

Feminism in Women's Business Networks A Freedom-centred Perspective

Villeséche, Florence ; Meliou, Elina ; Kumar Jha, Harsh

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

Published in:

Human Relations

DOI:

[10.1177/00187267221083665](https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267221083665)

Publication date:

2022

License

Unspecified

Citation for published version (APA):

Villeséche, F., Meliou, E., & Kumar Jha, H. (2022). Feminism in Women's Business Networks: A Freedom-centred Perspective. *Human Relations*, 75(10), 1903-1927. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267221083665>

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us (research.lib@cbs.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 05. Jun. 2023



Feminism in women's business networks: A freedom-centred perspective

Journal:	<i>Human Relations</i>
Manuscript ID	HR-2020-0833.R4
Manuscript Type:	Special Issue
Keywords:	Women's business networks, Feminism, Postfeminism, Blogs, Topic modeling, Dialectics, Freedom

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

Feminism in women's business networks: A freedom-centred perspective

Abstract

How do women's business networks (WBNs) help to advance women's freedom? Drawing on Zerilli's freedom-centred feminism, our study sets out to answer this question at the intersection of freedom, feminism and work. Critics argue that WBNs promote a postfeminist view of freedom focusing on individual self-realisation and thus participate in rolling back collective, feminist efforts to dismantle structural inequalities. We reconceptualize WBNs as political arenas and argue that making claims about shared interests and concerns in such an arena constitutes a feminist practice of freedom. With an original, inductive and qualitative research design combining topic modeling and dialectical analysis, we examine the claims made in 1,529 posts across four WBN blogs. We identify postfeminist claims and new forms of change and transformation that can help to advance women's freedom across three 'dialectics of freedom': conformity and imagination; performative care and relational care; sameness and openness. Our findings show that uncertain and contradictory ways of defining and engaging with women's freedom can emerge through claim-making in such arenas. The fragility of the process and its outcomes are, then, what can move feminism forward at work and beyond.

Keywords

Women's business networks, feminism, postfeminism, freedom, dialectics, blogs, topic modeling.

Introduction

Women's business networks (WBNs) are independent, bottom-up initiatives that organise women's voices and experiences to address the status quo in the gendered world of work (Dennissen et al., 2020; Villesèche and Josserand, 2017). Their bottom-up character differentiates them from employee resource groups (also known as diversity networks) within corporations where the control over initiatives and aims depends heavily on top-down decision-making (Donnellon and Langowitz, 2009). WBNs provide women with the opportunity to join a public group and share their views on work-related issues that matter to them. They may also constitute platforms for advocacy work (Avdelidou-Fischer and Kirton, 2016; Villesèche and Josserand, 2017). In that sense, WBNs display what Aronson calls 'feminist consciousness', i.e. an 'awareness and critique of gender inequalities' (2017: 335) that can lay the foundations for collective action.

However, research critical of WBNs argues that, while such groups develop support strategies that address their members' needs at the individual level, they fail to address organisational and structural inequalities (Petrucci, 2020). Scholars in gender and organisation studies often use the notion of postfeminism (Lewis, 2014; Gill, 2007) to characterise how, in the neoliberal world of work, there is a distancing from the critique of structural inequalities (Petrucci, 2020). From a postfeminist perspective, women's freedom from gendered constraints is the result of purposeful agency detached from a concern for the social conditions of its realisation (Hirschmann, 1996). Consequently, critics argue, the promotion of individualised, performance-driven processes of self-realisation and freedom of choice undermine the feminist movement's collective action, thus resulting in an 'undoing of feminism' (McRobbie, 2009; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017).

