

**‘This is what a feminist looks like’: Measuring the Complexities of Fourth Wave
Feminism through Fashion in a Transnational and Postfeminist Study**

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Figure 1.1. Pictured Emma Watson, actress and feminist campaigner, wearing the controversial 'This is what a feminist looks like' slogan top in 2014 for Elle UK's and The Fawcett Society's fundraising collaboration. It was reported that the garment workers in Mauritius who made these tops earned 62 British pence per hour, whilst they were sold by Whistles for £45.

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Abstract

The fashion industry is built upon the mass exploitation of people and planet. This human exploitation disproportionately impacts on women, and those living in the majority world. Yet fashion is also a tool of feminist empowerment, particularly in the current fourth wave which is mainly orchestrated in social media spaces. Within the fourth-wave movement, however, there is a disturbing lack of solidarity with garment workers. This is rooted in the colonialist structures that divide our world and its people, and subsequently are mirrored in inequality of the fashion industry. By the same token, the meaningful self-expression, self-love and intersectional feminist possibilities created by fashion in its present form must be considered too. These two points, the exploitation of one for the freedom of another, create a feminist tension which this thesis is interested in. Moreover, it asks: how far can fourth wave feminist interactions with the fashion industry be considered transnationally feminist, intersectionally feminist, and postfeminist?

Using a robust theoretical framework of postfeminism, postcolonial and transnational feminisms this research will trace and measure fourth wave interactions with the fashion industry. Through semi-structured interviewing of three minority world feminists with varying relationships to fashion, unpacking their lived experiences will produce a rich site of feminist contradictions that both affirm and complicate the narratives that, to adopt the language of Dina Siddiqi, “consuming bodies” in the minority world do not consider the violence underpinning their relationship to “producing bodies” in the majority world. Overall, this thesis seeks to complexify binary notions surrounding fashion and feminism to avoid resigning feminist interactions with fashion as inherently bad (nor necessarily good). Instead through employing Donna Haraway’s concept of *staying with the trouble* and dissecting the uncomfortable relationship between the toxic fashion industry and fourth wave feminism the coexistence of its empowering (yet selective) feminist potential against a landscape of capitalist, neocolonial labour exploitation will become clear. It is only through realistically addressing what this relationship looks like that we can begin to formulate a way out of it which, undoubtedly, is desperately needed.

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“It makes me happy that they are wearing something that I made. But I want to let them know that this is more than a piece of cloth. This piece of cloth is bathed in my blood, sweat and dignity. I’ve sacrificed all of that to be able to make a pair of pants that you will wear and feel comfortable.” – Shopna, a garment worker from Bangladesh speaking to *Action Aid*.¹

Introduction

I have always loved fashion; the expression of identity it awards cannot be underestimated. For many years I was a self-confessed ‘shopaholic’ and would thrive off the thrill of a bargain haul. But I, like many others, never considered the damage fashion causes - especially to other women.² On my journey from fashion consumer to activist I have been struck by the way in which fashion is used to experience feminist empowerment, despite the exploitative practices within the industry.³ Additionally, I observed that the disparity between these two realities is rooted within colonialist structures - as it is most commonly women in the majority world who make clothes for women in the minority world.⁴ The tension between women who produce and women who wear (though it is not a total binary) is therefore a capitalist and neocolonial matter, and something I will explore in this thesis. Using mainly postcolonial, transnational feminist

¹ Shopna (pseudonym) took part in *Action Aid*'s research on female garment workers in Bangladesh in 2019. See ‘80% of garment workers in Bangladesh have witnessed or experienced sexual violence and harassment at work’, *Action Aid*, 10 June 2019, <https://actionaid.org/news/2019/80-garment-workers-bangladesh-have-experienced-or-witnessed-sexual-violence-and> [Date accessed 6th July 2020]

² Globally, around 80% of workers in the garment industry are women and therefore it is a problem, like much of the climate emergency and global injustice, that disproportionately impacts on them. This is not to overlook the struggles of male garment workers of course, but to bring our attention to the most marginalised and often forgotten about groups – and in this case that is women. In using the term women, however, I do not wish to erase the experiences of Trans, Non-Binary and Gender Non-Conforming garment workers and consumers of fashion too. Hence why I will try to employ the term feminist where possible to describe this demographic as, of course, it is not only ciswomen who are feminists and engage with fashion. Yet most of the research I am utilising uses the terms women and feminism/postfeminism almost synonymously, which influences my work to do the same. I believe there is space for this field to consider the experiences of other genders more carefully, particularly how fashion is experienced as a tool of meaningful gender expression and Queer community building, though that is not the purpose of this thesis.

³ Often in fashion discourse the term fast-fashion is used to describe cheaply (over)produced garments. The brands that this thesis pays attention to are indeed in that category, yet it is important not to overlook the problems with the vast majority of fashion brands (even some of the ‘slower’ ones). Therefore, I use fashion/the fashion industry more generally than specifically fast-fashion. After all, it is the *industry* in its neoliberal form at fault more so than the concept of fashion itself, which is not inherently negative.

⁴ I chose to adopt the terms minority and majority world to explain what is commonly described as the Western/Developed/Global North (minority) and Rest/Developing/Global South (majority). I found these descriptors the most inclusive, although Global North and South is also appropriate, but the flipping of the West being signified as the minority world undermines the notion of Western excellence, dominance and position as ‘the norm’, as well as challenging notions of BIPOC being commonly designated as the ‘minorities’ because they exist in a society which prioritises Whiteness. Referring to ‘the West’ is also rather homogenising considering some countries located in the West, such as Eastern European/Balkan states, have not always been awarded the privileges of Europeanness/Whiteness as the work of Maria Todorova (2009) illustrates. However, the scholarship I engage with most often uses the term West and therefore I do also adopt it in some instances for sensical purposes, particularly when discussing postcolonial and transnational feminist theories.

and postfeminist theories, I will trace fourth wave feminist interactions with fashion through robust interview analysis with three feminist participants. My overall objectives are to critically analyse these interactions with an openness to both the merits and pitfalls, and appreciation that feminist tendencies which contradict must be allowed to coexist if we are to effectively challenge them.

I was profoundly inspired to conduct this research following my internship with *Extinction Rebellion Netherland's Fashion Action* group.⁵ Through this experience I gained more knowledge about the rights of garment workers by listening to and advocating for their demands.⁶ As Günseli Berik stated, “there is considerable room for feminists who care deeply for the well-being of women workers in developing countries to have a positive influence moving forward through both their activism and research.”⁷ Focusing solely on *why* the fashion industry is so terrible is something well known by now after years of scholarship, fatal industrial disasters and human rights campaigning around the issue. In bringing attention to the postcolonial-transnational-postfeminist connections I will offer something more complexified, and even useful in the cause of navigating out of fashion's tight hold by examining the realities of how fourth wave feminists interact with it. In terms of my own politics of location, the troublesome arena of minority world scholars speaking on behalf of women in majority world is not my approach here, hence I have opted to choose minority world women as my interview participants.⁸ Additionally, it is necessary to highlight that I chose to interview feminists who have a disposable income, as my concern is not with people who genuinely have no other option than to shop fast-fashion because they are living below the poverty line. It would be unjust to conflate them in this discussion of consumer responsibility.

⁵ During my internship, among many tasks, I helped create this website which details what the group does to help change the toxic fashion industry. See *Extinction Rebellion NL Fashion Action*, <https://www.xrnlfashionaction.net/> [Date accessed 6th July]

⁶ The main organisations I have accessed my information on these issues from are: Clean Clothes Campaign, Fashion Revolution – particularly their Garment Worker Diaries research, Labour Behind the Label, Action Aid, Asia Floor Wage Alliance, Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity. Also, the documentary *The True Cost* (2015), and film *Made in Bangladesh* (2019), and Instagram accounts including @ajabarber, @chicksforclimate and @tollydollyposh.

⁷ Though I disagree with the use of the term ‘developing countries’, as it suggests that such countries are defined by their status of poverty and nods to colonial racial stereotyping of backwardness, it must also be contextualised to the time of publication where other terminology was not as normalised. G. Berik, ‘Revisiting the Feminist Debates on International Labour Standards in the Aftermath of Rana Plaza’, *Studies in Comparative Development*, 52, (2017), p. 210.

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak excellently depicts the issues of positionality of the white minority world researcher writing about majority world subjects in G. Spivak ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

Overall, I am situating my research in the postfeminist canon with a postcolonial and transnational feminist intent. I do not want to completely let go of the analytical framework provided by postfeminism, as some have called for, but recognise that it needs to be complicated in review of fourth wave feminist interactions with fashion, particularly in online spheres.⁹ Fourth wave feminism, refers to feminism that has evolved from around 2012 in mainly online social media spaces, championing concepts like intersectionality, bodily autonomy and self-love.¹⁰ I recognise it as a revival of the *pride* in feminism, following its decline during the postfeminist era, although as the thesis will demonstrate there is significant overlap between the two waves as postfeminist sensibilities flow through time.¹¹ Furthermore, I use Angela McRobbie's concept of the "double entanglement" of feminism. As Rosalind Gill explains, "McRobbie (2009) elaborates the view that postfeminism involves a (double) entanglement with feminism in which it is "taken into account" yet attacked."¹² I take this approach primarily because I do not believe in engaging with "blame and shame politics", as influenced by principles and values of *Extinction Rebellion* who claim: "We live in a toxic system, but no one individual is to blame."¹³ Moreover, it is more realistic and productive to acknowledge the hypocrisies and complexities of contemporary feminism, given the globalised and neoliberal world it operates in. This is categorically not to excuse the clear violence underpinning the fashion industry, which feminists undeniably contribute to and *must* stop. However, in order to achieve these vital changes, the context in which this violence has emerged and lives must be carefully considered more so than weaponised against feminist agents of fashion, especially on the levels that I will engage with through my three participants: a consumer, an entry-level fashion employee, and a low-key influencer/model. The transformative changes needed are much bigger than these individualised spheres of influence, and therefore the fault lies more at the feet of stakeholders like brands, governments and trade

⁹ For example, Rosalind Gill notes that Jessalyn Keller and Maureen Ryan suggested that the era of postfeminism was complete due to the insurrection of the fourth wave, in the following call for papers, Keller, Jessalynn, and Maureen Ryan. 2015. "Call for Papers: Emergent Feminisms and the Challenge to Postfeminist Media Culture." Circulated May 12, 2015. However, this approach situates postfeminism as a period of time more so than a sensibility which flows *through* time, a point that Gill expertly makes. See R. Gill, 'Postfeminist media culture: elements of a sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10.2, (2007).

¹⁰ S. Curtis (ed), *Feminists don't wear pink (and other lies): Amazing women on what the F-word means to them*, (London: Penguin, 2018).

¹¹ When I say pride, I mean it as the common noun to be proud (compared to the more clearly postfeminist era where feminism was widely regarded as a 'dirty' word) not specifically in an LGBTQIA+ sense, though the fourth wave has arguably been more accommodating to such groups in its overall deeper engagement with intersectionality and openness to different kinds of genders and sexualities co-existing.

¹² R. Gill, 'Post-postfeminism?: new feminist visibilities in postfeminist times', *Feminist Media Studies*, 16:4, (2016), p. 621.

¹³ *Extinction Rebellion*, <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/about-us/> [Date accessed 3rd July 2020]

regulating bodies who have also been convinced by the toxic system of capitalist greed, normalised labour exploitation, and the systematic destruction of planet earth in the name of fashion.

Therefore, my main research question is: how far can fourth wave feminist interactions with the fashion industry be considered transnationally feminist, intersectionally feminist, and postfeminist? I also will consider: how far are garment workers considered in these interactions? In what ways does fashion empower fourth wave feminists, and alter their modes of engagement with their bodies? How important is social media in these interactions? Chapter 1: Theoretical Frameworks and Academic Debates will outline which concepts of postcolonial and transnational feminist theory I will utilise, whilst giving more attention to introducing postfeminism as a field before highlighting which elements are relevant to this study. Chapter 2: Methodology will explain the process of my interviewing method, heavily inspired by feminist research practices and desire to capture the lived experience. This is followed by Chapter 3: Research Analysis, where I will critically apply the theoretical frameworks to the interviews. Here, I seek to produce a rich site of nuanced analysis that both affirms, complexifies and expands narratives about fourth wave feminists who interact with fashion – thus employing Donna Haraway’s technique of *staying with the trouble*, even (especially) when it gets uncomfortable.¹⁴ I will finally summarise my key arguments in the Conclusion.

¹⁴ D. J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (1st ed.), (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2016).

Chapter 1: Theoretical Frameworks and Academic Debates

First I will discuss concepts from the postcolonial and transnational feminist canons in conjunction with one another and in relation to the fashion industry, though mainly focusing on the transnational as this perspective is what is needed to achieve feminist solidarity with garment workers and to ultimately challenge the brutal inequalities plaguing the fashion industry. I will also touch on some decolonial and ecofeminist works to enhance the depth and dynamics of my analysis, whilst forging connections with postfeminism in this section. The relationship between (a lack of) transnational feminism and postfeminism is one of the most important offerings of my Theoretical Frameworks and Academic Debates. Then the postfeminist section will be split with the following sub-headings to highlight my thematic areas of interest: mythologizing the independent female figure, postfeminism is not just for White minority world women, fourth wave feminism: post-postfeminism? and femvertising and intersectional representation.

Postcolonial and transnational feminism

Dina Siddiqi's work highlights a key concept that "producing bodies" in the majority world suffer to make "consuming bodies" in the minority world look and feel good, reproducing a colonial power structure. Siddiqi analyses ruptures in the myth of globalisation being an economic project to benefit all, like the industrial disasters in fashion factories, most famously Tazreen Fashions (2012) and Rana Plaza (2013) in Bangladesh.¹⁵ She states:

The deaths at Rana Plaza and Tazreen Fashions were unacceptable precisely for making visible the violent underbelly of transnational capital and rendering legible the violence that binds consuming bodies in the Global North with producing bodies in places like Bangladesh.¹⁶

Siddiqi also notes the Western framing of Rana Plaza as a necessary part of Bangladesh's linear process towards modernity; thus, their progression is mirrored on that of the minority world. This Orientalising approach also evades accountability for the violent capitalist machine, enabling its continuation as it is held up as the source of inspiration for majority world countries

¹⁵ 112 workers died in the factory fire at Tazreen Fashions in 2012. 1, 134 died when the Rana Plaza building collapsed in 2013, making it the worst industrial disaster to ever happen in the garment industry. See the following from the *Clean Clothes Campaign* on Tazreen, <https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/past/tazreen> [Date accessed 14th August 2020] and Rana Plaza, <https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/past/rana-plaza> [Date accessed 14th August 2020].

¹⁶ D. M. Siddiqi, 'Starving for Justice: Bangladeshi Garment Workers in a 'Post-Rana Plaza' World', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 87, (2015), p. 171.

to better themselves on at any human cost. Moreover, I will address in my interview analysis to what extent there is an awareness or willingness to understand this violent connection between consuming and producing bodies and how the industry is designed to avoid responsibility for it.

By the same token, some feminist activists and researchers rely on tired victimisation narratives of garment workers, and therefore adopt a saviourist stance symptomatic of the neocolonial international development industry.¹⁷ The work of Nalia Kabeer addresses this through a comparative study of Bangladeshi garment workers in Dhaka and London. She illustrates:

What allowed these different groups to make claims on behalf of women workers in the Third World was the remarkably homogeneous image of the ‘average’ Third World worker which underpinned their claims. She was young, single, cheap, docile and dispensable.¹⁸

Moreover, as Günseli Berik addresses, this colonialist framing actually prevents the cause of transnationalism by “ruling out the possibility that activism could be based on contextualized understanding of problems and be responsive to women workers’ aspirations.”¹⁹ This configuration of the garment worker reflects what Chandra Talpade Mohanty identified as the ‘Third World Woman’ in the ground-breaking *Under Western Eyes* (1986). The ‘Third World Woman’ was created by White minority world feminism as an *already constituted* category – inherently subaltern and culturally oppressed to adopt the language of Gayatri Spivak.²⁰ She was positioned directly against the Western embodiment of female liberation and so existed only through a Western lens. Therefore, the figure was accepted as ‘natural’ and readily reproduced without question, in a distortion of intersectionality championed by White minority world feminism, which did not (and arguably still does not) cater to the needs of women in the majority world. Mohanty conceptualised this academic framing of victimhood as the *feminist-as-tourist* model, inherently voyeuristic and viewing garment workers as one-dimensional

¹⁷ D. Moyo, *Dead Aid: why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa*, (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

¹⁸ N. Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*, (London: Verso, 2000), p. 10.

¹⁹ G. Berik, ‘Revisiting the Feminist Debates on International Labour Standards in the Aftermath of Rana Plaza’, *Studies in Comparative Development*, 52, (2017), p. 202.

²⁰ G. Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ In C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

beings defined by their suffering.²¹ Here, I am drawn to the ecofeminist (and by in large transnational feminist) collaborative work of *Ecofeminism* (1993) by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies.²² They argue that in a neoliberal structure like our consumer society, which normalises exploitation in exchange of progression towards modernity, there is this antagonistic (or I would say parasitical) dynamic that has been centre-stage since the Enlightenment through European philosophical thinking such as Hegel. This ‘unavoidable’ winners and losers mentality plays out for feminists too, who often believe they must assimilate into the consumer society in front of them to survive (and thrive) – even if that means accepting the ‘inevitable’ exploitation of others, including other women, as a means to become empowered. This idea is compounded by the figuration of the ‘Third World Woman’ as an easy target, as she is already constituted as destined for a life of poverty and exploitation, making the act of purchasing fashion more palatable and easy to rationalise as the damage is conceived as already done.

Furthermore, the transnational feminist project had a lot more promise at the time of original writing during third wave feminism, according to Mohanty’s revised version of *Under Western Eyes* (2003). For example as she reflects, ‘I was committed, both politically and personally, to building a noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders.’²³ This promise was lost in conjunction with the era of postfeminism, which turned (mainly) minority world feminist motivations inward in line with the individualistic seduction of neoliberalism and therefore out of reach of internationalist solidarity. Decolonial feminist scholars like Rafia Zakaria have traced this trajectory, for example:

In the West, post-feminist scepticism has rendered the very label ‘feminist’ irrelevant to some, and itchy, awkward, and constricting to others. Resurrections of feminist discourse, to the extent they have occurred, have remained preoccupied largely if not exclusively with the concerns of the White, upper-middle-class woman, pushing tomes written around their careerist aspirations of *Leaning In* and *Having it All* to the tops of bestseller lists.²⁴

²¹ C. Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.’, *Boundary 2*, 12.3 (1984), p. 520.

²² V. Shiva and M. Mies, ‘Introduction: Why we wrote this book together’, *Ecofeminism*, (London: Zed Books, 2014).

²³ C. Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles’, *Signs*, 28.2, (2003), p. 504. Italics added.

²⁴ R. Zakaria, in (ed) K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Verso, 2016), p. 9.

Zakaria therefore equates this rise in postfeminist behaviour, producing new configurations of womanhood, which shall be explored throughout this research, with an abandonment of transnational feminist solidarity. I will therefore utilise this concept in the context of fourth wave feminist participation in the fashion industry. What is more, I will consider how fourth wave feminists encounter a trade-off of their own empowerment, experienced through fashion and the social media presentation of that fashion, at the expense of the producing body of the garment worker. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that other scholars argue that Western feminist intervention stagnated the production of majority world feminist knowledge during the second/third wave as much as its successor. Chela Sandoval explicitly states that the 1980s U.S ‘Third World’ feminist movement “buckled from within” from the lack of support from White feminists at the time.²⁵ Therefore, it is important not to romanticise the second/third wave transnational project, nor sensationalise this postcolonial-transnational-postfeminist trajectory, though I do recognise the latter’s value especially when placed into the context of minority world fourth wave feminist interactions in the fashion industry.

