

# Introduction

In October of 2017, our social media accounts began spilling over with people in our networks posting the same message—from Twitter to Instagram, two words flooded our consciousness: Me Too. The #MeToo movement was powerful, featuring a distinguished and growing list of sexual harassers—politicians, actors, directors, doctors, academics, businessmen, and philanthropists whose time was up. The movement seemed to open a watershed of silence—almost every day a new name was added to the list, demonstrating the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault. At the same time, media coverage treated the issue as though sexual harassment and assault were novelties, failing to recognize the deep roots of the subject or the fact that Lin Farley coined the phrase “sexual harassment” back in 1975. To be sure, #MeToo is a significant call to action, but it is also an opportunity to understand how the political culture embedded in media’s use of #MeToo is rooted in a context of widespread, everyday sexism that transcends the terms of this newer movement. And while awareness created by the hashtag has helped reveal the widespread normativity of sexual harassment, it has also focused primarily on white,\* upper-class women, rendering the original framing by Tarana Burke less visible to the public eye.

In many respects, #MeToo is part of a wider dynamic that many academics have researched in depth. These studies argue that mass media reflect both popular and neoliberal feminism, essentially depoliticized ideologies

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\*The authors have intentionally used “white” vs. “White” when speaking about the racial identity of those who participated in our studies. We did this because of the historical use of the phrase White by White supremacists. Given that many institutions, including the Associate Press, are grappling with this very issue at time of publication we decided to go with the existing standard. Nonetheless, we want to acknowledge that Whiteness is a racial identity and that by not capitalizing whiteness we are working within a standard that can normalize racism.

that focus on individual empowerment versus structural change (Banet-Weiser 2018; Rottenberg 2018). #MeToo has helped both men and women admit knowledge of the ongoing existence of harassment and assault in a variety of workplaces, including but not exclusively those associated with Harvey Weinstein. However, we also see examples of pushback—pundits, opinion writers, or viral posts wondering why accusers did not speak up earlier? Such contradictions posit a necessary analysis not only of mass production but also of its *reception*. While #MeToo might be thought of as reifying popular feminist logics, engaging with audiences' reception of the hashtag also unveils the complexity of our cultural moment, which contains popular feminism certainly but also a trajectory toward a shift in how feminism is incorporated and accepted more widely.

In this book, we argue that part of our culture's ambivalent response to #MeToo can be explained by fact that sexist interactions are so frequent they have become an expected pattern of action (Nelson 2018; Lithwick 2018). Consider how this everyday sexism unfolds in coverage of the #MeToo movement. First, the popular media accusations against Weinstein discounted the earlier cases in which people did speak up (e.g., Ambra Battilana Gutierrez, the Filipina Italian model who did file assault charges against Weinstein with the New York City Police Department, although they declined to prosecute). The widely publicized #MeToo movement initially overshadowed Tarana Burke's earlier contribution. While she was mentioned inside *Time* magazine's 2017 "The Silence Breakers" as the person of the year, she was not selected for the cover (in her place were Ashley Judd, Adama Iwu, Susan Fowler, Taylor Swift, Isabel Pascual, and the bent arm of another women representing the millions of women still silenced). *Time*'s discussion of silence breaking also made the current moment seem like an anomaly, glossing over the history of sexual harassment activism more generally. After all, Anita Hill had openly discussed the sexual harassment charges against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in her 1991 televised testimony. And, predating Anita Hill, there had been a substantial grassroots movement to document and address sexual harassment—a term coined decades earlier in 1975 by feminist labor activist Lin Farley and taken up by grassroots activist groups such as Women Organized Against Sexual Harassment (WOASH).<sup>1</sup>

While #MeToo was an important catalyst on social media, the campaign fails to comprehensively engage with the pervasiveness of everyday sexism—to be fair, a big task. This explains why Matt Damon can say, "There's a difference between patting someone on the butt and rape or child molestation. Both of those behaviors need to be confronted and

eradicated without question, but they shouldn't be conflated" (Eppolito 2017). While Damon faced public critique for his comments, which try to differentiate between everyday sexism and outright assault, in some ways we agree with him that these two phenomena ought to be differentiated—yet we assert that they are related as well. In some ways, everyday sexism is integrally connected to the epidemic of sexual assault, and these connections should be unpacked in everyday cultural understandings of sexism. Popular feminism, though “having a moment” (Gill and Toms 2019, 97), is embroiled in an ongoing struggle for the visibility of feminist sentiments and often fails to unpack the complexities of the issues, which include the pervasiveness of sexism in everyday life.