Given that backdrop of scholarly debate on WBNs as they gain popularity around the globe, we draw in this article on Zerilli's (2005) work on freedom-centred feminism to

1
2
3 elucidate how we might (re)think how WBNs help to advance women's freedom.
4
5 Theoretically, we conceptualise WBNs as public sites of encounter for women, i.e. political
6
7 arenas, in which claims made about shared interests and concerns can be rejoined, contested
8
9 and transformed. Making claims in such a political arena constitutes a feminist practice of
10
11 freedom that provides the possibility of 'world-building' (Zerilli, 2005): a collective attempt
12
13 to make sense of the world we share and imagine how the world could be transformed, that is
14
15 to say creating forms or figures that are not already taken for granted.
16
17

18
19 We empirically examine the claims made in a corpus of 1,529 blogposts from four
20
21 WBNs. The selected WBNs were founded in the United Kingdom or the United States and
22
23 have international chapters extending across four continents. Their social media following
24
25 ranges from a few thousand to almost a million followers, and they have had active blogs for
26
27 the last seven to fifteen years. Members include entrepreneurs, managers and corporate leaders,
28
29 as well as women interested in (re)starting or changing their careers. Through a qualitative
30
31 analysis of blog posts, we identify three dialectics of freedom: conformity and imagination,
32
33 performative care and relational care, and sameness and openness. The dialectics reveal how
34
35 women's freedom is understood in WBNs and delineate the ways in which changing and
36
37 transforming our shared world is envisioned. We contribute to the literature on freedom and
38
39 feminism in the workplace and to scholarship on WBNs in gender and organisation studies by
40
41 reconceptualising how WBNs can help to advance women's freedom and by demonstrating the
42
43 political plurality of claims made in WBN blogs. The empirical investigation of WBN blogs
44
45 further extends our understanding of the practical possibilities of Zerilli's freedom-centred
46
47 feminism and enables us to make an ancillary methodological contribution through an
48
49 inductive and qualitative research design combining topic modeling and dialectical analysis.
50
51
52
53
54

55
56 In the remainder of the article, we first discuss the literature on postfeminism, freedom
57
58 and WBN. To extend the existing understanding of how WBNs help to advance women's
59
60

1
2
3 freedom, we present our freedom-centred feminist perspective chiefly grounded in Zerilli's
4 work. We then explain how we conducted our empirical study and present our analysis. Finally,
5
6 we discuss our findings, contributions to the literature and future research avenues.
7
8

9 10 **Theoretical framework**

11 12 *Postfeminism, freedom and equality in women's business networks*

13
14 Feminist scholars in gender and organisation studies have employed the notion of postfeminism
15 (Lewis, 2014, Gill, 2007) to describe the increasing emphasis on women's agency and choice
16 in exercising their freedom at work and beyond (Lewis et al., 2019). Postfeminism is not a
17 historical or theoretical break from feminist movements but 'an attitude, a reaction formation,
18 an always available hegemonic response to feminism not entirely linked to any particular
19 [feminist] historical moment' (Projansky, 2001: 88). The idea of unforced choice – the legal
20 right to do that which social conditions make practically impossible (Bowring, 2015) – is
21 central to the description of postfeminism and an important tenet of the classic
22 conceptualisation of freedom as 'negative liberty' (Berlin, 1958). From that perspective,
23 freedom (from patriarchy and other external constraints) is the result of purposeful agency
24 (Hirschmann, 1996) detached from a concern for the social conditions of its realisation. In a
25 postfeminist world of work, it is thus assumed that women have an equal chance of success to
26 men in the workplace if sufficient energy and enthusiasm is invested (Lewis, 2014). That view
27 delineates a particular type of agency for the 'free subject' that favours notions of self-
28 realisation devoid of painful choices located with and attributed to the individual woman
29 (Rottenberg, 2019). For instance, Sheryl Sandberg's¹ popular book *Lean in* epitomises
30 postfeminism by promoting individualistic strategies that women can deploy to enhance their
31 careers without a need to first undo gendered organisational structures. Brown (2015) argues
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59

60 ¹ Chief Operations Officer of Meta Platforms Inc. (formerly Facebook Group)

1
2
3 that this emphasis on free will and individual agency ultimately removes women from the realm
4
5 of politics and thus estranges them from feminism.
6
7