Postfeminism

I will mainly draw on the works of Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, Ariel Levy and comparatively Hannah Retallack et al. for my analysis of postfeminism. McRobbie’s foundational text, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), historicises the 1990s as a time when two things simultaneously happened: a questioning of feminist knowledge production inside the academy (i.e. who are we trying to speak for?) and the adjacent dismantling of feminism in society, through a postfeminist cultural production that promoted how women no longer needed feminism as they were independent agents now – author Helen Fielding’s character Bridget Jones from the critically acclaimed series *Bridgette Jones’ Diary* (1996) is a prime example of this new postfeminist woman. Postfeminism is not just the idea that feminism is complete and no longer needed, but the appropriation of feminist terms like *empowerment* and *choice* in what McRobbie calls “a process of displacement and substitution”.²⁶ Moreover, postfeminism exists firmly inside a neoliberal structure designed to further oppress women through an emphasis on the individual, however simultaneously make them active agents of such oppression through cyclic self-critique. McRobbie therefore claims that one-way postfeminism was enabled was by the promise of progress through representation in women’s fashion magazines. She suggests

²⁵ C. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 52.

²⁶ A. McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, (London: SAGE, 2009), p. 2.

that some feminists were rather complicit with these examples of equality and so the need for an active (or aggressive) feminist project became less. This went hand-in-hand with the decline of effective feminist critique as many were somewhat blind-sighted by this enhanced representation. I would add this was compounded by the fact that women (and indeed all oppressed groups) are socialised to be grateful for even the most tokenistic steps towards equality. This is something McRobbie engaged with to an extent herself:

In this respect I was perhaps myself complicit, without abandoning a feminist perspective, in accommodating to the genre itself, and reducing the level and intensity of critique, in favour of a kind of compromise position which aimed at having the staple contents co-exist with a strong but nevertheless popular feminist voice.²⁷

McRobbie also claims that through the postfeminist characteristic of self-indulgence, the postfeminist woman can distort the consumer society which engulfs her to further her own cause of empowerment. Driven by internalised neoliberalism that strives for more power or, as Ariel Levy would argue, to assimilate to men as her conceptualisation of female ‘Uncle Tomming’ illustrates.²⁸ As McRobbie questions: “What need might there be for a feminist politics at all, if women could simply subvert the meanings of the goods and the values of the dominant cultural world around them?”²⁹ Both McRobbie and Levy are therefore disappointed by the impacts that this ‘lost’ era of feminism has had on both the academy and its ability to effectively critique, but also on a material level as women seem increasingly cast under the spell of neoliberal ideologies that allow for consumer goods, or arenas of previously fierce feminist debate – such as the ‘porn wars’ in the 1970s/80s – to be subverted as a means to furthering this project of the postfeminist figure.

Moreover, a fundamental question that has arisen out of postfeminist thought is (and I ask fourth wave feminists): have women conflated empowerment with looking good and feeling sexy, to the detriment of their own progress? Levy answers this with a resounding *yes* in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2006) for example,

²⁷ Ibid, p. 5.

²⁸ A. Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, (London: Pocket Books, 2006), p. 103-108.

²⁹ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 3.

But just because we are post doesn't automatically mean we are feminists...“Raunchy” and “liberated” are not synonyms. It is worth asking ourselves if this bawdy world of boobs and gams we have resurrected reflects how far we've come, or how far we have left to go.³⁰

Levy is critical, and I would argue engages in unfair shaming, of women who engage in ‘raunch culture’, yet speaks to a context that preceded the fourth wave feminism - though is not entirely dislocated from it. In fact I view the raunch culture Levy identifies as having influenced the sexualised liberation evident in the fourth wave, especially through mainstream fashion brands such as *Pretty Little Thing (PLT)*, *Missguided* and *BooHoo* and the feminist grammar and symbolism they employ.

Mythologizing the independent woman figure

A notion that is important to consider in my comparative study of postfeminism and fourth wave feminism is the figure of the independent woman. Critically acclaimed author Sally Rooney evoked this thinking in me during her discussions of Marxism, where she stated: “I don't believe in the idea of independent people...my life is sustained by the work of other people all the time”.³¹ Therefore, this figure can exist more generally as a macro-goal of feminist activism, to attain independence from the many constraints of the patriarchy. But she can also exist in a specifically postfeminist sense, as the likes of Bridget Jones or Carrie Bradshaw (*Sex and the City*) embody. This is the figure who, through fashion, stands on her own two feet (in heels) and finds empowerment through her socio-economic independence. What is more, this notion of independence, and feminism being grounded in the individual experience, arises in fourth wave feminist rhetoric as the interviews will evidence. For a single idea to have had such a big impact on feminist visions struck me, as it is built upon a flawed logic; that anyone can be independent from anything in the globalised consumer society we exist in. Moreover, this notion of independence is symptomatic of the neoliberal allure of self-interest which, when placed in a transnational feminist lens, proves violent as it overlooks the oppression garment workers endure to enable this independent figure to flourish through fashion. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, feminist researchers of the fashion industry and creators of the proposed solution of *Earth Logic Action Research*, explain why interdependency is a more sustainable and humane (thus feminist) approach:

³⁰ Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 5.

³¹ ‘Sally Rooney Interview: Writing with Marxism’, Louisiana Channel, *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1S5bOdJq3U>, [Date accessed 5th July 2020].

Interdependency underscores the ways in which individual products or human choices, often made with little concern for or understanding of the whole, combine in cumulative, layered, holistic effects that influence entire systems.³²

What is more, it is important to explore the different kinds of independence in a postfeminist world. Women have certainly gained independence and reaped its rewards through their enhanced position in the workforce, which often becomes the focal point of their identity - the fierce (and highly celebrated) ‘female boss’ stereotype for example.³³ But this has not been the same across the majority world due to stark global inequalities, which of course are underpinned by colonialism. As McRobbie states,

Does access to work and earning a living necessarily permit possibilities of independence? For a global girl working 18 hours a day in a clothing factory in an Export Processing Zone and sending most of her wages home, independence is surely a very different thing?³⁴

Therefore, it appears that this postfeminist goal of independence, achieved through postfeminist figures who work in the fashion industry such as Rachel Green from *Friends*, and showcased through figures like Carrie Bradshaw in her obsession with expensive shoes, is only attainable to a certain kind of woman, in a certain part of the world. This brand of female figuration is plagued by hypocrisies, therefore, which is something that must be acknowledged and disentangled if we are to serve any justice to majority world garment workers.

Postfeminism is not just for White minority world women

Though it must be highlighted that women in the majority world can also be postfeminist. It is problematic to only locate such an analysis with the minority world and specifically the White middle-class woman, as it suggests she has a monopoly on the trajectory of feminism. This is symptomatic of longstanding academic concepts of feminism being born and centred in the minority world, and only mimicked by majority world. Jayawardena focuses on this in superb decolonial work on the origins of ‘Third World’ feminism, complicating the Western-

³² K. Fletcher and M. Tham, *Earth Logic Fashion Action Research Plan*, (London: The J J Charitable Trust, 2019), p. 33.

³³ Popular culture references such as this often centre around the fashion industry, such as Miranda Priestley, played by Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006).

³⁴ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 61.

centric narrative by debunking feminism as a Western import.³⁵ Hence why I prefer to adopt Siddqi's terminology of "consuming" and "producing" bodies rather than constantly reinforce the dichotomy of minority vs majority world through the fashion industry, as of course garment workers in the minority world can also be exploited as Kabeer's work demonstrates.³⁶ Moreover, as Mohanty argues, a decentring of the West and complexification of global dynamics is essential to successful transnational analysis.³⁷ Despite this, McRobbie locates postfeminism as a Western-born phenomenon only emulated elsewhere, a notion fiercely contended by the work of Simidele Dosekun. Through Dosekun's analysis of postfeminist women in Lagos, Nigeria she shows how it is more useful to consider postfeminism in terms of what Gill identifies as a "postfeminist sensibility" rather than to designate it in a particular nation - certainly those in the minority world. Gill's theorisation of the postfeminist sensibility was paramount to the field as it enabled a more fluid interpretation of postfeminism that can evolve, rather than be viewed as only an epistemological perspective, historical shift or a backlash to the turn away from feminism.³⁸ This study of women in Lagos therefore demonstrates their own form of postfeminist sensibility of hybridity, contradictory and localised interpretations. For example as Dosekun illustrates, "Many explicitly name their style as "girly" and themselves as "girly-girls" but emphasize that these positions signify neither feminine frivolity nor traditional domesticity but rather *stylized freedom*."³⁹ Furthermore, this idea of finding empowerment within an existing structure that oppresses women, such as neoliberalism and therefore postfeminism, reconfigures what empowerment means and how it can manifest in the lives of feminists. Hence why I wished to conduct interviews, so that this real, and even contradictory, lived experience could be captured.

I am drawn to the work of Saba Mahmood on agency. She makes a compelling argument that the Western definition of female liberation can only be achieved through *resistance* to patriarchal power structures. Influenced by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler brought this concept into the feminist canon in her work *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997).⁴⁰

³⁵ For example, Jayawardena uncovers the role of feminists in Egyptian reformism and women's rights protest movements originating organically in Egypt. K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Verso, 2016).

³⁶ N. Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*, (London: Verso, 2000).

³⁷ C. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles, *Signs*, 28.2, (2003), pp. 518-521.

³⁸ R. Gill, 'Postfeminist media culture: elements of a sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10.2, (2007).

³⁹ S. Dosekun, 'For Western Girls Only? Postfeminism as transnational culture', *Feminist Media Studies*, 15:6, (2015), p. 970. Italics added.

⁴⁰ J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

However, Mahmood problematised this notion with her case-study of the Muslim revival of Egyptian women who were turning to religion, for the *sake of religion*, and actively not resisting patriarchal structures but existing within them by choice.⁴¹ Mahmood welcomes Butler's analysis of resisting social norms as a means of achieving agency, and complicates it in her consideration of how this may be an over-prescribed Western solution by demonstrating how feminists can experience agency in alternative ways. For example, "Feminism, therefore, offers both a diagnosis of women's status across cultures as well as a prescription for changing the situation of women who are understood to be marginal, subordinate and oppressed."⁴² Furthermore, through an understanding of the malleability of postfeminism with Dosekun which is a superb transnational feminist analysis, supported by innovative and nuanced interpretations of agency like Mahmood's, I make the leap to see the possible reconfiguration of postfeminist sensibilities in terms of empowerment *through* fashion as evidenced by my interviewees. Even if this empowerment lives within a neoliberal and patriarchal structure like the fashion industry and illustrates postfeminist sensibilities, its existence should still be acknowledged, rather than automatically relegated to faux-feminism (and therefore invalidated) through a standard of feminism which equates liberation with resistance.

Fourth wave feminism: post-postfeminism?

Postfeminism deduces that feminism in any radical or critical sense has been "undone" and replaced by what McRobbie calls the "new sexual contract" where "young women are able to come forward on the condition that feminism fades away."⁴³ But I argue that McRobbie was too quick to judge this decline, as the possibilities that have been created by fourth wave social media spaces have been pretty revolutionary, although existing within a neocolonial structure with regards to the fashion industry and therefore have a long way to go before reaching transnational feminist standards. Therefore, I would still situate my research in the postfeminist canon as we are yet to reach the point where postfeminist sensibilities are entirely redundant. Instead postfeminist analysis ought to be updated to accommodate fourth wave social media feminist manifestations, as Gill argues: "Postfeminism falls short of adequately accounting for these complicated politics, as well as the internal dynamics of various forms of feminisms

⁴¹ Another example of this 'doing religion' mode of being is in Orit Avishai's study on Orthodox Jewish women in the U.S observing the menstrual practice called *Niddah*, and some finding it genuinely empowering even if by Western feminist liberation standards, it would not be so. See O. Avishai, 'Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency.', *Gender and Society*, 22, (2008).

⁴² S. Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival.', *Cultural Anthropology*, 16.2, (2001), p. 206.

⁴³ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 56.

currently visible across media culture.”⁴⁴ From roughly 2012, fourth wave feminist tendencies began to gain ground in social media spaces. The *Everyday Sexism Project* (2014) founded by Laura Bates in the UK which began on Twitter is a prime example of this, as is the more recent global revival of the *#MeToo* (2017) movement.⁴⁵ Other feminist hashtags centred around intersectionality, a pillar of fourth wave feminism, include: *#transisbeautiful*, *#blackgirlmagic* and *#notyourAsiansidekick*. Moreover, new online spaces became hotbeds for activist, and indeed feminist, potential as Hannah Retallack et al. offer: “Content created online, via new media technologies, is increasingly being recognised as an integral part of the communication of social movements and societal politics”⁴⁶.

Nevertheless, the bedrock of postfeminism – the importance of the self - has certainly been carried into the fourth wave feminist movement. This has positives in terms of helping feminist self-esteem, assertiveness and demanding higher standards but also drawbacks such as feminist selectivity and, ultimately as I will argue, being able to overlook problems with the fashion industry in this pursuit of self-love. Here, the trade-off of empowerment begins to emerge as the motivation for contemporary feminists to purchase fashion, which is compounded by the manipulation of the consumer as the important work of social theorist Robert G. Dunn demonstrates.⁴⁷ Moreover, attention must be paid to the fourth wave commodification of feminism in the fashion industry, which provides a clear example of the hypocrisies of this type of feminism especially from a transnational point of view. As Gill offers,

The notorious “This is what a feminist looks like” T-shirt scandal, in which the high end sellers were shamed by revelations that it was a product of sweated labour, highlights the “disconnect” between certain “stylish” versions of contemporary feminism, and long time (socialist and anti-racist) feminist concerns about deeply unfair

⁴⁴ R. Gill, ‘Post-postfeminism?: new feminist visibilities in postfeminist times’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 16:4, (2016), p. 613.

⁴⁵ The *Everyday Sexism project* documents women’s stories of sexism and misogyny from its daily normalised forms to overtly violent assault. See <https://everydaysexism.com/> [Date accessed 12th June 2020]. The *#metoo* movement was first coined in 2006 by Tarana Burke to help female survivors of sexual assault, particularly Black and other people of colour, and had a revival in 2017 in response to the Harvey Weinstein sexual assault cases. See <https://metoomvmt.org/about/> [Date accessed 12th June 2020].

⁴⁶ H. Retallack, E. Lawrence, J. Ringrose, “‘Fuck your body image’: Teen Girls’ Twitter and Instagram Feminism in and Around School’ in (eds) J. Coffey, S. Budgeon and H. Cahill, *Learning Bodies: The Body in Youth and Childhood Studies*, (Singapore: Springer, 2016), p. 87.

⁴⁷ R. G. Dunn, *Identifying consumption: subjects and objects in consumer society*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

global flows between South and North and the rights and wellbeing of garment workers.⁴⁸

Therefore, there is another consistency of the fourth wave with its postfeminist predecessor of falling short of transnational feminist solidarity in exchange for postfeminist ideals, especially through fashion's feminist commodification, by furthering this gap between consuming and producing bodies as consumers believe they are buying *into* feminism itself.

One could problematise the fourth wave feminist revival as replicating other shallow gestures of postfeminism, such as the low eligibility criteria, and focus on the individual claim to feminism rather than *actually* living a feminist life (in any transnational sense at least). For example, as Gill demonstrates:

The contemporary 'hot feminist' is grounded in the notion of not prescribing a certain way of being a feminist to anyone, and has no real mandate beyond women being equal and free to do whatever they want, the eligibility criteria being to be a woman who likes clothes essentially, therefore: 'modern feminism with style, without judgment' (sub-title to *Hot Feminist* (2015) by Polly Vernon).⁴⁹

Fashion is positioned as a cornerstone to this brand of feminism, following the postfeminist trend from for example *Sex and The City*, such as the episode entitled 'A Woman's Right to Shoes' which, as Levy claims, equated Carrie's sandals "with her freedom and worth as a single person".⁵⁰ The only difference between this and Vernon's *Hot Feminist* is that actually calling oneself a feminist became fashionable again, which does not automatically negate its postfeminist sensibility. Hence why in this vacuum the absence of solidarity with women who make women's clothes is enabled, through what is essentially a diluted and sometimes distorted version of feminism operating within a neoliberal framework, and through a neocolonial industry like fashion.

That being said, the fourth wave has brought promise in its challenges to postfeminist sensibilities worthy of attention. Scholars like Jessalyn Keller and Maureen Ryan claim that the fourth wave actually undermines postfeminism, as we are now beyond it in the trajectory

⁴⁸ R. Gill, 'Post-postfeminism?: new feminist visibilities in postfeminist times', *Feminist Media Studies*, 16:4, (2016), p. 618.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 172.

of feminism.⁵¹ Hannah Retallack et al. adopt a similar standpoint, however with more flexibility towards the academic worth of postfeminist thought, querying its use rather than abandoning it entirely. For example,

We will consider the entanglements between a potentially redundant ‘postfeminism’ in the light of this fourth wave, a wave characterised by the surge of feminist engagement rooted in the use of media technologies that allow for the dissemination and sharing of information and lived experience.⁵²

Moreover, Retallack et al.’s study was a source of inspiration for this thesis, in terms of looking to how fourth wave feminists utilise the online space to explore their feminism and empowerment through interviews, demonstrating the nuances of lived experience. Through such analysis, I also seek to complicate the point from McRobbie that the ‘postfeminist masquerade’, the beauty standard performed by postfeminist women, equates to disempowerment and entrenchment into a new self-imposed dimension of the patriarchy, when in fact *some* fourth wave social media manifestations render the male gaze redundant precisely by engaging with modes of typical femininity of this masquerade.⁵³ Therefore, whilst existing through postfeminist instruments like fashion, fourth wave feminists simultaneously resist tools of patriarchal oppression such as the objectifying male gaze, and I would add the tools of postfeminist oppression like the (self)critiquing female gaze. For many fourth wave feminists they no longer exist to satisfy the male gaze but to be celebrated by and in their own, and uplift fellow feminists in their own journey of self-love too. This is a key point I will revisit in my interview analysis section.

Femvertising and intersectional representation

Francesca Sobande’s analysis of three fashion advertising campaigns interrogates the concept of ‘femvertising’ – originally coined by Nina Åkestam et al.⁵⁴ Sobande recognises the postfeminist sensibilities evident in this type of commodity feminism, for example,

⁵¹ Keller, Jessalynn, and Maureen Ryan. 2015. “Call for Papers: Emergent Feminisms and the Challenge to Postfeminist Media Culture.” Circulated May 12, 2015.

⁵² H. Retallack, E. Lawrence, J. Ringrose, “‘Fuck your body image’”: Teen Girls’ Twitter and Instagram Feminism in and Around School’ in (eds) J. Coffey, S. Budgeon and H. Cahill, *Learning Bodies: The Body in Youth and Childhood Studies*, (Singapore: Springer, 2016), p. 88.

⁵³ Though it must be acknowledged that the ‘masquerade’ carries significant worth particularly in relation to highlighting the restrictions of Western beauty standards and how damaging they can be as they are by in large held as the global gold standard. McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, pp. 68-70.

⁵⁴ Åkestam, N., Rosengren, S. and Dahlen, M. (2017), ‘Advertising “like a girl”: Toward a better understanding of “femvertising” and its effects’, *Psychology and Marketing*, 34:8, pp. 795–806.

