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# **Postfeminism<sup>TM</sup>: Celebrity Feminism, Branding and the Performance of Activist**

## **Capital**

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## **Abstract**

This article contributes to postfeminist media debates by interrogating an emerging configuration of celebrity feminism; one in which authenticity, entrepreneurial subjectivities and intersectionality mark the uneasy contours of a new political subject. Coining the term 'activist capital', this paper moves beyond the impasse of celebrity feminism debates (where branding and commerce = bad, grassroots organising = good) to establish the uneven conditions through which celebrity feminist activism is accepted, even deferred to, in media and activist accounts. Drawing on an illustrative case study of the high-profile Amber Rose SlutWalk (2015-2018), a Los Angeles-based monetised and branded edition of an existing political movement against sexual violence, this paper employs a discourse analytical approach to argue that celebrity and activist cultures condition each other. Aided by digital media, a celebrity activism nexus is now emergent that is mediated by practices of individualised consumer capitalism and oriented by explicit social justice frameworks, troubling dominant narratives of depoliticised postfeminist sensibilities. These ambivalences, where commodification no longer holds the power of disavowal it once did, and where grassroots activism and celebrity culture collide, condition the emergence of new activist arrangements in this late capitalist moment.

Keywords: celebrity feminism, postfeminist brand culture, #MeToo, SlutWalk, celebrity activism nexus

## **Introduction**

Celebrity feminism is on the rise. A growing number of celebrity feminist flashpoints have been recursively mapped in Anglo-American popular culture since a media apex in 2014, creating a well-established terrain in which ideological struggles over the meaning and character of ‘movement work’ and its relation to the market are waged. Indeed, the figure of the ‘celebrity feminist’ provokes significant debate (Anita Brady 2016; Hannah Hamad and Anthea Taylor 2015; Emma Tennent and Sue Jackson 2019). The rollcall of A-list stars self-identifying as feminists continues to expand, with luminaries such as Emma Watson, Jennifer Lawrence, Lena Dunham, Miley Cyrus, Taylor Swift, and Beyoncé claiming a public and politicised identity. This reversal of feminism’s fortunes from a dirty word and publicly abandoned politics in decades past, has promoted the curiosity and ire of academics and cultural commentators alike.<sup>1</sup> Detractors of feminism’s new cool status argue that celebrity feminisms are firmly placed within the insidious category of ‘marketplace feminism’. Such feminisms rise to visibility through ‘casting systematic issues as personal ones and cheerily dispensing commercial fixes for them,’ as the media activist Andi Zeisler acerbically puts it (2016, 255). This is feminist identity as neoliberal, consumer-based individualism, bolstered by the workings of the celebrity industry. For Roxane Gay writing in the *Guardian* (2014), high-profile celebrity feminisms act as a gateway to political consciousness for wider constituencies, but we should remain cautious. ‘We run into trouble’, she suggests, ‘when we celebrate celebrity feminism while avoiding the actual work of feminism’. The clear implication is that celebrity and movement work are poles apart.

Indeed, celebrity is the very embodiment of a marketable commodity. Within industry circuits, the celebrity sign, and the human behind it, operates as a brand capable of turning expressions, services and products into commodities, including activism (Olivier Driessens 2012). Celebrity culture creates a powerful legitimization of the political economic model of exchange and value, which is fundamentally capitalist (David Marshall 1997). This insight underpins the growing dichotomy within feminist media studies that celebrity feminist activism is an oxymoron and a political impossibility. As leading feminist media scholars argue, contemporary popular and mediated feminisms, including celebrity feminisms, offer no critique of neoliberal capitalism (or the media platforms co-constitutive of communicative capitalism), but, rather, ‘contribute to its normalisation and conceit of inevitability’ (Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg 2020, 4).

Taking celebrity culture and feminist activism as its key analytics, this article identifies the current gap in treatments of celebrity culture within postfeminist and feminist media studies literature. Within this scholarship, celebrity is routinely seen as media-friendly, commodified, and premised on individualism, rather than an activist need for collectivist politics.

Empirically, I attend to the celebrity activism of Amber Rose, an American model, actress, entrepreneur, previous sex worker, and the publicly ‘slut shamed’ former partner of hip-hop stars Kanye West and Wiz Khalifa, who organised an explicitly branded and monetised annual SlutWalk between 2015 and 2018. Drawing on the concepts of celebrity capital (Olivier Driessens 2013) and affective labour (Melissa Gregg 2009; Tobias Raun 2017), the celebrity activist nexus of the Amber Rose SlutWalk, which commodified and interacted with an existing grassroots political movement, throws new light on conceptualisations of contemporary feminism. My approach challenges entrenched boundary work between ‘celebrity’ and ‘activist’ within feminist media scholarship, and questions how celebrity generates new cultural conversations and forms of attention between a multitude of fans,

audiences and industry actors on the question of feminist activism – albeit shaped, ambivalently, by the dominant nodes of wealth, media access, and privilege that constitute how celebrity capital accrues value within society (Driessens 2013; Janell Hobson 2016).