The sensationalized sexism discussed in the #MeToo movement also tends, in popular journalistic coverage and in much of its social media presence, to gloss over important feminist issues such as work-life balance, body positivity, gendered income inequality, and the underrepresentation of prominent female figures in leadership positions, all of which are persistent areas of gendered inequality, having been addressed only incompletely by feminist action for social change. The structural sexism that supports and accepts these inequalities is so ingrained that we argue it has become what Goffman (1959) would refer to as part of our “unthinking routine.” Not unlike Aristotle's notion of a “habit” or *hexis*, our data demonstrate that sexism has become, in the words of sociologists Ritzer and Ryan, an “acquired yet entrenched state of moral character that orients our feelings and desires in a situation, and thence our action” (2017, 317).

Normative sexism persists alongside the overwhelming turn of media culture toward popular feminism. While popular feminism is bound to the elite definitions of reality that legitimize social inequality and thwart participatory democracy (Fenton 2016), the media nevertheless have a history of operating as a true fourth estate that at times clashes with their increasingly neoliberal, corporate sensibility. This manifests in our concept of media-ready feminism, which we argue occurs *at the moment of reception* in the cases where media break through the strictures of popular feminism and address structural sexism. #MeToo incorporates a dimension of media-ready feminism alongside its popular feminism. For example, the truly breakthrough feminist dimension of #MeToo is important for shedding light on the pervasiveness of sexual assault, though by focusing on the sensational cases and their glamorous victims, coverage frames assault as unusual, as a break in our unthinking routine, and not emblematic of everyday sexism. What is needed instead is in-depth media coverage leading toward a fundamental understanding of intersectional inequality and the role sexual

assault and harassment play in the perpetuation of unequal power dynamics in the United States. Yet the coverage of #MeToo resonates sufficiently with women's experiences of both misogyny and everyday sexism to effectively constitute a moment of "break" in a popular feminist hegemony, a break that opens the possibility of a more in-depth understanding of feminist issues. There is a magic to the #MeToo moment, which was a true media *break*, in spite of its well-analyzed limitations.

In the words of Alyssa Milano as she tweeted back to Damon when he insisted that not all men are bad: "It's the micro that makes the macro." Indeed, we agree: without understanding the micro—which includes not only media representations, but also how *audiences interact with and engage in media representations*—we lack a deeper understanding of why the same situations women have been facing in the workplace have continued at the macro level for decades. We need to better define the terms we are using in this struggle, such as the difference between assault and harassment; but we need also to acknowledge and recognize the pervasive persistence—alongside outright misogyny—of macro-level and micro-level "everyday sexism": the pervasive problem of sexism as an everyday experiential occurrence for most women that penetrates the conventions of everyday life and structures the macro-sociological foundation of gendered inequality. Not only do "the media" rarely engage with this boundary-making process, but we find that when they do, audiences are hesitant to embrace the messaging. This is the media-ready feminist moment of reception: a rejection of the possibilities of breakthrough feminist media representation and media coverage. Throughout this book we will both identify the spaces in which media aim to push the boundaries of hegemonic feminism (conceptualized most recently as "popular feminism" in Banet-Weiser [2018] and as "neoliberal feminism" in Rottenberg [2018]) and also shed light on how audiences engage with the meaning making attendant upon this production. We conceptualize this interactive process at moments of media breakthrough as *media-ready feminism*. Our study focuses on the ways in which audiences at times either reject media-ready feminism—but also at times receive and elaborate its meanings as transgressive.

Media-ready feminism is similar in some important respects to three recently articulated versions of feminism: Banet-Weiser's "popular feminism" (2018), Favaro and Gill's "glossy feminism" (2018), and Rottenberg's "neoliberal feminism" (2018). It also incorporates postfeminist ideas and

sensibilities as articulated by Gill (2007) and Tasker and Negra (2007). Yet media-ready feminism differs from each of these concepts in important ways as well. It is an active, sociologically based conceptualization of audience reception that encompasses *both* media's attempt to transcend these crucially limited versions of feminism *and* the processes of domestication through which media audiences and users revert to more limited cultural schemas despite the widespread awareness of their limitations, which results from the reach of everyday sexism. Similar to the "enlightened sexism" articulated by Douglas (2010)—that sexism is acceptable given the newly widespread belief in feminism—and to feminism's "double entanglement" intricately described by McRobbie (2009a, 2013)—that feminism coexists with more conservative ideologies in neoliberal society—feminist representation nevertheless showcases "empowerment" in many forms (from the twenty-something singleton, to the newly married pregnant woman, to the working mother trying to balance life's demands). Yet it often does so through simultaneously showcasing consumption as the mechanism by which empowerment is achieved and perpetuating archetypal heterosexual, cis-gendered attractiveness and heteronormative life stages through a racially homogeneous lens. In media-ready feminism, the idea that women are white, middle-class, and heterosexual, criticisms made of second-wave feminism's mode of address, is too often normalized. And in contrast to the postfeminist assertions that individuals are rejecting the term "feminism," media-ready feminism encourages women (and men) to embrace a feminist label, while at the same time stripping this label of its political content by implying that feminism is a movement long over and accomplished (Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenberg 2010).<sup>2</sup>

