



**Feasey, R. (2017) 'Masculinit(ies) and the male celebrity feminist', *Men and Masculinities*, 20 (3), pp. 283-293.**

Official URL: <http://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17718587>

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## **Masculinit(ies) and the Male Celebrity Feminist**

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Feasey, Rebecca (2017) 'Masculinit(ies) and the Male Celebrity Feminist' *Men and Masculinities*, 20:3, 283-293.

### **Introduction**

There has been a growing interest over the past decade in famous women who have labelled themselves, or others as feminist, with further comment being paid to those who are more or less deserving of the label in question. It is only more recently that we have seen the media spotlight focus on those male celebrities who have spoken openly about their interest in gender equality. There are a small number of men from the film, television and sporting arena who appear with frequency and regularity on popular media listicles including, but not limited to 'Feminist Statements from Male Celebrities' (McWilliams 2015) and 'Male Celebrities Who Are Proud To Be Feminist' (Thorp 2015). Of those men who critique patriarchal society and condemn notions of sexual imbalance within and beyond the entertainment industry, some speak of respecting femininity, others applaud the woman's role and others again wear the (Fawcett Society) T-shirt.

I seek to examine the ways in which a number of men in the entertainment arena have vocalised their desire for gender balance. My question here is whether media portrayals of men such as Joseph Gordon Levitt and Ashton Kutcher are seen to be genuinely committed to social and sexual change or should be challenged for feminist-inspired musings that stop short of campaigning. I hope to draw attention to the growing body of male celebrity feminists and their equality commentaries on social media, before considering the ways in which these men might present a challenge to social and sexual norms within and beyond the entertainment arena.

### **Listicles and rankings: the male celebrity feminist**

Extant literature on film stars and celebrity figures tends to rank and classify personalities based on skill, talent and public curiosity. Likewise, the entertainment industry demonstrates a commitment to ranking recognisable figures based on the profitability of professional roles, levels of fashionability and on the success, or otherwise, of their domestic realm. In among these lists, hierarchies and directories exist a relatively new order or acceptance, that of claims to a feminist identity.

*Cosmopolitan* routinely releases lists profiling the top feminist celebrities of the year and a myriad of popular publications present similar honours and accolades. These lists are, with rare exception, dominated by famous females from the arts and entertainment arena, and they go to great lengths to rank their feminist credentials in relation to their investment in and activities relating to women's political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights.

Celebrities have been used in an effort to 'rebrand' feminism, with young women such as Jennifer Lawrence, Lena Dunham and Miley Cyrus making public claims to a feminist identity. Indeed, it has been suggested that feminism is 'the latest celebrity must-have' (Whelan 2015). And although much has been written to interrogate the roles, role models and responsibilities for this new generation of celebrity feminism, there is limited work to account for the growing number of men from the entertainment arena now beginning to voice their interest in the feminist cause or movement (Cobb 2015).

### **Male celebrities: proud to be feminist**

Under the title '8 Male Celebrities Who Are Proud To Be Feminists' *Marie Claire* (2015) tells its readership that they are 'never happier than when a man declares himself a feminist', and as such, the publication is keen to support men's contribution to a feminist cause. What is worth noting here is that, although the men on this short list speak about a myriad of equality rights and resources ranging from childcare provision to support for rape victims, most never refer to themselves as a feminist, nor actively campaign in line with the goals of a feminist movement.

We are told that 'feminism got the royal seal of approval' when Prince Harry delivered a message about dignity and respect at a recent 'Chime For Change' concert. As an 'ascribed' celebrity one might suggest that it is not appropriate for members of the British monarchy to offer more politically motivated or movement based commentary, but this lack of meaningful action extends into the sphere of 'achieved' and 'attributed' celebrity entertainers (Rojek 2001). *Marie Claire* went on to applaud Ryan Gosling because he is 'attracted to films that have strong female characters' and is vocal about their being strong women in his life. He tells interested parties that the equality debate has become of greater significance in his life since the birth of his young daughter. Outside of the gendered media sector, the actor has spawned a host of internet memes in which his image is paired with feminist quotes, which has, according to recent research 'helped men alter their opinions on feminism' (Sanghani 2015). That said, in the actors own words 'I didn't make those [memes], you know? It's not by design' (Bueno 2015).