In what follows, and through reference to the Amber Rose SlutWalk, I demonstrate how a celebrity activism nexus is emergent that is mediated by practices of individualised consumer capitalism *and* oriented by explicit social justice frameworks, troubling dominant narratives of postfeminist sensibilities. These ambivalences, where commodification no longer holds the power of disavowal it once did, and where grassroots activism and capitalist celebrity culture collide, condition the emergence of new activist arrangements in this late capitalist moment which can be grappled with through the concept of ‘activist capital’, which I introduce here.

### **Postfeminism, Celebrity and the Performance of Capital**

Celebrity is currently under-theorised within influential accounts of postfeminist media cultures. This lends itself to an unbalanced view of celebrity activism as falling squarely within the realm of commercial appropriation and political instrumentalisation. For example, in her erudite analysis *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018), Sarah Banet-Weiser interrogates a compelling range of articulations of popular feminism, from corporate campaigns and the self-esteem industry (Always #LikeAGirl; CoverGirl #GirlsCan), to initiatives to get more girls into tech (#GirlsWhoCode), yet celebrity feminism does not attract a sustained focus (also see Rosalind Gill 2016). In a recent published conversation between Rosalind Gill, Catherine Rottenberg and Banet-Weiser on mediated feminisms in the journal *Feminist Theory*, Banet-Weiser argues that popular feminism exists along a continuum. On this continuum, ‘spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility,’ whereas, ‘expressions

that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are obscured' (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020, 9).

Popular feminisms, in this account, are easily consumed, are about pleasure and uplift, and are heavily influenced by individualism, postfeminism and neoliberal corporate culture. Laura Favaro and Rosalind Gill (2018), in their analysis of interviews with female creatives working at women's magazines, similarly note a form of 'glossy feminism', in which feminist identities are commonly heralded, yet little of the politics behind feminism are actively articulated – generating what Gill terms a 'hollow defiance' (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020, 14). Within these accounts, celebrity feminism falls ideologically into the realm of postfeminist media sensibilities and depoliticised popular feminisms; indeed, through the motif of a continuum, celebrity and movement-based feminisms appear to occupy separate poles, or at least, are pulled into different foci in different moments and contexts, and occupy different representational regimes. The rhetorical thread or luminosities distinguishing them cluster around appeals to 'collective' and 'structure' on the side of feminist thinkers and activists, and 'individualised' and 'personal choice' (to consume, to commodify, to be oneself) on the side of celebrity culture.

While recognising the many ways celebrity culture exemplifies the working of commodity fetish (Driessens 2012; Marshall 1997), I suggest that the frequently mobilised category of celebrity feminism runs the risk of being overly homogenised. 'Similar to other power resources,' as Driessens puts it, 'celebrity is distributed unequally' (2012, 643). A more nuanced account is needed to understand the political affordances of a celebrity activist nexus. I understand 'celebrity feminism' to name a complex, internally varied assemblage of representations and political claims. This assemblage, or what Wicke (1994) refers to as the 'celebrity zone', is a historically situated, permeable site of social production – informed by civic society and in turn informing civic society, including its technologies and

infrastructures. This constitutes ‘a space for registering and refracting the current material conditions under which feminism is partly practiced’ (Jennifer Wicke 1994, 765). The Amber Rose SlutWalk (with editions, at the time of writing, running between 2015 and 2018) is of critical interest as it demonstrates the complex ways in which celebrity feminist activism is articulated, circulated and monetised. This constellation also brings into visibility how grassroots feminist actors and activists respond to the celebrity activist assemblage, in ways that illustrate the social practices of feminism within newly ‘brandable worlds’ that expose activist culture to market logics. Rather than conceive celebrity feminism and movement feminism as utterly distinct and dichotomous, due to their differing locations and social aims and functions, I instead look for their traffic and frictions, and moments of entanglement.

Coining the term activist capital as a key heuristic, I suggest a way out of the impasse of the celebrity feminism debate (where branding and commerce=bad, grassroots organising=good) is to understand the conditions through which celebrity feminist activism is accepted, and even deferred to, within media and activist accounts. National media outlets refer to Amber Rose affirmatively as a ‘Populist slut hero’ (Allison Davis 2015), ‘a champion of modern feminism’ (Madeline Roth 2015) and the ‘new face of a movement’ (Rose Hackman 2015); a similar discourse emerges from activists, as we shall see. I argue that celebrity and activist cultures *condition each other*. This helps name a new configuration of celebrity feminist activism that are closely attuned to the work of social justice movements, but which, simultaneously, draw differentiated advantage and capital from the workings of celebrity culture. Such celebrity feminist assemblages mobilise techniques from promotional industries to articulate consumer-based individualised collectivities *and* activist subjectivities, re-constituting narratives of the postfeminist sensibility in its wake.

