A Study on Feminist Perception towards Society

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ABSTRACT

Using a fake target lady and a measure of conventionally feminine and masculine qualities, the current study compared feminist perceptions against non-feminist women's perspectives. One image of a young woman (dressed up or down) and one paragraph (describing her) were provided to 40 undergraduate students (mean age 23, S.D. = 7.18) her as a feminist or not) and then took a test of typically feminist characteristics. Scores on this quiz were shown to change considerably depending on self-labeling, with participants who were told the lady in the image self-identified as a feminist believing she adhered to standard feminist tropes.

Participants also filled out the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981) as they would a "Typical Feminist" or "Typical Woman." A "Typical Woman" was seen to be rather androgynous, but a "Typical Feminist" scored more masculine and feminine on both ends of the spectrum. Overall, the outcomes of this study suggest that the feminist stereotype is shifting, and that "normal women" might be regarded to have features that align with the feminist stereotype as well.

Keywords: Feminism, Stereotypes, Gender Roles

Introduction

The current study explored perceptions of feminists by comparing them to perceptions of non-feminist women using both a fictitious target woman and a measure of traditionally feminine and masculine traits. 40 undergraduate students (mean age of 23, S.D. = 7.18) were presented one photograph of a young woman (dressed-up, or dressed down) and one paragraph (describing her as, among other things, a feminist or not). Participants then completed a measure of traditionally feminist traits. Scores on this questionnaire were significantly different based on self-labeling, such that participants who were told the woman in the photograph self-labeled as a feminist perceived her to be more adhering to traditional feminist stereotypes. Participants also completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981) as they believed a "Typical Feminist" or a "Typical Woman" would. A "Typical Woman" was perceived to be fairly androgynous, while a "Typical Feminist" had more extreme masculine and feminine scores. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the feminist stereotype may be changing and that "typical women" can also be perceived to possess traits in accordance with the feminist stereotype.

Despite negative stigma and contrary to a line of popular culture beliefs (e.g., Bellafante, 1998), feminism is not dead (Eagly, Eaton, Rose, Riger & McHugh, 2012). Research has shown that a hesitancy to self-label does not indicate that today's college students disagree with the feminist movement and its ideals (Burn, Aboud & Moyles, 2000; Williams & Wittig, 1997). On the contrary, studies have shown high support for such goals (Aronson, 2003; Zucker, 2004). It appears that the perceptions of feminists largely account for this discrepancy. As feminism continues to grow and evolve, women have begun to tailor the movement to fit their own needs, which is the very essence of the "third wave" of feminism. Rowe-Finkbeiner (2004) claims this new wave is based on the simple concept that "there are many ways to be a feminist" (p. 31). No longer do all feminists fit the stereotype of man- hating, bra-burning angry activists (Groeneveld, 2009).

The first two waves of the feminist movement are easily differentiated; Rowe-Finkbeiner (2004) defines the first wave of feminism as occurring from 1848, the year of the historic Seneca Falls Convention, to 1920, when American women received the right to vote. This wave was characterized by the suffrage movement and established women as a political entity (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). The second wave, which lasted from the 1960s to the 1980s, was led by women like Gloria Steinem and expanded to encompass a variety of goals, including ones pertaining to equal pay and opportunities, reproductive rights, and gender discrimination (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). Backlash from men, the media, and at times women themselves,

has been aimed at feminists from the beginning of the movement (Aronson, 2003). This negative appraisal has been used to explain the hesitancy of women to self-label as feminists, even when they agree with the goals of the movement (e.g., Twenge & Zucker, 1999).

The current study is aimed at exploring the ways in which college students perceive women and feminists, in terms of stereotypical feminist characteristics and traditionally feminine and masculine terms. It was designed to examine reactions toward feminists who do not fit the traditional stereotype and the ways in which such women are perceived.

