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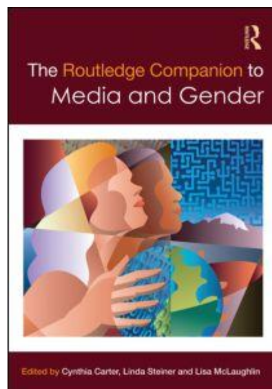


# The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender

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# Feminism in a postfeminist world

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# 50 Feminism in a postfeminist world

## Women discuss who's "hot"—and why we care—on the collegiate "Anonymous Confession Board"

*Andrea L. Press and Francesca Tripodi*

The recent media fascination with the best-selling trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*—what some have called "mommy porn"—illustrates that women's overt discussions of sexuality remain shocking in US culture. This is particularly true when those discussions transcend the bounds of "conventionality," however defined. In the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it is the explicit sadomasochism of the sexual encounter which most notably shocks. Various feminist commentators in the blogosphere recoil at Ana's submissive role, concerned that the sadomasochistic sex scenes objectify women's bodies and encourage emotional and sexual dependence (DelVecchio 2012; Perez 2012). Others celebrate the negotiation of sexual fantasy between Christian and Ana, in which Ana can find pleasure in various forms of sexual experience (Debold 2012; Maya 2012; Roiphe 2012). These recent debates echo the feminist sex debates dating back to the Barnard Conference of 1980, during which anti-porn feminists clashed with "pro-sex" feminists.[1] The proliferation of sexually charged media, their mass consumption, and the increasingly participatory nature of new media forms, all of which characterize the contemporary media environment, usher in a new set of questions for feminist reception studies which are relevant to these longstanding concerns.

McRobbie (2008) argues that we have not updated the paradigms in feminist theory developed in the 1970s and 1980s to understand current "sex war" debates. The new media environment has changed the game. For one thing, the ubiquity of pornography in spaces frequented by children and women has complicated the issues for feminists. Noting not only the new media environment, but the targeting of women as the new consumers of pornography, and the increasing sexualization of girls and teens, McRobbie urges us to seriously reconsider the impact on women of a new and increasingly sexualized cultural environment, rather than falling back on what can seem with the advantage of hindsight an overly simplistic anti-censorship position adopted by feminists of an earlier era.

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At issue in the "sex wars" was, and is, our attempt to keep women's welfare in view as we make arguments about many issues, including sex. McRobbie's frustration echoes Katha Pollitt, whose piece entitled "Women Who Love Republicans Who Hate Them" argues that women are the only group who "refuse to take collective insults seriously" (2012: 10) as she tries to explain why they garner such strong support from women given the strongly anti-woman Republican agenda on issues such as birth control, and abortion in the case of rape and incest.[2]

Both McRobbie's and Pollitt's comments highlight a general scholarly frustration within feminist media studies concerning the inability of feminist scholars to influence public debate. Much has been written about the "aftermath of feminism" in Western culture (Douglas 2010; McRobbie 2009; Tasker and Negra 2007). Studies show that, paradoxically, women identify with a series of feminist positions, though not with the label "feminist" (Houvouras and Carter 2008; Peltola *et al*. 2004; Scharff 2011). While women still care about concerns of gender equality raised by the second wave, they describe traditional feminism as constraining and no longer relevant (Houvouras and Carter 2008; McCabe 2005; Peltola *et al*. 2004; Stein 1997). Some young women appear to associate feminism with certain extreme second-wave positions (such as rejecting men, sex, and consumption, which constituted only a very small part of the movement). As a result, one trend is for women to identify with how they are *unlike* feminists of the past, rather than focusing on similarities (Baumgardner and Richards 2010), or on how to draw upon feminist theory and apply it to the contemporary period.

Nevertheless women often espouse viewpoints that many scholars and activists—if not the women themselves—would term "feminist." Our goal is to shed light on this actual operation of feminism in response to binary thinking that opposes "feminist" and "non-feminist" positions in a simplistic dichotomy. In a book project in progress, Press coins the term "feminism on the ground" to describe this simultaneous embrace and rejection of feminism.