In these features, media-ready feminism is similar to the popular and neoliberal feminism that has already been widely discussed in feminist literature (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2018). Yet we argue that media—even widely consumed popular media—often contain the seeds of a more fundamental feminist critique, providing an opportunity for the public to engage in discussions of the structural gendered inequality that ensures the persistence and reproduction of everyday sexism. However, even as media images push the boundaries, examining the process by which audiences engage and react to these stories provides the opportunity to augment earlier scholarship by confronting reactions to the disconnect between experience and media culture that characterizes the lives of everyday women in the #MeToo era. Media-ready feminism

reinforces a culture that negates and downplays women's experiences of everyday sexism while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of what Rottenberg terms "actual feminism," a feminism concerned with equality and gender justice.<sup>3</sup> Media-ready feminism focuses on these "magnified moments" (Hochschild 2003, 16), analyzing how audiences make sense of narratives that advance feminist goals in a cultural milieu that restricts feminist discourse. Our concept contains a fundamental insight into the limits of media's feminist influences and its ability to facilitate and enable feminist social change.

While recent discussions (Banet-Weiser 2018, x) have highlighted feminist scholars' ambivalence at their own reception of popular feminism given that such narratives do contain elements of a feminism we all resonate with, our study delves further both into precisely these contradictions within many media representations and into the contradiction between lived experience and media culture experienced by a wide swath of media audiences and users. Unlike popular and neoliberal feminism, media-ready feminism can push the boundaries of the limited white, liberal, heterosexist, middle-class feminism that predominates in mainstream media; but because of this, it also encounters pushback from audiences unable to translate their media consumption according to the transformative dimensions of feminist social movements. This reception study attempts to unpack the slow way in which media work to facilitate social change. Yet transcending the boundaries of a more regressive popular feminism is quite difficult for the audience members we sampled, and in this book we probe and describe the actual *process* through which feminism that is media-ready is tamed and accommodated during reception in order to fit, explain, and make sense of the lived experiences of those we studied.

Drawing on a series of case studies, we probe audiences' difficulties in confronting radical media content, tracing the operation of media-ready feminism across a variety of media platforms and documenting the work audiences do to resist, recuperate, and revert representations and platforms that push the boundaries of popular feminism. We describe what we feel is the true import of a media feminism that contains critical and transcendent elements. This is the almost Gramscian hegemonic process through which audiences end up acceding to these dominant cultural ideas of feminism, ideas that are contradicted—in the case of women—by their experience of a constant, reliable barrage of sexist treatment in many realms of life, the "everyday sexism" of our title.<sup>4</sup>

What is it like, we ask, for women and men who have come of age in the era of popular and neoliberal feminism to experience everyday sexism and even at times popular misogyny? How do they make sense of such a contradictory cultural environment and experience, where the common culture is dominated by feminisms in their varied incarnations, feminisms that frequently focus on an individualism inconstant with the tension of collective sexism in our everyday? How do audiences—media viewers, users, in some of our examples, creators—reconcile such dramatic contradictions in the course of their everyday lives and at different life stages? And how do they capitalize—or fail to capitalize—on media’s transcendent moments, in which transformation is imagined and envisioned?

To introduce our framework, we use the rest of this introduction to present an example illustrating the operation of media-ready feminism. We then discuss how each chapter in the book draws from reception and/or use of a different media *platform* to further elaborate this thesis.

### “I Don’t Regret My Abortion”: Media-Ready Feminist Reception

To observe media-ready feminism in action, we draw from a message posted to the now-defunct forum Yik Yak. This social media app was widely popular on college campuses in the United States from 2013 to 2014 and often involved the collective though anonymous discussion of popular and political issues. Using geolocative technology, Yik Yak restricted access to a limited area of users but allowed them to “peek in” on other places. While not exclusive to college campuses, Yik Yak organized the communities on the app around college locations (e.g., University of Southern California or Virginia Tech). The example we use below is drawn from an interaction captured by Tripodi (2017). In the Yik Yak screenshot in figure I.1, a user posts about her personal experience with abortion. As you can see from the text, this user is directly engaging in a debate about a woman’s right to choose but is also pushing back on what we would argue is the newly popular idea that makes abortion decisions palatable for popular feminism—that women will inevitably regret their decisions.