Perceptions of Feminism

The feminist stereotype is complicated, multi-faceted and contains many emotion-provoking elements (Jost & Kay, 2005; Twenge & Zucker, 1999). A salient part of the stereotype is that feminists are traditionally perceived to be lesbians. While Twenge and Zucker (1999) found no support for the notion that feminists are lesbians, their participants perceived feminists as being more likely to be lesbians than the "average woman" and endorsed the notion that lesbians are generally unattractive. Feminists were also perceived to be politically liberal, assertive and focused on work and careers, especially when compared to non-feminist women. The feminist stereotype has both positive and negative components but feminists, especially in the negative elements, were described in more behavioral terms (e.g., assertiveness) than non-feminists.Other perceptions closely related to notions of femininity and masculinity are also a part of the general feminist stereotype. Jost and Kay (2005) exposed participants to a list of agentic gender stereotypes (masculine) or communal ones (feminine) and then measured their feelings toward the current gender system. Women who had been exposed to the communal terms (e.g.: considerate, kind, gentle) showed increased support for the current gender system. Men, regardless of the manipulation received, strongly supported the gender system. The researchers proposed that this could potentially demonstrate why people justify our current gender system: the two categories (agentic and communal) can be seen as complementary. If the current system has support, and a goal of feminism is to invoke change, it would make sense why so few women self-label as feminists. Research has shown that the process of identifying as a feminist and the factors that discourage women from doing so are complicated and variable (Downing & Roush, 1985; Liss & Erchull, 2010; Williams & Wittig, 1997).

Fashion, Feminism and Heterosexual Romance

A controversial article appeared in a 2006 edition of BUST magazine, a publication for third wave of feminists, entitled, 'Be A Feminist or Just Dress Like One' (Groeneveld, 2009). Fashion has long been regarded by feminists as a way in which society reinforces patriarchy; a pro-feminist magazine publishing an article specifically about dress and clothing surprised some readers (Groeneveld, 2009). Groeneveld (2009) examined the context of this controversial article and its implications. She suggested that some self-proclaimed third wave feminists are reclaiming fashion and using it as mode for further empowerment. No longer are all feminists "Birkenstock- wearing, hippie, 'granola' lesbians (Groeneveld, 2009, p. 181)."

The notion that feminism is perceived by women, men and the media to work in opposition with beauty and fashionable women has been established (Cash, Ancis & Strachan, 1997; Groeneveld, 2009; Rudman & Fairchild, 2007). Rudman and Fairchild (2007) found that college students endorse the stereotype that feminists are unattractive. Participants responded to a series of questions about yearbook photographs of pretty and plain girls. The pictures of the plain women were more likely to correspond to predictions that the woman became a feminist. The researchers concluded that this idea closely follows the notion that women deemed plain or unattractive were less sexually-appealing to men and, therefore, were more likely to be lesbians, which made them more likely to be feminists (Rudman & Fairchild, 2007).

Traditionally, feminism has been viewed as antithetical to beauty and femininity. But, as the BUST article suggests, feminists may no longer agree with this; BUST readers saw that they can be both fashionable and feminists (Groeneveld, 2009). A new order of feminists, pop-culturally termed "third wave," "girly," and "lipstick" feminists, has emerged to include those women who are empowered by their femininity; however, little research has been conducted on this population. Ideas of femininity and beauty are so strongly linked in patriarchal society that the words are almost synonymous (e.g., Banziger & Hooker, 1979; Groeneveld, 2009). This link between femininity, beauty and heterosexual romance has implications for feminism and the perceptions associated with it. When feminism is perceived to oppose beauty and femininity, it can also appear as unsuited to heterosexual romance. Rudman and Fairchild (2007) explored this issue: heterosexual male and female participants completed a measure of attitudes toward feminism, a four-item questionnaire to gauge the amount of conflict participants believed feminism would cause for a romantic relationship and a third questionnaire to explore the lesbian part of the feminist stereotype. Both men and women who saw feminism as a barrier to heterosexual romance were less likely to self-label as feminists.

Feminist Self-Labeling: Theory, Hesitancy & Predictors

The process of becoming a self-labeling feminist is a complex one. Downing and Roush (1985) proposed that the process of developing a feminist identity occurs in five distinct stages. *Passive acceptance* involves women unquestioningly accepting the current gender system. The second stage, *revelation*, is reached when women become aware of gender inequalities. The third stage, *embeddedness,* also referred to as *emanation*, involves women associating with like-minded individuals and exploring the feminist niche. Next, women combine their individual identities and their newly-acquired feminist ideals in the fourth stage, *synthesis.* The final stage is *active commitment* and entails women deliberately working to challenge gender inequality.