Femvertising efforts often draw on messages of self-affirmation as part of the marketing of brands, products and services. As such, contemporary femvertising can exemplify the type of neo-liberal, individualistic and capitalistic sentiments that have been unpacked as part of postfeminist and Black feminist studies of media and the marketplace.⁵⁵

Moreover, Sobande stipulates that postfeminist and indeed Black feminist logic is still applicable to contemporary manifestations of feminist interactions with fashion through advertising. She focuses on the concept of intersectionality, and how it has gained prominence in the fourth wave feminist movement,⁵⁶ arguing that it is used by brands to gaslight consumers into believing they are purchasing into something ethical in what I would describe as classic ‘greenwashing’ or ‘wokewashing’ tactics.⁵⁷ For example,

As fast fashion brands try to survive mounting backlash that the industry faces, including on issues of sustainability and labour ethics, femvertising and diversity marketing remains a potentially alluring CSR diversion strategy.⁵⁸

The debate arises therefore of whether brands are just capitalising on this intersectional hype as a marketing tool to expand their consumer demographic, casting doubt onto if it is truly feminist to engage with or not, or if a complex middle ground can exist. This is an issue all my participants spoke to and therefore will be explored in detail during the analysis section.

Furthermore, there is merit to the enhanced representation in fashion models as part of this wave of intersectional feminism. As Tansy Hoskin’s interrogates, fashion is an inherently racist industry, one desperately lacking in representation. Hoskin points out how “Prada did not have a single black model on its catwalks between Naomi Campbell in 1997 and Jourdan Dunn in

⁵⁵ F. Sobande, ‘Femvertising and Fast Fashion: feminist advertising or *fauxminist* marketing messages?’, *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 6.1, (2019), p. 106.

⁵⁶ Intersectionality is a concept birthed by the Black feminist movement and can be traced back to *The Combahee River Collective’s* ‘Black Feminist Statement of 1977, where they outlined their demands for the multiple oppressions they face as Black women to be taken into account. Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw then coined the phrase intersectionality in 1989 after recognising that there was no legal framework to advocate for people who experience entangled oppressions on account of their identity. Prominent Black feminists bell hooks and Angela Davis have also been formative in the conceptualisation of intersectionality. See b. hooks, ‘Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability’ in *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, (London: Pluto Press, 1982), pp. 119-157. A. Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, (London: The Women’s Press, 1981). K. Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (1989), pp. 139-167.

⁵⁷ O. Jones, ‘Woke-washing: brands cashing in on our culture wars’, *Guardian*, 23rd May 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/may/23/woke-washing-brands-cashing-in-on-culture-wars-owen-jones> [Date accessed 28th July 2020]

⁵⁸ F. Sobande, ‘Femvertising and Fast Fashion: feminist advertising or *fauxminist* marketing messages?’, *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 6.1, (2019), p. 110.

2008.”⁵⁹ Therefore, the surge in not only enhanced representation of different ethnicities but genders, sizes and abilities has been welcomed with open arms by many fashion-going feminists.⁶⁰ Such increased representation can also problematise postfeminist analysis by redefining what (or who) empowerment looks like. It is no longer prescribing a one-dimensional figure like the Carrie Bradshaw but can offer a whole host of non-normative identities, as the diverse calibre offered by *PLT*’s International Women’s Day Campaign of 2019 illustrates.⁶¹

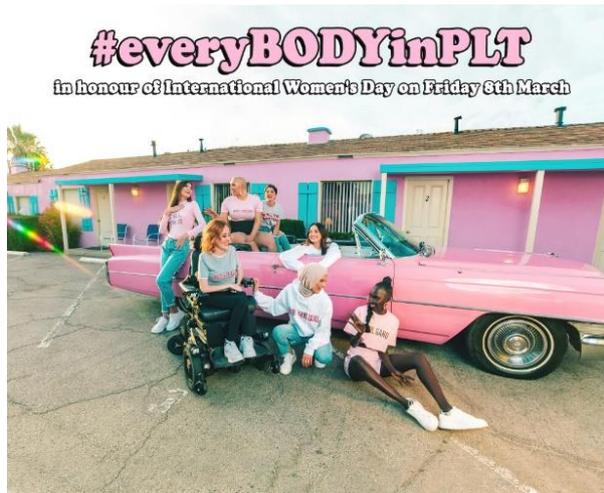


Figure 1.2. #everyBODYinPLT International Women’s Day campaign 2019.

Here, I turn to the work of Stuart Hall on the significance and power of representation for marginalised identities. Largely inspired by Foucault’s discourse analysis and concern with relations of power and products of meaning, Hall’s *Representation* (2013) describes the constructionist approach to representation through semiotics, the study of signs like a pair of heels (Ferdinand de Saussure), and discourse, the focus on historicised power relations like the patriarchy (Foucault). This proves relevant to my research because as Foucault says he was interested in “how human beings understand themselves in our culture”, and Hall states that fashion and clothes can provide signs for this construction of identity and meaning.⁶² Therefore through fashion I am interested in how feminists understand not only themselves, but in relation

⁵⁹ Hoskins also interrogates the disturbing links between the fashion industry and Nazism in the 1930s, such as big fashion houses like Dior and Chanel, as well as the John Galiano anti-Semitism scandal. T. Hoskins, *Stitched up: The anti-capitalist book of fashion*, (London: Pluto Press, 2014), p. 130.

⁶⁰ K. Hunt, ‘Is the fashion world finally getting diversity?’, *Elle*, 24th July 2017, <https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/longform/a37245/fashions-ever-evolving-new-diversity/> [Date accessed 15th June 2020]

⁶¹ #everyBODYinPLT International Women’s Day 2019, *Pretty Little Thing*, <https://www.prettylittlething.com/campaigns/2019/international-womens-day> [Date accessed 10th June 2020]

⁶² S. Hall, ‘The Work of Representation’ in S. Hall, J. Evans, S. Nixon (eds), *Representation*, Second Edition, (London: SAGE publications, 2013), p. 28.

to the world which their fashion is produced in, which is where the tension lies as there is a seeming lack of understanding or empathy. Moreover, I will use representation in the sense of viewing one's own identity in the accepted discourse where it was previously absent as a means to enhance self-acceptance and belonging as the interviews will demonstrate.⁶³

This section has highlighted some of the key academic debates in the fields of postcolonial, transnational feminism and postfeminism, and how I will utilise them in relation to fourth wave feminist interactions with the fashion industry. The next section will discuss my methodological framework.

⁶³ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Methodology

My method for the Research Analysis was semi-structured interviewing. I decided to adopt this approach as a student of Gender Studies because, as Shulamit Reinharz explains,

The use of semi-structured interviews has become the *principle means* by which feminists have sought to achieve the active involvement of their respondents in the construction of data about their lives.⁶⁴

Given the purpose of my interviews, to explore the complexities of fourth wave feminist interactions with the fashion industry, it felt only right to create an open and flexible space for this dialogue. Moreover, interviewing is very appealing to feminist research as it is key to employing Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges, which is a vital component of my interview analysis. Haraway dismissed positivist approaches to objectivity as redundant, arguing for a feminist standpoint grounded in lived experiences with a clear indication of the researcher's positionality. Ultimately, Haraway wanted to dismantle the structural biases of research; "The goal is better accounts of the world, that is, "science""⁶⁵ Furthermore, as Reinharz describes, "interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words *rather than in the words of the researcher*."⁶⁶ So it was precisely my objective in pursuing interviews to give space to my participants and capture their voice, rather than just fill the space with my own.

The foundational work of Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber's *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (2007) interrogates how in-depth feminist interviewing is an incredibly powerful tool for the discipline to uncover the "subjugated knowledge" of the lived experiences of marginalised groups.⁶⁷ Amplifying the voices of feminists in their daily lives is of particular interest to me as I believe sometimes discussions *about* them can miss the nuances that only listening *to* them can offer. I believe interviewing proved particularly relevant to my research as I am using lived experiences as a way of complexifying a discourse that might otherwise be understood in too simple or binary terms. This is not to say that my interviews did not affirm certain expectations of feminist interactions with fashion, for example that they do not consider garment workers in

⁶⁴ S. Reinharz, "Feminist Interview Research.", in *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 18.

⁶⁵ D. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' *Feminist Studies*, 14.3, (1988), p. 589.

⁶⁶ S. Reinharz, "Feminist Interview Research.", in *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 19. Italics added.

⁶⁷ S. Nagy Hesse-Biber, "A Re-Invitation to Feminist Research.", *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, 2nd edition, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2013).

the act of purchase, thus cementing the need for a postcolonial/transnational feminist approach to the issue. But this confirmation is also a part of the feminist interview project I welcome, rather than seeking to go against the grain entirely to prove a certain point, which could be counterproductive and inauthentic. Nonetheless, interviewing did equally complicate postfeminist narratives such as embracing fashion to satisfy the male gaze, as the interviews will attest. Moreover, it is only when zooming in on a microscale to these three concentrated, situated examples (which of course do not claim to speak for all feminist consumers of fashion) that I was able to appreciate such nuances of the debate. I do also believe that in order to wholesomely challenge and change consumer behaviour (a part of the work that needs to be done to tackle the fashion industry), an appreciation of the motivations and even the positive parts of the interactions feminists have with and through fashion is necessary. As Haraway identifies, “Feminist accountability requires a knowledge tuned to resonance, not to dichotomy.”⁶⁸

I conducted four semi-structured interviews between the 21st and 26th May 2020 over Zoom. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to meet any of my participants in person. I, therefore, reached out to make initial contact and arrange the interviews over social media too. I recorded the interviews via the Zoom recording function and later transcribed them by hand.⁶⁹ Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes long with no breaks. I decided not to use one of the interviews, with participant Ellie, as my analysis was already sufficiently comprehensive and, regrettably did not have space.

Regarding confidentiality, I ensured I protected my participant’s privacy by asking them to read and sign a consent form before conducting the interview.⁷⁰ I reiterated the terms of this consent form at the start of each interview. A mutual decision was reached that one of the participants, Jane, should use a pseudonym given her job role at a well-known fashion brand *I Saw it First*. This reflects my understanding of the need to protect the participant’s safety through my research. I also sent the selected quotes to each participant for their approval before submission, at which point some minor amendments were made, as Jane had requested for a sentence to be removed, for example. To provide as much personal accountability as possible, I opted to take brief notes both before and after each interview which document my thoughts

⁶⁸ D. Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’ *Feminist Studies*, 14.3, (1988), p. 596.

⁶⁹ See appendix.

⁷⁰ See appendix.

and feelings about them.⁷¹ This process of self-reflection helped me make sense of my interviews and also improve my technique as, for example, after the first interview with Ellie I acknowledged that I perhaps brought too much of my own opinion to the space which could have influenced her contribution. This was an additional reason why it was excluded from my analysis, as it was obviously the weakest.

I decided to choose participants who I had pre-existing relationships with on a varying scale. Jane is my ex-housemate from university (2014-2017) and someone I would classify as a distant friend, Shauna is a more recent relationship (2018-2019) as my ex-colleague and also someone I would classify as a friend, and Annie is someone I went to university with, though was more of an acquaintance, and our relationship has become friendlier over the years in an online space through our shared interests in social media activism. In 1981 British sociologist Ann Oakley identified the importance of relationship building through feminist interviewing, on the principle of “believing the interviewee”.⁷² Several of her participants became lifelong friends of hers, a testament to how she made them feel more valuable than simply being “data providers” as one might see through more traditionally positivist research.⁷³ Another innovative example of the fluidity within the feminist researcher-participant relationship is the long-duration ethnographic work of Gloria Wekker in the working class Afro-Surinamese *mati* community, in which she not only knew her research participant before, but actually lived with and developed a sexually and emotionally intimate relationship with her during the course of the research.⁷⁴ My approach is a modification of these methods due to the pre-existing and friendly relationships with my participants.

All of my interviewees are UK nationals, aged between 24-28, and cis-female. They all self-identify as feminists, however in differing capacities. For example, Shauna’s and Annie’s occupations are feminist, as they are in the charity sector working with marginalised identities. And, of course, they all participate in the fashion industry in some way, hence me choosing to interview them. They do all have a degree of understanding of the problems with the industry and are at various stages of trying to reconcile their consumer behaviour with that. Annie for example is a fan of charity shops and Jane is trying to make her own clothes. Due to their age

⁷¹ See appendix.

⁷² D. Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’ *Feminist Studies*, 14.3, (1988), p. 21.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ G. Wekker, *Politics of Passion: Women’s sexual culture in the Afro-Surinamese diaspora*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

they are, like me, positioned as millennials in fourth wave minority world feminism. This shared experience enhanced my research by enabling me to empathise more with their articulations of feminist empowerment through fashion and social media (namely Instagram) culture. Furthermore, in terms of speaking to intersectional identities through my interviewees; Shauna is a “average-size” Black woman, and Annie is a Plus-sized White woman. Jane is an “average-size” White woman, that, in this sense represents the Eurocentric hegemonic notion of the ideal woman/body and therefore served to contrast the experiences of Annie and Shauna in their experienced “othering”. Moreover, I noticed that these elements of their identity were relevant to the discussions around increased representations in the fashion industry, yet Jane’s identity markers did not come up in our conversation (which was admittedly much more focused on the industry itself due to her job). However, this underlying assumption that Jane’s body is “normal” and therefore her size and race does not need to be spoken about in any great depth can also be seen as a manifestation of the racist beauty standards perpetuated by fashion coming through my interviews itself; highlighting my own unconscious complicity in socially conditioned norms.

I argue the method of interviewing people I had relationship and trust with added critical depth to the research, grounded in a specificity of fourth wave feminist lives. Although on the surface my position would be to critique their behaviours of engaging with the fashion industry, by having a comfortable relationship with my participants it made the conversations around these issues easier to navigate. I was able to bring in my own past experiences of being a consumer and therefore hold myself accountable whilst encouraging them to for example. The closeness to my participants also made the conversations flow comfortably, which was particularly useful given they all had to take place online via Zoom, outside of our usual modes of interaction.

By the same token, I would say that as I have a connection with my participants, and knew they were giving me their time for free, a subconscious part of me did not wish to offend them. Retrospectively through the transcription process I noticed that there were instances that I thought could have perhaps ‘pushed harder’ on certain ideas - namely why garment workers are not the forefront of their minds when buying fashion, bringing in my own ideas about it being against transnational feminist solidarity. That being said, it would have been both unprofessional and against my personal ethics of anti-blame/shame politics to have engaged with my participants in such a way. Moreover, I would have centred myself in the interview conversation, and most likely dictated a less comfortable and welcoming tone, limiting the

nuanced potential of the interviews. So, while it may have given me a direct answer to a direct question, the whole purpose of the interviews was to show how this topic is by no means an issue with a direct solution.

I analysed the interviews by applying a range of feminist theoretical frameworks to explore their interactions with the fashion industry: postcolonial, transnational feminism and postfeminism mainly with some decolonial and ecofeminist perspectives as well. I reflected on the key arguments from this theoretical framework to see what was affirmed, expanded, and challenged by the interview content and selected my excerpts accordingly. It became clear during the interviewing that three strands of feminist participation were emerging through the interviewees: Jane as an employee of the industry, Shauna as a consumer of it and Annie as a influencer of it – although they were all also consumers and Annie was also an employee of it as a signed model. Hence why I decided to split the sub-chapters of the analysis section along these lines, paying attention to areas of overlap too especially among Shauna and Annie hence analysing them together. Therefore, Jane’s interview analysis in Part 1 tends to focus more on the industry itself, given her close proximity to it and particularly to the factories in the majority world, thus speaking to an objective of the thesis to assess the distance between garment workers and fourth wave feminists in fashion. Annie and Shauna’s analysis in Part 2 focuses on the following issues: fashion consumption and awareness, representation and self-identification and subverting the male gaze, therefore leaning into this fourth wave feminist lived experience of fashion despite its exploitative practices. Moreover, this diversity adds to the credibility of my method by drawing on voices from different lived experiences, rather than focusing on multiple participants from the same entry point, such as all fashion brand employees for example.

This section has outlined and assessed the methodological process which engineered my research through a reflexive analysis. Now I will present the key outcomes relevant to my research objectives and theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 3: Research Analysis

In this section I will use the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial, transnational feminism and postfeminism to analyse my interviews thematically. The overarching themes are the following: a confirmation of the reproductions of colonial power through the fashion industry, and consistency of the fourth wave, like its postfeminist predecessor, falling short of transnational feminist solidarity in the pursuit of creating opportunities for feminist empowerment through fashion - which are worthy of attention even if they pose a feminist contradiction. As Gill explains, postfeminism makes such discrepancies visible as feminism does not exist in a homogenous way. Moreover, instead of using these contradictions against feminists in a way that blames and shames them for participating in a toxic industry like fashion, I believe contextualising why they are a product of their society, and therefore accepting that it has enabled them to feel empowered according to these standards is necessary. What is more, there are examples of feminist interactions with fashion through social media actually subverting such standards, yet this ought to be critiqued as well as, ultimately, it is at the expense of garment workers and therefore not in line with transnational feminism. What is clear is that fourth wave feminist interactions with fashion produces points of tension, underscored by a question of essentially whose empowerment matters the most. As the conclusion(s) will illustrate, this line of enquiry is a part of *staying with the trouble* and I certainly do not think it means we should embrace feminist interaction with fashion brands that exploit other women. Instead, I wish to present a dense site of feminist participation in an industry that both harms and uplifts feminists worldwide, though not always in binary ways.

Part 1: Jane

Jane reflected a lot on her role, and her grievances with her employer, which gave me a powerful insider's view into the bleak reality of the fashion industry and *I Saw it First* specifically as a brand of fast-fashion: cheap, quick, over-produced and low quality garments. Jane has a direct line of communication with the factory owners who employ the garment workers this thesis is interested in. Whilst she stated that she had "*a few strong relationships*" with many of her "*clients*", one even sending her some loungewear during the COVID-19 lockdown period, she equally had to assert her authority at times if there were delays in the manufacturing process. As she explains: "*...it's my job to chase it [the order] so it's in on time and there's no delays...and if there is delays then I need to have a strong word and say we need discount off this basically.*" This mentality of the buyer needing to be compensated for

any ounce of potential profit loss on the product is deeply exploitative, and neocolonial, yet sadly commonplace throughout the industry. It situates the buyer as the party in control of the working relationship - the one extracting, exploiting and profiting the most - as they did during colonial regimes and have continued to following decolonisation.⁷⁵ I would suggest this influences the dynamic Jane has with her clients as a power imbalance became evident in the way she spoke about “them”. For example,

You never really know the full extent whether you can trust them because it is very much a mutually beneficial relationship like if I think they are good I will tell my manager and say let's use this supplier which helps them. Some of them are a joke, they don't deliver on time, they don't respond to you until they want their money.

Through Jane's descriptions of both this and her lack of flexibility with the delayed orders, power structures emerge which are compounded in a way that arguably others “them”, when considering mildly defamatory language like calling the factory owners “a joke” and stating some cannot be trusted. It is undeniable that there is a racial weight to a White minority world woman speaking about men of colour from the majority world in this way that deserves consideration.⁷⁶ However, it is important to keep in mind that some of Jane's clients are indeed European or UK based, and perhaps the assumption that she is speaking more critically about clients from places we more commonly assume to make fast fashion (like Bangladesh or China) is my own unconscious biases. This assumption arose during the analysis process and therefore was regrettably not able to gain follow-up clarification.

Moreover, Jane exposed the speed and intensity of the working standard, which makes the demands for discount on late orders even more audacious given the pressure the factories are under:

It's just too fast and it's just like...I'll sit at work and I'll just not even breathe for the whole day I'll just be like, I need to get this in I need to get this in – it's been a week like how can you expect a supplier to make you like 250 garments in less than a week

⁷⁵ In this instance I use decolonisation to refer to the independence movements from 1945 (India) onwards, though I recognise that in many ways decolonisation has not yet fully occurred, hence my more frequent use of the term neocolonial to describe the current state of fashion, so as not to overlook that it is directly informed by colonialist structures.

⁷⁶ It is worth noting that in general men are the authority figures in the fashion industry in the majority world and therefore deal with the correspondence with minority world buyers, whereas women are overwhelmingly represented as the garment makers, with little-no communication with the buyers.

when he's already got other clients and it's like - [claps hands] bang, bang, bang, bang, go, go, go! – who cares about the quality.