8 Although not questioning that postfeminist takes on freedom may indeed be observed
9
10 in WBNs, other research disputes that postfeminism is apolitical (Genz, 2006) and studies how
11
12 postfeminist politics unfold (Genz, 2006; Petrucci, 2020). In her study of gender-inclusive
13
14 meetup groups in the United States, Petrucci defines postfeminist communities as ‘groups of
15
16 individuals and non-profit organisations and/or corporations who politically organise around
17
18 gendered issues marked by postfeminist assumptions, goals and strategies’ (2020: 550).
19
20 Countering critical perceptions of postfeminism as apolitical, Petrucci argues that communities
21
22 such as WBNs constitute a form of political organisation that promotes postfeminist ideals.
23
24 Those communities’ shared beliefs and agenda lead them to reconfigure feminist practices in
25
26 individualistic, market-oriented ways, thus depriving themselves of the possibility to transform
27
28 workplaces and power relations, not least because their ‘desire for a postfeminist future in
29
30 which gender-neutral competition is fully realised, and thus oppression is resolved’ (2020: 549)
31
32 is misguided. In sum, promotion of the individual empowerment and self-realisation discourse
33
34 in such groups is seen to undermine the feminist movement’s gains and may result in an
35
36 ‘undoing of feminism’ (McRobbie, 2009; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). Postfeminism scholars
37
38 thus challenge the idea that WBNs can contribute to the realisation of feminist goals, which
39
40 require collective action oriented towards collective gains (Lewis et al., 2019; O’Neil, Hopkins
41
42 and Sullivan, 2011).
43
44
45
46
47
48

49 In contrast to the postfeminist stance and a view of freedom as negative liberty, positive
50
51 liberty supposes the recognition that (internalised) social forces limit our freedom and, as a
52
53 result, demands that we define a content for our choices, a shared governance (Bowring, 2015),
54
55 that requires collective action (Gill et al., 2017, Lewis, 2018). Critical feminist work in
56
57 organisation studies documents the ways in which women internalise external discourses that
58
59
60

1
2
3 shape how choices are produced, constructed and limited in the neoliberal world of work,
4 enhanced by and through the power relations that exist in our social contexts (see e.g. Adamson
5 and Kelan, 2019; Baker and Kelan, 2019, Scharff, 2015). Rectifying the power imbalance is
6 thus considered necessary to effect change, reach equality and free women. Such a view entails
7 that feminist collectives that can transform the world and gender power relations act to rectify
8 unjust and freedom-limiting structural inequalities with the goal of attaining equality and thus
9 freeing women. From that perspective, despite constituting political communities, WBNs
10 cannot achieve that goal because the means (support strategies for individuals) and end
11 (gender-neutral competition under neoliberalism) are judged as inadequate for realising
12 women's freedom (Petrucci, 2020).

13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26 However, defining a 'content' for freedom, i.e., a collective aim for action such as
27 gender equality, presupposes conformity to the agreed content and inevitably means excluding
28 competing notions of ways in which to be and act (Bowring, 2015: 157). In that sense,
29 favouring a view of political action as a means of enabling us to reach a pre-defined end – such
30 as equality – for particular subjects – “women” – based on a normative understanding of what
31 the problem is and how it can be solved to free women still aligns with the idea that we are free
32 once we have full control over our actions, i.e. a view of freedom as sovereignty. Instead, as
33 we will now argue, a freedom-centred feminism (Zerilli, 2005) perspective enables us to
34 consider uncertain and contradictory ways in which to define and engage with women's
35 freedom.

