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The Personal is Political: Assessing Feminist Fundamentals in the Digital Age

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Abstract: The ‘personal is political’ has long been recognised as the definitive slogan of second-wave feminism but can it still inform our understanding of the contemporary practice of feminism? Questioning the importance of this claim now invites us to critically reflect upon the trajectory Western feminism has followed in light of the efforts made by the Women’s Liberation movement to politicise formerly unquestioned aspects of social relations. In this paper, the significance of this feminist slogan will be assessed by locating it within two broadly defined historical periods. Firstly we identify the critical work performed by the ideas expressed in the slogan in the early years of the 1970s and then assess their continued relevance within the context of the early 21st century. Drawing upon the empirical analysis of young women’s experience of and relationship to feminism via their engagement with social media in Britain, this research critically assesses digital spaces as places where young women explore their personal experiences. We aim to understand how this may constitute a contemporary form of feminist practice consistent with the claim that ‘the personal is political’.

Keywords: second-wave feminism; the Women’s Liberation Movement; postfeminism; digital culture; feminist politics; social media

1. Introduction

Is the personal still political? Fifty years ago, the claim which affirmed that indeed ‘the personal is political’ became a guiding principle of second-wave feminism. With its clear and straightforward assertion, this slogan encapsulated a series of complex socio-political insights that were emerging out of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM). It served the movement well by providing a framework for the everyday enactment of a feminist subjectivity that challenged structures of oppression and critically reoriented cultural understandings of how and why women’s experiences mattered. The ‘personal is political’ has long been recognised as the definitive slogan of second-wave feminism but can it still inform our understanding of the contemporary practice of feminism? Questioning the importance of this claim now invites us to critically reflect upon the trajectory Western¹ feminism has followed in light of the efforts made by the WLM to politicise formerly unquestioned aspects of social relations.

In this paper, the significance of this feminist slogan will be assessed by locating it within two broadly defined historical periods. Firstly, the politicisation of the personal was established by Western feminism in the late 1960s and the early years of the 1970s. Through the proliferation of

¹ This article is located within the sphere of Western feminism.

feminist writings, many new and exciting ideas were explored alongside various forms of activism (Morgan 1970; Rowe 1982). After identifying the critical work performed by the ideas expressed in this slogan their continued relevance will be considered within the context of the early 21st century. This second era will be examined using an empirical analysis of young women's experience of and relationship to feminism via their engagement with social media. The aim is to critically assess digital spaces as places where young women explore their personal experiences and to understand how this may constitute a contemporary form of feminist practice. In setting up these two moments, this analysis will trace continuities, as well as, disjunctures in how we conceive feminist thought and practice. This will be achieved by assessing how some of the foundational premises of feminism as expressed by the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) illuminate the present socio-political context and in so doing, lend insight into ongoing debates about the relationship between different moments which together form the practice and politics of feminism.

The slogan, 'the personal is political', has its origins in a paper of the same title authored by Carol Hanisch. It was published in 1970 as part of a collection of essays edited by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt (Firestone and Koedt 1970), *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*. Hanisch (2006) was motivated to write the paper in defence of Women's Liberation Movement groups who were emerging out of existing radical movements such as the Civil Rights movement, the Anti-Vietnam War movement, and Old and New Left groups. Because these movements tended to be male-dominated the specificity of women's oppression was not deemed relevant to the political struggles these groups defined as their focus. As women from these movements began to organise and name their oppression Hanisch (2006) recounts how the women within the WLM movement were 'belittled' to no end for trying to bring their so-called 'personal problems' into the public arena, especially 'all those body issues like sex, appearance, and abortion'. Their concerns were regarded as discrete 'personal' issues best addressed through individual initiative, and as such, not the proper focus for radical political organisations associated with existing leftist movements. The practice of consciousness raising (women gathering together to discuss their own oppression) was condemned as mere 'personal therapy' or 'navel gazing'. A number of linked threads, which run through Hanisch's essay, warrant unpacking as they form the basis for a fundamental feminist theory of the socio-political constitution of gender relations, which continues to resonate with contemporary critiques of gender relations. These threads broadly fall under four interrelated categories: power, the private/public dichotomy, political action, and subjectivity.

2. Second-wave Fundamentals

Feminism, like liberal political theory, endorsed the tenet which holds individuals are 'free and equal beings emancipated from the ascribed, hierarchical bonds of traditional society' (Patemen 1983, p. 281). Demands by second-wave feminism for the full extension of liberal principles and rights to women represented a significant move towards the completion of the liberal project. The failure of liberalism to deliver on this promise, therefore, was a central plank in the politics of the Women's Liberation Movement. Without an adequate theory of power, grasping the limits of liberal theory was not possible. Hence, understanding that women's exclusion was the product of the essentially *patriarchal* constitution of liberal thought was a critical element in developing feminist critique. Patemen (1983, p. 281) classic essay begins with the assertion that 'the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately what the feminist movement is about'. A theory of patriarchal power was brought to bear in her critique of liberal political theory, and in so doing, she drew together a set of theoretical principles that explained the oppression of women as the product of historically specific structures of domination and subordination.

Liberalism is an individualist, egalitarian, conventionalist doctrine; patriarchalism claims the hierarchal relations of subordination *necessarily flow from the natural characteristics* of men and women. In fact, the two doctrines were successfully reconciled through the answer given by

the contract theorists in the seventeenth century to the subversive question of who counted as free and equal individuals. (Patemen 1983, p. 283, emphasis added)

The justification for not extending rights to women relied fundamentally upon the separation of spheres whereby political power in the public sphere was not to be confused with paternal power which governed familial relations in the private sphere. The exercise of male power over women in the latter instance was commonly understood to arise out of nature and as such was fundamentally different from the forms of power which governed the public sphere. Patriarchal power operated to produce gender as a relation founded on innate male superiority and not the product of structural social relations. Women (wives) as natural subordinates could not be 'free and equal'. Thereby, an inherent contradiction in liberal political theory was resolved (Patemen 1983, p. 284).