Not only is the content of this Yak unusual, but the large number of supporters of this message (757) is equally surprising. As Tripodi’s research demonstrates, typically Yik Yak succumbs to a form of algorithmic



Figure I.1. Screenshot of the Yik Yak thread in which the original poster writes about not regretting her abortion.



censorship (e.g., deletion, which we will discuss later), whereby only sentiments agreed upon by the majority of users are allowed to persist. Moreover, the high number of upvotes (at the time of this screenshot there were upward of 750) means this message was visible for a longer period of time than other Yaks because it ultimately transferred from the new list to Yik Yak's "hotlist" of ultra-popular Yaks. Getting on the hotlist is significant in itself because it increases a post's visibility—depending on the traffic, hotlist posts typically last about an hour, in contrast to "new" content, which often disappears as rapidly as ten minutes after posting, especially in cases where there are a large number of users on the app. As we can see at the bottom left corner of this post and in subsequent comments, the post remained on the "hotlist" for at least four hours. Such a large number of upvotes indicates its popularity. However, a closer analysis of the comments following this post reveals a powerful demonstration of the typical domesticating reception by which media-ready feminism is often received. The initial post, a somewhat radically prochoice sentiment, is modified to offer a limited set of situations in which a lack of regret concerning abortion can be deemed "appropriate."

One instance of this is immediately visible in the second commenter's text that no one is "excited," evoking ideas of harm and danger present in the "abortionist as evil" trope common to anti-abortion rhetoric (Condit 1989). The comment following this indicates that women do regret their abortions—but that they "probably regret unwanted children more." A few comments later, the discussion turns to rape—an extreme argument often invoked in favor of abortion by those who support reproductive rights only very conditionally.

In the screenshot in figure I.2, one commenter writes sarcastically, "Yeah, I totally regret my rapist's fetus." This comment is followed by a debate among users as to whether the commenter was raped, or whether she is speaking on behalf of rape victims who decide to have abortions—a perspective on abortion that has long been widely accepted—even though the right is currently contesting the right to reproductive choice as a series of states pass laws restricting access to abortion even in rape and incest cases (Reints 2019). Interestingly enough, however, and central to our argument about how media-ready feminism is created and received, rape is not discussed at all in the initial post.

The modification of the initial sentiment calls on sociologist Karen Cerulo's (2000) theory of "story elaboration." Much like the headline or story lead of a news article, fellow Yik Yak users are only processing the

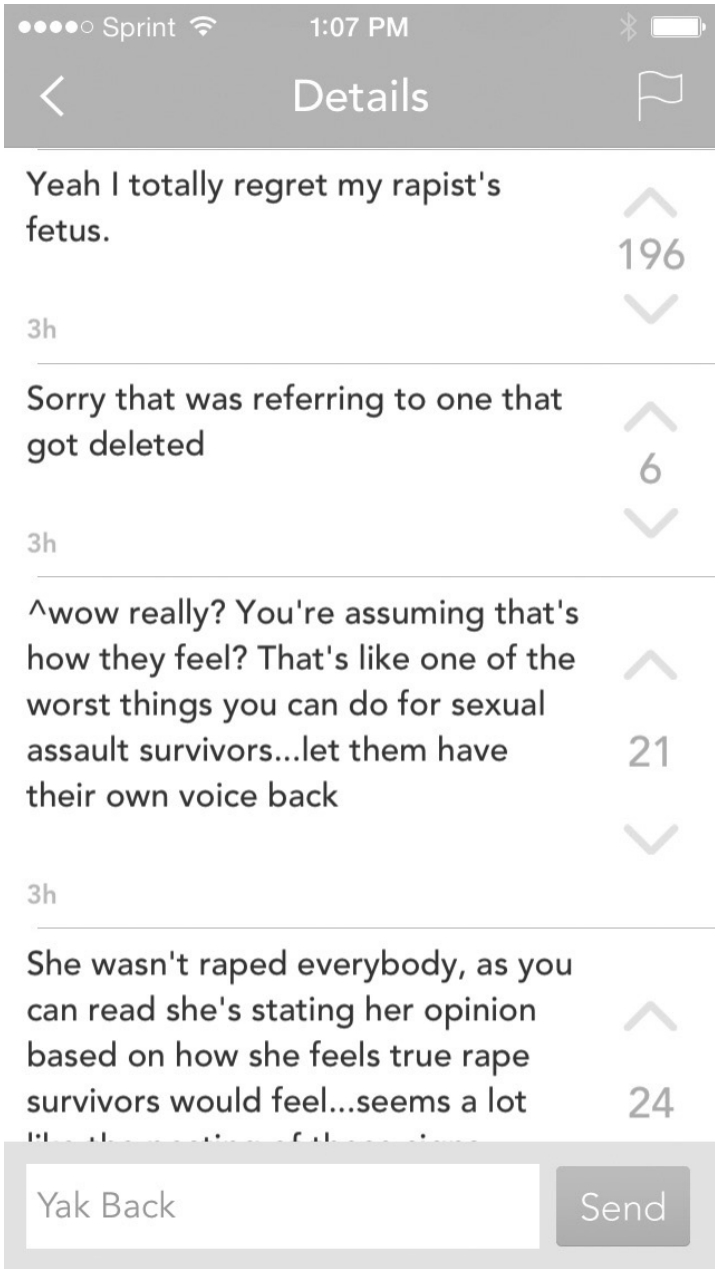


Figure I.2. Comments to the original post on Yik Yak debating whether the original poster was pregnant due to rape.