While Jane is aware of the problems with this hectic working method, as she indeed feels it herself as the self-identified “*lowest part of the food-chain*”, there is still a cognitive dissonance with the specific implications of this exploitative work being orchestrated by brands in the minority world, through a sense that this is simply the norm. Which furthermore speaks to Shiva and Mies’ ecofeminist depiction of the inevitable oppressor-oppressed dynamic that governs the globalised world, the notion that there is inevitable winners and losers, which is internalised as fact and therefore by in large remains unquestioned.⁷⁷ Siddiqi also speaks to this in relation to the ‘unavoidable’ suffering of majority world workers through industrial disasters, in an Orientalist framing of modernity that illustrates instances like Rana Plaza as a necessary part of the modernising process.⁷⁸ Thus I would argue that fashion is reproducing colonial power structures in the scale of extraction and exploitation of resources and labour, with a blatant disregard for the likely harm such demands will cause as, ultimately, the producing bodies are 1) defined by their labour and 2) matter less. But there is also a total lack of care for the consuming body as the garments are often made and sold wrongly e.g. “*who cares about the quality*”. Which to me situates the third agent in this abusive relationship, the brand and its highest-level decision makers, as the main culprit.

I was keen to ascertain whether the rights of garment workers are considered by the brand; if how the clothes are made in the factories she has such frequent contact with are discussed by employees either through awareness training or other conversations. However, unsurprisingly, Jane confirmed that “*No, I’ve never once had a conversation about it.*” This paints a dark picture of where garment workers land on the priority list of such brands, or if they are absent from the list entirely. Which furthers Mohanty’s and Jayawardena’s arguments that postfeminism’s neoliberal form (of the fashion industry) has driven a further wedge between minority and majority world feminists, embodying the out-of-sight-out-of-mind approach in the pursuit of accumulation of goods and, in this case, fashion as a means to further their neoliberal postfeminist agendas whatever the (human) cost.⁷⁹ The silence speaks volumes

⁷⁷ V. Shiva and M. Mies, ‘Introduction: Why we wrote this book together’, *Ecofeminism*, (London: Zed Books, 2014).

⁷⁸ D. M. Siddiqi, ‘Starving for Justice: Bangladeshi Garment Workers in a ‘Post-Rana Plaza’ World’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 87, (2015).

⁷⁹ C. Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles’, *Signs*, 28.2, (2003) and R. Zakaria in (eds) K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (London: Verso, 2016).

therefore about how painfully far away fashion is from evoking a transnational feminist solidarity, as (even an awareness of) garment workers are yet to make it onto the brand's agenda. What is more, while Sidiqqi claims that Rana Plaza made legible the "violence that connects consuming and producing bodies", it has failed to lead to tangible changes to the fashion industry at the ground level, as this violence is seldom even discussed.

Jane helped to shed light on the fact that the fashion industry does not only exploit people in the majority world. Despite the easy and linear narrative that this offers to fashion activists and scholars, it is important to understand that this issue is much more complex than what Hall conceptualises as a "West and the Rest" dichotomy (and to unpack the Eurocentric implications of desiring such an approach which positions the West in relation to what it is not).⁸⁰ Of course, consumers and producers of fashion aren't just located in the majority world. Nor are the CEOs of fast fashion brands all White, as Mahmud Kamani's family empire – widely regarded as fast fashion's 'first family' - owning *Boohoo Group Plc* (including *PLT*, *Nasty Gal*, *Karen Millen*, *Coast* to name a few) shows.⁸¹ In fact, many of the factories and warehouses Jane spoke of were based in the UK and Europe, and she was mortified by the way that they had been treated specifically during the COVID-19 crisis.⁸² She comments,

I'm sorry but we have been trading all the way through lockdown, better than ever, and I just think it's disgusting that they didn't let the warehouse like go home and all these suppliers just like, pretty illegally I think, reopened just to deliver the demand from like ourselves, Pretty Little Thing, Boohoo and all those brands I'm pretty certain.

This accusation of illegality that put workers in danger reflects the deep concern and resentment that Jane feels towards the brand she works for; she was willing to be vocal about their

⁸⁰ S. Hall, 'West and the Rest: Discourse and Power' in S. Hall and B. Geiben (eds), *Formations of Modernity*, (Oxford: Open University, 1992).

⁸¹ M. Hanbury, 'Private jets, parties with Khloe Kardashian, and \$1 million weddings: Inside the lavish lives of a billionaire fast-fashion dynasty', *Business Insider*, 5th December 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.nl/the-billionaire-family-behind-fast-fashion-powerhouse-boohoo-2019-11?international=true&r=US> [Date accessed 7th August 2020].

⁸² Jane's comments about the conditions under COVID-19 of UK based warehouses such as those in Leicester were confirmed in a recent media exposé by the *Sunday Times* as a journalist went undercover as a warehouse worker. They revealed that workers are indeed exploited and were not adhering to the government's safety advice during lockdown. Leicester has since become the first regional lockdown in the UK, something critics have drawn a parallel to the garment factories with. Boohoo's owners (sons of the Kamani family fashion dynasty) have since launched an investigation into their Leicester factories and cut ties with the suppliers who breached the code of conduct. See V. Matety, 'Boohoo's sweatshop suppliers: "They only exploit us. They make huge profits and pay us peanuts"', *Sunday Times*, 5th July 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/boohoos-sweatshop-suppliers-they-only-exploit-us-they-make-huge-profits-and-pay-us-peanuts-lwj7d8fg2> [Date accessed 7th August 2020].

malpractice. Furthermore, this critical frame of reference helps to do what Mohanty argues is essential transnational feminist work, decentre the West as the epicentre of civilisation and justice, and demystify how it treats ‘its own’ especially in times of emergency like the current pandemic. Moreover, I avoid the trap of what Mohanty calls the *feminist-as-explorer* model, which (similarly to the *feminist-as-tourist* model) only focuses on the majority world struggles, distinguishing the minority world as immune to such issues.⁸³ Kabeer’s work on Bangladeshi home-seamstresses in London also illustrates this, by showcasing the (arguably worse) discrimination and disadvantages they experienced compared to their Dhaka based counterparts, undermining the widely accepted narrative that worker’s rights in the majority world are automatically worse than in the minority world.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, this does not seek to erase that majority world workers are by in large treated more unjustly due to the structural impediments they experience which are rooted in colonialism. What is important to address is that they are of course not *defined solely* by this injustice as individual human beings with the capacity to experience much more than their working lives, as Kabeer offers: “Yet women workers do not only exist as artefacts of employers’ strategies nor is the quality of their lives fully determined by their experiences in the work place.”⁸⁵ However, this inequality is made abundantly clear by Jane as she describes the differences between the UK based factories, and the non-UK ones – the latter of which she had no knowledge on.

So we don’t know what the working conditions are like for those factories. But then there’s like the Leicester factories that are really good quality like they’ve been around since like the industrial revolution they’re really amazing working conditions are good as far as you can see – but yeah I don’t know about the Chinese factories or the ones in Istanbul and stuff – can’t imagine most of those factories are very good, can you?

A semi-dismissive attitude to the brand’s lack of transparency on “those factories” is evident, particularly through Jane’s rhetorical question “*can’t imagine most - are very good can you?*” which resides to what is widely accepted as fact, that ‘the rest’ has terrible working environments. Her certainty that the Leicester factories were “amazing”, and synonymous with an era widely celebrated in Britain as *the* showcase of their superiority like the industrial

⁸³ Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes” Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles, *Signs*, 28.2, (2003), p. 520.

⁸⁴ N. Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*, (London: Verso, 2000), p. 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

revolution (which actually resulted in an expansion of its Empire) is also worth noting in perpetuating European cultural exceptionalism, as the work of Étienne Balibar among other postcolonial scholars illuminates.⁸⁶ Whereas before it appeared that garment workers are not even considered as a subject that has never arisen at work, when they did come up it was through an assumption of their working conditions being poor, thus a relegation of their status to one of suffering in a typical Orientalist framing of ‘the other’. This taps into the ‘Third World Woman’ figuration of Mohanty in its “already constituted” categorisation, it is assumed to be fact that their factories would be bad conditions due to the widely held perception of this in the minority world. Whilst in many ways this is of course true, and something I wish for people in this part of the world to know and care about, it is the *assuming* of it which is harmful when coming from a White, Western woman in the industry like Jane as it uncritically reproduces a racially charged idea. And as Berik addresses, this categorisation of garment workers as inherently weak and voiceless stagnates the course of transnational activism in solidarity *with* them, leading to more reproductions of White saviourist approaches speaking *for* them.

Moreover, Jane’s interview was useful in cementing my understanding of the industry as a neocolonial project of abuse that affirms power imbalances and tired victimisation narratives of garment workers which, sadly, does not seem to be changing anytime soon.

Part 2: Annie and Shauna

Fashion consumption and awareness

From a postcolonial and transnational feminist point of view, there is an ignorance from feminist consumers of fashion that fails to *stay with the trouble* and which prioritises their comfort and privilege when buying fashion. This is compounded by the ease to which consumers can, and are actively encouraged to, be ignorant on these matters as Dunn illustrates.⁸⁷ Shauna claims the cost and convenience are simply too seductive and override the discomfort of how clothes are made, e.g. “*I think it’s easy to just try and ignore those things like when you see how cheap something is.*” This is reflective of the distance created between consuming and producing bodies which enables these types of behaviours to be normalised in the neoliberal system fashion operates in. Shauna also spoke about how if garment workers were more visible in fashion discourse, similarly to how the dangers of smoking are advertised

⁸⁶ É. Balibar., ‘At the Borders of Europe’, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸⁷ R. G. Dunn, *Identifying consumption: subjects and objects in consumer society*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

on the product, then it would have more of a dramatic impact on her consumer behaviour, though she was not as confident about that of other people. For example,

I suppose you could think of it like smoking and putting that on the pack that it's gonna kill you and have rotten lungs but it doesn't stop people if they wanna smoke they're gonna smoke...it would be interesting to see how that has affected it if at all. If I went on ASOS and saw terrible working conditions I think it would affect me but I'm not saying that it would affect everybody.

Again, a sense of fashion's malpractice being 'the norm' and certainly something that would be (too) monumental to change is created by Shauna's pessimistic tone, as she resides to the fact that if people want to engage in harmful behaviour they will, come what may. Whereas Annie stated that she deliberately avoids falling down "the deep rabbit hole" of learning about the industry in order to continue feeling comfortable with participating in it. This signals that an awareness of these issues exists in the periphery of feminist consciousness yet is easy to avoid, especially when fashion is so seductive as a feminist project. Moreover, as all the interviewees agreed that garment workers are not usually an active consideration when buying fashion, it demonstrates how engrained this distance between consuming and producing bodies has become. One can therefore trace the absence of a transnational solidarity, as garment workers are not a great enough concern to warrant changing behaviours for because they aren't visible enough according to Shauna, and the fear of facing the bleak realities of consumer complicity is strong according to Annie. Hence a trade-off of feminist empowerment begins to emerge through this fashion consumption.

Shauna describes her love of fashion; how important it has been to her personal journey of self-discovery and helping frame what type of woman she wants to be. For example,

Especially as I've like got older you find your own sense of style and like how you wanna be portrayed...when I look back at myself in uni and how I used to dress it's just like embarrassing – [both laugh] - I think that at that point in your life, well especially for me, I was dressing how I wanted to be viewed as like a student so as a woman, as a single girl, at that time. Whereas obviously the older you get the more in-tune with yourself you become and like my sense of style has only really come over the past 3 years and just figuring out like 'I don't like wearing those things' and 'that's just much more me' it might not be necessarily something someone else would pick but it's just

something that makes me feel confident and me feel good or makes me feel pretty or whatever.

Here, Shauna also outlines how as her relationship with fashion has morphed as she has grown older, and therefore become more feminist, meaning she has styled herself less for how society wants to see her “*as a single girl*” and more for how she wants to see herself. This nod towards the subversion of the male gaze will be addressed in its own section later. For now, I wish to draw attention to the fact that Shauna is an avid consumer of fashion with a personal relationship to it, and she is also a Black woman, which complicates McRobbie’s narrative that postfeminism, and therefore consumer culture through fashion, is just for White women. As she claims, “a post-feminist masquerade offers young non-white women only the option of mimicry, accommodation, adjustment and modification.”⁸⁸ Considering Shauna’s connection to fashion, often in a postfeminist sensibility on the aesthetic level such as using it to make her “*feel pretty or whatever*”, McRobbie’s view is undermined. To deny a Black woman the capacity and access to be postfeminist in this regard, as Dosekun’s analysis expands to majority world Black women too, fails to capture the nuances of the lived experience that interviewing can reveal. Thus, Dosekun and I reveal a blind spot of McRobbie’s. This point is not to defend the blatant hypocrisies of feminist interactions with fashion, but to highlight the issue of White Western scholars such as McRobbie taking the opportunity to be autonomously postfeminist away from Black and women of colour. Thus, my point is to defend the *right* of such women to be postfeminist, without the assumption that they are copying it from a White/Western source, rather than postfeminism itself. This intersectional nuance is therefore one of the ways my interviews complicated theoretical narratives of how postfeminist operates for fourth wave feminists.

Representation and self-identification

Both Shauna and Annie spoke about the personal benefits the enhanced representation in fashion they have experienced through models and clothes sizing over recent years. Shauna reflects on the disconnect she felt by not seeing herself in the models, thus not in the clothes, whilst shopping online:

⁸⁸ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 71.

You can only look at the same model so many times and it's just not connecting with you even it's more of an experience than just like 'I want that dress' on that person it's like seeing yourself in that outfit as well and being that person.

By identifying the lack of representation as a personal, embodied “*experience*” that runs much deeper than the clothes the model wears i.e. “*being that person*”, Shauna is speaking to the reproductions of power theorised by Foucault. Taking the ‘language’ of fashion as the discourse under analysis, its homogenously White, cis, thin, able-bodied representation of beauty produces a power imbalance by ostracising people who veer from these signified standards. So, by fashion lacking in such diversity, especially of Black women in the UK as Hoskins interrogates, it cements the ideology of Whiteness being ‘the norm’ and part of what Foucault calls the “regime of truth” through social conditioning. Annie had a similar experience, yet more on a material level of not being able to access clothes that were her size for many years as they did not exist in mainstream fashion - so much so that she often had to sacrifice her sense of personal style for “*another frumpy floral wrap dress*”.⁸⁹ This practical lack of connection to the clothes influenced her internal lack of self-worth too, therefore going beyond the material. As Annie states, the ‘extra’ clothes she would buy online “*from China... they never fit and it would always make me just feel shit about myself*”.⁹⁰ Moreover, not seeing oneself in the standard discourse can influence the personal narratives one creates, often built upon the internalised societal prejudices. On this level, the postfeminist self-critique and policing that McRobbie and Gill articulate is certainly active because of this lack of inclusive representation. Which, with Levy’s concept of postfeminist “Uncle Tomming” in mind, reflects a sad situation that women feel the need to assimilate into the mainstream to feel empowered. Though, unlike Levy, I do not judge women for desiring or acting upon this assimilation, nor do I believe that it is homogenously faux-feminist in its lived experience.

Moreover, through the current changes in the bodies fashion promotes, both Shauna and Annie have found great comfort and acceptance. Online brands like *ASOS* and *PLT* have been formative in this shift, and it has operated largely through Instagram.⁹¹ As Shauna illustrates:

⁸⁹ The colloquial term ‘frumpy’ pertains to clothing, which is considered off-trend in an uncool way that would make someone’s figure appear bigger than it ‘should’, for example with excess material and patterns one might assume someone who is much older would wear.

⁹⁰ The colloquial term ‘extra’ pertains to clothing, which is considered on-trend in a quirky, fun and even camp way, often with bright colours and accessories.

⁹¹ For example, *ASOS* was the first brand to hire models with stretch marks. Most recently, *ASOS* have begun to state their model’s pronouns when tagging them in Instagram content too, posing another point of tension as it almost pits the right to identify as your gender (fourth wave feminist experiences) and the right to be paid fairly

If you see a black model that might resonate with you and you can follow them and get to know them more and find out about like – like I’ve definitely done that just been like ‘oh I really like her hair her hair’s like mine’ and then following her and finding out what she does with her hair so I can like do that myself. It’s just like learning about yourself in that way ... it’s bizarre that that sometimes comes from places you wouldn’t expect like Misguided models or a PLT model.

Here, Instagram enables not only important self-identification but “*learning about yourself*” through a shared identity that the unrestricted access to people’s lives the social platform offers. Thus, it enables community building between different social groups such as Black or Plus-sized people. For Annie, the access to clothes that she feels best express her identity have been made more available, having a huge knock on effect to the ease and confidence with which she navigates her style through.

They have changed a lot for women’s confidence, like, you never used to see people who were just, normal? Like normal, regular people you’d never see them ‘do their thing’ you know it has seen all of this ridiculous clothing being accessible up to certain sizes as well it really has changed, I feel, has changed the confidence of so many like femme people and for me that’s been like a really positive impact. Even for like my own confidence.

Annie comments on the significant impacts that more diverse bodies being represented and celebrated has had on the confidence and empowerment of marginalised groups. By using inclusive descriptors like “*femme people*”, she also highlights that instruments of typical femininity are often cornerstones of femme Trans, Non-Binary and Gender Non-Conforming identity expression; and postfeminists ought to tread carefully not to overlook it in critiques of performative aesthetic femininity.⁹² This widening of the demographic is therefore consistent with the move towards intersectionality in the fourth wave and exacerbated through social media. This enhanced sense of inclusion, belonging and self-worth undermines the assumptions of McRobbie and Gill about the limitations of feminisms which exist in a neoliberal structure like fashion. I would argue that McRobbie, Gill and Levy reside to the fact that neoliberal forms and postfeminism are synonymous and therefore will fail to create

(garment worker experiences) against (or in an exchange of) one another through the modern fashion industry, and specifically its social media culture.

⁹² Non-binary artist and activist Alok Vaid Menon spoke about this gendering of fashion in relation to the following book, A. Hollander, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress*, (New York: Alfred. A. Knopf, Inc, 1994) on Jameela Jamil’s *I Weigh* podcast heard on Spotify, 12th June 2020.

opportunities for ‘real’ empowerment – that which exists in resistance to power structures, as Mahmood’s analysis of agency conceptualises. This line of thinking that women are only tricked into believing they have ‘real’ choice and desire in the postfeminist world – something Levy calls ‘kind of pathetic’ – proves uncertain as Annie and Shauna have - seemingly - experienced genuine personal empowerment from it. Therefore, as instances captured by these interviews show, neoliberal forms and postfeminism are *not always* mutually exclusive, especially as those neoliberal forms become more inclusive and accessible.

It is important to pay attention to the motivations of the brands diversifying their representation precisely because they exist as stakeholders of a system which values profit over people. Furthermore, when thinking along transnational feminist lines, as Sobande demonstrates, “Upon closer inspection, visual representation should not be mistaken for a brand demonstrating its commitment to an intersectional and feminist global politics.”⁹³ In this sense, the firm view of Ruby Hamad that intersectionality is redundant if it is still involved in the oppression of women in the majority world speaks volumes, thus casting doubt on the validity of this diversification of fashion given its exploitative practices.⁹⁴ By this regard, the diversification cannot firmly qualify as postfeminist as it is intersectional in its embracement and celebration of different identities and therefore leads to empowerment for those who exist beyond the postfeminist archetype. Nonetheless, it certainly does not bridge the gap to transnational feminist solidarity given its evasion of responsibility towards garment workers. I would therefore call it a selective, distorted intersectionality that exists within a postfeminist sensibility.