Reality television pop star, Harry Styles is said to be what the magazine refers to as another 'proud feminist', albeit a proud feminist who does not refer to himself as a feminist in interviews, press junkets or tweets. Styles is congratulated both for calling on his fans to support the United Nations 'HeForShe' campaign and for being part of a phenomenally successful pop group whose lyrics tend to speak of female empowerment rather than female objectification. Elsewhere he is noted for doing 'amazing stuff' including offering support to anti-bullying campaigns, taking a public stand against domestic violence, and drawing attention to the problem of homophobia in sport (Wood 2015). However, what this amounts to is holding a placard (Styles 2014), painting his nails (Ennis 2015) and wearing a NFL shirt (Jeffries 2014).

The women's magazine applauds an ex-*SNL* comedian, Andy Samberg, because of his insistence that women, like men, can be funny. Samberg is heard commenting that '[s]ince there have been men and women, there have been funny women ... f--king idiot-ass men keep saying that women aren't funny. It makes me crazy. I find it disgusting and offensive every time'. Elsewhere Samberg is given the feminist moniker not because of his commitment to breaking down sexist barriers in the world of comedy, but because of his depiction of masculinity, or rather, of masculinity in crisis. We are told that the actor 'holds a mirror to the most loutish of American males, rendering Peeping Toms, self-righteous belligerents, and cocksure ladies' men with heavy-handed mockery' (Zeveloff 2011). However, when he wore a National Organization of Women t-shirt to a Spike television event 'even the most accommodating among us had a difficult time believing him' due in part to the fact that he routinely trades in female objectification, physical humour and fake vomit, while never publicly referring to himself as a feminist (ibid).

Unlike the feminist candidates before him, Joseph Gordon Levitt does refer to himself, repeatedly and during a myriad of television and online forums as a feminist, explaining that his mother raised him to understand the campaigning voices of the second wave movement. *Marie Claire* is in support of the actor as he draws attention to pay inequalities and what he sees as the complexities surrounding the term itself. Speaking of his choice to identify as a feminist the actor comments that today 'there are still plenty of tensions and unfair situations that arise more so for women than for men' both within and beyond the entertainment arena. Levitt speaks about his film, *Don Jon* (2013) as being inspired by feminist debate and posted a Youtube video that explored the diverse interpretations of feminism for an interested audience. In an interview with Ellen DeGeneres he tells us that 'women can frequently be regarded as objects, and if we don't work to fight sexism it can become a part of our belief system' (Zarrell 2014). And yet although he has pronounced that feminism should be celebrated because it is of 'benefit to

society' he has also been heard speaking at a Comic-Con panel telling interested fans that 'most pretty girls aren't funny' (Gray 2013). Although the actor has since apologised and retracted his statement, it does leave us questioning the sincerity of his feminist identity, after all, his feminist announcements and Youtube musings time nicely with the promotion of and press junket relating to his auteur vehicle.