36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 *Freedom-centred feminism and women's business networks*

50
51 In her freedom-centred feminist political theory, developed most notably in her book
52 *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (2005), Zerilli proposes plurality as the irreducible
53 condition of politics and a view of feminism as a conflict-ridden, world-building practice of
54 freedom. Grounding her analysis in Arendt's work, Zerilli adopts a non-sovereign approach to
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 freedom, viewing it not as only the result of will, of individual agency deployed to overcome
4 causes of unfreedom. She is thus critical of freedom as negative liberty as expressed in
5 postfeminism but also points to the limitations of how subjectivity and the path to freedom is
6 understood in preceding feminist movements. For Zerilli, notwithstanding differences in their
7 social, radical and liberal orientations, the focus of feminist movements from the 1960s onward
8 on social justice and equal rights (so-called second wave feminism) and the identification with
9 an 'all-powerful sisterhood' (2005: 10) struggling against the workings of power, obliterates
10 particularity and, with it, plurality. This is the case even if for example black feminism and
11 other breaches in the movement have contested this unity and highlighted the differences
12 among women. Indeed, albeit the means may take other forms, Zerilli argues that such
13 perspectives displace the political and promote a view of feminism as being merely a means to
14 an end. In turn, although subsequent theories (so-called third wave feminism) have
15 acknowledged gender as performative (Butler, 1990) and notably created new space for
16 intersectional and queer identities (Showden, 2009), the political solutions remain limited
17 beyond attempts to reveal and deconstruct (the power of) norms or advocating work on the self
18 for desubjectivation. Zerilli thus argues that the focus of such work is still on the 'subject
19 question', placing the individual and identity, rather than plurality and action, at their core.
20 Moreover, in both cases freedom is still articulated as a sovereignty gained by countering
21 power 'from above' or by undoing the power that constitutes the subject.
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46

47 Basing her argument on Arendt's notion of politics as a struggle among people who
48 choose the aims that they represent, Zerilli challenges both subjective and objective notions of
49 identity as grounds for politics and as a way of defining a political actor, whether individual or
50 collective. In the argument that Zerilli weaves, a conceptualisation of feminism through the
51 lens of the subject is wholly contingent on the subject's capacity for agency and, as a result,
52 risks limiting politics to an instrumental activity (2005: 12–13). Zerilli's stated aim is to
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 'return' to feminism's concern for freedom and to examine how women's freedom is realised
4
5 by engaging in ongoing and incessant public interaction to (re)build a shared world.
6
7

8 From a freedom-centred feminist perspective, freedom is a predicate of action.
9
10 Referring to Arendt's formulation, Zerilli argues that freedom cannot be achieved based only
11
12 on what one wants – 'I will'; it also requires an 'I can' reflecting the worldly conditions that
13
14 enable the subject to do what they will. Creating such conditions requires action in a political
15
16 community, thus necessitating that women act as a political collective that 'involves speaking
17
18 for others, being spoken for and speaking back' (Zerilli, 2005: 180). Women's struggles to
19
20 express themselves and achieve recognition of their claims is where Zerilli locates the political
21
22 in feminism. Thus, making claims and the political decision to affirm or refuse community and
23
24 affiliation are at the heart of feminism and are the ultimate meaning of freedom. Abandoning
25
26 a means-end logic entails, as a result, acknowledging that we cannot act according to a plan
27
28 (social goals of politics) nor control or predict the outcome of our actions. This means that 'the
29
30 predicative moment of politics involves not the exchange of proofs but the ability to *claim*
31
32 commonality' (2005: 171, emphasis in original) in a public space with a plurality of
33
34 participants.
35
36
37
38
39

40 Drawing from Arendt, Zerilli defines plurality as acting in an 'already existing web of
41
42 human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions' (2005: 13).
43
44 Reducing freedom to a means-end, instrumental conception of politics denies plurality, the
45
46 very condition of democratic and feminist politics. Such relations in plurality represent what
47
48 Arendt calls the 'common world' (2005: 19) and engaging in such a space constitutes a practice
49
50 and experience of freedom. It is in this space of the common world that differences become
51
52 meaningful and the newly thinkable can appear (2005: 181). In that space, either affirmation
53
54 or refusal is possible: 'we have the world in common because we view it from different
55
56 perspectives. [...] Rather than threaten our shared sense of worldly reality, in other words,
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 plurality generates it' (p. 140). As a result, world-building takes the form of incessant public
4 interaction, the aim of which is not to reach a consensus or decide on the validity of particular
5 claims, but rather to enable us to better understand our common world and further shape it.
6
7