initial soundbite briefly, but then they proceed to fill in the blanks guided by the rules and scripts dictated by their sociocultural context. Similar to a newspaper headline, the original Yak professing “no regret” over an abortion is then “filled in” by remaining users, creating a dialogue that is compatible with broader sociocultural opinions limiting choice. As a result of this modification, the original sentiment of the user is ultimately changed—deradicalized—to fit the cultural context of abortion opinion within the southern university at which this Yak was observed. Modifying and changing the content to fit this narrative effectively silenced the original feminist expression that someone had an abortion and did not regret it. As one commenter notes, it was only after the poster seemed to acknowledge that she was speaking on behalf of women who were raped that “her yak started getting upvotes like crazy”—perhaps from a popular feminist public who were influenced by the ideology of popular feminism to ignore the collective experience of American women, in which (depending on the source) 30 to 40 percent have at one time or another considered abortion.<sup>5</sup>

We’ve noted a similar modification process applied to other Yaks, tweets, and online expressions initially expressing other radical political sentiments on topics other than feminism. So, for example, following the events of Ferguson, Missouri, while some Black student activists tweeted the increasingly influential #BlackLivesMatter, many in the broader populace began modifying this epithet to the more universal and less racially pointed #AllLivesMatter. At the University of Virginia, a Twitter campaign began in the wake of a recent article in *Rolling Stone* detailing (erroneously, as it later turned out) the brutal campus rape of a student named “Jackie” under the handle #IStandwithJackie. Following criticisms of the article, this was modified on campus feeds to #IStandwithSantaClaus and other belittling variations, as the Twitter campaign #BlackLivesMatter was immediately mocked with #AllLivesMatter. These processes underscore what we argue in this book characterizes the domesticating reception of media-ready feminist breakthrough moments.

### Media-Ready Feminism and Its Reception across Platforms: The Case Studies

In sum, media-ready feminism 1) shares the following features of “popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser 2018) in that it embraces the name feminism—while depoliticizing the movement, focuses on women who already

dominate media representations (white, heterosexual, young, cisgender, upper middle class), and fails to engage with the broader structural issues that maintain and reproduce everyday sexism; 2) shares with the new “neoliberal feminism” (Rottenberg 2018) the focus on the individual as a unit rather than collective action and as a result views the ideal of “work-family balance” as something to be worked on at the individual level only; 3) however, what media-ready feminism adds to this conversation is an understanding of how media can at times be transgressive, pushing the boundaries of what is popularly considered acceptable by offering an authentic reaction that collectively acknowledges pervasive everyday sexism.

Audience ethnography reveals that when true breakthrough feminism emerges it is often met with resignation, reversion, or resistance—audiences fight back, because the common culture embodies everyday sexism as well as popular feminism. By only looking at examples of popular or liberal feminism in the media, a feminism that is limited, scholarship can miss media’s genuinely “critical” moments. Media have often been important progressive social forces in struggles for gender equity (Dow 1996; Haralovich and Press 2018). Unfortunately, these moments of media transgression do not always lead to meaningful social change, because popular and neoliberal feminism do not encourage audiences to develop a language accordant with transgressive feminism and social change. By recognizing these moments of critique, this book also aims to capture audiences’ ambivalence when dealing with these tensions as they respond to both a popular feminist media hegemony and media moments that pierce through it. A recent proliferation of feminist media scholarship captures today’s feminist climate but nevertheless misses the opportunity to consider how audiences engage with popular feminism, neoliberal feminism, and feminism that falls outside these boundaries. By focusing on moments of reception, this book sheds light on how women and men grapple with these tensions and problematize, at times embrace, and often fail to challenge the prevalence of everyday sexism.

Our case studies illuminate the process by which both popular feminism and neoliberal feminism are reproduced, repackaged, and reaffirmed by audiences struggling with the everyday sexism they experience. Based on our findings, we argue that when media push boundaries, existing feminist pushback is not strong enough to combat the larger structural issues necessary for achieving equality. Media-ready feminism is regularly transformed into a more acceptable form of debate that engages with the inequalities of those who already hold a position of power in society,

ensuring that the struggles of women of color, transgender individuals, sexual minorities, and lower socioeconomic populations too often fall on deaf ears. This is what we classify as feminism that is “not media ready.”