Woman, in fact, never makes the transition from the mythical 'state of nature' to the body politic. She *becomes* nature. She is necessary to the functioning of cultural life, she is the very ground which makes cultural life possible, yet she is not part of it. This division between nature and culture, between the reproduction of mere biological life as against the production and regulation of social life, is reflected in the distinction between the private and the public spheres, the family and the state. (Gatens 1996, p. 51)

Second-wave feminism challenged and politicised this assertion of natural difference and the associated conviction that it would be 'unnatural' to extend the rights of the free individual and autonomous subjecthood to women.

Where man's behaviour is underdetermined, free to construct its own future along the course of its rational choice, woman's nature has over-determined her behaviour, the limits of her intellectual endeavours, and the inevitabilities of her emotional journey through life . . . The place of the free-willed subject who can transcend nature's mandates is reserved exclusively for men. (Alcoff 1995, pp. 434–35)

This analysis of patriarchal power illustrates that gender inequality depends upon denying that particular aspects of everyday life have political importance. By asserting that issues such as sexuality or the body are not 'merely' private matters second-wave feminism politicised socio-spatial relations structured by the gendered public/private distinction. In the introduction to the anthology of writings from the WLM, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (Morgan 1970, p. xvii), editor Robyn Morgan explains the unique nature of the collection highlighting the way it combines 'all sorts of articles, poems, graphics and sundry papers' that reflect a range of experiences *defined by women* as central to their oppression. The variety of topics covered and the formats of expression employed illustrate that 'Women's liberation is the first radical movement to base its politics—and, in fact, create its politics—out of personal experiences. We've learned that those experiences are *not* our private hang-ups' (Morgan 1970, p. xvii). Second-wave feminism significantly extended critical understanding of how power flows through the micro level interstices of everyday life.

Whatever else feminist politics have done in the last decade, they have broadened the concept of the political. In saying "our politics begins with our feelings"—rather with our exercise of the franchise—feminists are drawing attention to the fact that the field of what is usually considered political is a created one. Politics, in any and every sense, is about power, and it is as much about the power that men, wittingly or unwittingly, exercise over women as it is about the power that presidents and prime ministers wield over nations. (Oakley 1981, p. 310)

The insight that laid bare the power relations governing 'private' experience led to more nuanced understandings of what types of activities could form part of a broader political movement concerned with the advancement of women's interests. Practices such as consciousness raising were not, therefore, merely individualistic personal therapy but rather provided the basis for generating identification

with a wider collective social experience that arose out of specific social and political forces. As Hanisch argued in 1969 in defence of consciousness raising groups, it is a 'political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say' (Hanisch 2006). Practices which seemed to be about women's everyday lives and experiences were theorised as fundamentally political.

Our politics begin with our feelings The political unit in which we can discover, share and explore our feelings is the small group. Raising our collective consciousness is not a process that begins and ends, but is continuous and necessary given the enormous pressure placed on us everywhere to deny our own perceptions. (Oakley 1981, pp. 285–86, cited in Oakley 1981, p. 297)

This approach to theorising experience was also central to the 'personal genesis of Black Feminism' which arose from 'the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives and the development of intersectional politics (Combahee River Collective 2014, p. 272). For women of colour, the act of claiming the specificity of their oppression became foundational to a politics which challenged both the sexism they experienced within their own communities and the racism they experienced within predominantly white feminist communities. Moreover, naming their oppression exposed the 'false universalism of "women's experience"' (Phipps 2016, p. 305).

Finally, the slogan encouraged the notion that these practices, undertaken in places and spaces not conventionally defined as political, would contribute to the development of new female political subjectivities that would enable women to speak as autonomous political subjects. These included not only those rights conventionally assigned to the individual within traditional liberal political theory, but a set of newly *self-defined* rights that related to issues such as sexuality and the body.

In order to create an alternative, an oppressed group must once shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it and, at the same time, project its own image onto history. In order to discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor, it has to become visible to itself . . . As we begin to know ourselves in a new relation to one another we can start to understand our movement in relation to the outside world. We can begin to use our self-consciousness strategically. We can see what we could not see before. (Rowbotham 1973, pp. 27–28)

In summary, by theorising gender as a product of patriarchal power relations, the WLM movement extended the definition of politics to areas of everyday life formerly trivialised and understood as natural, challenged conventional norms that defined political action, and developed a set of strategies that allowed women to discover the political nature of their experiences as the foundation for activism.

3. The Trajectory of Feminism

It is worthwhile revisiting these original insights as they continue to provide a critical framework for analysing the nature of gender politics, albeit within a socio-cultural context significantly altered by the development of digital technologies and the production of virtual space, the rise of neoliberal governance, and the various successes won by feminism over the past 50 years. Discussions of the current state of feminism, which seek to evaluate its development across time and space, often confront the suggestion that feminism faces numerous challenges which threaten its existence. The reasons for this vary with some attributing it to a preoccupation with fragmentation caused by internal reflection and self-critique (Adkins 2004, p. 433), a cultural backlash (Faludi 1991), co-optation by neoliberal capitalism (Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2009), and the rise of postfeminism as the dominant logic of contemporary culture (Gill 2007). All of these positions address the common concern that feminism no longer operates with the coherence, political force, and purpose that perhaps it once did. In response to this evaluation, however, some have cautioned against telling the story of feminism as one in which the dominant theme is either progress or loss (Hemmings 2011).

Western feminist theory tells its own story as a developmental narrative, where we move from a preoccupation with unity and sameness, through identity and diversity, and on to difference and fragmentation. These shifts are broadly conceived of as corresponding to the decades of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s respectively, and to a move from liberal, socialist and radical feminist thought to postmodern gender theory. (Hemmings 2005, p. 166)

The structure of this narrative creates opposition between so-called crudely ‘essentialist’ second-wave feminists, who yearn for a proper politically engaged past and contemporary ‘difference’ feminists who supposedly espouse a more sophisticated and self-congratulatory contemporary sensibility. Kavka (2001, p. ix) thoughtfully reflects that ‘perhaps with some nostalgia, many of us who call ourselves feminists look back to the peak of the second-wave in the 1970s, to a feminism that in retrospect seems to have had a clear object (women), a clear goal (to change the fact of women’s subordination), and even a clear definition (political struggle against patriarchal oppression). Such clarity is a trick of memory, no doubt’.