8
9
10 In sum, the freedom for women to be political actors, Zerilli argues, is one that belongs
11 just as much to self-asserting individuals as to self-asserting collectives. In both cases, that
12 freedom rests on no firmer foundation than the claim and its recognition by others. It is by
13 making political claims in public arenas that we may be able to recover feminism's 'lost
14 treasure' (2005: 25): the radical demand for women's political freedom, to see women able to
15 exercise their political freedom collectively and thus see feminism as a world-building practice.
16
17 Using the example of a manifesto produced by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective in
18 the 1980s, Zerilli illustrates the ability of collectives to imagine women under the figure of
19 freedom: 'the desire for "something more" rather than equality' (2005: 102) and for something
20 different from investing the feminine with 'some positive social quality' (p. 113). To be clear,
21 Zerilli specifies that 'claiming one's right' and the need for equality can indeed be a practice
22 of freedom, albeit not one where the validity of the claim in relation to a particular object and
23 social setting is determined in advance (2005: 98). There is thus no opposition, but a
24 relationship between the exercising of freedom and long-standing objects of feminism such as
25 rights and equality. Zerilli thus helps us to think about feminist practices that are not
26 exhaustively determined in advance, i.e. based on truth claims about particular subjects and
27 social ends.
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48

49 On that basis, instead of assuming WBNs' participation in the 'slow and devastating
50 erosion of feminism's emancipatory impetus' (Rottenberg (2017: 340), we take up the project
51 of 'affirming feminism anew' (Zerilli, 2005: 31) in WBNs. In this article, we pursue such ideas
52 further in seeking to understand, through our empirical exploration, how plurality manifests
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 and how world-building unfolds in WBNs. We do so by examining the claims made about
4
5 common objects of interest in WBNs as political arenas.
6
7

8 **Methodology**

9 *Research context and data collection*

10
11
12 To assess the claims made in WBNs about how women may realise their freedom, we
13
14 empirically examine a particular mediated form of WBN interaction: online blogs. Besides
15
16 interactions such as face-to-face meetings, blogs are a contemporary way for WBN members
17
18 to engage with each other on issues that matter to them in relation to work. Blogs are popular
19
20 online spaces enabling the participation of multiple authors and easy publication of content for
21
22 a vast audience (Swan, 2017). They are contemporary extensions to diary-based research which
23
24 help us to understand social actors and their day-to-day experiences and reflections (Hookway,
25
26 2008). Previous research has explored women-dominated online spaces such as Mumsnet (see
27
28 e.g. Mackenzie, 2018; Pedersen, 2020). Blogs represent a significant format in popular culture
29
30 providing users with distinct written social interaction and meaning-making possibilities
31
32 (Graves, 2007).
33
34
35
36
37

38 In this study, we want to examine the claims made in WBNs from a freedom-centred
39
40 perspective to better understand how WBNs help to advance women's freedom. The aim is
41
42 thus not to compare different WBNs and their blogs, but to examine a corpus of a sufficient
43
44 scope and size to be able to address our research question. We selected the four WBN blogs
45
46 used in this study based on appropriateness rather than statistical representativeness. In
47
48 particular, the selection criteria are as follows : (1) We selected WBNs that have both online
49
50 and offline activities, so that the blog would be part of the offer rather than solely being a
51
52 blogging site for women in business. (2) We looked for WBNs with regular blogging activity
53
54 over several years to collect a large volume of posts and capture a wide range of themes that
55
56 were not related to a particular contextual event (such as the financial crisis or the current health
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 crisis). (3) We aimed for blogs that have attracted practitioner and media attention as
4 particularly worthy of interest (e.g., the Forbes.com list ‘15 great websites for business
5 owners’) as well as federate readership and membership internationally, including large social
6 media followership, albeit in English language only. (4) Finally, we selected blogs where posts
7 are written by different network members, rather than by a single author, to capture a diversity
8 of voices. The selected WBNs were founded in the United Kingdom or the United States and
9 have international chapters extending across four continents. More information on our sample
10 can be found in Table 1, including information about the type of members and social media
11 followership. We downloaded the full websites for each network using the SiteSucker software
12 for macOS, extracted the blog pages from the earliest year available and converted them into
13 .txt files. We collected 1,529 blog posts ranging from a couple of paragraphs to two pages.
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28