## **The Contentious (Celebrity) Politics of SlutWalk: Context and Analytical Approach**

Positioned within a host of protest movements that use nudity and body politics as central motifs (see Hester Baer 2016), SlutWalks have been hailed as one of the most successful, if not contentious, feminist actions of the past twenty years. The protest march originated in Canada in 2011, following a police officer advising a group of students at a campus safety event at York University, Toronto that ‘women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized’. Responding to this rape myth – that clothing can serve as an invitation or justification for rape – local activists organised a march to the local police headquarters, demanding accountability. The protest was highly mediatised and quickly attracted global resonance. As a precursor, and conditioning event, to the later viral #MeToo movement,<sup>2</sup> over the next seven years activists in over fifty countries organised independent SlutWalk marches, spanning the global north and south, including events in Brazil, Hong Kong, Iceland, India, Morocco, Namibia, and South Korea. While each satellite march adopted its own aim, form and sometimes brand name, there was a common goal of ending rape culture and victim-blaming attitudes. Critical responses to the marches vacillated between a celebration of their transnational organisation and vibrant constellation of tactics, to a critique of pandering to pornification through its protest aesthetic and for lacking a race and class analysis (see Kaitlynn Mendes 2015).

What happens, then, when a celebrity (of colour) organises a SlutWalk event, picking up on the movement as it begins to wane in activist energy and rearticulating it for new audiences through the sign of celebrity? This study adopts a discourse analytical approach to interrogate how the celebrity text of the Amber Rose SlutWalk (2015-2018), a monetised and branded edition of an existing protest movement, is made intelligible and acceptable in a range of media and activist communicative sites: from mainstream and alternative media publications, to the feminist blogosphere, to social media platforms, including Amber Rose’s official



Twitter account (@DaRealAmberRose). To state that celebrity is discursive, however, is not to dismiss that celebrity exists as a system upheld by wider industry practices and relations.

As Graeme Turner (2004, 9) usefully elaborates:

Celebrity is a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity and media industries that produce these representations and their effects, and it is a cultural formation that has a social function.

Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding, I approach the discursive work surrounding celebrity feminist activism as a contingent socio-political construction that produces articulations that work to orientate and structure broader phenomenon, including providing subject positions through which social actors can identify (David Howarth 2000). My dataset consisted of over two hundred items, encompassing news and entertainment articles, social media messages, pictures and videos, promotional materials, websites and activist penned commentaries, all featuring the Amber Rose SlutWalk as a key referent. A news sample was compiled through LexisNexis using the search terms ‘Amber Rose+SlutWalk’. English language titles were queried between 2015 and 2018, with results cross referenced with the press biography listed on the official Amber Rose website. Activist sources posted online were accessed via a keyword Google search of ‘Amber Rose SlutWalk’. Analytically these assembled items were first coded into themes such as feminism, celebrity, activism, and brand in line with my research objectives, before being inductively re-conceptualised into four, intertwined discursive tracts of feminist leadership, branding, enterprise, and labour. I will now discuss these imbricated discourses, mobilising indicative narratives drawn from journalists, activists, and Amber Rose’s own mediated discourses of her feminist self.

## **Amber Rose's Branded Celebrity Feminism**

In line with increased luminosities of grassroots and celebrity feminisms in the mediated public sphere, Amber Rose's rise to prominent celebrity has been structured by an overtly feminist narrative which takes personal and sexual empowerment at its core. Presenting herself as a 'proud mother, activist, television and radio personality, producer, entrepreneur, and published author' ([www.muvarose.com](http://www.muvarose.com)), Rose embodies the ideal postfeminist subject, striving for success in her intimate, business and political life, and maintaining a 'have it all' femininity.

In her ascent to fame, Rose (real name Amber Levonchuck) cultivates physical and erotic capital as part of her celebrity sign: she is a former Ford model, has launched multiple clothing and merchandise lines, has served as brand ambassador for Estee Lauder, Reebok, Beats, and Smirnoff, and adopts the affectionate name Muva, with Rosebuds and Rosestuds signifying her fan base. As Driessens (2012, 652) makes clear, the celebrity's 'name, image, hair(style), clothing style,' and other personal effects, are turned into commodities to be sold and consumed, and they actively create audiences and markets through endorsing products and brands (with celebrity as self-brand). A striking appearance and peroxide buzzcut are key to Rose's brand image, with *Time* referring to her as 'an enigma with an hourglass figure, sunglasses and a signature blonde, nearly bald hairstyle' (Erica Williams Simon 2015). If postfeminist ideals are normatively white, middle class and heteronormative by default (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020), then Rose's biography troubles this libidinal economy. She is from a working-class background, identifies as bi-sexual and has a bi-racial heritage, being of Irish, Italian and Cape Verdean descent.

A narrative of personal survival and financial savvy characterises this celebrity activist's biography. Rose was raised in a 'very poor' single-mother household in South Philadelphia and worked in the sex industry between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five as a stripper to

support her family (Eliza Thompson 2015). In line with a postfeminist empowerment discourse and a neoliberal privileging of market rationalities, Rose recounts her experience of sex work through the prism of an entrepreneurial training ground: ‘Being a dancer definitely was like being in business school, because I constantly spoke to people [...] I mean, I literally had to persuade a man to give me money out of his pocket. And I apply that to my daily life’ (Cassie Carpenter 2015). The invocation to business school seeks to emphasise Rose’s status as an entrepreneur; she continues, ‘The fact that I was a stripper does not take away the fact that I’m smart, that I am witty, that I am capable of running my own business’. It also enacts a neoliberal postfeminism as the ‘hustle’ of sex work and the shrewd ability to get ahead financially is applied to everyday life.