The research presented in this article seeks to avoid deploying a reproductive logic that requires feminism is ‘passed on’ in particular ways for it to be perceived as successful (Adkins 2004). Like the narrative critiqued by Hemmings (2011), generational metaphors easily lead to a sense that current expressions of feminist identification are deficient in some way (Winch et al. 2016). For example, they are often deemed not sufficiently ‘political’ (Dobson 2015) or too individualised (Budgeon 2011). The analysis undertaken here does not narrate feminism as a series of distinct, progressive stages which together constitute a heteronormative tale of generational reproduction and troubled ‘mother/daughter’ relationships. In performing this analysis, we will, however, historicize the significance of the personal by critically grounding the ideas it represents within the specific material and cultural social conditions widely referred to as postfeminist (Genz and Brabon 2009; Gill 2007).

As defined by Tasker and Negra (2007, p. 1), ‘Postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the “pastness” of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated’. In many respects, Western feminism has transformed from a radical oppositional movement into an institutionalised form of common sense. To be ‘taken into account’ in this way requires the repudiation of those claims which suggest that the structure of gender relations continue to be problematic (McRobbie 2009; Scharff 2012). Gender can be acknowledged as relevant to contemporary social relations on the condition that feminism, in the form of a pervasive critique of those relations, is dismissed as outdated (Budgeon 2011; Dean 2010). This contradiction facilitates a weakening of the oppositional potential of feminist practice despite the institutionalisation of many feminist principles such as ‘equality’ (Lewis et al. 2017). Repudiation of feminism, however, is not a new phenomenon.

When I was seventeen feminism meant to me shadowy figures in long old-fashioned clothes who were somehow connected with headmistresses who said you shouldn’t wear high heels and make-up I had a stereotype of emancipated women: frightening people in tweed suits and horn-rimmed glasses with stern buns at the backs of their heads . . . feminism seemed the very antithesis of freedom. (Rowbotham 1973, p. 12)

This quote epitomizes the sense of uncertainty that women have often expressed when evaluating their relationship to feminism and what it represents. Rowbotham, however, wrote this in 1973, a time that is often represented as being straightforward, even essentially so, in women’s orientation towards adopting a feminist identity. The ambivalence it communicates remains relevant and has become a hallmark of contemporary postfeminist social conditions.

The project of feminist critique is also often historicized in terms of a shift within feminist analyses away from a ‘centralised power block, e.g., the State, patriarchy, law, to more dispersed sites, events and instances of power conceptualised as flows and specific convergences and consolidations of talk, discourse, attentions’ (McRobbie 2009, p. 13). Understanding how gendered subjects come into

being through various cultural forms and representational practices has been at the centre of this orientation and is central to approaching postfeminism as an object of analysis (Gill 2008a; Gill 2017). A concern with the production of gendered subjects, in combination with a cultural landscape which selectively incorporates feminist values, has led to the study of new forms of femininity that emphasise choice, independence, and self-empowerment (Budgeon 2015; Gill and Scharff 2011; Gonick 2006; Harris 2004; Ringrose 2007). As argued by Rogan (2018, p. 1), against the contemporary backdrop of postfeminism and neoliberalism, women have gained ‘symbolic equality’ in ‘which they seemingly achieve socio-cultural, political, and economic parity not through collective action or fundamental political change, but through individualised participation in the (free) market, undergoing extensive “body projects” ... and “looking good”’. The rise of social media is often identified as a site that promotes the production of narcissistic and highly individualistic subjects whose performance of the self is consistent with the celebration of neoliberal values (Giroux 2015). Moreover, as the use of social media is gendered (Blakley 2012; Clifford 2014; Duggan and Brenner 2013; Harris 2008; Miller 2016; Schuster 2013), concern is often expressed in popular and academic discourse about the consequences of young women’s digital practices (Sanghani 2014; Sales 2016). There is a strong desire to determine whether these practices are inherently oppressive or empowering to women (Bates 2016; Hodkinson 2017; Mesch 2009).

4. The Personal is Political Revisited

We have previously outlined some of the second-wave fundamentals that are bound up within the phrase, and it is our aim to discuss the ways in which these may both converge with and diverge from contemporary practices, many of which take place within the everyday digital realm. This analysis will critically engage with three key questions informed by the slogan ‘the personal is political’. Firstly, in an age when digital technologies have transformed the structure of the social sphere, where does the ‘personal’ reside? For the WLM, politicising the personal strategically made activities undertaken within the private sphere visible, thus, challenging the view that politics was solely concerned with the workings of the public domain. Ford (2011, pp. 50–51) suggests information and communication technology usage is fundamentally breaking down the barrier between the public and the private. Moreover, it is the highly visible nature of these spaces that has made them an object of interest. The greater visibility social media grant to women’s individual experiences creates opportunities for increased levels of social surveillance and self-monitoring. As such, they are potentially oppressive (Lupton 2016; Marwick 2012). Women’s online practices may contribute to a growing ‘economy of visibility’ (Banet-Weiser 2015) that works to elevate women’s bodies and appearance as signifiers of worth. Digital spaces, therefore, enhance neoliberal modes of governance in which power acts directly upon the subject who is tasked with creating an empowered, entrepreneurial self seemingly unconstrained by structural power relations. On the other hand, more positive evaluations claim that because of their accessibility and presence within the fabric of everyday life online spaces also provide important opportunities for sharing information on a global scale; exploring and communicating one’s experiences to others; and fostering awareness of gender issues—all of which resonate with the principles encapsulated by ‘the personal is political’ (Baer 2016; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Eileraas 2014; Keller 2016a, 2016b).