29 -----
30
31 INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE
32
33 -----
34

35 *Data analysis*

36
37 To interpret our corpus, we followed a two-step inductive and qualitative approach. The first
38 step is based on topic modeling allowing us to identify the key objects of discussion, or *what*
39 is discussed across the blog posts in our corpus. While the use of pure machine learning
40 approaches to textual data analysis has been criticised for limiting researchers’ interpretations,
41 the inductive design we adopted in line with recent recommendations (Aranda et al., 2021;
42 Brookes and McEnery, 2019; Hanigan et al., 2019) mitigates such downsides. In the second
43 step, we focus on identifying claims made in relation to the topics uncovered through topic
44 modeling in step one and aggregated them into ‘dialectics of freedom’. The specific of the
45 process are as follows:
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 *Step 1.* In the first step of the analysis, the objective was to identify the most prevalent
4 discussion topics across our data corpus of 1,529 blog posts. This is important because
5 understanding WBNs as political arenas in which claims can be rejoined, contested and
6 transformed requires that we ‘recognise common objects as candidates for judgement, objects
7 on which our considered opinions might very well diverge’ (Zerilli 2016: 267). In other words,
8 we need to identify the objects about which views are formed before we can decide for
9 ourselves which perspectives we want to rejoin and carry forward.
10
11

12 Following the ‘linguistic turn’ in management research (Alvesson and Kärreman,
13 2000), computer-based language processing techniques have become increasingly prominent,
14 especially for analysing large sets of textual data to understand actors’ cognition and meaning-
15 making (Hannigan et al., 2019). We used Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (Blei, 2012; Blei
16 et al., 2003), an unsupervised machine learning tool of topic modeling. We used MALLET
17 software (McCallum, 2002) to run the LDA algorithm, with individual blog post text files as
18 input, and computed several topic models (10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 and 70 topics). Topic modeling
19 returns a solution in the form of a pre-specified set of ‘topics’, i.e. groups of words that tend to
20 co-occur more frequently across documents (Mohr and Bogdanov, 2013; DiMaggio et al.,
21 2013). Running the algorithm is only the first step in the exploration of meaning structures
22 underlying any large data corpus, and researchers need to interpret the outputs of the algorithm
23 (Jha and Beckman, 2017; Bail, 2014; Mohr et al., 2013).
24
25

26 Each author independently examined the different models to find the solution with the
27 most interpretable sets of topics. We agreed that the 30-topic solution was the most appropriate
28 (see Appendix Table A1 for the full solution), individually proposed a summary title for each
29 topic and dismissed non-interpretable topics (i.e. topics that we judged to be non-interpretable).
30 That process led us to identify 26 interpretable topics, i.e. key objects of discussion in the WBN
31 blog posts, and we dismissed four (topics #0, 11, 23 and 25). We then imported into the NVivo
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 software the top ten most relevant blog posts in terms of meaning concentration for each of the
4
5 26 topics, giving 260 posts in total, identified through their Dirichlet parameters. A close
6
7 reading of the posts, comments and discussions among the authors allowed us to further refine
8
9 our understanding of the topics. See Table 2 for the list of topic titles reached by team
10
11 consensus at the end of this process.
12
13

14 -----
15
16
17 INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE
18
19 -----
20