While entrepreneurialism first emerged as a topic of public interest in the late 1980s, these discourses currently ‘serve as a center of mythic energy’ (Daniel Lair, Katie Sullivan and George Cheney 2005, 317), underscoring not only postfeminist celebrity culture, but the biopolitical organisation of life itself. It is through entrepreneurial, market-driven subjectivities that individuals are expected to construct their biographies in terms of choices and self-responsible actions. Here, Rose’s rationalisation of sex work as being her entrepreneurial training ground provides a narrative of the ‘choosing self’, capable of self-responsible actions, self-improvement and economic resilience.

It is this entrepreneurial spirit, coupled with the misogynistic, humiliating attacks from her former partners, music stars Kanye West and Wiz Khalifa, that formed the impetus for the inaugural Amber Rose SlutWalk in 2015. As outlined in the *Guardian*:

[Kanye] West went on record in February saying he had to take “30 showers” after being with Rose before he was allowed to form intimate ties with current partner [now spouse] Kim Kardashian. And in a song about women described as “hoes”

being passed from man to man at parties, Wiz Khalifa wrote: “I fell in love with a stripper, funny thing is I fell outta love quicker,” “Instagram turnin these wives into hoes,” “Just make sure you clean off that pole”. (Hackman 2015)

The slut-shaming repertoires here are clear: West and Khalifa drew on classed narratives to abject Rose’s body as unclean and pollutant. These insults are further imbricated in racialising discourse, as Black women have been historically constructed as hypersexual, animalistic, diseased and licentious. It was these public attacks, coupled with the ferocious online misogyny that Rose regularly faced in connection to her sexualised self-presentation on social media, that instigated her turn to feminism. On 14 March 2015 Rose announced via Twitter that she was organising her own SlutWalk in Los Angeles that year, stating in an interview for the June edition of *Cosmopolitan* that ‘I guess social media did help create the feminist monster that I’ve become’ (Thompson 2015).

By using the metaphor of the ‘feminist monster’, Rose playfully draws on the long-held abject position of the feminist as threat, excess, and horror. The tenor of this feminist articulation differs from those offered within the celebrity feminism nexus of Beyoncé and Emma Watson, for example, who emphasise discourses of equality, and whom seek to reclaim the identity of feminist as a common-sense label for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Amber Rose’s feminism leans more into the frame of what Michel Foucault (1980) would call ‘subjugated knowledges’ – the registers of knowledge that are trivialised, ridiculed, and made illegible. Rose occupies mainstream feminism’s abject positions – as a former sex worker, and as a celebrity whose self, body and sexuality is the commodity relation publicly performed as part of her brand (which is abject from the perspective of anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist understandings of activist politics).

Yet such subjugated knowledges, if such a connection holds, are made newly legible within media landscapes transformed by the SlutWalk protests and #MeToo era, and become part of Rose's celebrity and activist capital in terms of media coverage. As a rape survivor, an object of intense misogynistic targeting, a sexualised presenting star, and as a celebrity who attempts to bring a narrative of racism, poverty and violence to transgender people to her public mediations of feminist activism, Rose crafts a complicated postfeminist brand activism, which moves ambiguously through media, popular culture, and activist communities. This branding invokes and distances herself from wider operations of celebrity.

At the second annual Amber Rose SlutWalk in 2016, for example, Rose carried a professionally designed sign bearing the statement "Fuck fame. Start movements". Within press interviews, Rose recounted how her brand of feminist activism does not circulate with the same legibility, or legitimacy politics, as other celebrity activists. As she narrated to *Paper* magazine, Rose felt snubbed by wider feminist celebrities. In response to a question about the larger conversations put in motion through #MeToo and the Time's Up movement,<sup>3</sup> she replied: 'I have reached out to so many celebrity women to help me fight this fight, and they felt like I wasn't good for their brand. Maybe because I used to be a stripper, or maybe because I'm extremely outspoken. But they didn't want to help me, and now I see them at the Golden Globes and they're wearing black and all of a sudden, they're feminists' (Claire Valentine 2018). As she continued: 'I'm still not invited, I still don't get any help from anyone, because I don't just advocate for Hollywood starlets. I advocate for the strippers and the porn stars and the gay boys who get raped all the time. Transsexuals – all of the people that are forgotten, they're all at my SlutWalk.' The activist capital that Rose accrues and performs within sympathetic grassroots communities is based upon an inclusive and intersectional politics of recognition, where the margins meets celebritisation.

## **Individuated Celebrity and Activist Subjectivity**

It is clear that empowerment discourses are brought to the fore of postfeminist ideologies, as feminist scholars have shown. This has significant reverberations for how issues of sexual violence and gendered harm can be conceptualised. Issues of collective injustice are typically reprivatised under this sensibility, as ‘even experiences of racism, homophobia or domestic violence are framed in exclusively personal terms’ (Rosalind Gill 2007, 153). Within this configuration, feminism as a political project is invoked yet displaced, as empowerment comes to signify the freedom for young women to enter into consumer capitalism as an ‘agent of capacity’ (Angela McRobbie 2009, 110) with no need for feminism as a social movement.