It is evident that brands are capitalising on feminist sentiments like intersectionality as part of the wider feminist revival since 2012. This is something all the participants agreed upon to varying degrees. Jane was far more adamant that it was a shallow gesture from brands who just want to expand their consumer population e.g. “*I personally don’t think they give a shite about someone whose curvy feeling body positive... It changes like the wind.*” Shauna echoed the financial motivations “*I just think it is just money making*” and Annie addressed the tokenism of it “*so they are just gonna be like yeah let’s tick this box put one Black girl in the campaign sort of thing.*” Moreover Gill’s analysis that feminism is a “cheer word” which has travelled

⁹³ F. Sobande, ‘Femvertising and Fast Fashion: feminist advertising or *fauxminist* marketing messages?’, *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 6.1, (2019), p. 107.

⁹⁴ R. Hamad, ‘Is intersectionality enough if the only intersections we see are those that affect women in the west?’, *Medium*, 28th February 2017, <https://medium.com/all-about-women/is-intersectionality-enough-if-the-only-intersections-we-see-are-those-that-affect-women-in-the-6a319534681f> [Date accessed 19th June 2020].

too far, “in a way that does not necessarily pose any kind of challenge to existing social relations” is an appropriate means to reflect on the worth of this diversification of fashion.⁹⁵ However, both Annie and Shauna brought up the positives of this change, and I would infer that this is because they embody identities which are marginalised in fashion therefore they have a more personal connection to the impact of its diversification, whereas Jane does not as a White, slim, traditionally beautiful woman. This supports the line of enquiry mentioned in my Methodology about how these interviews affirm the standardised norms of beauty (and therefore power) as for Jane these topics of identity markers like race and size do not carry much personal meaning, thus enabling the discussion of representation to be generally dismissed.

Whereas Shauna says, “*it’s great that it does draw more people in and make people think more about diversity and culture and that kind of thing within it so I’m happy that it’s doing that as a message*” and Annie states “*there’s always this other side to it like, even though they’ve not had the right intention it’s still had a positive impact on people*”. Again, Mahmood’s concept of agency being accessed within power structures is clear as there is a re-organisation of power; by consumers taking the positive impacts of enhanced diversity for themselves *despite* the dubious intentions of the brand. Therefore, these positive outcomes are important nuances to appreciate and should not be disregarded. But while it is important to hone in on individual lived experiences as I have done to reveal issues that may otherwise be considered in more binary terms, this should not cloud the reality of how this feminism is operating at the higher stakeholder levels and, as Gill states, measure how far these changes are directly challenging structural inequalities on the whole. What is more, with a transnational feminist lens in mind, this diversification of fashion, despite its positive impacts on an individual and collective level for certain identities, has done little to extend solidarity with garment workers and thus challenge the structural neocolonial inequalities of fashion.

Subversion of the male gaze

A further and final theme that arose from the interviews was the subversion of the male gaze through fashion and social media technologies. As Shauna describes a feminist Instagram account she follows @nobracclubshop, which champions women who ditch their bras (yet

⁹⁵ R. Gill, ‘Post-postfeminism?: new feminist visibilities in postfeminist times’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 16:4, (2016), p. 619.

commodifies feminism in its slogan tees that read the likes of ‘do my nipples offend you?’), has provided her the space to reflect on the male gaze:

If I don't wanna wear a bra then you shouldn't be like staring at my nipples do you know what I mean it's just like or if you are staring at them it's just like... [dismissive hand gesture] so [laughing]... I think that it does definitely give – it's made me feel like comfortable in the sense that I feel I can post [on Instagram] what I like.

Here, Shauna redistributes the power of the male gaze to herself by simply not caring what it does to her body - she has risen above it - hence why it even becomes a source of laughter. This self-confidence and assertiveness, traditionally qualities which women (especially Black women) are disgraced for⁹⁶, are practiced through Shauna's own Instagram content as she reflects on her momentarily doubting whether or not to post a photo of herself in her bikini on holiday, before recognising that these doubts had been socially conditioned and internalised therefore should be overcome:

I worked so hard for that body for Barbados like why do I care about what like people think? It's just like getting past that I think for just like myself but that's like I said it's just like a thing society has taught you like you have to think about it whereas you really shouldn't have to think about it, in my opinion.

Again, the patriarchal gaze is disempowered through the focus on the individual; Shauna works hard to look and feel good for *herself*. Moreover, this reflects the benefits that the individualisation process critiqued by postfeminists has brought through its maintenance within the fourth wave movement, perhaps in a more productive way, therefore. Though it must be addressed that this subversion occurs only on the individual level here, the structural and ideological level of female objectification through the male gaze is very much still alive and well particularly within social media culture, so should not be overlooked. In these online spaces often women's bodies are put under the microscope of the male gaze and encouraged to perform to it.⁹⁷ Moreover, the fact that its subversion occurs on the individual level is in itself

⁹⁶ For one example see the following passage, “And then we do a much greater disservice to girls, because we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of males. We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller...” in C. Ngozi Adiche, *We should all be feminists*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 27.

⁹⁷ Although Schöps' study focuses more on how performativity theory intersects with consumerism, it still proves relevant to the point made that the male gaze is present within fourth wave interactions with fashion online, as women are encouraged to perform to it through the seduction of consumerism and fashion. J. D. Schöps, ‘Consuming commodified selves – Accelerated identity co-construction dynamics through fashion performances on Instagram’, Conference: ACR 2018, At Dallas, TX, *Volume: Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 4.

is a neoliberal idea that places the emphasis back on the individual to navigate herself out of the power play which oppresses her, rather than actively dismantle the system which enables it in the first place. In this sense the validity of postfeminism becomes apparent as one can trace neoliberal postfeminist sensibilities in this so-called new feminist wave. It is essential to not be tricked into believing that the fourth wave offers *the* postfeminist antidote, thus we should always maintain active and balanced critique, in order to avoid becoming blindly immersed in patriarchal and neoliberal structures like fashion that offer empowerment in selective (and often distorted) ways. That being said, the sentiment of no longer being held by the male gaze is a key characteristic of fourth wave feminism, as the words of prominent Nigerian feminist author and speaker Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche made explicit in her ground-breaking Ted Talk of 2012: “I wear them [stylish clothes] because I like them and because I feel good in them. The ‘male gaze’, as a shaper of my life’s choices, is largely incidental.”⁹⁸

Annie speaks more explicitly to this male gaze subversion, which is unsurprising given the dialogue she regularly engages with through her Instagram influencing. As she explains:

I feel like we have totally reclaimed how we dress and how we express and it's nothing to do with the male gaze which is like being pretty was always about the male gaze and maybe like okay a little part of feminism is like 'I'm gonna look cute just to erm like hurt men's feelings' but now it's just like well 'I'm gonna look cute and also sometimes I might not look that cute and I actually don't give a shit because it's for me'... I certainly can't remember the last time I gave a shit about what men thought about what I looked like so (laughs) it's definitely worked for me!

From this I infer a parallel to the postfeminist era of female individualisation that was very much still performing to the male gaze, i.e. “*I'm gonna look cute just to erm like hurt men's feelings*”, and the fourth wave disregard for what men think about the way women look “*I'm gonna look cute and also sometimes I might not look that cute and I actually don't give a shit because it's for me*”. The emphasis from Annie here also being that feeling empowered by the way she looks is not determined by societal beauty standards of ‘cute’, because her worth runs much deeper than that and is more of an internal constant. This is consistent with the trend that Retallack et al. identifies, that, though social media spaces, women are redefining modes of engagement with their bodies. Their study of a group of young girls who, on the back of their

⁹⁸ The iconic Ted Talk received such international accolade that it was made into a short book. C. Ngozi Adiche, *We should all be feminists*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 40.

group interview around issues of policing female bodies at their school, launched a viral campaign to embrace and reclaim their body image also reflects this moving trend, orchestrated online, of feminists existing to satisfy their own standards. For example,

These findings contribute to a new set of research literature on fourth wave feminism that indicates ways that girls and women are troubling ‘postfeminist’ dominant forms of beauty and embodiment (Gill 2008) through their uses of social media (2015).⁹⁹

What is more, the classic postfeminist question of whether feminists are conflating looking good with feeling empowered is complicated, as Annie embodies the ability to do both with depth of awareness. Here, it is the lived experience which proves distinctly feminist, echoing the importance of interviewing to unveil subjugated knowledges. So, while it does not render postfeminism obsolete, Retallack et al.’s study and mine certainly challenge its predominance in the ways that certainly *some* younger feminists interact with feminism online.

As Retallack et al. note,

McRobbie and Rosalind Gill see post-feminism as introducing a new form of self-policing and sexism to women’s lives; one that becomes hard to critique and dismantle as sexual self-objectification is continually presented as a matter of individual choice and desire.¹⁰⁰

This is consistent with the postfeminist view that neoliberal structures, like fashion and indeed social media, make it near impossible for authentic feminist empowerment to flourish. However, when one unpacks the motivations behind this, it reveals a rather binary view of authentic feminist empowerment – or agency, in the view of Mahmood – which lies in resistance to these neoliberal structures. Moreover, so-called postfeminist characteristics such as self-indulgence and embracing sexuality or ‘raunch culture’ according to Levy would seemingly be in contradiction to authentic feminist empowerment. Yet as the interviews have shown, Shauna and Annie find empowerment through precisely such means as self-loving selfie posting, embracing fashion, and more widely engaging in this social media culture that rewards feminists for ‘doing you’ i.e. prioritising yourself.

⁹⁹ H. Retallack, E. Lawrence, J. Ringrose, “‘Fuck your body image’: Teen Girls’ Twitter and Instagram Feminism in and Around School’ in (eds) J. Coffey, S. Budgeon and H. Cahill, *Learning Bodies: The Body in Youth and Childhood Studies*, (Singapore: Springer, 2016), p. 99.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

I therefore must disagree with the point from McRobbie that the “postfeminist masquerade” equates to automatic disempowerment and further entrenchment into the patriarchy for women who participate within it. As she explains:

The post-feminist masquerade (embodied in the figure of the so-called fashionista) is then a knowing strategy which emphasises its non-coercive status, it is a highly-styled disguise of womanliness which is now adopted as a matter of personal choice. But the theatricality of the masquerade, the silly hat, the too short skirt, the too high heels, are once again means of emphasising, as they did in classic Hollywood comedies, female vulnerability, fragility, uncertainty and deep anxiety, indeed panic, about the possible forfeiting of male desire through coming forward as a woman.¹⁰¹

Firstly, I take issue with the tone of McRobbie, invalidating and almost mocking the elements of the postfeminist figure e.g. “the silly hat, the too short skirt”. As the fourth wave movement has showcased, yet as has been ongoing long before, women can and do find fulfilment in fashion and certainly in dressing provocatively. This does not undermine their feminism, especially when the male gaze is not the objective of their attire as McRobbie suggests, yet the interviews prove otherwise. Therefore, this is a crucial oversight and tired perpetuation of homogenizing myths of what feminism looks like or stands for. Secondly, McRobbie links the “possible forfeiting of male desire” – or the male gaze - with intensely negative emotions like “deep anxiety”. However, the interviews express quite the opposite, in fact a power and feminist strength *through* these elements of style and self-adoration which enabled them to take hold of the male gaze, disempower its impact and instead exist for their own consumption.

A further and final point to make is that few weeks following the interview Annie reached out to tell me that she had done a lot of reflecting after our conversation on the fashion industry and her role within it, and decided to stop working with the modelling agency she was signed by as they did not align enough with her own principles and values, and she felt like she was having to sacrifice too much of her autonomy for the role. I feel this further validates my research as it demonstrates how engaging in safe conversations around feminist participation in fashion can help challenge and change it, calling people *in* rather than *out*.

Conclusion

¹⁰¹ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 67.

The main purpose of this section is to embrace the complexities – to *stay with the trouble* – and explore feminist participations in the fashion industry no matter how difficult they may seem to reconcile with a claim to feminism. Gill identifies this well as she states:

It seems to me that we have to move beyond a taken-for-granted and unquestioned assumption of displacement—the idea that new ideas automatically displace older ones—to a more complicated but realistic understanding of the way that multiple and contradictory ideas can co-exist at the same moment, field, plane.¹⁰²

The Research Analysis has seen a weighing up of the pros and cons of fourth wave feminist participation with the fashion industry, seeking to highlight the loud freedoms of feminists in fashion drowning out their empathy with female garment workers. I hope to have showed the complexity of this through the lived experiences of different feminist interactions with fashion measured against postcolonial, transnational, and postfeminist lenses.

¹⁰² Gill, 'Post-postfeminism?: new feminist visibilities in postfeminist times', *Feminist Media Studies*, 16:4, (2016), p. 621.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has explored three different fourth wave feminist interactions with the fashion industry. Mapping out and applying a robust theoretical framework, it has critically measured how far these interactions are consistent with postfeminist sensibilities and a transnational feminist project in solidarity with garment workers through semi-structured interviewing. It has also lent itself to the connection between postfeminism and a decline in transnational feminism regarding how fourth wave feminists participate in fashion. By the same token, it has given space to the ways that fashion acts as an instrument for fourth wave feminist empowerment, though problematised the nuances of this empowerment simultaneously. Throughout it has highlighted the core issues with the fashion industry from a feminist perspective and nodded towards ways to improve it. The thesis has maintained an intersectional lens, often contemplating White prescriptions of theory like postfeminism, whilst trying to disrupt harmful binary narratives such as fast fashion being a solely majority world problem too. The overall aim of the thesis was to enter a dense and complex site of fourth wave feminism and fashion, with its empowering and contradictory potential, and see what came out when applied against a diverse theoretical framework – though with the injustices against garment workers firmly in mind. In this regard I believe to have showcased the nature of fourth wave feminist fashion interactions in a way that enables deeper understanding, empathy, and effective critique. Furthermore, the research could certainly be expanded to consider the online realm more, particularly Instagram culture, by analysing visual content and discourse from feminist accounts and even the user responses to and utilisation of these posts. Within this, the modes of empowerment identified by the interview participants could be given greater depth. A further recommendation would be for this thesis to act as inspiration for better relationship building between the minority and majority world, along feminist lines, as the means to create solutions to the toxic fashion industry - by highlighting the current void between these two worlds. Moreover, the academic realm is only one site to navigate out of this crisis from; transnational solidarity through direct action and intersectional community organising is equally essential.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ The work of NGOs like the Clean Clothes Campaign and Fashion Revolution have started this process, working with garment worker led organisations and unions, which is essential for a just transition for them whilst bringing dramatic changes to the fashion industry. There is still much to be done on a governmental level to stop brands from continuing to overproduce however, as well as a much-needed cultural shift in attitude towards our hedonistic consumerism. The work of Kate Soper on an “alternative hedonist disenchantment with consumerism” thus rejecting “the good life” seduction of consumer society, speaks volumes on this matter. See K. Soper, ‘Alternative Hedonism, cultural theory and the role of aesthetic revisioning’, *Cultural Studies*, 22.5, (2008), pp. 567-587.

Mohanty encapsulated my motivations for this thesis excellently when she said:

In fundamental ways, it is girls and women around the world, especially in the Third World/South, that bear the brunt of globalization...And this is why a feminism without and beyond borders is necessary to address the injustices of global capitalism.¹⁰⁴

I believe we must take responsibility and action as consumers to change this industry, enacting transnational feminism and adopting this within our fourth wave feminism, even if that means letting go of, and taking accountability for, the seduction of feminist empowerment that fashion offers. But blaming and shaming feminists is not going to be the way to attain this; calling people *in* rather than *out* should be the approach as the results of my discussions with Annie demonstrates. This requires feminists to *stay with the trouble*, to be willing to sit with the discomfort of what their consumerism means and let go of the benefits it offers in exchange for an internationalist solidarity with garment workers. Hopefully, a middle ground can exist whereby feminists can still be empowered through their sense of individuality, but not striving for an ignorant independence through fashion that comes at the expense of others. Which ultimately deduces this as a capitalist problem with an anti-capitalist solution requiring a dismantling of consumer culture both internally in its connections to one's feminism, and externally in socio-economic structures which uphold this system. Hence why my work with *Extinction Rebellion* is a key inspiration and driver for this thesis.

A transnational feminist project is therefore the goal and the fashion industry is certainly standing in the way of it. Yet what I hope for this research to have achieved is a critical contextualisation, therefore deeper appreciation, for the reasons why and how fourth wave feminists participate in the fashion industry at various levels. This is not to excuse such participation in a transnational feminist regard, as their involvement in the industry is undeniably at odds with garment worker equity. However, it is to pay attention to the fact that, as the interviews evidence, the fashion industry especially through its online instruments like Instagram has brought empowerment to fourth wave feminist life through representation, (selective) intersectionality, and individualised sentiments to increase self-worth and even subvert the male gaze. As someone who has experienced and benefitted from these things too, it would be disingenuous of me to disregard them entirely. To pay attention to these positives of the industry does not mean to erase the experiences of garment worker exploitation; if we are

¹⁰⁴ C. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles, *Signs*, 28.2, (2003), p. 514.

to adopt an ecofeminist lens which challenges this notion of a dichotomy always having to exist with one idea displacing the other – when actually in the real world feminisms coexist in complicated and conflicting ways. Not everything is linear nor can be firmly categorised, which is one of my main learnings from the school of Gender Studies. Through *staying with the trouble* on these points of tension and hypocrisy I have recognised more than ever the need for a reform of fashion, critical review of fourth wave feminism in relation to fashion and online culture; but equally the importance of engaging with feminists non-violently about these issues.

Finally, above all we need an urgency on enacting this necessary change for people and planet if we are to avoid the sixth mass extinction.¹⁰⁵ We therefore must act *now*.



Figure 1.3. 'No fashion on a dead planet' graphic from Extinction Rebellion Fashion Action.

¹⁰⁵ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report of 2018 declared that there are just 12 years left to avert irreversible ecological destruction. **That is now just 10 years.** See IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers. In: *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla, A. Pirani, W. Moufouma-Okia, C. Péan, R. Pidcock, S. Connors, J.B.R. Matthews, Y. Chen, X. Zhou, M.I. Gomis, E. Lonnoy, T. Maycock, M. Tignor, and T. Waterfield (eds.)].

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Appendix

Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3: Interview transcripts

Figure 1.1: Jane interview

Beth: So yeah if you wanna start by just telling me a bit about what feminism means to you?

Jane: Can I just ask what is your definition of feminism in this context?

Beth: That's a really good question because there's different types of feminism.

Jane: I don't really know all the types...

Beth: When I'm thinking of the garment workers in the Global South I am thinking along the lines of transnational feminism so feminism that thinks about women all over the world so if its transnational feminism maybe there is an issue with participating in the fast fashion industry, however, I also understand appreciate and want to show the balanced view that there is feminist empowerment that can come through fashion through these slogan tees but also things like the PLT All Body campaign which was very diverse so I am open to the fact that there is different kinds of feminism...it's not all one definition, so thanks for bringing that up. That brings me well onto my first question actually about what feminism means to you and how it manifests itself in your life?

Jane: Well what feminism means to me is...well I've never really understood it properly because I (hesitation/pause) I don't know how to...I think my perception of it is that you love one another, you support one another and you just let people be who they wanna be. I have no real concept of men and women like I'm just I think everyone should be who they wanna be I'm not limited to my gender should be this or could be this or anything I think everyone can just do what they want, I'm not really phased by much - as long as you're not a serial killer!

Beth: (laughing) I am definitely typing that into the transcript!

Jane: But yeah my definition is probably women empowerment, feeling empowered. I'd say I'm not super obsessed with it but I think men and women should be equal for sure. But I don't identify as a complete woman all the time, I feel like I'm very – dunno – I'm not like women should have everything like this and men should have everything like this I'm more like...peace and love (joking peace hand signal). I don't understand enough about it to be like I think this and I think that.