These debates lead directly to the second question: What is the role played by virtual spaces and digital femininities in the practice of politics? The WLM forcibly argued that our understanding of politics had to extend to activities that lack visibility and/or are deemed non-political. In view of the contradictions and complexities of postfeminism and neoliberalism, conceptualising the role played by personal experience in political activism is an important challenge. Phipps (2016) argues that within a neoliberal context personal experience is often reconfigured as a form of commodified capital which perpetuates individualisation. This is a particularly pertinent point as individualised experience, severed from a wider socio-political context, has been problematically heralded as a site of

empowerment. [Rottenberg \(2014\)](#), for example, highlights how a new form of feminism, consistent with neoliberal rationality, celebrates the ‘personal’ as a site of individualised empowerment.

Even in the heyday of the feminist movement in the early 1970s, the call for self-transformation or self-empowerment was accompanied by some form of critique of systemic male domination and/or structural discrimination. Today, by contrast, the emergent feminism is contracting, shining its spotlight, as well as the onus of responsibility on each female subject while turning that subject even more intensively inward. As a result, neoliberal feminism is—not surprisingly—purging itself of all elements that would orient it outwards, towards the public good.

This second question also demands, therefore, that we understand how power infuses social media spaces both as a site of resistance and as a depoliticised space within which potentially oppressive social relations are reproduced ([Rottenberg 2014](#), p. 431).

Thirdly, because female individualisation has been identified as a central feature of late modernity ([Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002](#); [Budgeon 2003](#)), it is important to understand the practices associated with the formation of feminine subjectivity. Women’s right to assume the status of the autonomous individual—i.e., the ‘subject’ of liberal political discourse—was central to the politics of the WLM. As neoliberal rationality governs ever more aspects of social life, a shift in the construction of feminine ideals has taken place, which complicates this principle. We have witnessed a transfer of emphasis away from the normatively ascribed sensibilities assigned to conventional models of femininity, such as passivity and self-sacrifice², toward new forms of ‘empowered’ femininity, defined by the values of self-determination, strength, and resilience. Where patriarchal power operated as an oppressive force that required women to enact a ‘docile’ and submissive femininity, women are now subjected to a form of power that requires a different performance ([Oksala 2011](#)). In contrast, neoliberalism, as the spread of economic rationality to other ‘realms we ordinarily understand as ‘non-economic’ or at least ‘relatively autonomous’ i.e., our ‘personal’ sense of identity, interests, happiness, hopes, and even the value of life, ([Inoue 2007](#), p. 80) produces an actor who recognises and acts in her ‘own best interests’.

... the economic subject is someone manageable, but through different mechanisms that the docile subject of the disciplinary society: he or she is someone who will always pursue his or her own interests and who is—not in spite of this, but precisely because of it—eminently governable. ([Oksala 2011](#), p. 111)

Do online practices contribute to the production of an idealised feminine subject preoccupied with individualised and depoliticised self-management?

5. Methodology

This study focuses on a set of important questions regarding the nature of young women’s relationship to feminism in the age of digital femininities. The findings are situated in a relationship to the fundamentals established by second-wave feminism and the WLM. Our aim is to critically examine contemporary digital culture and the possibilities presented by social media for the enactment of political feminist subjectivities. Social media can provide a political space that deviates from normative understandings of ‘the political’—a stance consistent with the definitions of the political advocated by the WLM. The discussion below draws on data from an online questionnaire and nine focus groups carried out with girls and young women between March and July 2015.

² Naturalised gender difference upon which liberal political theory reconciled women’s exclusion from the public sphere positioned women as naturally suited for caring and nurturing and justified the concomitant surrendering of their own interests to those of husband and children.

The questionnaire was created online using Survey Monkey and included ten questions regarding the respondents' relationship with and attitudes towards social media use³. The questionnaire was posted on various social media forums such as Facebook and Twitter, calling for responses from girls and young women under the age of 21. Fifty responses were received from girls and young women across the UK, although some respondents resided in other Western states such as the United States and Australia. Some of the benefits of the use of the Internet to gather questionnaire data have been highlighted by [Wright \(2005\)](#), who emphasises its great potential for quickly reaching specific groups—particularly those who exist largely or primarily online. There are, of course, some potential limitations to relying on survey or questionnaire data. Feminists, in particular, have been critical of survey-based research as it has traditionally assumed a stable objective 'truth' that can be uncovered and measured ([Reinharz 1992](#)). However, rather than relying on pre-written 'selectable' answers, many of the questions in this study were open-ended, meaning that respondents were encouraged to write their own comments rather than relying only on closed categories. It is this type of data—rather than quantitative survey results—that we draw on here. While we make use of the qualitative questionnaire responses in this discussion, it is still useful to place these alongside the data gathered from face-to-face focus groups to demonstrate the ways in which these findings are corroborated and mirrored when utilising different methods and when working with a range of participants in different settings. The nine focus groups were conducted in three urban locations in England—one in the South-East, one in the West Midlands and one in the North West. In each location, three focus groups were conducted. These were carried out in comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges: two were conducted with Year Eight students (12–13 years old), one with Year Ten students (14–15 years old), and six with sixth form students (16–18 years old). Each group consisted of between five and eleven girls, with a total of 63 participants overall⁴. Each group lasted approximately one hour and followed a semi-structured format.

[Wilkinson \(1999\)](#) has suggested that focus groups are particularly well-suited to feminist fieldwork concerned with minimizing power imbalances between the researcher and the researched. Group-sharing and story-telling have also long held a place in feminist movements ([Matson 2016](#), p. 205) and focus groups seem appropriate research tools to create the kind of space that allows and encourages women's voices to be included in the academic discussion of their own experiences. Participants were already known to each other by being classmates and, in many cases, friends. This type of group setting may help to mitigate feelings of discomfort or anxiety amongst participants in ways that individual interviews may not ([Phipps and Young 2015](#), p. 308). As these focus groups were conducted within school settings—environments which are often predicated upon adult/child power imbalances and adherence to clear rules and regulations (particularly for girls; see [Robinson 1992](#))—this was particularly important.