As this model was created almost thirty years ago, questions of its validity have been raised. More recently, Liss and Erchull (2010) conducted a study to reevaluate the Downing and Roush (1985) model, with particular emphasis on the *synthesis* stage, which has been thought to be the point at which individuals start self-labeling. The researchers found that, for their college-aged women participants, the only two stages strongly predictive of self-labeling were *passive acceptance* and *active commitment*. The researchers suggest that, because of their status in today's gender system, women may begin at the *synthesis*

stage even without any individual effort. Women at the *synthesis* stage felt empowered and capable but continued to accept traditional gender roles. Researchers   suggest this may be because they were unaware of the inequality between genders and that these women also highly valued their femininity.

The tentativeness that people, especially women, seem to have toward self-labeling is seen as problematic by feminist scholars (see e.g., Burn, et al., 2000; Williams & Wittig, 1997; Zucker, 2004). It has long been observed that supporting feminist ideals does not necessarily mean one will self-label as a feminist (Myaskovsky & Witting, 1997; Williams & Wittig, 1997). Myaskovsky and Witting (1997) found that 51% of their college-aged women participants, while hesitant to self-label, supported the feminist movement in "all" or "most" of its goals.   They concluded that women may avoid self-labeling not because they personally view feminism as negative, but because they believe others and society, in general, do so. Burn, et al. (2000) asked their male and female participants to complete the Liberal Feminist Attitude & Ideology Scale, which is considered a covert measure of feminism because it does not use the word "feminism." The participants also answered an overt measure of feminism ("To what extent do you consider yourself a feminist?"). Participants were more likely to support covert than overt feminism and were more likely to express agreement with feminist principles than to actually self-

label.

Extensive research has also been conducted in hopes of discovering predictors of feminist self-labeling (Moradi & Subich, 2002; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Roy, Weibust & Miller, 2007). Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997) discovered that the following factors help predict self-labeling: optimistically evaluating feminists and the women's movement; having had contact and experience with feminists; having witnessed sexual discrimination; and supporting cooperative action. Williams and Wittig (1997) found that evaluating feminists positively, showing support for women working together to accomplish goals, and knowing feminists to be particularly predictive of one's choosing to self-label. Roy, et al. (2007) also found that participants who identified as feminists were very likely to express feeling the need to challenge generally accepted notions regarding gender. Moradi and Subich (2002) observed that non-feminists reported having experienced fewer circumstances of sex discrimination than feminists.

The Current Study

The present study was designed to explore perceptions of different types of feminists and elements of the feminist stereotype. Participants were given a packet of information about a young woman, and were then askedto rate the target on a list of stereotypically feminist traits. The second part involved use of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1981) to give an indication of the participants' perceptions of a "typical woman" or a "typical feminist." This measure has been validated and used in numerous studies (e.g., Auster & Ohm, 2000).

Hypothesis 1. For Part 1 of the current study, it was hypothesized that when the target woman was shown dressed-up, regardless of feminist self-labeling status, she would elicit higher scores (meaning less conformity to typical feminist stereotypes) than when she was depicted as dressed-down.

Hypothesis 2. For Part 2 of the current study, it was expected that participants would attribute higher scores on traditionally masculine traits to a "typical feminist" when compared to a "typical woman."

Method

Participants

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. The participants of this study included 40 undergraduate students (31 females) at a university in the Pacific Northwest. The mean age of participants was 23 years (S.D. = 7.18). The majority of participants were Caucasian (85%) and 10% were Hispanic/Latino. There was an almost equal representation of years in school (25% freshmen, 23% sophomores, 25% juniors, 23%

seniors and 0.05% post-baccalaureate students). 17.5% reported being non-traditional students and 40% were psychology majors. Compensation in the form of extra credit slips to be used for psychology courses was given for participation.

Procedures

Advertising for the study was done using flyers posted on a bulletin board in the psychology department. Participants were randomly assigned to each condition. Prior to data collection, files were made up for each participant. These files included the informed consent form, a packet of materials for the first part of the study, the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981) and the demographics form. The packet for Part 1 included one photograph (of a dressed-up or dressed-down woman), one vignette (describing the target as a self-labeling feminist or explicitly stating that she does not self-label) and the questionnaire itself, to create four unique conditions. The instructions for the BSRI varied; half asked the participant to answer as a "typical woman" and the other half as a "typical feminist," similar to the Twenge and Zucker (1999) study. Participants were given no further clarification from the researcher regarding the two terms. As the packets were compiled before data collection

began, the researcher gave each participant the one on top of the stack at the time they came in, thus ensuring random assignment to the various conditions.