## Feminism in the new media environment

New media offer a set of locales in which we can witness this intricate maneuvering between positions, sometimes in the public dialogic space afforded by blogs, social media, message boards, etc. Pioneering thinker boyd (2007) calls spaces such as Facebook or Myspace "mediated publics," which differ from unmediated spaces because they are persistent, replicable, searchable, and accessible by invisible audiences. These mediated public spaces offer opportunities for the expression of positions which characterize the current state of feminism.[3]

Mediated spaces have sometimes posed new threats to women and others, as well as opportunities for self-expression. This chapter explores discourses around sexuality, and women's sexual attractiveness, found in a heavily used online message board that draws the bulk of its audience from students at a state university; the same and similar boards are extremely popular at universities throughout the USA. On this campus, Collegiate ACB ("The Anonymous Confession Board for college students throughout the country to discuss anything") was widely read and very well known;

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over half of respondents in our survey (more in our focus groups) had heard of the site, and of those who knew it 90 percent visited it at least occasionally. While use of the board was highest amongst first year students and members of fraternity and sorority organizations, in general at least casual use of the board is high across the student body. According to our research, the board is mostly used by the white and Asian students on campus, while often avoided by African American and Hispanic students. Most users appear to be heterosexual, although the gay male community has a limited but distinctive presence. We find that many, indeed most, of the posts on the board target and police the appearance and sexual behavior of straight white and Asian women.

While gay and straight men are discussed, the types of critiques leveled at women are rarely pointed in men's direction, establishing that the group "dominance" of straight white men continues, and, even more important, is still assumed, in some mediated public spaces. Alternately, this pattern might signify that the dominance of this group is so contested, that spaces such as these are part of the ongoing work needed to reproduce and re-establish this dominance. The posts by and about gay men are interesting. At times, they are criticized (like straight women) for not being thin ("I thought to be a [twink] you had to be skinny?" or "[FULL NAME] has the biggest gut I've ever seen."). Overall we don't think the parameters of "attractiveness" are as narrow for gay men as for straight women, but certainly a degree of appearance policing was going on for gay men. Lesbians are invisible on the site, perhaps related to the belief of some users that women read the board, but post only to defend the reputations of their friends or themselves.

In any case, the message board illustrates the limits of "feminism on the ground." While women's bodies and sexual behavior are targeted for praise and critique over and over, few if any objections to these discourses are raised. In this chapter, we ask the following questions: How is it that feminist perspectives have been incorporated into the general public's beliefs about a series of issues, while support is given to the continued privilege of certain groups, in particular, as the board illustrates, straight white males? How do these contradictions inflect current discussions of sexuality which maintain a privileged male "politicking" of women?

The board we examine exists in some form on many campuses across the United States. Collegiate ACB has persisted since 2008 under a variety of names, including College ACB, Blipdar, and Juicy Campus. College (now called "Collegiate") ACB was launched in 2008 at Wesleyan University as a more anonymous alternative to Facebook—safer for posters, who are not subject to the dangers posed by the traceability of Facebook posts; but not for the subjects of posts, who often do not remain anonymous. While users can "report" information they find offensive, the process of getting offensive content removed—even content that contains specific names—can take days, and material is easily reposted. Content remains searchable for years, and has even followed the board through several sales and renaming of the website. It is privately controlled by owners seeking to turn a profit from the board and its activity, though when we spoke with the owner of one of the board's iterations ("Blipdar") he expressed doubts as to its profitability.

Thus, the site embodies boyd's (2007) tenets of mediated spaces: even when ownership changes, the content persists, remains searchable (by title of post or content),

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can be "moved" to other mediated publics with a simple "cut and paste," and is read by hundreds of people who do not post content of their own. On these boards, current college students post about a variety of topics, including where to find good sandwiches; politics; and which fraternities or sororities to join. But even casual perusal of the boards reveals that the most popular threads posted concern the sexual attractiveness and behavior of students, particularly heterosexual white or Asian women, who are named, categorized, and discussed at a level of detail which is often very specific about their body parts, appearance, and sexual activity.