Like Joseph Gordon Levitt before him, Jon Hamm is a self-proclaimed feminist, due in part to his maternal inspiration. *Marie Claire* quotes him as saying '[m]y mom was relatively young and raising a kid by herself, so I do consider myself a feminist ... I get that sensibility. I'm certainly not a misogynist, no way, man; I'm down with the strong ladies'. Elsewhere, feminist inspired websites congratulate the actor for speaking out about inequality between the sexes, especially given his notoriety as the unreconstituted male chauvinist from the AMC drama, *Mad Men* (2007-2015) (Taylor 2011). The actor says that he was inspired to teach after spending 'the majority of his life in summer camps, after school programs and daycare centres' with limited male role models to look up to (Moore 2011), continuing on this topic when he spoke about the importance of outreach programs to boys and young men at a benefit for the Rape Treatment Center. Hamm suggests that we have to broaden our discussions about rape and consent from girls and women, to boys and men in order to keep society safe (Moore 2011). Although audiences have no reason to challenge Hamm when he tells us that 'I've never treated any women as badly as Don Draper treats them, with his lies, his affairs, his sexism and chauvinism, and I'd hate anyone to think I was like him' (Wigg 2011), his comments might be directed at audiences and television executives alike. After all, few actors look to be type-cast, irrespective of the popularity of the character, genre or medium in question.

Of the eight male performers *Marie Claire* selected as out and proud feminists, only two of the men have actually uttered the word feminist, and none of the aforementioned performers have taken any action to further the feminist agenda, beyond the use of a Youtube video, tweet or hashtag. The final two names on the list go further in terms of the feminist agenda by trying to do more than encourage debate, and yet these men are not doing so as self-proclaimed feminists, but rather, as vocal fathers and partners.

Since becoming a father, Ashton Kutcher has campaigned for increased baby changing facilities in men's public toilets (Kutcher 2015). His concern is not just with baby changing facilities, but a broader felt sense that men should take on more paternal responsibilities, making the point that it is an 'injustice' to assume that childcare is the sole responsibility of a wife or mother (Larimer

2015). Although Kutcher might be championed for his paternal interest, he is speaking as a father not a feminist. The two are not mutually exclusive, but it is worthy of note. Kutcher states that 'I would like my daughter to experience a world where gender doesn't dictate one's responsibility or limit one's opportunity' (ibid) and it is for readers to decide whether the 'personal is political' or if the personal is simply that, firmly situated within the domestic sphere.

Like Kutcher, David Schwimmer can be seen as a campaigner, again based on personal experience rather than broader feminist sentiments. The actor tells us that having two ex-girlfriends who were the victims of child-abuse sensitised him to the issue and inspired him to campaign for the victims of rape, to become a director for a centre for rape victims in California and to star in several television Public Service Announcements (PSAs) urging men to end violence against women. Moreover, Schwimmer tackles the themes of innocence, child sexual assault and the sexualisation of young girls in the media in his first full feature movie as director, *Trust* (2010) in order to draw further attention to what he sees as important social and sexual issues. Although Schwimmer's interest in gender equality informs his volunteering and activism, it is difficult to present him as a male celebrity feminist, because not only does he fail to refer to himself as a feminist, but he openly rebukes his celebrity status and seeks to put personal and professional space between his work and any notion of fame or notoriety.

*Bustle*, an online news and entertainment website for women, by women, makes the point that although 'many men might agree that women should have equal rights, far fewer wear the label of feminist proudly' before introducing us to a small number of male celebrities who are 'using their influence, power, and voices to advocate for gender equality' (Dionne 2014). Although it is worthy of note that many of the names foregrounded by *Marie Claire* are repeated here, and that these names, as already mentioned, do not use the feminist moniker, the way that these men are presented is of interest.

The emergence and growth of male celebrity listicles would have audiences assume that great feminist strides are being made within and beyond the 'HeForShe' campaign, and although it is important to hear about support for women's causes and to be informed about those men and women who are campaigning and fundraising for gender equality, these recycled quotes and winsome gifs are revealing beyond any feminist advice and advocacy. My point here is simply that *Marie Claire* pronounces 'Awww' after its overview of Kutcher's efforts to encourage fathers to take on greater childcare responsibilities, while 'swooning' over Gosling, meme or no meme.

