselves as feminist attack others for their sexual preferences. If feminism arose from women's lack of choice, why, then, do you invalidate other women's choices? It is my body and I am going to do what I want with it, not what will fit into anyone else's ideas about what sex should be.[30]

The author knows that enjoyment of sex is a central feature of her feminism, but her sexual preferences and choices are fraught with opportunities for others to challenge her perceived feminist legitimacy.

Another tricky topic tackled by *Cosmopolitan* was rough sex. A 2014 article titled "Some Like It Rough" contained a subsection dedicated to answering the question "Can you like it rough and still be a feminist?"

It's a maturing of feminism that women have started to embrace all aspects of what they want in bed, rather than just the politically correct ones [says Claire Cavanah, co-author of *Moregasm* and cofounder of sex-toy store *Babeland*]... Like sexual desire, the concept of feminism itself is not black and white. We police ourselves in so many areas of our lives—maybe sex is the one place where we want to be able to let go.[31]

This passage identifies feminism with embracing one's sexual preferences in a way that feels empowering, echoing Stampoulos' personal sentiments about feminism and is consistent with the general message of *Cosmopolitan's* sex content from 2013 and later. An emphasis on women's rights to make their own choices and do things that make them feel good without judgment has long been a fundamental component of *Cosmopolitan's* feminism.

While it is impossible to classify many actions and ideas as feminist or unfeminist, *Cosmopolitan* has been suggesting

that women are independent, desirous sexual actors since 1965. Consequently, much of *Cosmopolitan's* "feminism" has revolved around women's right to actively participate in their sexuality to whatever extent they desire. For example, in January, 1997, *Cosmopolitan* advised readers, "positive sexual development means knowing when you want to stop just as much as knowing when you want to go. Remember: You and he do have control over your sexual choices." [32] Messages like these appear in many *Cosmopolitan* articles and reiterate *Cosmopolitan's* core belief that women control their own sex lives.

### ***Cosmo* Feminism as Challenging the Feminist Status Quo**

The status of *Cosmopolitan's* feminism is constantly up for debate, accordingly, many *Cosmopolitan* articles about feminism are unsurprisingly dedicated to challenging what qualifies and disqualifies people from participating in feminism. *Cosmopolitan* articles from 2013-2017 generally structure their arguments as:

[addressing a feminist stereotype], followed by [rebuttal], justified by [feminism == individual choice making].

Various *Cosmopolitan* articles tackle a question that has haunted feminism throughout the last few decades: Can feminists be beautiful? More specifically, do feminists partake in the beauty rituals created and necessitated by a capitalist society infatuated with skinny, rich, white beauty? Beauty rituals have been treated with suspicion by feminist theorists such as Naomi Wolf, [33] and much anti-feminist effort has perpetuated the historical stereotype that feminists are ugly and unattractive to men. A 1997 article titled "Should Women Feel Guilty About Wanting to Look Good?" [34] faced this problem explicitly, grappling with the then-emerging feminist viewpoint that beauty standards are socially constructed and part of an oppressive structure disadvantaging women. Ultimately, this article challenged the feminist "anti-beauty" stereotype by asserting that women could want to look good and still be feminists.

Indeed, the most recent decade of feminism seems somewhat occupied with dispelling the myth of universal feminist ugliness. For example, the viral Elle “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” campaign, where conventionally beautiful Western celebrities were photographed in t-shirts bearing the slogan.[35] Meanwhile, *Cosmopolitan’s* feminism articles have essentially contributed to the new feminist public relations campaign. One *Cosmopolitan* article from May 2015 entitled “I’m a Feminist... and I Got a Boob Job,”[36] and the following month’s online article “I’m Proud of My Race, But Can I Have a New Nose?”[37] explored the complicated relationship between cosmetic surgery and (feminist) self-acceptance. Both of these pieces reflected one of *Cosmopolitan’s* most prominent assertions about feminism—that feminism does not exclude women from caring about their appearance. Instead, *Cosmopolitan* suggests caring about appearances can be crucial to both women’s professional working lives and to their sense of self-worth and empowerment.

### **Feminism as Personal Ideology**

Feminism was often discussed as a natural part of being a sexually active woman in recent years. In one article, a young woman fighting to change conservative rules about sex at her Mormon university stated, “The truth is, I’m not a virgin. I’m a sexual woman and a proud feminist, and I don’t feel bad about it.”[38] Here, *Cosmopolitan* suggests that feminism and autonomous, expressive sexuality go together.