## Methods

We first analyzed several of the most popular threads on the board's different names (College ACB, Blipdar, and Collegiate ACB). We focused on issues concerning women that we found troubling and of interest from a feminist perspective, in particular sexual attractiveness conceptualized as "hotness," women's sexual prowess, and questionable female sexual behavior labeled as "sluttiness."[4] In conjunction with interpretive textual analysis of the posts in these subject areas, we conducted two preliminary focus groups of students on campus who were alternately familiar with, but sometimes unaware of, the sites.[5] Many indicated that if they did post to the site they would not tell anyone. Respondents were cognizant of the site's taboo nature. Those who reported not using it expressed surprise at the content—in particular the use of first and last names in explicitly sexual and/or defamatory comments and threads.

Our initial focus groups quickly made clear that students were reluctant in the presence of their peers to admit using the site. To combat this problem we designed an online, anonymous survey to examine how many people used the site on campus and to explore issues surrounding feminist response, or lack of it, to various posts on the board.[6] The survey was distributed in the first week of the 2011–12 academic year to large introductory-level courses and general student listservs. We received 379 out of 2,825 responses for an approximately 13.4 percent response rate, rather low but still sufficient for preliminary analysis.

We held one final focus group with members of a sorority familiar with the board to further examine trends in the quantitative data. We also visited a feminist theory class who commented on an earlier draft of this chapter, in class discussion and in class posts. In particular, we were interested in examining the emphasis on ratings of women that we noted on the site, and why the space was not a place for feminist expression to resist such posts. Throughout the research we communicated with several key student informants familiar with the site and its place on college campuses, and with the fraternity–sorority system.

## Discussion

We received a sometimes contradictory set of responses to our queries about how audiences read the sexualized comments made about women found on Collegiate ACB.

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### *Sexism*

In a perhaps surprising use of a second-wave feminist term, many of our informants—particularly in our online survey—identify the particular way female sexuality is treated on Collegiate ACB overall as "sexist."[7] When pressed as to what they mean, students respond in a number of ways. A typical reaction was that men and women are treated unequally. Our survey showed that 92.2 percent of respondents, both men and women, felt women were written about in a sexist or derogatory way; only 61 percent felt that men were similarly written about—although perhaps that is a surprisingly large egalitarian application of the "sexist" label to the treatment of both genders.

Students overall talked explicitly about the systemic denigration of women, and about the denigration of feminism, as another sexist aspect of the board, in addition to the explicitly sexual comments about women. A typical post in this regard reads: "Wanna hear a joke: Women's Rights." Also cited as sexist was specifically the objectification of women: "People talk about [women's] breast size or how easy they are to get into bed. There's probably less sexism toward men, but there are still derogatory comments made."

### *Hotness, fatness*

Comments and jokes about women's bodies fuel and sustain Collegiate ACB. Women's bodies are either praised or censured for alternately conforming or not to the narrow, sexualized contours of acceptable appearance for women (and these seem to be the thin, white, large-breasted parameters prized by mainstream media culture). Which women are "hot" and which are "fat" or "not hot" ("has that girl [gained] about 30 pounds since freshman year?" implies that she is "not hot") become a constant source of commentary. The board often discusses sororities in this fashion, including by ranking the "hottest girls" in specific sororities, and the "hottest sororities" (those with the highest number of "hot" women); these are continually listed, debated, and commented upon.