Buzzfeed tells us that Levitt is dreamy (Zarrell 2014), while the *Bustle* feature begins with an 'obvious newsflash: the coolest, smartest, sexiest men also tend to be feminists' (Dionne 2014). While one actor is spoken about with 'ever-increasing affection' another is referred to as 'a gorgeous male lead' (ibid). In this same way, *Cosmopolitan* tells us to '... connect with more pro-women dudes ... as if you needed another reason to adore some of Hollywood's sexiest leading men' (Hurwitz 2014). And such commentary is not reserved for the women's magazine sector. After all, in a *Huffington Post* listicle we find that 'there are many fierce ladies who have been ... applauded for working to make the world a better place for women. But it's also important to remember that we have some awesome -- and swoon-worthy -- male allies out there' (Vagianos 2014). The feature refers to what it calls 'easy-on-the-eye' celebrities before concluding that 'if any of these guys are single, we call dibs' (ibid). The entertainment inspired infotainment Blog, Wonderslist, refers to one actor as 'smouldering' and another as 'adorable' before telling us that a number of 'drool-worthy men have proven that you do not need to be a woman to be a feminist' (De 2014). Moreover, even though we would all agree that further efforts should be made to end domestic violence, marital rape and sex trafficking, one might question how much these male celebrity feminists have actually contributed to these causes.

Bloggers and journalists dote on these men as both feminists and physical specimens, irrespective of their credentials in challenging the broader patriarchal culture. This treatment is so routine that Cassandra Leveille penned a frustrated call to "Stop Fawning Over Male Feminists" for the millennial online news site, Mic (Leveille 2014). The main concern here is that we are setting the bar too low, so that these recycled quotes and accompanying photographs will replace feminist activism; while simultaneously being 'held up as proof that feminism is working' (ibid). If popular male celebrities taking on the feminist mantle are being held up as evidence that feminism is working, then we run the risk of maintaining, if not actively encouraging the patriarchal status quo. Globally, vast numbers of women work towards feminist goals, and we have to ask if they consider male celebrity feminists helpful to the cause. The answer is '[m]aybe, but most likely they're more concerned with whether the work they're already doing will have enough funding to be successful' (Zeisler 2014).

The men on these lists are commercially successful and traditionally handsome, and although one would not suggest that they appeal solely to a female demographic, there is a sense that their musings about respect, equality and empowerment are popular with a particular population; those women who avail themselves of the beauty, celebrity and entertainment sector. The fact that it is routinely Prince Harry and Harry Styles in these popular feminist

listicles over and above Barack Obama is telling here. While the Harry's, plural, recognise the male role in empowering women, Obama signed the Fair Pay Restoration Act bill into law. The fact that the men on these lists are spoken of approvingly in terms of both their feminist voice and physical appearance does little to further the political, economic, personal or social rights for women. In short, there is an assumption that the top 8, 9, 10 or 28 male celebrity feminists means that society is making inroads into gender equality, when in fact these lists seem to distract us from the real work of feminism that is and has yet to take place.

### **From the 'real' work of feminism to 'real' men and feminism**

The names on and beyond this list make reference to the roles and responsibilities of what they term 'real men' in their informal musings and more organised campaigns relating to equality. So important is this term to the male celebrity feminist that it is used in numerous star-fronted equality campaigns in general and sexual violence campaigns in particular.

Prince Harry tells us that '*real men* treat women with dignity and give them the respect they deserve' (Thorp 2015, emphasis added), and a popular *Vampire Diaries* (2009- ) actor goes on record stating that 'men have an important role to play in sending out the message that *real men* do not hurt or abuse their partners (Reilly 2014, emphasis added). A Women's Aid campaign asked men and women to send out the message that '*real men*' do not abuse and control women – physically, emotionally, sexually or financially, seeking 10,000 online pledges to stand up against domestic and sexual violence (Lockhart, emphasis added). Another, similarly titled 'Real Men Don't Buy Girls' campaign to end human trafficking and end sex slavery, conceived by Ashton Kutcher and then partner, Demi Moore, features a series of YouTube videos with male celebrities, or what elsewhere might be termed male celebrity feminists. The concept of the tongue-in-cheek campaign is that real men do a lot of silly, even foolish things. But one thing they do not do is buy women for sex. And although the campaign was launched back in 2011 in order to fight trafficking, particularly of children, into the sex trade, the hashtag #RealMenDontBuyGirls was more recently tweeted as a call to action to release several hundred Nigerian girls who were kidnapped in 2014 (Hebblethwaite 2014).