[Budgeon \(2001, p. 12\)](#) and [Keller \(2016b, p. 3\)](#) note the voices and concerns of girls and young women, in particular, are often marginalised within academic debates. This study attempts to analyse the lived experiences of girls and young women, whose voices have often been curiously absent from research on social media. The need for these voices is particularly salient in the current moment, where girls' identities are understood as particularly amenable to forces of neoliberalism ([Winch et al. 2016](#), pp. 565–66) and postfeminism. By making room for the voices of young women who have come of age

³ Within this article, we draw largely on responses to the following questions: 'To what extent and in what ways do you believe social media to be important in your everyday life/the everyday lives of people in your generation?' and 'What role—if any—do you think social media plays in helping to create or shape your identity?'

⁴ Within this sample, 37 described their ethnic origin as White British, White Irish, or White European. Fifteen described their ethnic origin as British Asian, two as Black African, and two as Black Caribbean. The remaining seven participants described their ethnic origin as mixed. Participants were not asked directly about their social class, although the geographical locations of the schools and sixth forms may be helpful here. One of the sites was located in a town that has some of the highest socioeconomic deprivation in the UK, whereas others were located in higher-income areas. All schools and sixth forms visited were mixed-gender comprehensives and were attended by both working-class and middle-class students. Gatekeepers were asked to approach a diverse group of students when recruiting.

in neoliberal social conditions, this research allows us to examine how far accusations of apoliticality levelled at contemporary young women resonate with how they see (and produce) themselves and their relationship to feminism, digital technology, and the self. Drawing on data from focus groups and online questionnaires, we examine the extent to which the public/private divide, subjectivity and political action have been transformed by the rise of neoliberalism and the technological revolution. What is the usefulness of a phrase such as ‘the personal is political’ at a time when personal experience is said to be both commodified (Phipps 2016) and depoliticised (Rottenberg 2014)? It is particularly important to think about the phrase in relation to contemporary social media practices because social media platforms incite the production of the personal and rely upon the willingness of users to actively offer personalized content. This information, freely provided, is a vital source of data which internet companies draw upon as a revenue-generating resource. The architecture and profitability of these platforms commodify the personal in this regard. Moreover, social media practices are said to have transformed young women’s social, cultural, and political practices and experiences because these platforms constitute a space they inhabit on a daily basis.

6. Findings

6.1. *How Has Social Media Transformed the Relationship between the Private and Public Spheres?*

The cultural, social, and political mainstreaming of social media in recent years has clearly disturbed some of the traditionally gendered lines which previously established firm boundaries between that which is understood as ‘public’ and that which is considered ‘private’ (Marwick and Boyd 2014; McLean and Maalsen 2013; Chambers 2017). During this study, it became clear that the private/personal smartphone and computer can become tools of public connectivity and production for contemporary girls and women. Participants regularly discussed their continuous use of social media throughout the day, often highlighting the ways they spent most of their time in the domestic sphere (homes/bedrooms) using their phones to connect with friends, socialize, or learn about and discuss political topics they found interesting (such as racism, sexism, transphobia). Youth and girlhood scholars note that girls and young women have tended to be regulated and controlled in ways that significantly differ from their male counterparts. For example, in their seminal research on bedroom cultures, McRobbie and Garber (1976) argued that girls and young women are socialised into the private domestic sphere from a young age, often living out their private cultural lives in their homes and bedrooms, rather than out on the street. In many ways, the Internet and social media have now become places in which girls and young women locate space for themselves, both culturally and politically (Hodkinson and Lincoln 2008). Notions of participation and engagement were central to discussions with participants. Here ‘participation’ relates to both cultural production and political and civic engagement. Participants spoke of their access to subcultures and communities on b/vlogging sites such as Tumblr and YouTube and the ways in which they were able to locate networks where they could discuss their interests and form support networks unencumbered by geographical restraints. The accessible nature of the Internet⁵ meant that many participants understood it to be a positive tool in forming and maintaining relationships and friendships, problematizing the often-peddled argument that technology is contributing to a ‘crisis of intimacy’ and overseeing a decline in ‘real’ human connection (Turkle 2011).

Despite these possibilities and opportunities in relation to obscuring the public and private, many scholars have also conceptualised digital space, and social media in particular, as a site of feminist

⁵ This is not equally true for all girls and young women. Indeed, it has been noted that access to free leisure time is both classed and racialized. Kearney (2007) has also noted the ways in which access to media technologies continues to be structured by gender, class, and ‘race’. For example, working-class girls are often “called upon more to help with childcare and household chores, and thus have little undistracted leisure time” (p. 37) and this must be kept in mind when thinking about who has access to the resources and time needed to participate fully in online communities.

concern wherein women are subjected to unprecedented levels of surveillance and scrutiny (Gill 2018; Elias and Gill 2017). These conflicting attitudes towards social media were mirrored in focus groups as contradictory feelings were conveyed throughout discussions. For example, in the West Midlands, many participants expressed positive attitudes about increased levels of participation and engagement, however, they also expressed their discomfort at the pervasive levels of visibility that often comes hand in hand with the creation of digital identities. For Darcy, a year ten student in the South-East of England, this visibility heightened pressure to 'look good'. The pervasive nature of photograph-taking and video calls meant that the traditionally gendered feeling of being 'looked at' was exacerbated by increased levels of digital visibility. The widespread use of photo-editing tools was also highlighted as a concern, as was the fear that personal intimate relationships could easily (and often did) become commodified for public consumption.

Participants highlighted a particular concern with regulatory surveillance from parents or potential future employers. In the South-East, a year ten student named Emily described how her parents monitor her Facebook account on a weekly basis. Leanne, a year eight student in the South-East, also identified similar parental rules and explained that her parents check her iPad weekly to both keep tabs on her behaviour and ensure that she is not being harassed by others. Fern, another year eight student, spoke of how she knew her mother had been reading her text messages without consent because she could identify her last opened app after her mum had been using her phone. This meant that technological devices are not entirely 'private' in the same way that their uses are not always entirely 'public'. Participants also noted that their uses of social media were often subject to mockery (from peers and mainstream media outlets). This was particularly evident when discussing digital practices that have been constructed as particularly feminine. For example, behaviours such as selfie-taking or posting 'too many' statuses about 'personal' or private matters were often ridiculed, even by participants themselves. This follows recent feminist work on girls' and women's digital practices, which has demonstrated that women's online behaviours are far more likely to be conceptualised as narcissistic and self-indulgently 'showing off' than those of men (Burns 2015; Handyside and Ringrose 2017).