In the chapters that follow we pursue a sociologically based inquiry of media reception, following media audience members, creators, and users as they navigate a contradictory media landscape containing extreme instances of feminism counterbalanced by both everyday sexism and extreme misogyny. That so many women from so many walks of life have retained their optimism, sanity, and commitment to feminism in this environment is a testament to the strength and persistence of our feminist heritage. This book is dedicated to the women who have generously shared their life stories and reactions to popular media with us. We hope the media environment can make increasing headway against the everyday sexism and the popular misogyny it currently supports.

The book is organized around five cases—centered on reception “moments.” Each of these moments demonstrates how audiences negotiate the complex relationship between media-ready feminism and everyday sexism. The distinct cases focus on the feminist issues of sexual violence, work-family balance, the sexual double standard, dating apps, and online sexism inside a widely used knowledge platform. In each example, media grapple with issues central to the feminist movement in its current media incarnation. Through these cases, we build the theory of media-ready feminism employing the methodological traditions of audience ethnography and media reception. Drawing in part on feminist methodology as we employ these methods of reception analysis, we rely heavily on the words, perspectives, and worldviews of many people whose social positioning often renders them less “audible, less visible, and thus less able to shape the structures influencing their lives” (Avishai, Gerber, and Randles 2012).

While individual analyses of these cases yield important understandings of the connections between media creation and reception, theorizing across the data sets allows us to begin to generalize and elaborate these patterns. Such comparisons between seemingly incompatible types of media reception nevertheless shed light on an analytical pattern whereby respondents confront media-ready feminist moments of transgression but use a series of strategies to revert these moments back to the disempowered, analytically inert popular versions of feminism most often encountered in our media and culture. Given the breadth of the media environments we study in this project, such a repeated pattern was somewhat surprising, but it enabled us to flesh out a new and timely model for reception research

in the current media environment. The way this hegemony of popular feminism works is clearly demonstrable through reception research, which helps illustrate the process through which transgressive ideas are domesticated in the process of reception. Each case study combines interpretive analysis of media representation with the investigation of reaction to or engagement with these issues, using focus groups, individual interviews, and ethnographic observations of both physical and virtual environments. What we find is a complex interplay between the articulation of actual feminism in the context of women's experiences of everyday sexism and their responses to it.

One assumption of popular feminism is the element of the postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007) that we live in a sexually empowered world where both women and men can be sexually aggressive and active. In chapter 1, we confront one of the most remarkable media phenomena, the text of the remarkably popular television series *Game of Thrones*, adapted from the equally popular series of novels by George R. R. Martin. Reception of this text allows us to examine the way audiences actually push back on a paired representation of popular feminism and "popular misogyny" (Banet-Weiser 2018). Yet the popular feminism of *Game of Thrones* is often so extreme that it becomes transgressive. Powerful women rulers are so powerful they rule "dragons" and large kingdoms, and regularly outsmart the men in their world. Powerful female warriors are so powerful they triumph over all other forceful warriors, exhibiting an almost invincible female masculinity (Halberstam 1998). Yet sexual violence against women is regularized in the narrative and visual text of this show, a sexism shown to be an accepted and normal part of everyday life. This text presented a rare opportunity to peek at an extreme example of the way an almost shockingly transgressive feminism is paired with what might be termed its opposite—regressive misogynist images that shock even audiences used, in the Trump era, to a background of popular misogyny. Responses to this show on the whole fail to note and challenge that extreme feminism and misogyny are so often paired in its imagery.

In chapter 2, we consider a text that moves from explicit misogyny to sexism of a more common, everyday sort, the kind of "background" sexism that constitutes the everyday sexism of our title, alongside a more muted feminism that is nevertheless at times media ready. We hone in on a particularly transgressive media moment contained within an episode of the popular television show *Jersey Shore*, an episode entitled "Dirty Pad" (S2, E9). As we collectively viewed and discussed this episode with a series

of the show's fans, we shed light on how, in this instance, media-ready feminism fought back against the double sexual standard that persists in our culture and the ways in which audience members confront and accommodate to the contradictions of a culture characterized by a popular feminism existing alongside the everyday, assumed sexism supporting a continuing double standard of sexual conduct for men and women. In the episode, one of the characters is labeled a "slut" based on her sexual behavior (she's too active, in too many different contexts). Though the labeled cast member objects to this with a feminist argument about parity of gendered sexual activity, no one else in the cast backs up her perspective or defends her behavior. Instead, they undermine it and criticize her resoundingly for her behavior, criticisms seemingly motivated by a nonfeminist, judgmental double standard for women's sexual behavior.