Other articles reference feminism as a counterpart to queer gender or sexual identity, such as a 2016 article titled “Does Your Love Need a Label?”[39] The article discussed same-sex relationships and the author identified herself multiple times as both queer and a feminist, indicating a relationship between the two aspects of identity. In a 2015 article titled “I’ll Never Be a Gold-Star Gay,” author Laura Leigh Abby discussed her marriage to a woman after spending much of her life in romantic and sexual relationships with men. Although feminism was not a primary topic of the article, Abby noted that “...I subscribe to Bad Feminist writer Roxane Gay’s version of ‘flawed feminism,’

although for me the term also concedes that being a lesbian simply means being human.”[40] An article called “What We Get Wrong About Black Women’s Sexuality,” published in 2016, approaches the topic from a different angle. Lexy, a queer, Black 24-year-old woman who has never had sex, describes the tension between her feminism, sexuality, and learned ideas: “I still feel shame in allowing myself to be sexual, even though I consider myself a sex-positive feminist. I was told not to be sexy, and I internalized that.”[41] For all of these authors, the relationship between queer identity and feminism seems more requisite than coincidental.

Interestingly, many of the articles from recent years containing the word “feminist” or “feminism” were celebrity interviews with each month’s cover star. Actress and model Emily Ratajkowski, actresses Kaley Cuoco[42] and Zooey Deschanel, actress and singer Rita Ora, and singer Madonna are just a few of the women whose features in the magazine have touched on their personal, sometimes conflicting, views on feminism over the last few years. In Madonna’s 2015 interview, she described her fraught relationship to feminism:

I didn’t think about the word feminism as much as I thought about women who were feminists... women who didn’t take the path most traveled. I wasn’t thinking, Oh they’re feminists and I want to be a feminist. I was just thinking, They’re strong women and I want to be like them. I wasn’t categorizing or labeling, but I was certainly grateful that they existed as role models. I think humanist is a better idea [than calling myself a feminist]...The revolution of love is not about just pushing the rights of women, it’s pushing the rights of every living creature on this planet.[43]

Other celebrity interviews revealed a similar discomfort with the term feminism, but many embraced it. Celebrity interviewees frequently cited their feminism in one-off comments that revealed a common, yet vague, understanding of feminism as women’s freedom, empowerment, or equality with men. Ratajkowski

stated, “I feel lucky that I can wear what I want, sleep with who I want, and dance how I want [...] I don’t need to not wear a bra to be a feminist. I can celebrate myself, and whether I want to wear makeup is my own business.”[44] Zooey Deschanel commented that she was proud to associate with feminism, and referenced the debate about feminism and self-presentation. Hoping to dispel the notion that feminism and fashion are mutually exclusive, Deschanel commented “Just because you’re wearing a nice dress doesn’t mean you don’t have any ideas [...] But you can be a feminist and femmy. I don’t see how those things contradict each other.”[45]

In general, the perspectives offered by celebrities who self-identified as feminists were not very controversial. Rita Ora’s interview offered a similarly lukewarm take on feminism, describing feminism as “a support system for other women. It’s not like we want to kill every guy in the world. It’s being proud of the fact that a woman is doing something and saying, ‘Yeah, good for her!’”[46] This feel-good, uncomplicated take on feminism helps make it more accessible to a large readership of women from a variety of intellectual and political backgrounds worldwide, but does little for advancing more progressive or radical feminist goals.

### **Reading Between the Lines—Toward an Intersectional Approach to *Cosmopolitan***

Notably, the concept of “intersectional” feminism did not appear—at least not in name—in *Cosmopolitan* between January 1998 and January 2016, even though it had become an important part of feminist discourse by then. In fact, the only mention of the word “intersectional” logged by the EBSCOHost database did not appear until May 2017. The article in which the term appeared was not even explicitly about feminism, but instead about the representational politics of Black women’s natural hair, calling the wider representation of Black hairstyles “a sign of intersectional female solidarity.”[47] *Cosmopolitan* has also received a significant amount of backlash in the last half-decade for its missteps in covering—or not covering—racialized topics.