The Amber Rose SlutWalk in part consolidates this reprivatisation, as sexual violence and slut-shaming become sites of interpersonal agency in which women must learn to become more supportive of each other and victims can ‘forgive’ those who slut-shame them as a form of personal empowerment. The tearful speech Rose made at the inaugural Amber Rose Slutwalk, forgiving her former partners West and Khalifa, secured international news coverage of the event – indeed, it constituted the most significant coverage of the Amber Rose SlutWalk within my dataset. Even feminist activists such as Meghan Murphy – who critiqued the celebrity spectacle for its lack of structurally-engaged feminist politics, writing that “‘forgiveness” and “positive energy” will never shake the patriarchy’ (Meghan Murphy 2015) – noted a form of likeable activist capital at work in the display of vulnerability. As Murphy wrote on the alternative media platform *Rabble*:

To be clear, I don’t dislike Rose. I respect that she is trying to heal from all this and I respect that her intentions were good, in terms of organizing this event. Her tearful speech, talking about

the pain of being humiliated and insulted by men who used her,  
who she loved, who she got pregnant by, was moving.

The use of the term ‘moving’ speaks to the affective labour woven throughout Rose’s feminist activism, as I will come to discuss shortly, which generate activist capital effects of authenticity. This sentiment is echoed in other media commentary, such as a quote from a *Cosmopolitan* article that positions Rose as ‘one of the few celebs up for taking a real stand against the very real issue of slut-shaming’ (Ellen Scott 2016). From these two excerpts, the repetition of ‘respect’ (*Rabble*) and ‘real’ (*Cosmopolitan*), discursively work to champion Rose’s feminist activism, positioning her as something of a unique figure within wider celebrity industry circuits. The implication being that the postfeminist aspects of these speech acts are blurred: violence is articulated personally, but is held, as with the wider discursive events of #MeToo and other hashtag activisms against sexual violence, within a collective framework of personal enunciation and collective redress.

More specifically, a *feminist sociality* is brought forward by Rose, articulated, somewhat paradoxically, under the sign of individuated celebrity and personal activist subjectivity. Within the promotional materials for the Amber Rose SlutWalk, SlutWalk’s origin, and to a lesser extent its status as a global movement, is acknowledged. Yet the event is branded as a particular innovation of Amber Rose. To wit the following statement on the event’s fundraising page: ‘Los Angeles is just the first of many cities that we hope to expand this movement to with your help’. The celebritised event attempts to create *brand communities* around the march, but elides the fact that US activists had held over one hundred SlutWalk marches before the inaugural Amber Rose SlutWalk, including two earlier editions by a local SlutWalk LA group in 2011 and 2012; and that over 250 SlutWalks have taken place

globally, across six continents and fifty countries, as documented in the visual digital archive of SlutWalks that I initiated on the education resource [www.grassrootsfeminism.net](http://www.grassrootsfeminism.net).

### **Celebrity Feminist Leadership, Uneven Labour, and Organisational Cultures**

To turn to activist receptions of Amber Rose's celebrity feminism: while some grassroots campaigners noted a certain awkwardness to this market-led approach, as I discuss below, there is a compelling acceptance of Rose's portfolio as bone fide activist work. Tracking the contours of these debates pulls into view how feminist activism is actively received in this medially converged and interactive, neoliberal moment; how popular, celebrity-driven feminisms are used to assess the health and efficacy of on-the-ground organising; and to appraise the role of authenticity and intersectionality in generating compelling forms of what I call 'activist capital'.

If we turn to organising practices and questions of activist labour, clear distinctions can be drawn between celebrity feminist activism and grassroots iterations. An article published on the alternative media platform *Medium*, for example, critiques the Amber Rose SlutWalk's 'celebrity commodification of grassroots activism,' as written by a self-presented woman of colour, sexual assault survivor, and co-organiser of multiple SlutWalks, Creatrix Tiara (2015). In this article, the material distinctions between movement feminism and celebrity feminisms are established in terms of the precarity of unpaid, grassroots organising. As the author states: 'Some of us, including myself, are struggling to find work, maybe because employers balked at the idea of a 'Slut' walk [...] Amber Rose likely won't have to worry about her reputation or employability'. Indeed, the Amber Rose SlutWalk was a key self-promotional tool for Rose, taking place just before the launch of her best-selling book and self-help memoir, *How To Be A Bad Bitch* (2015), published by an imprint of Simon & Schuster. In counter-distinction to the DIY economy behind SlutWalk, the Amber Rose



SlutWalk was managed on the ground by a boutique marketing agency, Sax Productions, and Exact Publicity, specialists in celebrity representation, branding and endorsements. The proprietary nature of the branded protest event drew concern from Creatrix Tiara who worried that ‘regular people – including prior organisers – will not be able to host their own Slutwalks without running into trademark problems,’ referring to the registration mark which appeared across all promotional materials for the Amber Rose SlutWalk.