Beth: I think you understand more than you think because some of the things you just said were really great.

Jane: But that's the thing it's hard like the terminology of things I don't like to get bogged down with all that.

Beth: Yeah. I think nowadays the terminology can be quite daunting.

Jane: Yeah it's like oh shit should I have said that. You don't mean anything by anything but sometimes you just don't think about what you're saying and there's just so much going on all the time now it's hard to keep up.

Beth: Yeah, for sure. Okay, so now moving onto more about fashion. Where do you usually get your clothes from, and on average how often do you buy clothes?

Jane: So I don't actually buy clothes that often to be fair. If I was gonna buy clothes, I would probably not shop where I work, it's not for me, you know me I'm not that brand. I would probably like to be a lot more sustainable but I am restricted by money. I would go on ASOS and weigh up what's nice. It's so hard to say what's fast fashion nowadays too – mass produced products are fast fashion. It's just the fact that these fashion companies all outsource all their manufactures, H&M and all those that own Cos, Arket, Weekday all of those brands, And Other Stories, Zara they manufacture themselves but all these brands like PLT, BooHoo, ISIF that is they don't do anything they just copy and then they send it to somewhere and it gets made. But I don't shop there, maybe some basics. I shop in charity shops as well and on Depop, and upcycling I am making some of my own clothes too I am making some pants at the moment.

Beth: Amazing -

Jane: So that's more what I want to do, make my own clothes instead of just feeding these consumerist-consumerism – what do you call it – feeding corporate companies and that's what I think is really important at the moment.

Beth: Wow yeah that's really good, I am really pleased to here that you're on this journey and it's really good, but I wonder if you could think more about the time before you were like this – if there was a time, or has sustainability always defined your relationship with fashion? – I know for example when I was younger, even through uni really I think it was towards the end of uni that I started to be more conscious – I did shop in charity shops but I did also buy loads

on ASOS on every night out I needed a new outfit, I didn't really consider the consequences, like sustainability wasn't something really in my mind when I was buying fashion.

Jane: No I agree I don't think it was really in my mind. Probably it wasn't in my mind...I wasn't like I need to buy a new outfit for every fucking night out, but every now and then I would maybe buy a new top from all the brands. It's only really now become a thing for me since doing a masters in fashion and reading a really interesting report – you might know it if not you should read it - called the McKinsey and Co it's really good and talks a lot about sustainability. Until that I really had no idea just how detrimental the fashion industry can be on the environment like I had no idea really. You just don't picture it, you think of things like what-do-you-call-it aeroplanes and cars like you picture those sort of things having a detrimental effect on the environment but fashion is such a big contributor.

Beth: Yeah (agrees)

Jane: It's the natural resources. I think what's so hard about sustainable fashion is one it's expensive...and two people don't understand that like there is other materials that can be used in order to make something sustainable. And like I didn't even know that until I did a fashion degree – they don't know that you can use pineapple skins to make leather, they're just not gonna know it.

Beth: I know wow yeah. And do you think that, like what do you think the main reason is why people still buy fashion in the way that maybe we used to? Erm do you think it is just that lack of awareness or?

Jane: It's 'cos of consumerism. It's the desire and need to want and have everything constantly and it's a huge driver for every industry... in our generation everyone wants something new. I remember there's like – don't quote me on this – but there's like erm in the McKinsey report there's something like, on average, you can only wear an item of clothing three times before it's indispensable and you wanna get a new garment. It's something like that.

Beth: Yeah, yeah (agreeing). And I think like compounded with that is like some garments are – I mean this happens in a lot of industries but certainly in the garment industry – and I don't know whether you can speak to whether this happens in the place that you work or not – but a of garments are made deliberately to end up being disposed of they're not made well because they don't want them to last they want people to continue spending.

Jane: Oh yeah definitely. They're made fast to meet a demand and...the sizing is all wrong...so they send that back and then what happens to that product is that it's disposable – you cannot use it. You can - like good companies would probably be like we're not gonna throw that away let's try and use that material again and make something else with it. I know for a fact that in the company I work in there is a huge loss of money and resources in wrongly done items of clothing and wrongly sort of like packaged the whole production line – the supply chain- from A to B is just faulted it's just ridiculous. It's just too fast and it's just like...I'll sit at work and I'll just not even breath for the whole day I'll just be like, I need to get this in I need to in – it's been a week like how can you expect a supplier to make you like 250 garments in less than a week when he's already got other clients and it's like - bang bang bang bang (claps hands) go go go – who cares about quality it's like 'we're not gonna go through them all', they just don't care, do you know what I mean? It's a lack of care. You know what I mean? Like how can you be that and do that and not see how bad it is just like, *slow it down* a bit, have a second take a moment. But yeah it's too expensive for fast fashion to do sustainability.

Beth: Yeah, yeah. Could you maybe just like speak a bit more about your specific role like what it entails?

Jane: Yeah so I work as a Buying and Merchandising Admin Assistant which is the first role that you get in Buying and Merchandising so my job is basically to...I'm in charge of intake for my areas so I operate knitwear, nightwear and lingerie, so it's my job to ensure that I raise orders and send them out to the individual suppliers and create like a good communication between me and them so anything that is doing really well I'll be like right we need to rebuy that so I'll send that to the supplier and be like when can you get it us we need this by XYZ so I'll have like a massive spreadsheet of when everything needs to be in and it's my job to chase it so it's in on time erm and there's no delays...and if there is delays then I need to have a strong word and say we need discount of this basically.

Beth: Okay, wow. Erm, and what are those relationship likes with those suppliers – are you speaking to the factory owners or?

Jane: Yeah, I'm speaking to like the top dogs. The guys who are your essentially run the factories. I have got a few really strong client relationships in that who I really trust like one of them sent me some stuff in lockdown like some cosy sets but, you never really know the full extent whether you can trust them because it is very much a mutually beneficial

relationship like if I think they are good I will tell my manager and say let's use this supplier which helps them. Some of them are a joke, they don't deliver on time, they don't respond to you until they want their money. There's a very strong lack of...they don't care basically...they just want your money.

Beth: And do you get any sense from them what their factory conditions are like for the garment workers?

Jane: Well, speaking from during this lockdown period...loads of suppliers shut and everyone was panicking. A lot of the suppliers for knitwear are in Leicester were shut down and everyone was freaking out like 'oh my god, what are we gonna do, there's no suppliers there's no one that can do what we want!' And I was just like wow relax, they've got to shut, they have so many employees and they're people too, why do you expect them to be open?! I'm sorry but we have been trading all the way through lockdown, better than ever, and I just think its disgusting that they didn't let the warehouse like go home and all these suppliers just like, pretty illegally I think, reopened just to deliver the demand from like ourselves, PLT, Boohoo and all those brands I'm pretty certain. And I've been on furlough so I've just been reading about all these warehouse workers who are just like not getting paid and all these companies that aren't paying their suppliers and I'm like it's ridiculous, it's disgusting like okay yeah you still wanna trade but why don't you just chill out, you don't have to go against all of the rules, even trying to get me back in the office now like I don't wanna do it I'm not getting on a tram are you joking, just cause I'm the lowest part of the foodchain?

Beth: Yeah (agreeing). So where are your suppliers based generally?

Jane: All over. So we've got a few in Turkey, China, lots in Paris, lots in Italy, lot's in England – lots in Manchester lots in Leicester – all over really. We get it wholesale so we go to like a showroom and choose what we want and then get them to basically make it with our label – that's pretty much how it works. So we don't know what the working conditions are like for those factories. But then there's like the Leicester factories that are really good quality like they've been around since like the industrial revolution they're really amazing working conditions are good as far as you can see – but yeah I don't know about the Chinese factories or the ones in Istanbul and stuff – can't imagine most of those factories are very good, can you?

Beth: No, I mean from what you hear no but I wonder is like when you started the job or throughout any time that you've been there is that like a conversation that gets happens or do

people speak like ‘oh I wonder what the garment worker conditions are like’ or is it not something that’s really thought about a lot?

Jane: Not really, not really. I mean I definitely think about it. I think I’m quite different to the people I work with. It sounds really bad to say this but the only reason I took this job was to get experience on my CV. It’s not where I wanna be, at all, especially during this period I’ve been considering the fact that it’s not for me at all.

Beth: Is that because of the ethics?

Jane: That yeah and just this whole time I’ve been sat here like ‘why won’t they just let the warehouse have a day off?’ just leave them alone like stress stress stress stress. But also because I don’t like fast fashion and I don’t agree with it. Like what’s the point in making something if you’re gonna make it badly? Like you could make something amazing, why make it badly? It’s just like the world we live in is so toxic.

Beth: Yeah (agreeing), definitely. Erm, okay, so at work it’s not really a topic that’s discussed.

Jane: No I’ve never once had a conversation about it.

Beth: Okay what about when you were a student as a masters student of fashion like these issues particularly around female garment workers was that something you were taught about?

Jane: Yeah. Yeah it was a very big part of the course, to understand and establish the global trends and future of the industry. And sustainability always got you the highest marks – it was very much encouraged in everyone’s thesis. So it’s definitely a topic that’s being introduced and discussed at length in education. But I still think there needs to be more of an understanding of it, and it needs to be taught better. It definitely needs to be taught better.

Beth: Yeah, I actually went to a workshop last week erm, I don’t know if you know the academics Kate Fletcher or Mathilda Tham? They’ve developed this concept of Earth Logic and they think that needs to come into the fashion industry.

Jane: Slow it down, yeah yeah yeah. It’s like yeah how do we go back now but it is possible because everything is possible (smiles).

Beth: Do you think there’s a will to change it?

Jane: I don't, at this point, in those specific companies that's the last thing on their mind. They're just so interested in growing and in money. And I don't think they care who they tread on to get there, I honestly don't. And one thing that really irritates me is that like in these companies they'll be a trend, like for example the LGBT movement, and they'll like jump on it and use it to profit. And that irritates me so much. Like, Caroline Flack dies and what do they do? Bring a bloody t-shirt with fucking her face on it? It's like the girl killed herself what are you doing? Well, they did put all the money to charity but, still, it's like, they're just trying to look good, they almost like groom everyone around you so people think they're really good and super nice when they don't give a crap. They don't care at all, that's what I think personally. They don't go home and think about it whilst they sleep.

Beth: Wow that's really interesting. And it actually nicely moves me onto the next point which is related to what you were saying about like feminism and LGBT issues, lots of diversity issues I think have been commodified by the fashion industry particularly issues like feminism and the brands that we are speaking about. But specifically this language of feminism, it seems like we have had a revival of it but like what do you think about that? Do you think its genuine or can have some positives? Or, it's like, all shallow?

Jane: I think that part of it like slogan wise is positive. And I do think that that's actually coming from a place of like 'yeah, girl power, girl rights' because I know a lot of girls now are like so about that. Which like I am as well like girls need to be equal sort of thing. And it is a very heavily based girly office so sort of everyone is on that sort of vibe like 'ooh girly' (makes gesture). But I do think that its heavily commodified for a profit-making mechanism like 100% there's no two ways about it. Like what I was saying before someone kills themselves and they put it on a t-shirt, I think that's weird like I don't know about you but it's weird. Even with my manager I was just like is it just me or is that really weird like the poor girl has killed herself like leave it alone it's disgusting, you don't need to have her face on a t-shirt. Let her family do that do you know what I mean?

Beth: Absolutely. I do agree with that. I was actually really saddened by her death it really got to me.

Jane: Me too, like I just felt she did one thing wrong and everyone just jumped on this bandwagon like people don't even know what it's for or what it's about. They just jump on it without any thought. It's so easy now and the consequences can be fatal.

Beth: Absolutely. So another thing that has come out of these brands aside from the commodification is like this girl power language which does have its drawbacks considering how its been made etc. But I have also noticed a huge shift in representation? I don't know that much with ISIF, but definitely with PLT, you see all sorts of shapes and sizes of models and all ethnicities and even abilities sometimes. So what do you think about that like, is it all for show or tokenistic, or is it because the industry genuinely wants to change its attitude to bodily and female representation?

Jane: Well, I think at ISIF they don't really have any larger models, I know the others do but they're bigger whereas ISIF is still sort of start up vibes. I don't think they want body positivity at all I just think they want as many sales as possible through appealing to a wider market. Yeah I personally don't think they give a shite about someone whose curvy feeling body positive. They just know that if they put it on their website and market it like this people will be like 'ooh, that's so cool, like that's me I'm gonna buy from there, they're catering to me and my needs'. But that's it genuinely, it's all about influence and if someone's having a problem or something isn't being taken into consideration then a really good way to market it is to tailor to certain needs and that's exactly what fashion does. It changes like the wind. Like next week, they'll probably be doing facemasks like protective ones because that's the trend. But they don't care, they don't care about what it's actually doing, honestly.

Beth: Yeah, okay, yeah (agreeing). That's interesting. Especially what you said about the fact that they are only expanding their sizes so that they can expand their profits more, not that they actually want to make plus size women or people feel good.

Jane: I mean yeah I personally don't think they care about that, and I don't know for a fact but I think someone has seen that idea because they have seen other brands doing it...it's like what I was saying about jumping on the bandwagon of the next 'thing' the next trend, the next 'idea' of what people are fighting for, and they'll just utilise that to benefit them, that's what I think.

Beth: That's interesting, even if that idea is someone's identity. But I suppose we do live in the era of identity politics so maybe it corresponds well with that really.

Jane: Yeah it's probably just someone in marketing that's gone 'I know what we can do, body positivity everyone's talking about it let's do it' and that gets passed around they come up with this campaign and then that's it and it's onto the next trend, do you know what I

mean? That's how it works. Literally how it works. Some brands might be conscious of it and do it because they genuinely care but I don't think fast fashion is in that category at all.

Beth: Right, okay, cool. Well I think that's everything unless there's anything else you want to talk about that we haven't touched on? Maybe something you expected to come up but didn't?

Jane: No, you've touched everything. It's been good. Thank you!

Figure 1.2: Annie interview

Beth: If we just start with you speaking to me about what your feminism means and how it kind of manifests itself in your life?

Annie: Oh...(long pause) I don't know, Beth

Beth: - it's okay if you don't know, maybe just think perhaps more like on a personal level of what it means?

Annie: Well, for me, it's like about biting off what I can chew and I feel like I already bite off far too much and so for me it means as much as you can amplifying marginalised voices, and for me as well using my platform to erm make people feel comfortable in their own skin and confident and to create positive relationships you know to go and achieve what they want to do like regardless of their background or their relationship with their family or anything like that. And I mostly do that through mental health, body image and other creative stuff ... and I suppose my stuff focuses more on WOC and LGBTQ people just naturally that's just where I am connected. And it comes into my day job as well as I work with young people who have been sexually exploited erm so we do a lot of "empowerment" work and feelings and that sort of thing.

Beth: Yeah, brilliant. And just to bring it a bit more to fashion specifically, more generally like where do you get your clothes from, on average how many clothes do you buy, stuff like that.

Annie: Okay, erm, when it's not lockdown I love charity shops – no joke I go to charity shops like everyday (laughs) – and it's just because I have nothing that tells me like no about that because I am donating to charity, I'm buying something that's been used already and I try to have a policy where if I use something I will take something to the charity shop because otherwise – and I'm only allowed like one little rail in my room so it's just like well if it

doesn't fit on the rail it's a no – and then if I am online shopping I would use ASOS and PLT and I know there's many downsides to that but a lot of it is to do with like sizing, and wanting to look cute...I'm size 16/18 so in most of those shops where it's like 'extra' I'm a size 18 and most other brands just don't have that available I just have to wear something frumpy and I'm just like 'urgh another floral wrap dress' and that's just not me!

(both laughing)

Beth: Yeah I also love charity shop shopping and take it quite seriously...a bit like an Olympic sport not gonna lie, I'm interested in your whole rail thing like that's a good measurement to go off –

Annie: - yeah like if it starts sinking

Beth: - Yeah (laughs)...okay so what you were saying about PLT etc, I think it's really important to point out that for a long time I was a consumer of those shops as well and like with everyone I have been interviewing I've had this conversation where it's like not about blaming and I don't really believe in blame politics at all especially in consumer society like in many ways we have been hoodwinked as well and convinced that we need to accumulate and spend more and overproduce so it's not something that we should necessarily be blamed for but it is something we need to be aware of – which obviously you are in terms of your charity shop shopping as well.

Annie: - yeah (agreeing)

Beth: So in terms of like when you are buying clothes from say not charity shops erm like you mentioned factors that you consider like sizing which I think are incredibly valid – but how present are other factors like say the environment or how clothes are made – like when I think back to when I was buying clothes like that in Topshop as a younger person etc it was never something I thought about, we were just never told, and it wasn't a part of that consumer shopping experience and this is what I am interested in.

Annie: Honestly, yeah. I don't think about the environment when I'm shopping for clothes. Because of the way I shop I think about like how many times I'm gonna wear it and stuff I suppose on that side I will think about the environment I suppose but yeah I'm not like looking item by item at how it's been made and stuff like that.

Beth: Yeah, I think its all part of consumer society and consumer culture – it's done deliberately at the end of the day to try and maximise profits so – and what about not just the environment but if we think about how clothes are made and who makes them? Again, when I think back to when I was shopping – even this year I have bought a pair of trainers from Aisics because I needed for running – it's like that negotiation of like, well, I know that this is probably quite problematic what I am putting my money into but we also live in a system where sometimes it's just impossible to not sometimes so I'm interested to see what you think about that.

Annie: Yeah, no, I know I don't I suppose sometimes don't think about it a whole lot and I think it's because I'm involved in so many other things – and this sounds like an excuse but it's just more of like – I know if I like get involved in something, I can't only get a bit involved in something, and I'll like overload and like –

Beth: - it's a deep rabbit hole

Annie: Exactly so I'm like, it's a bit like naughty in that sense, but err – as well like I'm friends with quite a few people who have like sustainable brands and because I'm a bargain hunter and because I love charity shop prices I then find it hard to – and I don't *need* anymore clothes – I don't need clothes, ever. So I find it hard to be like oh I'll have a few expensive key pieces so I just won't spend more money on things. So I try to go to charity shops more than like online shopping, 'cause those are the prices that I'll agree with.

Beth: That's the other thing that's been brought up like – the convenience as well but – the expense of like if you wanna go for a proper new sustainably made piece you can be paying upwards of hundreds of pounds for say a jumper and it's simply not accessible for a lot of people is the bottom line.

Annie: Yeah, yeah (agreeing)

Beth: But yeah I see that as like a barrier for sure. Erm, okay, and just moving on more to the social media feminism stuff as it's what I wanted to speak to you more about as it's what you've got more experience in. Like, I've observed that fashion brands – particularly the likes of the ones we've mentioned like PLT, BH, MG – fast fashion brands – have really cottoned onto this like language that we as feminists all engage in and enjoy, so like I said like terms like feminis-no sorry not feminism, empowerment, choice and like this notion of 'you doing you' it's erm kind of all about the individual actually. Erm, and I think it comes a lot through

fashion, actually. So I'm just interested to see how you've experienced that because I think there could be both positives and negatives to it and I think like I wanna see a balanced view so I'm interested to see what your experience of that has been really.

Annie: Yeah, so – it is a real mix – because, there's been campaigns where the whole campaign has been about yeah like 'you do you' and 'we wanna be inclusive' and they'll like stick one size 18 woman in there and then when you click on the website there's actually just like two size 18 pairs of trousers and everything else goes up to a size 14 max. And there's that kind of like tokenism in it, and then there's like the other side to it where they make t-shirts that say like woman empowerment and shit like that and I know the irony behind it is like urm you can't like I know that in the past I bought a t-shirt from BH that's says girl power right and that was maybe 2-3 years ago but since then and me realising the logic behind these things and the irony I've since then not really bought these things like a feminist slogan t-shirt from a fast fashion brand.