Upon entering the testing area, participants read and signed an informed consent form. After giving consent, they were given their file of study materials and the researcher gave brief oral instructions regarding each section. The participants viewed the photograph/paragraph packet and rated the target on the measure of traditional feminist traits that had been created specifically for this study. Then, participants completed the BSRI, following the instructions to answer as either a "typical feminist" or a "typical woman" would. After completing the demographics form, participants were debriefed and given their extra credit slips.

Materials

The first part of this study involved four stimulus elements, which, when combined, created four unique conditions. Explanation of the elements follows.

Dressed-Up Woman. The dressed-up woman was a black-and-white photograph of a Caucasian woman aged 21 with dark hair and eyes. In the photograph, she wears a tight dress and high-heels; she has her straight hair down and is wearing make-up.

Dressed-Down Woman. This picture is of the same woman as the first and she is standing in the same position, facing the camera with arms at her side and a small smile. In this photograph, the model is wearing jeans and a flannel, long-sleeved shirt. She has her hair in two braids and is not wearing make-up.

Vignettes. One of two vignettes was paired with one of the above-mentioned photographs to create the four conditions. The paragraphs described a typical college student and were the same except for the final sentence, "She [does not] identif[y]ies as a feminist and attributes this to the way she was raised." (The vignettes are included in the Appendix.)

The combination of photographs and vignettes created four unique situations: a dressed-down woman, a dressed- up woman, a dressed-up feminist (to suggest the "Lipstick Feminist" stereotype) and a dressed-down feminist (to suggest the "Granola Feminist" stereotype).

Measures

Adherence to Feminist Stereotype. To evaluate the participants' perceptions of the woman in the photograph and described in the vignette, a measure was created that instructed participants to rate the woman on a Likert scale of 1. *Always Describes Her* to 4. *Never Describes Her*. A number of studies have been designed to identify words and phrases that are commonly believed to be associated with the feminist stereotype. Using two of these studies, the researcher chose, and created the measure around, 25 terms that have been found to be part of the feminist stereotype (Jost & Kay, 2005; Twenge & Zucker, 1999), such as "She is strong," "She is politically liberal" and "She is a lesbian." Nine of the terms were reverse coded because they represent elements contrary to the general feminist stereotype, including "She is nurturing" and "She is submissive." The complete list of terms is included in Appendix 1.

Perceptions of Sex Roles. The second part of the study utilized the 40-item version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981). This inventory was designed to measure one's level of masculinity and femininity. Participants rated all of the terms on a Likert-type scale, with 1=*Never*, 4=*Neutral* and 7=*Always*. Some of the masculine terms include: assertive, forceful and athletic, while examples of feminine traits are: shy, childlike and sympathetic. Participants completed this inventory as they perceived either a "typical woman" or a "typical feminist" would answer.

Design

The first part of the study was a 2 (Photograph: dressed-up, dressed-down) X 2 (Paragraph: feminist, non- feminist) design with a dependent variable of ratings on a list of stereotypical feminist traits. The second part of this study included two variations ("Typical Woman," "Typical Feminist") and the dependent variable was score on the BSRI.
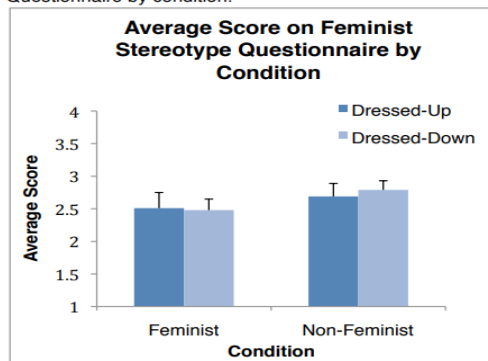
Results

The mean scores (+1 S.E.) for feminist stereotype traits for the Dressed-Up/Dressed-Down and Feminist/Non-Feminist conditions are displayed in Figure

1. The measure used was created to examine perceived adherence to the feminist stereotype and lower scores indicate the target was believed to possess more feminist characteristics. The average score for the dressed-up feminist was 2.51 (*S.D.*= 0.17) and the average score for the dressed-down feminist was 2.48 (*S.D.*= 0.24). The average score for the dressed-up non-feminist was 2.69 (*S.D.*= 0.14) and the average score for the dressed-down non-feminist was 2.79 (*S.D.*= 0.20).