When we spoke with respondents viewing the episode, they said that the episode really seems to hit home for them, and that the double standard is a genuine dilemma that they continually face. There remains an "economy of sexual capital" for women, who face dual pressures to be both sexually liberated but to avoid the traditional pitfalls of this: being labeled a "slut." By drawing on language used in the episode and by our respondents, we demonstrate how the show's media-ready feminism paints a picture of the "empowered" woman who enacts sexual freedom; yet in the moment of reception, both in the words of characters on the show and by those in our audience study, that moment is quickly shut down. Both the show's cast and viewers in our study are unable to address the fact that women who engage in casual sex continue to be labeled "sluts" in everyday experience. Viewers recount this fear *and* the text illustrates it as it proceeds beyond its breakthrough feminist moment.

Popular and neoliberal feminism assumes that work-family balance is a woman's individual problem to solve—that despite the structural gender imbalances that persist, "each woman must choose" a path for herself. Chapter 3 draws on the once exceedingly popular television show *Desperate Housewives* to document the travails of individual women trying to solve the work-family balance issue, illustrating how the show's media-ready feminism begins to challenge the notion that this dilemma is inherently an individual problem to solve, presenting this problem to a population that ultimately lacks the structural language to push forward on this insight. Women's experiences as mined in our focus groups reveal that they understand at some level that the impossibility of work-family balance is a structural problem that many women face in different ways

(e.g., following the impact of divorce; returning to the labor force after a break for childrearing; being overlooked for promotions at work, in part because of child care responsibilities). Yet, for the most part, women lack the analytic vocabulary to describe the problem in social structural terms. In addition, women who work often possess the feminist insight that they are not being judged according to the same standards as are men, who easily and regularly pass them by in the labor force, and this engenders conflicting attitudes toward combining work with career for affluent women who, unlike most women, have a choice to withdraw from the paid labor force. Working women are also hyper- and critically aware of continuing sexual attention from superiors to themselves and to other, often younger, women. This further supports a negative and often cynical attitude toward women's potential in the workplace and a particularly suspicious attitude toward women who succeed, a cultural trope reflected in the episode. The chapter well illustrates the power of popular feminist representations to influence women's interpretations of their own experiences, particularly for affluent women who find themselves reflected in the representation. Yet it also illustrates the failure of media-ready feminism's transgressive moment to spark an authentically feminist response to this problem, even in the white, relatively affluent women who connect more with this representation. This holds true despite the widespread insights women's experiences of everyday sexism give them into the inadequacy of a simplistic popular feminist formula to successfully resolve their conflicts.

The particular version of media-ready feminism in this episode fails to speak to the experiences of less affluent women, who do not find their situation reflected because they do not grapple with issues of choice yet face tremendous obstacles as they attempt to support their families. African American women and a Latina immigrant woman in our sample also find the episode unrepresentative of their experiences both culturally and economically. For the former, family experiences most often include strong working women role models; for the latter, a strict father has restricted her participation in cultural life in the United States in ways this media-ready feminism does not capture.

The white, affluent bias of media coverage of working mothers is nowhere more evident than in the college admissions scandal of 2019. As we write this, *Desperate Housewives* star Felicity Huffman, playing the lead woman "Lynette" of our episode, is serving jail time for her participation in the scandal. Falling prey to the pressures of affluent moms, Huffman hired an illegal college placement service to falsify the credential of her



daughters as they applied for admission to elite colleges, thus ensuring them a place in a prestigious private university that they apparently could not otherwise earn. Huffman, a glamorous, white, wealthy star of television and film, embodies the unspeakably affluent working mom—her net worth has been estimated at upward of \$20 million (Shannon-Karasik 2019)—whose experience overshadows cultural discussion of work-family balance. Sociologist Annette Lareau (2003) discusses the process of “concerted cultivation” undertaken by (primarily) mothers in higher socioeconomic status families to ensure the reproduction of class status for their children. The college admissions scandal illustrates that this pressure is experienced by mothers at the highest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, and there has been no shortage of media attention to their wrongdoing (Shannon-Karasik 2019; Jackson 2019). Yet these particular activities are confined to the highest percentage of earners in our society, who are almost entirely white (96.1 percent by some estimates; see Moore 2017). Descriptions of these particular pressures touch very little on the experience of the vast majority of working mothers who earn only a fraction of this group’s annual income, and who face a series of other pressures left out of the general cultural conversation.