Beth: Yeah slogan tees are a big issue

Annie: I mean I'm not really like – I like a slogan t-shirt I'm wearing one right now this one, I was gifted it -

Beth: - oh love it

Annie: I'm pretty sure this was sustainable, but they're raising money for like a foodbank –

Beth: - nice

Annie: I can't even remember what point I'm on about now – oh actually do you wanna see a preview of something exciting –

Beth: - always

Annie: Have you heard of We Are Hairy People?

Beth: yes, absolutely, as a hairy woman I have heard of them (laughing)

Annie: insider info, they've done a collaboration and made t-shirts with like feminists and (shows top on camera) it says 'all bodies are snacks' and I know that that's super sustainable like it's not gonna get me into trouble or anything like that.

Beth: Wow – see that's amazing! So that's interesting because tees like that and the tee you're wearing I think they are a great thing, and that is like a potential, mechanism for

empowerment and for a sense of female bodily autonomy for example – would you agree with that? So yeah would you agree that there can be space for like good in fashion?

Annie: Yeah so then like my positives to it were like that fast fashion and – I’m gonna call it, like, basic fashion – my terminology is like brands that are like consumerism and cater to the basic woman, the basic gal if you know what I mean, they have changed a lot for women’s confidence, like, you never used to see people who were, just erm, normal? Like normal, regular people you’d never see them like do their thing you know it has seen all of this ridiculous clothing being accessible up to certain sizes as well it really has changed, I feel, has changed the confidence of like so many like femme people and for me that’s been like a really positive impact. Even for like my own confidence – having access to clothes that – so for example like I used to get, like when I was a teenager, I used to order the like ‘extra’ kind of things from like China, and they were always one size fits all, and they never fit and it would always make me just feel shit about myself, so I just had to go like the extra mile to find something that was a bit more cool. So yeah it’s just been nice that everyone’s had access to like ‘cool clothes’ and been able to show off their own style in a different kind of way so I would say that’s been the most positive thing that’s come out of this yeah fashion craze.

Beth: Yeah. No I think that’s really important and really valid like and I was thinking more along the visual representation and like you see someone whose a bigger size or a different race or gender but your point is much more about practicality of actually being able to get clothes that fit you and see yourself in those clothes like that’s an actual lived experience that like you said it’s genuinely improved through fashion yeah so these are the nuances that I definitely want to pay attention to because it’s not so black and white as the fashion industry is horrendous and terrible – yes of course it is terrible and does exploit people and the planet as well – but I think it’s important to recognise these elements as well. One thing I’ve been speaking to people about is this movement towards more representation and more diversity in fashion. Do you think that like in terms of the upper levels of those brands that they have done this with good intentions – or that it’s been more to monopolise on the trend as like the more clothes they sell to people the more money they can make?

Annie: I think that on every team it’s gonna be different. But I think that on that team there’s always gonna be like a certain percentage that like really want this and for the right reasons but then at the end of the day there’s always gonna be like the decisions of the money makers

right so I think then they realise they're not gonna get it by saying oh this is ethical etc they have to be like look you need to keep up with the times and you need to keep up with the trends to make money and that's just how marketing works like – when did I watch telly – cause I never watch TV but when I did it must have been a few weeks ago I was just shocked that everything was about lockdown already like all the adverts and I was just like wow – marketing is so fast, they are so fast – so of course they are just gonna be like yeah let's tick this box put one black girl in the campaign sort of thing like of course they're used it. But then, there's always this other side to it like, even though they've not had the right intention it's still had a positive impact on people and say you looked on like a fashion website, they'll use the same models over and over again...but when you look at like influencers and how that works, you see it on so many different people but they just pick people with loads of followers for that they don't pick the people who they think meet their standard.

Beth: Okay, yeah, that's interesting. Because I have been kind of thinking about this as well like I think there is some – so like this kind of fashion feminism exists in a neoliberal structure that's designed to completely maximise profit above all else, above anyone's rights, so therefore it's always gonna be quite problematic however the things that you've described and the things I was thinking of before this conversation like the positives that have come out of this enhanced representation like that's kind of taking the power back I would say and it almost like doesn't matter what their intentions were for making this body diverse campaign or making more sizing and if people have taken some empowerment from it then it's a positive for me. But yeah another thing that I have been speaking to other people about, I've been reading quite a lot for this research about postfeminism – so this idea that sort of in the 90s/00s the classic Bridgette Jones/SATC figure of the independent woman who no longer needs feminism, and therefore feminism became a dirty word – and they were really critical of the sexually liberated figure that I think that our generation of feminists have really found a lot from I know that I have personally but I think that some postfeminists would argue that we have somehow conflated looking good and feeling sexy with empowerment and therefore empowerment has become somehow devalued in that process. So I'm interested to see what you think about that – do you think that, to put it shortly, the type of empowerment that we subscribe to of looking sexy/feeling sexy that that is you know genuine empowerment like bodily autonomy and genuinely feeling like a sense of liberation like – do you think that it is?

Annie: I feel like we've been able to separate – to be honest, I appreciate all that context – because in terms of like timelines and stuff like that because I don't know much about it but

in terms of like, I feel like we have totally reclaimed how we dress and how we express and it's nothing to do with the male gaze which is like being pretty was always about the male gaze and maybe like okay a little part of feminism is like 'I'm gonna look cute just to erm like hurt men's feelings' but now it's just like well I'm gonna look cute and also sometimes I might not look that cute and I actually don't give a shit because it's for me -

Beth: - yes (firmly agreeing)

Annie: Like and when I'm saying that it's not because everyone is there yet it's just not like I'm from like you'll know from being from like Northern places it's like in Halifax for example women do still dress and act for the male gaze but like deep down they do actually know it's for them...so like we're getting there, we're getting there and I certainly like I can't remember the last time I gave a shit about what men thought about what I looked like so (laughs) it's definitely worked for me!

Beth: Yeah, yeah, I completely agree and I'm really glad that you raised that point like it's not actually for the male gaze it's for yourself and I think that's how I think about it myself because like through all this reading I've started to like doubt myself thinking like 'omg is the feminism that like my generation has grown up with just like fundamentally flawed' because it exists in a neoliberal structure and panders to the patriarchy in many ways but it's actually just about it being for yourself and I think that's what I have come to realise more too. A lot has happened in the generations before us and I think that different feminisms suited different times but where we are now with the social media age and the context that we live in now, yeah, I would definitely say that I know myself I have experienced genuine empowerment – yeah it might be wearing makeup and getting dressed up but it's for yourself.

Annie: And I think as well another point to add to that is that we have moved away from these like really binary terms as well like you know all genders are wearing make up now, all genders are wearing whatever the fuck they want – it doesn't mean that every Tom Dick and Harry is doing that as you might say – but we've kind of moved from that and some people who may never interact with the opposite sex might wear a dress or wear makeup or wear heels – someone might wear heels to their own garden in lockdown just because they want to no-ones looking at them so it's like those kind of elements too like if you go to a Queer event, I've never seen more extra people in my whole life and they're definitely doing it for nobody but themselves.

Beth: And I think like I agree, and fashion's a definite instrument for that it's such a sense of creative expression and therefore me now I'm starting to see fashion as more of an art and an expressionist form and the industry as something that does need fundamentally changing and exploits people and in many ways reproduces colonial power structures in terms of who makes the clothes and the international distribution of labour and stuff but I don't think we should be attacking fashion as a the thing because of the things that you've described you're lived experience and so many other people you know so yeah maybe that's an important distinction moving forward. Okay, so we're nearly there, let me just have a look if there's anything I've missed – oh yeah – it's something we touched upon before but I just wanted to speak about it more explicitly. 'Cause you mentioned about the two t-shirts, so, as an influencer and someone who might get asked to participate in some campaigns etc would ethical considerations be a part of that process for you when you're deciding on whether to go for it?

Annie: Erm, so, like, in theory I would want to but the reality is like when you're a model or an influencer and you're signed to agencies it's not always as black and white as that. I'll always do things in line with my like – I dunno obviously this is never gonna happen, but if someone wanted me to wear like a Tory t-shirt I'm not gonna do that –

Beth: (sarcastically) I'm so glad that you said that

Annie: (laughing) unless it was 'thou shalt never fuck a tory'

Beth: Yeah or 'never kissed a tory'

Annie: It's this whole thing of when erm when certain brands and we're talking about the bigger brands now, we're talking about like fashion week, you know brands are using you as a token. But you know you're at the bottom of the hierarchy cause you're the model. You don't have the power to change what's at the top, and so sometimes it's about like making your way so you can make more change and I guess where I'm going with this is that sometimes I don't really have much choice – because I'm like 'signed' and I have to do certain things and run it through them first which is why I like never do anything (laughs) 'cause they'll just say no – but that's another story. Erm I think it's like tricky to even answer because I haven't been asked to do that many things. Erm, so it's something I've definitely thought about, but, at the same time it's like, no, I won't be able to because it's like – I have a friend who is a signed model and she's also a plus sized model and I think she nearly always works with sustainable brands. One of the brands came to me and said they would like me to

shoot with them, but they could only offer me a very small amount of money which – I mean obviously they don't have the money because they're sustainable and they do all this stuff like I've done barely any paid work because all of the brands I've worked with are like small brands like We Are Hairy People – they can't pay, because they're a social enterprise so at the end of the day it's like this whole thing like we're in a system. If you want to make any money out of it or a career, you can't be fully, like my friend who only works with sustainable brands she is moving very slowly around like I'm not fully sure how she's affording it to be honest.

Beth: Yeah that's interesting, but it's just like all this bureaucracy and because we exist in this structure this economic structure is so dire in my opinion and you do have to make these negotiations on a daily basis and especially if you wanna build a career in something like influencing then you have to make sacrifices it seems. Okay, well that's fine, and I think that's everything. I would just like to give the space to you to say anything?

Annie: I think you sort of mentioned everything I expected you to. I suppose I don't know a lot about it, I mean, is there anything being done on like a higher up level about like deconstructing any of this?

Beth: Yeah I mean I think the power lands with the stakeholders of like brands, governments and trade regulating bodies like I don't think the onus should be put on us as individuals because – well that's neoliberal anyway – but also we put too much pressure on ourselves anyway especially as feminists as if it's all down to us. But for this, this toxic fashion system in my opinion, to change it needs to happen at that higher level. Well, obviously there's like Extinction Rebellion have got like different Fashion Action groups in London and I'm involved in the group in The Netherlands – but there's also something called the Slow Fashion Season as of next month which we are aiming to get 25,000 people signed up to commit to not buy anything new for 3 months and I know that's back on the individual but it's about that balancing act of the consumers driving down demand but also trying to target the industries and the brands. Like today I've seen that Gucci have said that they're no longer doing seasons now so instead of it just being constantly overproduction and overconsumption because they recognise that the climate emergency that we are in the fashion industries consumption and production just isn't in line with that and the fact that Gucci have done that at such a high level I think that's a really positive thing because hopefully other brands will follow suit if Gucci are doing it like – it's Gucci.

Annie: Yeah when big dogs do it it makes the others feel like oh we look bad now so that's good

Beth: Yeah, for sure. But ultimately it's a political solution I would say because it's about the governments that are in power and what their vested interests are I mean there's a lot of campaigning to be done and going on – the Clean Clothes Campaign are brilliant, Fashion Revolution are very good – they're also doing a lot of work directly with garment workers and getting their voices a big of a part of this as possible which I think is very good and something I find very important as a transnational feminist approach. But yeah, like all issues, there's a lot of work to be done and lot of work being done and it's just about sticking with it and sitting with the trouble really.

Annie: (pause) Yeah there's a whole side to it as well that can sometimes, often I find that fast fashion feminism and that can kind of be a part of white feminism I don't know if you've found this? It's sometimes like I know white feminists who care about puppies and being a vegan but don't care about like – black lives. And so sometimes that element comes into it when I think about it and some of the accounts I'm following seem very focused on one type of feminism – so when I see that is when I'm sometimes just like 'okay, I'm doing what I can ... they're doing what they can and I'll use my page for this kind of thing so'

Beth: Yeah, definitely. I think that erm it's definitely a trope that exists especially in the climate based movements it's overwhelmingly – well, I would say it's getting a bit better – but predominantly white, with a faction of people that I would definitely say that I'm a part of really trying to bring the issues of climate justice to the fore and of white privilege and whiteness in general. And the main motivation for writing this was this issue of coloniality and race and how it's mainly women of colour in the global south who are garment workers who are making clothes for people in this part of the world to look and feel good and I think there's like a tension there. But yeah it's something I'm aware of, I mean I try to be aware of it in all the movements that I'm in because whiteness is so insidious and it just kind of like slithers in and it's like oh shit oh fuck you know you can't keep the blinkers on you've got to keep yourself in check and keep checking in on you know so how diverse is this and what kind of diversity is it. So yeah it's a real good point to raise, and I would understand if like felt like a bit of a – not so much a barrier – but a sort of like oh okay that's what's going on there kind of thing.

Annie: Yeah I think that sometimes it's just like – because my main platform for feminism is IG and I learn a lot from the people that I follow and as soon as I think like okay yeah this is blinkered I just wanna step out a bit. So if you like have any feminist accounts that are like super inclusive and engaging more with the colonialism stuff then I probably would engage more. There's a definite vibe sometimes with these areas of more like white feminism. But I know you're plugged in so –

Beth: Yeah I know what you mean it's really important and like I said whiteness is just so insidious and it's like it's invisible to white people by hypervisible to people of colour and that is a real power dynamic that is reproduced through activism in so many ways and I've seen it so much and it fucking fucks me off so – yeah if I see anything well I can send you some stuff anyway. But yes, it's a key issue. I just think that ultimately there are so many issues and so much good work is being done around them and social media is a real means of that.

Annie: And it is good that charity shops are finally chiming into this whole influencer thing and I'm part of a project with the British Heart Foundation so that's really good. Lockdown has kind of messed it up but I am owed a filming day on it and plan to create lots more content around it!

Figure 1.3: Shauna interview

Beth: What does feminism mean to you and like yeah how does it manifest itself within your life?

Shauna: For me it's all equality and I know there's like different waves but that's kind of where things can get a little confusing in life like some people would see it as not good if someone was to open the door for you whereas some are like let them open that door for me so that's where the lines can get a little blurred I think of what makes a good and bad feminist. Whereas for me it's like more about an individual journey of empowerment and finding that equality within everyday life. So that might just be like acceptance and gender equality in all aspects in terms of just like pay and jobs and just like do you know what I mean? So I just think it's more of a personal thing and just about being open to having different conversations and like versions and aspects of that equality. Some people find it really horrible – well not horrible but they don't like it if – a woman is like expressing their fashion in terms of being nude or something and they think that's anti-feminist but then that person is doing that expression because they feel like it's very feminist to be able to have that

kind of like autonomy over your body and your thoughts in that way. So it's just about being open to those conversations and just doing what you think is good for as long as it's not like damaging in terms of that whole like equality in general I think that's important.

Beth: Yeah, that's really interesting especially what you said about like the different waves of feminism and different types of feminist – do you think that sometimes that can be like – you said for example there's some women who dress in a sexually liberated way and show a lot of skin but then there's some women who judge that and then there's like difficult tensions there, do you think that maybe makes people want to identify with feminism less or more do you think?

Shauna: I think that unfortunately people see it as a negative if people want to portray themselves probably just because of society oversexualising the female form like it's just like 'cover yourself up' 'it's not right it's not feminist' or whatever...it's stupid because just the other day I posted a picture on Instagram it was like me on holiday I was just in my swimming costume lying there and I think I was just a bit hesitant about posting it like thinking well what are people gonna think about it do they just think I am like showing off my body and it's just like I was just like well, even if I was like why does it even matter? I worked so hard for that body for Barbados like why do I care about what like people think? It's just like getting past that I think for just like myself but that's like I said it's just like a think society has taught you like you have to think about it whereas you really shouldn't have to think about it, in my opinion.

Beth: Yeah, yeah (agreeing).

Shauna: If someone wants to do that it's up to them.

Beth: Do you think that like erm IG has provided that space? Like I spoke about the language of like PLT, etc but I think that that is very much presented via IG and social media like 4th wave feminism is just like social media feminism ... do you think that like therefore when you posted that photo you felt good about it and therefore you've faced up to it? So has IG like given you that space to be empowered about your body would you say?

Shauna: Yeah I think so like when I look at other pages as well like erm I don't know if you've seen it's called the No Bra Club and they always post like pictures it's like a t-shirt and it says like No Bra Club and like some of their slogans say like Do My Nipples Offend You and it's just like just not wearing a bra under your tshirt and obviously like that has

become something that is so sexualised and like you could look at their page and think it's that but then there's like that undertone of being just like it's my body and if I don't wanna wear a bra then you shouldn't be like staring at my nipples do you know what I mean it's just like or if you are staring at them it's just like so (hand gesture suggesting I don't care) (laughing) I think that it does definitely give – it's made me feel like comfortable in the sense that like but like I feel I can post what I like but then it's just like I have been restricted in my own just like what I said about society and my group of people where I might feel a little bit judged if I like post something like that as well.

Beth: Yeah right yeah. I think that I have been thinking a lot about it and what you touched on is just like it comes down to whole my body my choice argument, and therefore I think that that is empowering because well some people would argue that that type of feminism where it is very sexually liberated isn't empowering because its like reproducing this sexualised image of a woman but I think like our age group we have only experienced this kind of feminism in its current form therefore I think we can really know through the lived experience that it can be a sense of yeah this is my body my choice and if I want to post a picture of myself in a bikini of if I don't wanna wear a bra or if I wanna wear like a really short dress than that can feel good, right?

Shauna: Yeah exactly like and I think that that's the thing like I think in the case of that picture like I felt good in that picture and like I said I had been working so good to look and feel good on the beach -

Beth: - And you looked damn good!

Shauna: (laughs) well, exactly, and like why should I not wanna show that off if I want to? But like I said it was just like a thing of what are people gonna think, it's about what I think about myself and it's just a bit shit really.

Beth: Right, yeah –

Shauna: But it's just like getting past that I think...like I don't really care about what anyone else thinks about it and it's not about the likes it's about...it's just about me.

Beth: Yeah, exactly, okay, cool. So we have actually have touched on a couple of the other points there but it's fine it's good -

Shauna: - Oh I'm sorry!

Beth: No I'm happy it came up organically like that – so it's not like I've had to prise it out of you, erm but if we just kind of like move a bit more towards fashion now. Just to get a sense of like what your relationship is like with fashion as a consumer. Like, erm, where do you generally get your clothes from and when do you get your clothes?

Shauna: Erm, mostly get my clothes from ASOS. I think I celebrated like my 10th birthday with them this year! Which should make me feel ashamed but then I was pissed off because they didn't give me anything for it –

- (both laughing)

Shauna: Where's my discount code bitch? But no like I don't like going out shopping so I hate like in every aspect I hate clothes shopping in person. So then for me it's more about convenience like when I was living in town I used to go to Forever 21, but then again that was convenient because it was just around the corner from my house so...so yeah mostly ASOS is where I shop.

Beth: Okay, yeah, so do you think shopping and buying nice clothes, having nice clothes is important to you like as a feminist? In terms of therefore how you can express yourself outwardly to the world, but then also how you can feel yourself internally as well?

Shauna: I think so like especially as I've like got older you find your own sense of style and like how you wanna be portrayed...when I look back at myself in uni and how I used to dress it's just like embarrassing -

(both laughing)

Shauna continued: I think that at that point in your life well especially for me I was dressing how I wanted to be viewed as like a student so as a woman, as a single girl, at that time. Whereas obviously like the older you get the more in-tune with yourself you become and like my sense of style has only really come over the past 3 years and just figuring out like 'I don't like wearing those things' and 'that's just much more me' it might not be necessarily something someone else would pick but it's just like something that makes me feel confident and me feel like good or makes me feel pretty or whatever.