"Hotness" as a label came up often on the board and in our survey responses. But when we tried to probe this issue in our focus groups, we got mixed responses. In one group, women acknowledged the ubiquity of "hotness" rankings and discussions on the board, but did not object to them, even when we pressed the point. So many posts engaged the "hotness" judgment that many women seemed inured to being subjected to constant judgments about it, at least in our face-to-face conversations. Focus group participants made no specific objections to this type of "rating." One woman in our sorority focus group, when pressed, said nothing was wrong with this listing, because those listed were all women who in "fact" *were* hot. "Veracity" made the list acceptable. *Why* would anyone object to a listing of girls who were "hot" as long as the label truly applied to these women? Sorority women were in fact happy to see that the board included a list of the "hot" women in their group, as the presence of sexually attractive women—when known publicly—increased group status, benefiting everybody. It was uniformly flattering, even if they themselves did not make the list. Yet their comments betray a sense of unease. For

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example, we asked, "Do you object to this kind of ranking of girls? Does this make you angry?" One responded:

> Maybe it should but it doesn't, I guess because I don't know, it's almost like flattering. I'm like "yeah, that girl is really pretty and I like her too so yeah, if someone says your friend is pretty it's, it's because they're …

As the sorority group would gain status from being home to "hot" women, we wondered if it was perhaps simply the desire for status that determined their positive response to the "hotness" list, and discouraged feminist critique. This was a new sorority and probably in need of recognition and status. They couldn't afford to be critical of a system in which they were trying to excel.

### *The judgment process: dual-edged*

Yet, how women arrive on the "pretty" or "hot" list is opaque, and a part of the policing process. Our respondents explicitly mentioned that only the women who date a lot and "get noticed" tend to be on the "hottest" lists:

SARAH: They're the girls that guys notice. … They are pretty but they also go out a lot and I feel I like if you're not the person who goes out a lot even if you are pretty you're not going to be put on the most attractive girls list.

JACKIE: Because like you know if you go out a lot and you represent your sorority … if you make a name for yourself you're like that girl.

Women do not react to this with any sort of feminist anger, with the "Maybe it should but it doesn't …" position being a typical response, one indicating awareness that the system flouts feminist rules, but also distancing the speaker from feminist values. In general, people in our focus groups were not upset even when friends were ranked or judged by their physical appearance. Some seemed to define ranking as dangerous but only regarding unflattering posts or in response to debates about whether a particular woman was attractive or not:

SARAH: [I]t's just very unfortunate when people post on that group and someone will post right under it, No that person is not attractive.

These derogatory comments could easily lead into other kinds of criticisms, as in the case of women whose sexual behavior was described as "slutty," discussed on p. 549.

In this way, the women of our sorority focus group began to describe the slippery slope that was being constructed when women were ranked by their physical appearance. As the conversation above indicates, women who are listed as "hot" or "pretty" were labeled as such because they were the ones "who get noticed." When you're noticed, you can be easily criticized as well as praised, as Sarah notes in the comment above. This type of notoriety is what quickly takes women from "flattering" lists to those that respondents described as more harmful, that described them as sluts or, conversely, prudes.

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For example, one woman mentioned that she had a friend who'd been the subject of some posts calling her a "fat slut." She found this post hurtful because, in her words, "*she's not fat*": clearly in the face of these insults she felt compelled to respond to the larger of the two; the "slut" aspect seemed to bother her less. But a "fat" girl can't be "hot" according to current gender standards, a negative status that might spill over to friends and sorority. The label of "fat" applied to a good friend, therefore, was damaging, and hence worth a defense. It crowded out the second derogatory term "slut," as we elaborate below. On a related point, when we asked women what types of posts they object to, positive and negative categories appeared to be confused. Notice of any sort is a dual-edged sword. People want to be noticed, but notice only comes in the context of judgments, whether positive or negative, about their bodies and sexual attractiveness. Despite themselves, women responded with trepidation towards negative judgments and relief—even joy—at the positive.

In sum, the unpopularity of feminism as an identity, coupled with young women's overall lack of familiarity with many second-wave feminist arguments, led to a kind of confusion about what a legitimate critique of the board's posts would look like. Women were happy when they or their friends received positive, though judgmental, attention. While they were dismayed by negative remarks, and sometimes fought back against them, they did not tend to object to the type of discourse that subjected women to continuing judgments and rankings. Even when the lack of similar rankings or ratings for men was pointed out, feminist-inspired objections were absent.