Next, an analysis of variance test was conducted to examine the mean differences between each group. The omnibus test was significant, $F_{(3, 36)}$ = 3.10, p = .002 and the relationship between conditions and average level of evaluations was strong, η^2 = .34. Further, to control for Type I error across multiple pairwise comparisons, Tukey HSD post hoc tests were conducted. Results revealed significant differences between the dressed-up feminist and the dressed-down non-feminist (SE = .09, p = .01) and between the dressed-down non-feminist and the dressed- down feminist (SE = .09, p = .004). Finally, there were marginally significant results between the dressed-up non- feminist and the dressed-down non-feminist (SE = .09, p =.07).
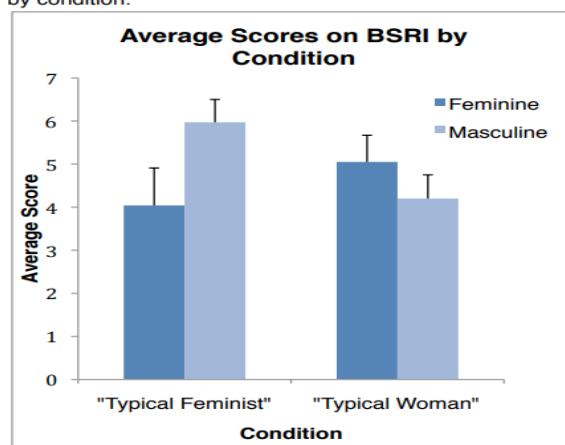
Figure 1. Average scores on the Feminist Stereotype Questionnaire by condition.

The mean Masculine and Feminine scores (+1 S.E.) corresponding to the "Typical Woman" and "Typical Feminist" BSRI conditions are displayed in Figure 2. The means scores for the various conditions were as follows: in the "typical feminist" condition, the average feminine score was 4.04 (SD = .87) and the average masculine score was

5.97 (SD = .53). In the "typical woman" condition, the average feminine score was 5.05 (SD = .62) and the average masculine score was 4.20 (SD = .55). Moreover, results revealed significant differences between the "typical feminist" condition and the "typical woman" condition on the average BSRI feminine scores, $F(1,39)=10.56$, $p < 0.001$, η^2 = .32. There were similar patterns for the two conditions on the average BSRI masculine scores, $F(1,39)=109.51$, $p < 0.001$, η^2 = .74.

Discussion

For Part 1 of this study, it was hypothesized that the dressed-up photograph would receive higher scores (meaning less conformity to typical feminist traits) in both conditions. This hypothesis was not supported, as the conditions to receive the highest scores were actually the two non-feminist ones (dressed-down feminist and dressed-up feminist). When looking specifically at mean scores, the feminist label appears to have been more of a determinant of scores than the type of dress. The two conditions that included a feminist label had the two lower average scores and the two without the label had the higher scores, indicating that the "feminists" were perceived as more conforming to the traditional feminist stereotype.

Significant differences were found between the two dressed-down conditions. The dressed-down non-feminist was seen as significantly less conforming than the dressed-down feminist. This finding was unsurprising and provides further evidence of the strength of the feminist stereotype; self-labeling as a feminist increases the likelihood of being perceived as adhering to the feminist stereotype.

Looking beyond the dressed-down conditions, significant differences were also found between the dressed-down non-feminist and dressed-up feminist conditions. This is also unsurprising, as these two conditions are exact opposites. The finding suggests that a woman dressed-down and not wearing make-up was seen as significantly less conforming to the feminist stereotype than a dressed-up woman who self-labels as a feminist. Considering the observation with the mean scores, this could be related mostly to the label.

Figure 2. Average scores on the Bem Sex Role Inventory by condition

Marginally significant differences were found between the dressed-up non-feminist and the dressed-down non- feminist, such that the dressed-up woman was seen as slightly more conforming to the feminist stereotype than her dressed-down counterpart. This trend is surprising; in the past, it could have been predicted that a dressed-down woman without make-up would be perceived as more of a feminist, but this study found that the opposite was true.