Its web content, which is perhaps vetted less intensely than the articles that make it into the print edition, has occasionally come under fire for its insensitivity to how racial biases affect notions of beauty, as well as its failure to fully acknowledge these shortcomings.[48]

In recent years, *Cosmopolitan's* embrace of increased reporting on issues affecting women of color and queer women bodes well for its potential for a more intersectional future. *Cosmopolitan* currently can be expected to include at least one in-depth feature article each month that addresses a social or political issue affecting a diverse cohort of young women. Perhaps the greatest strength in *Cosmopolitan's* attempts to diversify its content has been its choice to showcase writers who can bring their own insight and life experiences to the magazine. Just as the magazine has almost always been predicated on women, not men, writing about women's issues, today's *Cosmopolitan* also recognizes the need for authentic voices to speak on issues regarding their own experiences with a diverse range of cultural backgrounds.

### **In Conclusion: Considering the Future of *Cosmopolitan***

The September 2014 *Cosmopolitan* issue featured an essay from Roxane Gay, a prominent feminist and cultural critic, entitled "Can You Be a Sexy Feminist?" Although any number of essays could have been chosen that represent the depths of Gay's commitment to progressive issues, perhaps most notably race, this essay reveals one angle of the feminism *Cosmopolitan* is most willing to articulate:

Women are equal to men. We deserve to be paid the same as a man for equal work. We have the right to dress and move through the world as we please, free from gross catcalling or the threat of violence. We have the right to easy, affordable access to birth control and reproductive services. We have the right to make choices about our bodies free from legislative oversight. And we

have the right to earn respect. While I am not well-versed in feminist history and I have interests and opinions that may not fall in line with mainstream feminism, I am still a feminist. I cannot tell you how freeing it's been to accept this about myself.[49]

This ideology, which Gay coins “Bad Feminism” in her book *Bad Feminist*, exemplifies the complex yet palatable brand of feminism that *Cosmopolitan* seems most comfortable promoting to its wide readership of women.

*Cosmopolitan* has never escaped its reputation for being preoccupied with sex. This preoccupation is often extrapolated as anti-feminist. I suggest that *Cosmopolitan*, sex tips and all, is more feminist than usually assumed. Sex-related content published by *Cosmopolitan* has been not only varied in its discussion focuses, but also contains generally positive messages for women. *Cosmopolitan* has become more “feminist” over time by emphasizing the concept of feminism as a personal ideology through articles featuring both average women and celebrity women. Overall, *Cosmopolitan*'s increasing publication of articles related to feminism or arguably feminist issues has demonstrated an increased commitment to claiming the feminist label on its own terms.

A variety of feminist critiques can and should be quite thoughtfully applied to *Cosmopolitan*'s treatment of race, sex, class, and gender in the magazine. Such critiques should pay appropriate attention to the content of the magazine, social context, and a range of feminist theory for new analytical exploration. Quality scholarship on *Cosmopolitan* magazine will be necessary for a more holistic understanding of American women's mainstream ideas of sexuality going forward. Additionally, the magazine itself would do well to listen to a swath of feminist theorists who can guide the magazine to a progressive and successful future as feminism continues to change in America.

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**Notes:**

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- 17 Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, *Re-making love*, 56.
- 18 Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, *Re-making love*, 56-57.
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- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Joanna Coles, "Gloria Steinem Has Great Advice on What to Do When Someone Calls You a Bitch," *Cosmopolitan*, January 06, 2017.
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- 24 Prachi Gupta, "27 Incredible Things Gloria Steinem Said in Just 1 Hour," *Cosmopolitan*, January 06, 2017.
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- 30** Mary Stampoulos, “I’m a Feminist, but I Like When He Comes on My Face,” *Cosmopolitan*, February 02, 2017.
- 31** Chiara Atik, “Some Like It Rough,” *Cosmopolitan* 257, no. 5: 168.
- 32** Susan Block, “Bringing excitement to your relationship,” *Cosmopolitan* 222, no. 1 (January 1997): 74.
- 33** Naomi Wolf, *The beauty myth: how images of beauty are used against women*, London: Vintage Books, 2015.
- 34** Karen Lehrman, “Should women feel guilty about wanting to look good?,” *Cosmopolitan*, May. 62.
- 35** Annabel Brog and Lucy Johnston, “Call yourself a feminist?” *ELLE UK*, June 23, 2016.
- 36** Anne March, “I’m a Feminist... and I Got a Boob Job.” *Cosmopolitan* 258, no. 5 (May 2015): 130.

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