SlutWalk scholar Kaitlynn Mendes (2019) also queries the political economies underpinning this celebrity event: labelled as non-profit, Mendes raises concerns regarding how the Amber Rose SlutWalk replicates the capitalist economies of the creative industries by seeking volunteers to marshal the event, models to take part in the fashion shows, and artists to donate work to the SlutWalk art exhibition – all unpaid and, presumably, done for the ‘love’ of the work, while the event itself attracted corporate sponsorship, product tie-ins, and sold VIP backstage passes to its showcase event. Such economies seem to employ the immaterial (Leopoldina Fortunati 2007; Michael Hardt 1999) or affective (Raun 2017) labour of activists and fans. As media and cultural studies scholars have demonstrated, in cultures of production, to engage in activity that ‘does not result in a direct financial profit or exchange value, but rather produces a sense of community, esteem, and/or belonging for those who share a common interest’ (Gregg 2009, 209) is a form of labour, which, ultimately I argue, accrues value for the Amber Rose SlutWalk brand.

While the account presented of the Amber Rose SlutWalk so far appears to suggest an ardently postfeminist, capitalist appropriation of a grassroots movement, one that uses social media platforms to promote, retail and recruit unpaid volunteers and cultural workers to maximise a profit ethos, in actuality Rose’s event was more nuanced and thought-provoking politically speaking. In the inaugural Amber Rose SlutWalk, alongside a feminist fashion show, twerking competition and supporting turns by celebrity feminists, such as Matt

McGorry from Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black*, there was evidence of a coalitional politics. Heather Jarvis, co-founder of the original SlutWalk protest movement, was a panellist at the rally, alongside speakers discussing reproductive justice, AIDS and social change initiatives. These plenaries were curated by Lori Adelman, the Associate Director of Global Communications at Planned Parenthood (a community partner to the Amber Rose SlutWalk) and Executive Director of the feminist blog *Feministing*. The line-up of speakers, performers and musicians predominately featured women of colour.

The event created a ripple both in how SlutWalks are conventionally presented and in how the postfeminist sensibility is thought to operate. The Amber Rose SlutWalk moves beyond what McRobbie (2009, 135) terms a 'faux-feminist language of "women's empowerment"' that works to 'defuse, refute and disavow the likelihood of a new solidaristic vocabulary being invented.' It did so by articulating a challenge to gendered, racialised and class inequalities. The protest event demonstrates an emerging engagement with discourses that are resolutely intersectional. Among the banal use of neoliberal tropes such as 'your body, your choice', the Amber Rose SlutWalk mobilises social justice language including 'heterosexism', 'misogyny', 'cissexism', and 'patriarchy' when promoting the march. The Amber Rose SlutWalk has a mission statement advocating for a politics of recognition for marginalised communities, including women of colour, transgender people and sex workers; constituencies who are at particular risk of sexual violence (Rebecca Stotzer 2009; White House Council on Women and Girls 2014). This is a radical presentation for a popular feminism, with Rose's own embodiment as a woman of colour and a former sex worker consolidating the necessary and convertible activist capital behind the mission statement.

In the digital realm, narratives within feminist blogs and centre-left news outlets suggest that Rose's embodied position as a woman of colour and former sex worker could open up

feminism for new constituencies.<sup>4</sup> It is important to question how this could work. The Amber Rose SlutWalk mission statement, with its focus on the ‘voices of marginalized groups’ and its ‘strong desire to find common ground among all of our intersections’, speaks with intent about creating a more inclusive form of feminist engagement. As feminist scholars have argued, there is a ‘need for more explicitly intersectional thinking about celebrity and feminism’ (Nathalie Weidhase 2015, 129). Rose’s fanbase includes a strong constituency of young people of colour who attend her annual protest marches in their tens of thousands, and Rose has commented in press interviews that a future ambition is ‘to try to take the racism out of feminism for our generation’ (Sandra Song 2015). The strategy, so far, is multiple: to create a space for empowering disadvantaged communities (with empowerment rendered as a form of self-ownership, expression and agency), to provide access to women of colour role models and social justice experts, and to facilitate dialogue. The very visibility and embodiment of Rose as a woman of colour, publicly taking up a feminist mantle, becomes the discursive site and prompt for a newly thinkable and much desired intersectional feminism to take place.

The activist capital presented through initiatives such as the Amber Rose SlutWalk as an opportunity for movement work, then, not only speaks to the intersectional embodiment of certain stars – seen as a corrective to white-dominated grassroots movements – but also to newly wrought forms of affective labour within the nexus of celebrity activism. For example, the activist Janna Zinzi (2015), writing for the social justice publication *Rewire*, praises the Amber Rose SlutWalk for attracting a large audience of young women of colour. Zinzi assesses debates within feminist spaces regarding the ‘celebrity co-optation of the cause’. Seeking to unsettle hard dichotomies between celebrity feminism and movement feminism (asking whether a celebrity advancing their career through activism is any different from ‘climbing the ladder in a non-profit organization’), Zinzi’s article appeals to the realm of

affective labour as a legitimising factor for celebrity advocacy work. She argues: ‘there is a place in movement work for celebrities who genuinely *care* about the cause for which they are advocating. Famous people have greater access to resources and a broader audience than most organizers can reach’ (emphasis added). This acknowledgement of financial and symbolic resources speaks to celebrity capital as accumulated media visibility, enhanced entry to social networks, and publicly recognised authority (Driessens 2013).