Rudman and Fairchild (2007) found that when participants were presented with yearbook photographs, they (all of whom were heterosexual men and women) were more likely to predict the woman was a lesbian if she was unattractive. This provides strong evidence that lesbianism is a strong component of the traditional feminist stereotype. Because of this, and similar findings, "She is a lesbian" was included as an item on the questionnaire for Part 1 of this study. Findings from the current study, however, do not provide such strong evidence of this association. All but two of the 40 participants responded "Rarely Describes Her" or "Never Describes Her" to this item. Of the two who responded "Always Describes Her" (none chose "Often Describes Her"), one was in the dressed-down/feminist condition and the other was in the dressed-up/non-feminist condition. This appears to refute the notion that lesbianism is strongly linked with the feminist stereotype, but as the current study only used a single item in one questionnaire to examine this, more research is needed in this area to make broader conclusions.

In general, the findings for Part 1 were intriguing: They suggest that the feminist stereotype and the label can strongly influence evaluations made about a woman. These findings also suggest that a change has occurred in the way women are viewed; the perception of the dressed- up woman as adhering to the feminist stereotype could mean that being seen as ultra-feminine and girly did not indicate that she could not have also been perceived to be ambitious and professional.

Part 2 of this study also provided interesting results. It was hypothesized that the "typical feminist" condition would lend itself to higher masculine scores than the "typical woman" condition; this hypothesis was supported and significant differences were found across condition (Feminist/Woman) and component (masculine/feminine). Masculine scores were significantly higher in the feminist condition and feminine scores were significantly higher in the woman condition. A more complete picture emerges when considering the averages for each condition and component; the feminist condition produced the extreme scores (high masculine, low feminine) while the woman condition showed moderate scores for both components. This observation was unanticipated because it would be expected that the typical feminine and low masculine scores. The BSRI was developed to measure the extent to which one adheres to traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine traits. The findings suggest that a "typical woman" is viewed as fairly androgynous and that a "typical feminist" is very masculine and less feminine.

A re-evaluation of the BSRI items by Auster and Ohm (2000) used the same statistical process and requirements for inclusion of terms that Bem used in 1974. The researchers provided interesting insight into the current study's findings regarding the BSRI scores. Eight of the original 20 masculine terms met the requirements Bem used. Interestingly, these items (i.e., "act as a leader," "forceful," "independent") are related to parts of the feminist stereotype and even align with items used in the feminist stereotype questionnaire designed for this study (i.e., "domineering," "career-oriented," "overbearing," "driven," and "bossy" were all included in the measure for this study).

The current study presents a few limitations. The dressed-down photograph used in Part 1 may not have been drastic enough to invoke the "granola feminist" stereotype hoped for. The woman in the picture is wearing clothes that, while not particularly feminine, are still fitted. The questionnaire for Part 1 and the BSRI include a number of large or unfamiliar words (i.e., yielding, flatterable, and self-sufficient). A few participants asked for definitions of words they did not understand, but it is possible that others did not understand the words but failed to ask for such clarification. The researcher conducting the study was a young woman, which could have intimidated participants, given the gendered nature of the study, and influenced them to not answer entirely truthfully, if they believed she would be offended. The fact that the study utilized a small sample size of only forty participants is an additional limitation.

While much research has been conducted around feminist self-labeling (e.g., Liss & Erchull, 2010; Myaskovsky & Wittig, 1997; Zucker, 2004) and components of the feminist stereotype (e.g., Jost & Kay, 2005; Twenge & Zucker, 1999), little has been done to explore the newly emerging "lipstick feminist." Today's young people are aware of this result of "third-wave feminism" (Groeneveld, 2009) and seem to accept that feminists can, in fact, also be feminine. Future studies could probe this phenomenon further to explore the similarities and differences these feminists have with the traditional "granola feminist" of years past. It would also be interesting to examine how women who identify as "lipstick" or "girly" feminists perceive their feminism and overcome the stereotypical perceptions of it. The relatively new term "lipstick lesbian" has emerged to describe feminine lesbians (Bell, Binnie, Cream & Valentine, 199