### *Sluts*

In addition to comments about women's bodies, women's sexual behavior was examined and criticized in many posts. Sexual experience and prowess are sometimes praised, sometimes denigrated. The "slut" label is almost as ubiquitous on the board as "hot," and was widely feared as an epithet. Often "slut" was linked to particular women's names and specific allegations around sexual activity. Entire threads documented who gave the "best blow jobs," who had the "kinkiest sex." In such posts positive or negative qualities sometimes could be ambiguous.

Being mentioned as a slut on ACB was not always taken as offensive. As one woman put it:

> I think that like if a girl was posted about on this site and it was about her blow job giving skills and they were positive comments, honestly I don't think she'd be upset. I'm so serious, vs., if she said that she was so bad in bed or whatever she'd be hurtin' more and want it off …

This echoes the above example in which women described a friend discussed on the site as a "fat slut." They were concerned about her being overweight, but not especially about the intimation she had been with "too many" men.

Praise for sexual prowess, however, follows a slippery slope descending into censure. Our focus group interviews showed that this kind of public labeling had concrete

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consequences in that women termed "hot" received, as many noted in our interviews, significantly more male attention *because* of these posts, which were widely read. Such women were sought out in public spaces—they had been labeled "hot." However, they also ran the risk of being labeled as "sluts" because of their excessive sexual activity, enabled in part—or at least suggested—by their public labeling. Both labels—"hot" and "slut"—therefore carried a potentially negative association.

### *Culture police*

We concluded that the site functioned overall to police female appearance and sexual behavior. The posts defined through a set of rules what should add up to "hot," while avoiding the negative label of "slut." Women should be thin and sexually attractive, but should not carry their sexual attractiveness, or sexy behavior, to extremes, lest they risk being labeled "slut." The distinctions between these categories requires constant vigilance if boundaries are to be maintained. This could account for women's seemingly obsessive attention to the board, as they seek reassurance that they and their friends are "getting right" a set of subtly shaded categories and boundaries which are difficult to separate in their judgments of their friends, enemies, rivals, and associates, and in their evaluation of themselves.

While men's sexual behavior is sometimes censured on Collegiate ACB as well, they do not come under the same type or degree of criticism leveled at women; certainly there is no comparable dissection of their bodies and "hot" appearance. Heterosexual white men seem, insofar as this can be determined from an anonymous message board, to be the policers; white and Asian women the policed. African American and Hispanic students apparently declined to participate on the board, largely due to concerns about lack of anonymity on campus given their smaller numbers. There are fewer predominantly African American and Hispanic fraternities than white ones, and minority students in our focus groups said they faced greater dangers than whites if their posts could be traced.

The legacy of feminism is in part a level of comfort with sexuality and perhaps, as McRobbie (2008) argues, an increased fluidity of the boundaries of heterosexuality. Yet, we witnessed precisely the opposite on Collegiate ACB and its predecessors, which seem to police these boundaries rather than to enable their fluidity. Douglas introduces the term "enlightened feminism" to describe an alternate perspective on young women's relationship to feminism. In her terms, feminism is assumed (Douglas 2010). Therefore, when sexist behavior—in our case, labeling and ranking women for their appearance and sexual activity, on a website that does not similarly label and rank men—occurs, it is accepted, with a "wink," because we can assume a certain level of feminism as its cultural context.

Yet we found less assumed feminism than simple incomprehension of feminism as a perspective, at least when applied to issues of ranking women's bodies and policing their sexual activity—issues that would rankle any second-waver. Our attempts to elicit a feminist critique of these issues, made in frustration, almost disbelief, fell largely on flat ears. While some survey respondents expressed a negative judgment of the sexism they witnessed on the board and labeled it as such, many did not. Our focus group interviews betrayed a notable lack of objection to these types of posts.

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In a final attempt to provoke discussion of feminism in relation to these issues, we planted two posts we considered overtly "feminist" responses or critiques on two different threads on Collegiate ACB, one thread which referred to "hottest girls" and the other to "biggest boobs." Our post called the comments "sexist." What was interesting was the almost total lack of response to our criticism; we were ignored (no posts responded to us at all, and we received three "thumbs down" comments and no "thumbs up"). Rather than opening up a space for feminist critique and discussion, it was entirely silenced within the space and discourse of the board.