Social media is not a monolithic space and mainstream sites that are widely-known to adults (such as Facebook) were utilised by participants far less than other 'marginal' spaces. Participants had little interest in maintaining Facebook pages, although they often kept them in order to present a carefully managed social media identity to their parents and other regulatory adults. Simultaneously they inhabited spaces outside of the mainstream by creating anonymous Tumblr blogs or actively searching out spaces created and dominated by like-minded young people and young women in particular. This allowed them to not only protect themselves from ridicule but also allowed them to learn and discuss new ideas that can be largely understood as political.

6.2. *What Role is Played by Virtual Spaces and Digital Femininities in the Practice of Politics?*

Feminist research has highlighted the scepticism older feminists often express towards new forms of 'digital' feminism (Schuster 2013). This is due to the largely 'hidden' and perceived individualistic nature of this feminism—allegedly lacking the consciousness-raising groups and meetings that were so central to the WLM. However, many feminist scholars have recently begun to take seriously the role of social media in the enactment of (particularly young) feminist subjectivities and the role of the digital in contemporary feminist activism—offering both positive evaluations and interesting critiques (Keller 2012, 2016a, 2016b; Loza 2014; Clark 2016; Sills et al. 2016; Retallack et al. 2016; Ringrose and Lawrence 2018). This growing interest in social media and its emerging body of research poses some important questions: what does it really mean to do activism in consumer-capitalist contexts? Is a meaningful political counter-movement in the shape of the WLM possible under current conditions? Because the aesthetics and appeal of 'resistance' and 'feminism' have been appropriated within the marketing, advertising, and branding industries of consumer capitalism, it is often assumed that young women unreflexively buy into what has been termed 'commodity feminism' (Goldman et al. 1991;

Gill 2008b). This position assumes that their feminism is largely an identity project—a watered down version of feminism displayed only on the body through fashion and ‘self-empowerment’. However, the findings presented in the previous section problematize these claims somewhat, by highlighting social media practices used to connect with others and (perhaps inadvertently) raise political consciousness. While there is some resistance to seeing online feminism as possessing the radical potential necessary to enact proper change (Khoja-Moolji 2015), Kathie Sarachild, a leader in the consciousness-raising movement of the 1960s and 1970s, stated that

From the beginning of consciousness-raising... there has been no one method of raising consciousness. What really counts in consciousness-raising are not methods, but results. The only ‘methods’ of consciousness raising are essentially principles. They are the basic radical political principles of going to the original sources, both historic and personal, going to people—women themselves, and going to experience for theory and strategy. (Sarachild 1978, pp. 147–48)

The principles that underpin the political practice of consciousness-raising emphasise the need to start from one’s experience. The digital spaces which these young women engage with afford the opportunity, and even incite them, to speak their experience in a relation to others and in this way these spaces hold the potential to act as consciousness-raising forums for a lot of participants and respondents in this study. Examples from the online questionnaire highlight this well:

Without Tumblr I would have had no idea there were more than two genders, and being non-binary is a huge part of my identity.

I would not have discovered my sexuality if not for the social media I use.

One way I know it helps create an identity is through the growth of awareness and knowledge of sexuality and gender orientation. It’s served as a way for many people to learn more about themselves.

It’s how young people connect with so many other people around the world from them, also especially with Tumblr new stories are spread fast and a lot of things can be discovered. For example, I would never know about Micheal Brown unless it was for Tumblr, also it helps campaigns to be started and get change.

The respondents clearly outline how participation in sites on social media (often Tumblr) allowed them access to the discourse they required to define their own identity and connect with others with similar experiences. The prominence and visibility of feminism on social media also emerged as a topic of discussion in focus groups. While many participants highlighted e-petitions, Facebook events, viral tweets/videos, and ‘trending’ topics as way for young people to engage with politics generally, there was often a specific focus on the theme of feminism as particularly visible in certain online spaces such as Twitter and Tumblr:

Charlotte: There’s a lot of, I don’t know what to call it, social activism or whatever where everyone is very accepting. There’s a lot of correcting other people on—I don’t know—gender pronouns and stuff.

Emi: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok that’s interesting.

Charlotte: It’s kind of educating people in a new acceptance in society.

[...]

All: Yeah.

Charlotte: It’s very ... feminist. Like, aggressively feminist.

The above exchange, from a focus group with sixth form students in the West Midlands demonstrates that particular digital spaces can be utilised by young women to enact and ‘educate’

others on feminist causes. The activism often taken up by women online is particularly interesting when considering how ‘the personal is political’ maps onto contemporary digital practices. Not only do the comments above suggest that online spaces can be understood as a way to raise consciousness around gender diversity, it also draws attention to the discovery of space for themselves that young feminists are finding online. As has already been outlined, women’s historical relationship with the public sphere has been particularly contentious (Patemen 1983; Fraser 1990). In this study, social media was being utilised to carve out alternative spaces (or ‘counter-publics’) for the enactment of feminist politics and discussion. Interestingly, these feminist spaces were often described as having issues of ‘the body’ at their centre. While there was some concern around the visibility that social media creates and the implications this might have for the body image of girls and young women, there was also some celebration of social media for giving women the opportunity to represent their own image, and in so doing, reclaim their (mis)representation from the advertising and entertainment industries that have long been critiqued by feminist scholars (Wolf 1991). In the West Midlands, sixth former Deana highlighted the emergence of ‘body positivity’ rhetoric online as a positive counter to the apparent mainstreaming of photo-editing and self-surveillance

It’s very body positive though . . . like it depends what you’re on but a lot of sites at the moment are going that way.

Positive evaluations were also offered in the questionnaire responses:

Using websites like Tumblr, my own self-image has vastly improved as I’ve realised my looks do not define me, the media is warped.