Beth: Okay, great. Well I think you've got a good sense of style, I don't think you were ever that bad – although I didn't know you back then! Yeah even if I think back to like even the first year of uni I had some shocking outfits (laughing)

Shauna: (laughing) So bad...but my body was so much better then so I could get away with so much more!

Beth: (laughing) Oh god, erm, okay...so now I just wanna speak more about when we participate in the fashion industry as consumers why is it that we don't think about the very bad side of the industry...like I'm trying to think back to when I was growing up, and I think I have always been aware of this like I even remember when I was younger I did a little like Primark boycott for a couple of years but something just happened like consumer culture just overtook me like the thrill of buying clothes was just so much stronger so I just kind of stopped that ...and I shopped in all the high street shops you know like Topshop was a big thing for obviously a big thing before online shopping I imagine it was for you as well. And I'm just very interested like I would like to hear your views as well about why you think it is that we just don't consider like how the clothes are made, which is often in very dire conditions, but also much more recently how we have come to understand the implications on the environment in terms of its water usage and its emissions. So yeah what do you think it is that enables us to not think about it when we are buying clothes?

Shauna: I think erm...it is the convenience and the cost mostly. I think it's easy to just try and ignore those things like when you see how cheap something is, that's not necessarily always the case 'cos you know you can just go to a charity shop to find something that's just as nice that's already been used and just give it a new lease of life basically, but then that's not always something people don't consider like it's not something I do enough but that's just because it's the effort of going to a shop and stuff like that whereas I am much more likely to shop online if I want something new or if I want something for like an event or going on a night out...that's when I tend to overshop and overthink about the event, I will order something like 6 dresses and just keep trying them on but again that's just like convenience it means that I don't have to go out of my house to stand in like crappy, annoying changing rooms with terrible mirrors and terrible lighting and just like look at myself to decide if I like it, I can just like have it at home and do that. And again like I said about the cost like annoyingly like Primark is only somewhere I would ever go like if I really needed something because it's just annoying to shop in, but if I was to go there for something like tights specifically I would go there because I know I can get like 10 pairs for £3 do you know what I mean like.

Beth: Yeah

Shauna: It's frustrating. Like it is something in my consciousness, especially these days its in my thoughts more and I think that's just because in general me and Wayne have just been trying to be more conscious of like our carbon footprint and the things that we're doing on this planet like...it's the same situation as like eating meat and you can kind of like put it akin to that just because even though you know like what it really means to eat meat - it's a convenience thing it's a cheapness thing - it's about not being educated about different ways of eating so for us that's something we've like tried to educate ourselves on and we try to shop in terms of just being like a little bit more eco-friendly but its just like being able to that with fashion and thinking like well if I can do that in this area of my life I can do it in this area of my life as well even if it's not like completely being green it's just like making smaller steps towards it just being like a little bit better...I haven't been shopping that much recently, but that could just be down to lockdown but it's cause ASOS have done that thing where you can 'shop responsibly' and like see what like where your clothes come from - they're always a bit more expensive but it even inwardly makes you feel a bit better and I know that sounds like really selfish but it's just like I have tried to like shop a little better, I've tried to do something a little bit more...it is hard and it is frustrating and I frustrate myself with it to be honest but it's just because it's so simple and so easy to send back it's just try again.

Beth: That's it like it's too easy not to do for some people and that's something that I completely sympathise with and appreciate you know I've read a lot about how consumers are victims as well like we have been so conditioned into this 'good life' thing you know just like want to accumulate and consume more and more...and erm yeah someone else I interviewed spoke a lot about like KLARNA - I know you use it don't you and how that's like revolutionised people to access more clothes but like on credit essentially.

Shauna: Yeah, yeah that is definitely something that I use and it was almost like the next step that ASOS needed to do to just like be even more accessible for everyone 'cause like even if you've not got the money that month it doesn't matter you can still get it and just pay for it in 3 months depending on what you put it on. It just means that you're more likely to spend more and buy more as well...like if you buy say 10 outfits and you try them on and you don't have to pay for them now you're just gonna be like oh I only like 3 of them but I'll just keep them because I can pay for them next month it's just like so much easier. And that's why they've done it and why they're doing it really well I think like I know like PLT and Missguided and that have KLARNA but I think they don't have free returns which is really

frustrating and it's like a barrier, whereas ASOS have like no barriers if you don't like something you can literally just send it back the next day and not have paid a thing at that point.

Beth: Gosh. Yeah that's the thing like I said it's almost too easy not to do if you love that fashion and want to buy it for sure I get that completely. I just wanted to touch more on these ideas of why we buy even though maybe in the back of our minds we know we are contributing to an industry that's not so good or maybe not so ethical erm do you think that if people had more awareness about it like for example if on the website that you buy in you would be able to see the conditions of the factories that would make a difference? I think what I am trying to get at is that I like to believe that if most people were aware of that they would make different decisions?

Shauna: I think erm I suppose you could think of it like smoking and like putting that on the pack like that it's gonna kill you and have rotten lungs but it doesn't stop people if they're wanna smoke they're gonna smoke...it would be interesting to see how that has affected it if at all. If I went on ASOS and saw like terrible working conditions I think it would affect me but I'm not saying that it would affect everybody. But then again it's like the same thing as like I know...if I saw like what a pig had to go through and seeing that instead of just the end product it would put people off, it puts me off as well...cause you know it happens but it's just like battling with your own conscience like you know you want that piece of bacon but don't do you know what I mean? It's just making those changes, and I think that different things trigger different people in different ways so one thing might play on peoples conscience and mean that they won't shop that way but for some people it's just so easy to ignore it and just put it to the back of your mind even if like, it's right there in front of you and just saying this is wrong. I think that can be akin to so many things, I keep saying about eating less meat because that's been a big thing in our house more on an environment level than a cruelty level.

Beth: Yeah that's a good parallel to make. Like my reasons for being vegan/veggie have always been more animal rights focused than anything else, but my sister Abby's have been just about the environment like she was never really that bothered about animals. But I think it's good to make these parallels because if we don't we end up – now I don't want to go down this narrative of sort of saying like 'if you buy fashion you can't be a feminist' because I think it's so much more complex and nuanced than that like there's different kinds of

feminism, and I think that different people's feminisms manifest themselves in different ways like obviously your work through your job is inherently feminist and its feminist with a real diverse selection of women working in specifically the BAME communities. So I don't think one like invalidates the other but I'm interested to look at the complexities of it, do you know what I mean?

Shauna: Yeah, no I think that it's really valid. I think that was what I was tryna say in the beginning like it kind of works for an individual feminism it's not always as simple as being an umbrella term of like 'I'm a feminist' (swiping hand gesture) it's just like what it might mean to that person. I think that there's like very obvious traits that would NOT be feminist like obviously but then it's like really difficult to try and piece it together and say right that's just feminism. Like as you said I would say my job is like feminist in that way, but there probably are other bits that we do that people would say well you're not feminist – like for instance I changed my name when I got married, which a lot of people might say is not a feminist like that's completely anti-feminist but for me like I didn't mind I want to be a part of – for me its like a family thing I want us all to have the same name when we have kids so they'll have the Lacey name it doesn't mean that I'm any less of myself or that I belong to Wayne because we share the same last name but for a lot of people they might not agree with that.

Beth: Yeah I also just don't feel like it's very useful to just tell different women like what and who they are – I dunno I just feel like judging people doesn't really get us anywhere – so just like having these types of conversations, which hopefully would transpire to more of a consciousness about fashion YES, but also its not to like bash anyone in a particular way and that's why I'm so glad I have done these interviews because it's given me the face to face like – I think it's very easy for feminists when they're just writing about people to just say like XYZ but I'm really interested in the complexities of the human experience and how like feminism manifests itself in so many different ways and yes sometimes that's contradictory but that's also reflective of the system that we live in being a consumer etc. Okay, so, the last thing I want to talk about is around 4th wave feminism and social media, particularly the fashion brands of PLT, Boohoo, Missguided but also other brands so like ASOS I guess because you go on it a lot so can speak to that I guess. I've noticed a big change in representation, so I think there's a lot more plus size models, a lot more non-white models I think there's a big change I've noticed. And I think for me representation is really important it can be a key to someone's empowerment. So what do you think about that?

Shauna: I think I agree completely with you. I think those brands being able to be more inclusive and much more diverse in their messaging is really important for having a different face on it. You can only look at the same model so many times and it's just not like connecting with you even like it's more of an experience than just like I want that dress on that person it's like seeing yourself in that outfit as well and like being that person, so there needs to be more diverse representation to be able to allow for that so on like erm a business level for them as much as it's very empowering for the consumer it's also just a very good business move. But I think as well it's just erm – it was today actually just this morning I was on IG and ASOS had a model that was erm non-binary and someone posted in the comments like 'is that a girl or a boy' and then I think it was ASOS that commented and said THEY are non-binary and we try and make sure that all of our models are diverse and blah blah blah. And then that person just said 'oh okay sorry I didn't know' and then it just like educated that person, I mean that was just one person and some of the other comments were not kind which is a shame but you're gonna get that and it did actually change that one person's perspective on that issue of gender, and I think that's really important for brands to do that. But in the same way it can also be kind of damaging because – PLT or one of them – put like messaging on their t-shirts it only represents what they view feminism as which is sort of like pushing their agenda on people too and it doesn't necessarily fit with everyone else's views so it's still pushing that onto the consumer as well.

Beth: Yeah, yeah, definitely. You touched on a lot of things there –

Shauna: - oh I was gonna say as well I think it was ASOS that was the first online brand to allow, to show like stretch marks on a model which I think is really empowering it's like seeing yourself in that person and being like 'oh they have stretch marks too' but they look obviously like incredible with them (laughing) but I think that's like really important as you were saying about body image it's really important for consumers to see that.

Beth: Yeah it is. And do you think your experience as a woman of colour has been like have you seen yourself more and how has that affected you?

Shauna: Yeah I think so and with IG it's like you can know a model more like if the brand posts something and tags the model so if you see a black model that might resonate with you and you can follow them and get to know them more and find out about like – like I've definitely done that just been like 'oh I really like her hair her hair's like mine' and then like following her and finding out what she does with her hair so I can like do that myself. Erm

it's just like learning about yourself in that way because I don't know what I'm doing with this (touches hair) half the time so it's nice to have somewhere to like look as a guide and it's bizarre that that sometimes comes from places you wouldn't expect like Misguided models or a PLT model. But I think that sometimes as well they can be like – some of the models don't represent in a good way it's just like unexpected body norms that just aren't achievable because of like surgery and photoshop and which I think is like it is worrying when you do see a picture like that because its like this tiny waist and these huge hips and just like perfect proportions in that way and you read comments like 'omg she's just amazing I wish I had that body' and it's just like so damaging and like 'you will never have that body' -

Beth: - yeah it's been surgically enhanced

Shauna: Yeah it's just like that's never happening...so I think that's a problem that they have as well with it. They can't have it both ways.

Beth: Yeah, and you mentioned about like it being a good business move because they are maximising their profits by for example making bigger sizes and appealing to wider demographic – do you think that that's their motivation and therefore it's erm a bit corrupt almost? But even if that is their motivation do you think that the benefits that people have got out of it like from your personal experience as well like outweigh it, if you know what I mean?

Shauna: I think that's tough. I mean it's a business at the end of the day so as much as it would be nice to be think they were doing it for moral purposes...it's not, not at all. I don't think that anyone's that good really. And I'm not saying that the people in that team aren't that good because their motivations may have been to create some sort of change but ultimately it's a money-making goal so that is there business goal. Like I'm sure if there was some sort of – I mean this is never gonna happen but – I dunno, I cant think of anything – I was tryna be like -

Beth: - like a random new trend

Shauna: -Yeah like I dunno if there was suddenly like a Swastika's trend or something (both laughing) they would just be like 'yeah let's go with this'

Beth: - 'we'll make it work'

Shauna: No that would never happen. But even like the ok yeah the masks for Coronavirus and it says on them when you like swipe through that they're not at all medical and have no value in that way. It's just pure fashion, just for people to jump on they make it into fashion and people are gonna buy it because 1) it's convenient 'cause I can get a mask in a day and 2) it just looks better than having a scarf on their head or a bandana or a mask that I've had for like 5 weeks it's just the ease isn't it? And yeah I just think it is just money making, like yeah it's great that it does draw more people in and make people think more about diversity and culture and that kind of thing within it so I'm happy that it's doing that as a message but ultimately it's just money for them.

Beth: Yeah. I mean ultimately it exists in a capitalist structure so I think that anything that exists within that vacuum where the objective is to have infinite profit and infinite growth is just gonna struggle to ever be like not problematic in some way.

Shauna: Yeah exactly – it's manipulation at the end of the day, it's supply and demand, and that's what they live to do like you said as a capitalist company and part of this structure in our world that's what they're there to do so it's like as much as you would like to think they have these really good moral end goals, they don't.

Beth: Yeah, okay. Well I think that's everything. Is there anything else you wanna say about what we have discussed?

Shauna: I don't think so. I think that obviously when I knew we were having this conversation it made me think a lot about myself in terms of clothing and buying and things like that and it is frustrating like I get mad at myself like when I do shop I do kind of go crazy on it like I had a wedding and I don't know how many parcels I ordered to just get one dress for one day I mean it's pathetic really (laughs). And like I said in the same way that we have made changes to our like eating with meat it's just like the same steps will need to be taken I think to change the way we shop for clothes. And I would like to make those changes I think I would like to be better at it I think probably maybe even just being in lockdown allows you to think about it more...I don't know if you've seen but there's a website called HireStreet I think and you can rent clothes for like occasions and that's something that like I could do for a wedding as a better option than just buying dresses all the time...they're just sat in the wardrobe because of our picture culture I'm like I can't wear something more than once and that's something I just need to get over like I'm not Kim Kardashian no ones gonna care if I wear the same thing twice!

Beth: We need to normalise re-wearing definitely. But yeah, can I suggest something to you? It's called Slow Fashion Season, we with XR are collaborating with them and trying to get up to 25,000 not buying clothes for 3 months which is a bit less than the year boycott because that's quite a big ask for people who essentially have a fashion addiction –

Shauna: - Yeah it's like crack really

Beth: Exactly, so I can tag you in that as it's a really good idea.

Shauna: Yeah it's like if you do lent or something, it can actually trigger something to make you think differently about it, it's like bread I did it with bread a few years ago. Does going to a charity shop count as part of that?

Beth: Yeah those aren't new clothes so would be okay, as would renting and trying to swap clothes with friends and challenging the ways we interact with clothes more widely.

Figure 2.1: Reflective notes pre and post interview

Notes pre interview with Ellie 21/05/20

- Feeling a bit nervous!
- Intrigued to see what comes up, especially things I hadn't thought of
- Hope I make her feel comfortable to be as honest as possible and she doesn't feel compelled to tone down her fashion buying
- I want to try and not dictate the tone or issues too strictly and give her space to talk, whilst getting all the information that I want so got to keep her on topic to an extent

Notes post interview with Ellie 21/05/20

- Feeling pleased and motivated to do more interviews and work around this topic
- She raised points and perspectives that I hadn't considered which is great
- It organically moved into the different topics
- I think me turning it into more of a conversation helped her feel comfortable to be honest, by offering my own accountability and experiences as a consumer specifically
- I worry I put my own opinion in it too much at the end, but such is an equal conversation
- I covered all the topics I wanted to on the list

Notes pre interview with Jane 22/05/20

- Less nervous as I have done it before now, and have some things I want to do differently like be clearer at the start about the overview of the research themes
- Bit apprehensive about Jane's job and how that might affect her resistance to be totally honest about the dark side of the fashion industry
- Enthusiastic about getting an insider insight

Notes post interview with Jane 22/05/20

- Feeling pleased with how it went and really happy about the professional insight she brought
- I think I did better at fostering a relaxed environment and open dialogue, although didn't offer my view as much as with Ellie (could be reflective of our closer relationship) which I feel like was actually a bit better at not influencing what she wanted to say
- I believe I got a powerful insider confirmation of the toxicity of fast fashion
- Definitely need to protect her identity with regards to work

Notes pre interview with Shauna 25/05/20

- Don't feel as nervous as this is my third time doing it now
- Hopefully will uncover some different perspectives as everyone has their own lived experiences to bring to the table, and as Shauna is a WOC perhaps this will come up
- More cautious of offending her regarding buying habits but I have navigated this well so far so hopefully it should be okay

Notes post interview with Shauna 25/05/20

- Really happy again and feeling further affirmed in my choice to conduct interviews
- I think capturing the reality of the human experience of consumers who are feminists is really important, as it's too easy to quickly judge and invalidate people's claims to feminism by measuring it by certain standards when actually there are nuances and complexities that ought to be considered too

Notes pre interview with Annie 26/05/20

- Feel a little rushed in general, and slightly nervous as she is the person I have the least close offline relationship with

- Excited to see what insight she can bring as she is someone whose opinions I admire a lot
- Want to continue with the rhythm and approach I have been using thus far and grown into

Notes post interview with Annie 26/05/20

- Happy with the views I got from her in terms of balance and positives of the representation in the fashion industry, and the 4th wave feminist empowerment
- Glad she raised the point of fashion activism potentially being quite white and why this is potentially off-putting for her to engage with it

Figure 2.2: Consent form

Consent to Participate in Master's Thesis Research Project

As part of my master's programme in Gender Studies at the Utrecht University, I, Beth Meadows (b.r.meadows@students.uu.nl), am conducting a qualitative research project. The research seeks to analyse 4th wave feminist participation in the fashion industry. The research is overseen and examined by my supervisor Milica Trakilovic. I intend for the project to be completed by August 2020.

I would like to ask you to participate in this research project because of your active participation with working in, buying or advocating for fashion. The purpose of the interviews is to better understand how feminists in the Western world, in this instance in the UK, interact with the fashion industry in terms of its potential as a tool for female empowerment, and with or without an awareness of its ecological and humanitarian consequences.

If you agree to participate in this research, I will ask you a series of open-ended interview questions. The interview will therefore be semi-structured and should last around 30-45 minutes. You are free to skip any question you do not want to answer and/or to stop the interview at any time in case you do not feel comfortable anymore. I will share my thesis findings with you upon completion, unless you request to review them earlier. This can be requested in the interview itself or later. You can request to be anonymised with a pseudonym to protect your identity, please indicate this below. I would wish to include other details like your gender, age, race, nationality, religion, sexuality, ability and occupation (not specific place of work) as I believe these will enhance the analysis of the interview.

Your participation is voluntary and there is no compensation provided. You can decide at any time, even after signing this form, to end your participation. If you decide to end your participation, you must notify me, and I will not use any information you provided me; I will also delete this information from my data. Your privacy will be protected. Your responses will be used in my master's thesis, which will be submitted to my supervisor and examiner for grading purposes and stored in the repository of the university library. I will store interview transcripts and other research materials that may contain your identity in a secure manner and not share it with anyone else in any form.

I, _____, born on _____, understand the research project and agree to participate. I understand that I can revoke this consent at any time by contacting the researcher. I give permission to (please mark with 'X'):

record interviews. If I do not give this permission, interviews will not be recorded.

use my name and the identity characteristics listed above. Even if I give this permission, I retain the right to review uses of my name on request from the researcher. If I do not give permission, the researcher will allocate me a pseudonym instead to ensure I am not personally identifiable.

be directly quoted. Even if I give this permission, I retain the right to review direct quotations on request from the researcher.

If I have concerns about this project or feel that I have not been treated appropriately, I understand that I may directly contact the supervisor of this research project: Milica Trakilovic (M.Trakilovic@uu.nl)

Participant's Full Name and Signature:

Date: _____

Email: _____

Please send a (digitally) signed copy to the researcher and retain a copy for your own records