The male celebrity feminists pointed to here seem to share a consensus in suggesting that social media has the power to enact change, because, in the words of Ashton Kutcher 'the most important thing ... is that these videos get people talking about the issue' be it domestic violence, sex-trafficking or the fight for equality of opportunity (Kavner 2011). He continues:



At the end of the day anyone and everyone can be involved in this campaign. The minute you like our Facebook page, you're already one step closer to this three-step-process, you've made an advocacy video that you can share. One minute of your time might be all a girl needs to save her from sex trafficking (ibid).

Might indeed. Although the meme 'Real Men Don't Buy Girls' was designed to be a bold statement against human trafficking, critical commentary points to two key concerns here for the politically and socially active feminist. Firstly, one must question the lasting impact that such online campaigns have for raising awareness about equality and diversity in general and for actually creating a change in domestic patterns or violent behaviour in particular. Secondly, the use of the phrase 'real' men is in dispute if one considers debates around R.W. Connell's work on the hegemonic hierarchy of masculinity (Connell 1995).

One might suggest that recasting masculinity or rather, negotiating the hegemonic hierarchy 'with a more progressive, feminist patina' is of help to a feminist agenda (Auguston 2014). After all, it would debunk the hegemonic hierarchy by drawing attention to the fact that masculinities are fluid, time-related and variable across cultures and eras as well as subject to change over the course of a person's life. Much media research has concerned itself with the ways in which the contemporary male has either upheld or debunked the hegemonic hierarchy, with the male celebrity feminist being one such example (Feasey 2008; Lotz 2014; Cobb 2015). The concern here with the 'Real Men Don't Buy Girls' campaign then is less the negotiation of the hegemonic ideal and more the statement relating to the concept of 'real' men. The statement speaks of a reductive masculinity, overlooking the lived masculinities, plural, and the full range of gender identities that exist within and beyond the feminist cause.

One might question whether performers such as Levitt and Kutcher are genuinely committed to gender equality, are pandering to a gendered fan base, or offering their commitment to a feminist cause as a new way of maintaining hegemonic power within and beyond the entertainment marketplace. Either way, because of, or in spite of the hegemonic hierarchy, the male celebrity feminist is part of an equality agenda that is, in the main, contained within the women's fashion sector, gossip and blogosphere. And irrespective of the authenticity or credibility of their feminist credentials, they seem to be an important part of what is being referred to as the fourth wave, due to its investment in social media and voice in the blogging community.

## **Conclusion**

The names included here are oft repeated elsewhere in the news, magazine and online entertainment arena, with *Marie Claire* offering a useful starting point for what I hope is a larger discussion about the emergence and development of the male celebrity feminist. That said, the fact that the aforementioned article is without a single note or comment a full year after publication speaks volumes about the power of these features to incite feminist debate or movement activism. Indeed, the women's fashion, beauty and entertainment sector heap praise on a small number of men in the entertainment arena whom they deem worthy of the feminist moniker, and while most of these men are happy to hold up a 'HeForShe' placard, speak of their admiration for strong mothers, wives, daughters and colleagues, there is little use of the label and even less evidence of personal or political action. The suggestion here then is that the men in question are offering equality vox pops and sound bites as part of a broader campaign, not I might add, a campaign to further the feminist cause, but rather, to further their own career by encouraging audience interest and investment beyond their film roles and routine celebrity gossip surrounding friends, fridges and fashionability.

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