The appeal to ‘celebrities who genuinely care’ speaks to the revised working of affective or emotional labour as a form of celebrity-activist capital. The affective, immaterial sphere has long been theorised by cultural and political theorists as the realm in which care, love, education, socialisation, and communication is socially reproduced (such as the domestic sphere of the family), and which has historically been undertheorised in accounts of contemporary capitalism (Fortunati 2007; Hardt 1999). Emotional work is understood as the often-unrecognised labour produced by service, retail and entertainment industries workers who must keep a smile on their face and perform positivity to keep the customer happy (Arlie Russell Hochschild 1989). The affective caring labour in the case of celebrity feminist activists, however, expresses a phenomenon closer to the affective labour generated by micro-celebrities and YouTube stars, which can be understood as the public sharing of intimacy and personal vulnerability as a form of self-branding and authenticity (Raun 2017).

This affective labour, when seen as being authentically displayed, translates into favourable celebrity and activist capital that strengthens the star’s celebrity activist brand power. To care, therefore, becomes a form of celebrity-activist capital that converts into productive activist work and helps to create sympathetic audiences (and immaterial labourers), as common narratives of pain, advocacy and personal risk-taking and vulnerability are generated. This affective labour on the behalf of the celebrity activist is then converted into a moral and practical imperative for activists, forming, in Zinzi’s direct address to her activist

readership, ‘our duty’ to seek coalition with celebrity advocates due to the resources they offer for social justice organising. This pragmatic belief in accessing new constituencies and heightened forms of visibility through celebrity culture may elide the obstacles of connecting directly within the celebrity industry, but it does speak to the new ‘interactivity’ and ‘reachability’ of stars, especially those who use social media to construct their celebrity personas via digital media (Alice Marwick 2013), and stars and audiences who use social media as an avenue to debate fame-based feminisms and their ‘proper subject’ (Judy Isaksen and Nahed Eltantawy 2019).

### **Conclusion: Toward a Theory of Feminist Celebrity and Activist Capital**

Constellations of celebrity feminist activisms are constantly developing and shifting, as is the broader postfeminist media and brand environment which condition them. A recent tactic within Hollywood celebrity feminist circles and the Time’s Up campaign, for example, involved a coordinated effort to ‘bring an activist’ as a strategic guest to film awards; this was understood as a way to turn celebrity capital of heightened visibility into activist capital, which brings mainstream recognition to the ongoing, grassroots organising work that often falls outside of the headlines. As reported in *Teen Vogue* under the legend ‘Hollywood Actresses will bring Social Justice Activists to the Golden Globes’ (De Elizabeth 2018), the intention was to highlight ‘legislative, community-level and interpersonal solutions that contribute to ending violence against women in all our communities’. Alongside the motifs of empowerment, choice, and so forth, it would appear churlish not to also recognise the language of social justice that is being mobilised with increased legitimacy, value and interest within media outlets that uphold patriarchal norms, such as women’s magazines.

Celebrity feminists such as the actor and United Nations HeForShe ambassador Emma Watson are gaining counsel from feminist leaders and intellectuals such as Gloria Steinem

and bell hooks (bell hooks and Emma Watson 2016), and new forms of quiet, and less spectacular, celebrity activisms are beginning to form. In recognition of the need to learn feminist ideas, histories and critiques, Watson, for example, recently launched a feminist reading initiative called ‘Our Shared Shelf’ on the *goodreads* platform to create an open, participatory feminist book club, which includes ‘pay it forward’ book gifting routes for members to pass their feminist books on to others, with the rules to ‘as always, kindly refrain from self-promotion of any kind whatsoever’.

Such celebrity feminist initiatives are uneven, may have ambivalent relationships to neoliberal capitalism and promotional culture, and may not sustain, but they are part of a new constellation of celebrity feminist activists who are engaging with activism, not only through the mechanisms of NGOs and charities, but through curated interactions with community organisations, everyday activists, and grassroots campaigners. With regards to postfeminist media culture: this is not a displacement, or succession. Such celebrity feminist activisms are resolutely conditioned by wider social, economic and technical renditions of the political under advanced capitalism. What this article has sought to demonstrate, however, is that what has been called ‘movement feminism’ (itself a spectral, phantasmatic construction rather than a blood and bones referent) is also conditioned by celebrity feminist activism: celebrity and postfeminist brand culture are overlapping, proximate realms of the thinkable for many (although not all) grassroots activists.

What is missing from the now considerable canon and archive of feminist scholarship on postfeminist media cultures is the traffic and parsing between activist, capitalist, celebrity and postfeminist formulations – the subjectivities which move, ambivalently, in contextual political moments, and where activists, in turn, may be open to celebrity as a means to promote and illuminate grassroots work (to put it neatly, the views from activists are missing). If anything, postfeminism’s media archive needs to include counter-examples:

while a demonstration of patterned gendered relations is key to understanding shifting social relations, there can be a risk, at times, that categories such as postfeminism, individualism, neoliberal and celebrity feminism start to harden at the edges; they circulate with ease and formula within feminist scholarship and pedagogy and can appear to be impervious to critique. If certain expressions of popular feminisms have heightened visibility within this current moment and block others from view, the same could be said of popular and postfeminist cultural analysis itself: the categories of white, class privileged, heteronormative, and the cis-gendered, for example, still patrol postfeminism as its primary and overly-rehearsed analytical object and privileged subject. One such way of destabilising these calcified certainties, its preloaded ethical outrages, is to follow the tracks of ‘activism’ as this unstable ideation moves in and through popular media cultures, and, analytically, to linger on the fissures of the ‘easily dismissible,’ such as commodified feminisms. To do so, would enable a greater understanding of the affects/effects they carry, ambivalently, and with uneven political afterlives, which radiate out from the assembled signs, practices, promises and embodiments that circulate in popular culture.