## Conclusion

Marwick and boyd (2011) ruminate on the potential imagined audience of different "tweeters" on the social media site Twitter. Perhaps Collegiate ACB is a site where those new to the college scene struggle over the collective "we" of students on a particular college campus. The "feminist" public sphere is particularly in search of a "we" in what is essentially a postfeminist—or at least, a post-second-wave feminist—age. The struggle over various versions of feminist identity—second wave, third wave, postfeminist, non-feminist—attests to the difficulty of forming a "we" posed by contested forms of feminist identity. For this reason, the treatment of feminist issues in the new mediated public spheres is made possible by ubiquitous social media and is crucially important for the terms of contemporary feminist debate. What we have found is that feminism is both denigrated and ever present; the "feminism on the ground" of the college students we interviewed was sometimes evident, yet more often hidden under a variety of perspectives that borrow from antifeminist, postfeminist, and "third-wave" feminist discourses.[8]

Our analysis raises several key issues which are difficult to parse given the current ambivalent and contradictory opinions concerning feminist issues espoused by our respondents. While it's tempting to invoke Pollitt's notion that "women are the only group" allowing, even at times supporting, collective insults, when responding to the absence of critical attitudes toward the rating of women it's too pat and simplistic a position to be explanatory. Most women think they know sexism when they see it. This is clear from our survey. From our focus groups we see that young women want to claim the freedom to be "hot," or to enjoy when friends and sorority sisters are so labeled, and to enjoy the status of associating with such women. Undeniable in the mass audience that the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy enjoys is the presence of many women at least apparently enjoying sexual fantasies that feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and many others might find misogynistic.

But once again, as feminist media scholars, we are left yearning for media industries that highlight more and different choices for women. In a new media environment that supports *Feminista* and a plethora of other explicitly feminist blogs, why is Collegiate ACB the more used, more widely read forum on a wide variety of college campuses? Why were women in our focus groups literally scared to admit they read a feminist blog—one woman put it: "yes, I read blogs—NOT feminist blogs." The entrenched, enduring nature of sexism in our media culture is not natural—it is remarkable, and demands our continuing attention and analysis.[9]

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## Notes

1. See Vance (1993) on the Barnard Conference, and McRobbie (2009) for commentary on these issues. See Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988) for their theory of pornography.
2. Denise Walsh points out (personal communication, October 2012) that self-hate is a long-standing issue for subordinated groups. Women are not the only group to vote against their own interests.
3. See websites such as Feminista, Thefbomb.org (younger feminist dialog), www.hercircleezine.com, www.themamafesto.com (feminist moms), www.blackademic.com.
4. In reproducing threads and postings from the boards, we disguise the actual names posted; at times we alter the words used so that the posts we quote cannot be traced. All focus group names are quoted pseudonymously.
5. Preliminary groups used volunteers from students in a class taught by Press. Remaining focus groups were comprised of students in a sorority who were familiar with the board.
6. The survey used Morgan's (1996) Feminism Scale—a sociopolitical tool to measure and assess gender role attitudes, goals of feminism, and feminist ideology.
7. The question asked in the online survey was: "Do you think women/men are written about in a sexist or derogatory way?" Students were asked to elaborate on the meaning of these terms. In the focus groups we tended to shy away from direct references to feminism or sexism to avoid biasing student responses. We did note, however, a tendency for students not to identify publicly with feminism; this might have influenced their responses in the more public focus group method, and might explain its occurrence more frequently online.
8. "Third-wave" feminism is sometimes seen as encouraging a new openness around issues of sexual appearance, activity, and expression (Baumgardner and Richards 2010; Hogeland 2001).
9. Ridgeway (2011) offers an interesting explanation for Pollitt, relevant to our analysis, of the specificity of gender domination. She links this to the relationship women have to men requiring constant association, and a constantly linked status.

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