Twenty-first-century dating brings with it a seemingly limitless number of potential partners. In chapter 4, we explore how apps like Tinder perpetuate popular feminism by framing dating as a source of sexual agency. The ability to swipe right (indicating an interest in continuing the relationship) or to swipe left (abruptly halting contact) amplifies the narrative that the app enables women to assert control over their sexual conquests. Unfortunately, merely empowering women to make initial connections fails to account for the normative “situational” sexual expectations we observed on the college campus we studied—the persistence of an everyday sexism that supports a climate of sexual violence against women. As recent data on the epidemic of sexual assault on college campuses and elsewhere indicate (Wade 2017), our study also finds that a boundary exists whereby women no longer feel comfortable saying “no” to sex yet continue to define engaging in casual sexual activity as an example of feminist agency, whether they enjoy these encounters or not (relevant to this, recent research documents the paucity of female orgasms in the casual sexual encounters Tinder often fosters [Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2010]). This is the intrusion of media-ready feminism into the popular feminist appearance of Tinder. Exploring the relationships between the popular feminist appearance of Tinder and the everyday sexism involved

in the “tacit consent” implicit in the sexual activity Tinder facilitates, this chapter examines how many straight women on college campuses again lack the transgressive language they need to confront the pressure to consent. We then contextualize this case in relation to the reaction to “Grace’s” much-publicized accusation of sexual assault against Aziz Ansari in order to reiterate why #MeToo is a clear example of a transgressive media-ready feminist “moment” that stands out from the popular feminism more often dominating mainstream media discourse.

In chapter 5, we use ethnographic observations of “edit-a-thons,” Wikipedia’s “Articles for Deletion” pages, and in-depth interviews to argue that the culture of Wikipedia remains entrenched in patriarchal systems of inequality. Not only is it difficult for new editors (typically women) to feel comfortable adding to Wikipedia, but the standards for what constitutes “notability” for a biography page, such as the number of exhibits in well-known art museums or periodical coverage of events, are linked to systemic biases against women’s inclusion. We find that while Wikipedia’s motto of the “free encyclopedia that anyone can edit” and the nature of its edit-a-thons themselves constitute the promise of a media-ready feminist redress to this system, its structural environment explicitly ignores the persistence and strength of the everyday sexism that curtails the ability of edit-a-thons to follow through on this promise. Drawing on examples of how women modify their actions in edit-a-thons (from username selection to avoiding editing certain spaces), this chapter demonstrates how avid Wikipedia editors practice what they term “stealth feminism” in order to avoid harassment. This chapter illuminates how in doing so users wishing to combat the “gender gap” on Wikipedia (Adams and Brückner 2015) work only in what they describe as its “quiet corners,” and documents how this perpetuates the problem of gender asymmetry on the world’s largest encyclopedia.

In conclusion, the coexistence of media-ready feminism and everyday sexism is not without consequence. As was made evident in the 2016 presidential election, media-ready feminism played a significant role in framing Clinton’s campaign. Throughout the election period, the press hailed her *Lean In* mentality, embraced her hard-hitting demeanor, hailed her performance in the presidential debates, and emphasized at times the truly radical dimension of potentially placing a female executive in the White House. The polls reaffirmed her imminent success, convincing those of us who followed the media coverage of the election that she would become the first female president of the United States. At the same time,

the media failed to account for Trump's almost constant use of everyday sexist language—his dismissive remarks about Hillary's appearance, his comment that she was a “nasty woman,” his constant discussion of whether women were attractive, his seemingly innocuous “locker room talk,” and his criticism of a beauty contestant's weight gain, all would resonate with many voters embroiled in the unquestioned culture of everyday sexism. The sheer fact that media criticism of his rhetoric was framed as “surprising” is evidence that sexist, patriarchal attitudes are commonplace and underreported—part of our everyday, accepted reality. Further, as Banet-Weiser argues (2018), with the Trump campaign popular culture crossed the line from accepting everyday sexism to accepting popular misogyny. In addition, the much-discussed phenomenon that younger women failed to identify Clinton's candidacy as a feminist triumph illustrates how popular feminism frames feminist social change as an already-accomplished victory, thereby disempowering the much-needed feminist activism that remains. Yet though media show evidence of a new “traffic in feminism” as documented by scholars such as Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017), a discussion focused simply on media representation is unprepared to confront the type of hegemonic sexism exhibited in the Trump campaign, which for many viewers remained intact despite feminist criticism and analysis (Ortner 2016). In this book, we use reception study in conjunction with media analysis to try to make sense of this explicit coexistence of such contradictions. As the findings from our cases demonstrate, the problem of patriarchal barriers will persist (Rubin 1997 [1971]; Lerner 1986; Ortner 2014) if citizens are left with no penetrative, transgressive ideologies that actively challenge them.

But that is not to say that all hope is lost. We believe that by writing this book, we can shed light on why the idea of “feminism” as a popular concept can potentially disrupt instead of simply sensationalize. We think that expanding the purview of what constitutes feminism in our media to include those who fail to identify with the movement is a good first step. We also believe that by exposing the ubiquity of media-ready feminism and exploring its impact, we can begin to embrace a kind of equality that has up to this point been media “unready.”