Staying in the ‘easily dismissible’ realm, such as celebrity feminisms (which are structured by capitalist relations, and in many ways embody capitalist relations), enables underexplored areas of feminist activism to come into view: such as the questions of labour and activist precarity that emerged in this paper through tracking ambivalent discourses surrounding the Amber Rose SlutWalk. In a provisional form, this paper has generated a new piece of conceptual language, that of activist capital, as a way to further understand the traffic between celebrity and movement work. Rethinking celebrity through Bourdieu’s field theory, Driessens (2013), for example, suggests the term celebrity capital to better understand how celebrity converts into other resources, such as economic capital. He proposed that celebrity capital should be conceptualised as accumulated media visibility (i.e. repeated media

representations) – not as a subset of social or symbolic capital (referring, respectively, to the networks you have access to, and the forms of prestige you have acquired).

My proposition of activist capital – deployed here as a heuristic and prompt rather than a defined, distinctive form of structuration – speaks to the processes and factors that are important to successful social movements and activist projects to launch. From the Amber Rose Slut Walk case, several key elements emerge, each which require further empirical corroboration. These include: the activist capital associated with leadership; the ability to provide compelling stories, images, and narratives to frame social problems; media visibility and access; passion, authenticity, innovation; the ability to disrupt; the affordances of being seen as ‘safe’ versus ‘risky’; personability and the ability to connect disparate networks; strategic use of digital media and new technologies; the capacity to produce sites for collective interaction and processes for social action; and the ability to inspire and educate. These are all substantial factors which find profitable connections with the affordances of celebrity. To connect concerns with activist capital to the workings of celebrity feminism – and to pay greater attention to how activism itself is an imaginary, discourse and set of social practices that travel unevenly through postfeminist media landscapes – could significantly broaden our archives of (post)feminist comprehension, influence and reach. Such an approach, I suggest, would move from seeing postfeminism as *necessarily* a politics of foreclosure, to bring more securely into view its ambivalent effects and mobilisations that increasingly compose, and re-compose, collectivist feminist activist and industry practices alike.

## Notes

1. Within academia, pains have been made to consider both the *affects* and *effects* of fame-based feminisms as a form of social action. The spectacular image of Beyoncé performing at



the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards in front of the word ‘FEMINIST’, as a popular example, is captured and remediated in recent academic texts including *Emergent Feminisms: Complicating a Postfeminist Media Culture* (Jessalynn Keller and Maureen Ryan 2018) and *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Banet-Weiser 2018). The feminist journal *Signs* hosts a digital archive of articles related to ‘Celebrity Feminism’ as part of their Public Intellectual project, and the long-standing feminist publication, *Ms* magazine, assembled a sympathetic timeline of popular celebrity feminisms ‘From Y2K to Today’ (Janell Hobson 2018). Whether seen as regressive, positive, or as highly ambivalent, celebrity feminisms clearly matter for contemporary feminist politics.

2. The activist use of ‘me too’ originated with the African-American social justice activist Tarana Burke who founded a ‘me too’ grassroots programme in 2006 to help survivors, particularly Black women and girls from low wealth communities, to heal from sexual violence (<https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history>). The #MeToo hashtag went viral globally eleven years later in 2017, after the American actor Alyssa Milano posted a tweet encouraging survivors of sexual assault to post a #MeToo status to challenge silencing around sexual violence, following public allegations against Hollywood producer, and now convicted rapist, Harvey Weinstein. The celebritisation and white-centric narratives associated with the #MeToo movement has generated increasing critical commentary from activists and academics (see Alison Phipps 2020).

3. Time’s Up launched in the autumn of 2017 with an open letter against sexual harassment in Hollywood and wider US workplaces, signed by over 300 women in the entertainment industry. The open letter was published in the *New York Times* on 1 January 2018 (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/01/arts/02women-letter.html>). The initiative has since formalised into a non-profit charitable organisation and legal defence fund, fighting

for policy and legislation gains within the entertainment, advertising, tech and healthcare industries (<https://timesupnow.org>).

4. Rather than being rejected for its self-promotion or capitalist intentions, the branding and commodification practices behind the Amber Rose SlutWalk are re-imagined as an activist gesture in the following account from the feminist blogosphere: ‘Perhaps the most radical thing Amber Rose could have done to the already far-left movement was to brand it, to put her face and name all over it. To do so is in direct protest of not only our rape culture, which stigmatizes and victimizes women of color and queer and trans women, in unique and nuanced ways, but all the prior organizing around it – which is widely criticized as white-centric’ (Carmen Rios 2015).

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