While there are some key overlaps here with the key tenets of the WLM, it is important to note one key divergence. Participants—particularly in the focus groups—often rejected the label ‘political’ and made quite clear distinctions between what they understood as ‘political’ (e.g., Westminster, politicians) and things that affected them. It was acknowledged that social media can open up participatory possibilities for young people in general, but there was a reluctance to discuss their own practices as decidedly ‘political’. In this regard, feminist issues might have become absorbed as matters of ‘common sense’ as argued by McRobbie (2009). When participants discussed feminism it was often distinctly separate from their discussions of ‘politics’ as a whole. Many of them did not recognize the deeply political nature of many ‘personal’ issues such as those that relate directly to the body. Indeed, even issues such as tuition fees and public transport were categorised as somehow less political than the ‘real’ political issues of taxes. Sixth former Caeleigh, in the North-West, for example, stated that

[young people] care about, say, tuition fees and stuff—things that affect them. But as we get older real things will start to affect us too, like taxes and stuff so we’ll be more inclined to get involved with the bigger picture. But now . . . the things that affect us are such small issues.

This highlights how participants sometimes saw their online engagement—whether specifically feminist or otherwise—as dealing with ‘small’ issues. Throughout the focus groups, participants often rejected the term ‘political’, which they related only to the formal political process (voting) and normative spheres of politics (Westminster).

6.3. Do online Practices Contribute to the Production of an Idealised Feminine Subject Preoccupied with Individualised and Depoliticised Self-Management?

As previously noted, by politicising the personal, the WLM had hoped that new female political subjectivities would be developed. By telling women that their experiences mattered on both an individual and collective level, they had imagined a feminist revolution wherein women’s so-called personal, psychological, or ‘private’ hang-ups would instead become recognised as highly political. The overall success of this project is perhaps limited (as discussed in the literature review earlier on). With the rise of neoliberalism and postfeminism, a widespread individualisation and depoliticization

of personal experience and identities and, indeed, feminism more widely, has been witnessed. Young women, in particular, are held up as exemplars of this new and individually ‘empowered’ but political devoid subjectivity, and social media is often highlighted as a space within which neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities can be both constructed and widely disseminated (see [Duffy and Hund 2015](#)).

The data collected here complicates the assertions made by those such as Giroux, who claims that social media is merely (or primarily) a tool of neoliberal governance. According to Giroux, ‘selfie cultures’, which he sees as almost synonymous with ‘social media’ itself, lead to a worrying preoccupation with individualised and narcissistic self-management ([Giroux 2015](#)). This is also a claim often made in the mainstream press, who tend to focus on the role of social media in the rise of mental health disorders amongst young people in the UK ([BBC News 2017](#); [Donnelly 2018](#); [Harding 2018](#))⁶. However, much of the data collected in this study suggests these claims are deserving of close scrutiny. A questionnaire response is useful in opening up some of these conversations:

With social media, we can share and explore who we are in the present, which of course is always changing, but sharing what we like, what we’re interested in or just our thoughts can be very important in affirming who we are, not only to ourselves but to other people . . .

This idea of ‘affirming’ one’s identity links into some of the claims embedded in the phrase ‘the personal is political’. The idea that women in particular are closely connected by shared experience is, of course, one of the key claims of the slogan (and the WLM more widely). The use of social media to ‘affirm’ one’s identity through the sharing of general interests and thoughts is something that was also discussed in focus groups in the West Midlands. A group of sixth formers discussed the ways in which digital fan cultures had advocated for more representation of girls and women in TV and film with positive results:

Fay: Like a lot of new TV shows that are becoming very female-dominated, I think there are a lot of TV shows recently with female leads.

Interviewer: Can you give some examples?

Fay: Orphan Black. That’s like a female-led sci-fi show and Orange is the New Black is another one for women. I don’t know how I got onto this topic [. . .] There’s an awful lot of them. I think the group I’m in on Tumblr we all watch more or less the same shows. Take Orange is the New Black with you know Laverne Cox as a transwoman I think that’s really important to kind of be portraying that and Orange is the New Black is very popular now. Pretty Little Liars is a female-led show and loads of people watch that—it’s just lots of female-led shows becoming more prominent and I think that can inspire women in a way.

While discussing social media as an activist forum, the participants were interested in talking about using social media to challenge the cultural representations of women in the wider mainstream media. Social media use was not always understood as a tool of individual self-management and self-representation. When asked how important social media is to today’s younger generations in terms of creating an individual identity, there were a surprising number of references to ‘connection’ and self/peer-directed learning. The following responses provide some examples:

It entertains us, connects us, educates us.

It’s a way we connect and spread our knowledge amongst each other. There are quite a few things I would never know about if it weren’t for the internet/social media.

⁶ Discussions of young people’s mental health in the mainstream media often rely on overly simplistic accounts of social media and its role in ‘causing’ mental health crises. There is worryingly little engagement with austerity and precarity as driving forces behind this phenomenon.

It's a fast easy way to stay in touch with others, spread vital information and just plain make friends.

It's important for us to feel connected to the broader world.

The role played by identity in feminist activism is incredibly complex and contradictory (see Kelly 2014). In line with the argument presented in our analysis, many scholars adopt a broad definition of what counts as political activity including both collective action and individual acts of resistance. Defining a 'feminist identity' in the early 21st century involves recognizing that that feminism can simultaneously seem to be "everywhere" as an ideology shaping individuals' worldviews and cultural and social norms, and "nowhere" given the sometimes limited visibility of explicitly feminism activism (Reger 2012). Making an empirical link between identity and participation in activist communities is beyond the scope of this study. Rather, our aim is to explore how social media affords a space to the participants within which they explore their identity in ways which exceed a commodified production of self-identity often associated with critiques of online platforms. What does emerge in our data is how young women experience their identity working in *relation* to others and, in this regard, these identities create the potential for the building of a community based on the *recognition of shared experience*—an ethos comparable to the aims of consciousness raising. For these respondents, it is evident that social media does not serve a solely individualistic function. The respondents were asked specifically about individual identity construction, and therefore, it is interesting to note the numerous references to both connection, to other people and groups, and education. It seems problematic to assume, then, that the identities constructed by young people within digital cultures rest solely on individual image management. Indeed, the answers above suggest that connecting oneself to a wider network is really the driving force behind much social media use. Finding others to connect with, which is made eminently easier by social media, is what 'affirms' one's identity. This, again, is broadly consistent with claims championed by the WLM in the 1970s—by linking one's experiences to a wider network, these participants feel 'connected to the broader world'. This recognition that experiences do not operate in isolation was, in part, what the WLM had been aiming for when advocating for a politicisation of the personal. These further examples are also particularly useful when thinking about the contemporary relevance of the WLM slogan:

It's a way for me to connect with the world beyond myself. I could tell you all about the feud between two suburban high schools, but thanks to social media I can now also talk about things like feminism and racism and ableism and transmisogyny in depth. It's given me a new perspective.

A lot of my beliefs were undeveloped. I knew what I believed, but I couldn't put it into words or give informed responses. But now I can.

I believe that it is giving our generation the ability to learn about the things they are interested in without having the block of having to go through biased educators.

These respondents highlight some of the core tenets of 'the personal is political'. By connecting with others, these girls and young women are able to verbalise and acknowledge their experiences with more clarity. The reference to 'biased educators' is also interesting because it contests the authority of alleged 'objectivity' in education and challenges the pervasive construction of the teenage girl as politically apathetic or particularly susceptible to being 'brainwashed' by the draws of neoliberalism. These responses allude to a form of consciousness-raising, wherein they connect their experiences to a wider network. While this may not be a specifically defined political movement in the same way that the WLM was (indeed, there is little reference directly to feminism), it offers an interesting lens through which to read the ongoing relevance of the phrase 'the personal is political' in contemporary contexts.

7. Discussion

The WLM proceeded on the basis that gender inequality depended upon denying that particular aspects of everyday life have political importance. This was a political movement directed by experiences *defined by women* as central to their oppression and resulted in a project that fundamentally

challenged the private/public dichotomy structured by patriarchal power—a structure designed to exclude women from the rights of the autonomous liberal subject. This strategy encouraged women to rethink individual experience as something shared widely by women and this recognition enabled women to speak as political subjects. In exploring the accounts young women give of their online practices, we have given them the opportunity to define what aspects of their experiences matter and why these are important to them. The ‘personal is political’, which encapsulates a series of conceptual threads examined here, broadly falls under four interrelated categories: power, the private/public dichotomy, political action, and subjectivity. We have demonstrated how each of these key dimensions remains central to a contemporary feminist analysis of the experiences central to young women’s engagement with digital practices. Several noteworthy points emerge in this analysis that allow us to appreciate how and why the ‘personal is still political’.

Firstly, neoliberalism requires a theory of power which can critically analyse the normative production of feminine subjects whose attributes contrast directly with the passivity that top-down patriarchal power made a requirement. Feminist research has examined the myriad of ways that young women today are often celebrated as exemplars of a self-determining, confident, calculating, entrepreneurial selfhood central to contemporary governmentality (Gill and Scharff 2011; Phipps and Young 2015). In direct contrast to the femininity conjured by liberal political thought, whose essential character bound women to the private sphere and naturally excluded them from the status of autonomous identity, the idealised neoliberal feminine subject has become an ‘egotistical subject of interest, a subject making free choices based on rational, economic calculation’ (Oksala 2011, p. 114).

However, young women’s voices are curiously missing from many of these discussions. We have argued for the significance of conducting fieldwork with contemporary girls and young women who are not only the first ‘digital native’ generation (Prensky 2001), but also the generation who have grown up during neoliberalism. This status has resulted in older feminists, who have a “‘pre-neoliberal’ political formation’ failing to take those who grew up in different cultural and political contexts seriously’ (Winch et al. 2016, p. 565). Young women are often presented as the willing handmaidens of neoliberalism, and older women have frequently been seen to blame those younger than them for unthinkingly accepting neoliberalised and commodified versions of femininity (Levy 2005). Contemporary young identities will inevitably be informed by the pervasive nature of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses. However, it is important not to simply take for granted that they have played such a key role in the formation of cultural and political subjectivities for young women that they are now unwilling or unable, to offer serious critiques or resistance to these wider structures. This has also been highlighted by Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012), who argue that academics who hail from different cultural and political contexts must recognise these differences when studying contemporary young women within neoliberal, consumer-capitalist frameworks. This resonates with calls from Dobson (2015) to learn from young women and take them seriously while offering thoughtful critiques of the wider structures they often operate within.

Secondly, we need to grasp the gendered nature of the digital sphere (Miller 2016). The fact that women outnumber men on social media sites is well documented (Blakley 2012, p. 342; Duggan and Brenner 2013; Clifford 2014). While recent figures suggest that this divide is beginning to decrease, with more men using social networking sites such as Reddit, Twitter, and LinkedIn (Duggan and Brenner 2013), there is an understanding that women across all age groups generally spend more time on and/or have more use for the majority of social media sites (Harris 2008; Blakley 2012; Schuster 2013). This poses some challenges to both classic and contemporary feminist discourse, and women’s dominance of social media can be read as both a continuation of and a challenge to their historical exclusion from ‘public’ political and cultural space. On the one hand, then, such dominance in parts of the digital sphere is said to open up more participatory possibilities for young women. It can be argued that digital spaces, therefore, offer the opportunity to challenge the traditional expectation that the ‘public’ and ‘private’ can be neatly demarcated from one another. The rise of social media—and

its cultural feminisation—has problematized some of these deeply entrenched ideas around young femininity and political apathy. By engaging with young women's personal experiences, as explored through their digital lives, the findings presented here force us to confront the messy contradictions that often lie at the heart of social media discourse: the blurring of the private into the public not only offers possibilities for women's participation but may also serve to reinforce and reproduce oppressive gender structures. It is important to acknowledge these critiques and the ways in which these potentially oppressive practices often run alongside the participatory possibilities outlined above.

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