21
22 *Step 2.* Akin to the methodological approach of Elliott and Stead (2018) and Hellgren
23
24 et al. (2002) to examining argumentation practices in printed media, we explored the claims
25
26 made in the blog posts. We read the 260 most relevant blog posts again, this time with the aim
27
28 of distinguishing the different claims made in relation to the discussion topics. Based on our
29
30 freedom-centred theoretical framework, we conducted an interpretive reading of our corpus to
31
32 assess and then aggregate those claims. This interpretive reading let us identify claims that
33
34 reflect postfeminist ideas, as emphasized by previous research, as well as claims that imagine
35
36 other avenues for change and transformation to advance women's freedom.
37
38

39
40 For example, blog posts related to *Career change and interview skills* (topic 4) include
41
42 claims such as 'we need to copy the men', vs 'women have to teach each other'; blog posts
43
44 related to *Mind and body work* (topic 22) include claims such as 'we need positivity and self-
45
46 control for success', vs 'we need to display vulnerability and support each other'. The claims
47
48 on each side of our theoretical framework were then aggregated across topics based on
49
50 commonalities. This process led us to delineate three dialectics, i.e. sets of tensions across
51
52 'verbal ideological tendencies' (Bakhtin, 1981) between which 'systems of meaning'
53
54 (Edwards, Hawkins and Schedlitzki, 2019) are debated and redefined. The following section
55
56 presents our findings in detail.
57
58
59
60

Findings: Dialectics of freedom

Through our analysis of claims across topics, we identified three dialectics of freedom: conformity and imagination, performative care and relational care, and sameness and openness.

With the support of excerpts from our data set, we present below an analytical interpretation of those dialectics.

Dialectic 1: Conformity and imagination

The first dialectic emphasises the relationship between ‘conformity’ and ‘imagination’. ‘Conformity’ is expressed in the (re)production of a feminine identity in the neoliberal world of work, aligned with the gendered status quo and with conceptions of freedom as sovereignty. Imagination, on the other hand, is defined by Zerilli as ‘the faculty that enables a feminist critical practice that does not seek to occupy the external standpoint or entangle us in forms of reflection for which the strange is inevitably the exception that puts the rule into radical doubt’ (2005, p. 59). Imagination can give rise to new forms and figures for transformative action. That is exhibited here through a redefinition of normative boundaries between work and life relying on practices of making judgements in a web of relations and as a feminist community (Zerilli, 2005).

On the one hand, we observe in various blog posts that much of the advice offered assumes the reproduction of traditional gender roles as inevitable: women can realise their freedom through work only if they always/already realise themselves as women – and mothers. That need to accommodate the existing social world is grounded in a commitment to the binary gender/sex divide as the condition of their freedom, thus highlighting the postfeminist sensibility of femininity as a bodily property (Gill, 2007):

Until we become sensual sexual beings, the shame, hurts, wrongs and the pain of our female predecessors are not important, and we are free to grow and explore who we are. As soon as we develop into women our genetic imprint reminds us of how

1
2
3 important it is to procreate and find the ‘perfect’ partner, the one who will protect and
4
5 provide for us.
6

7
8 Many blogposts invoke ‘values embodied in female behaviour’ (Zerilli, 2005 p. 97/98), as
9
10 women should make space for work yet simultaneously take full responsibility for motherhood
11
12 and childcaring. This cost-care calculus (Rottenberg, 2018) is evident in the following excerpt:
13

14 [You need] to ignore things that are not critical and simply ‘walk over Lego’. If you
15
16 work from home, there is a great temptation to keep picking up toys and cleaning the
17
18 house every day. But to work on your full potential, it’s time to let other standards fall,
19
20 dramatically.
21
22

23
24 Such advice is meant to help other women to realise their freedom to work; however, they still
25
26 must feel the pain of not fulfilling their feminine duties.
27

28
29 Moreover, women are expected to embody specific versions of ‘desirable femininity’
30
31 (Lewis, 2014). Maintaining that image requires a constant critical gaze on the self to ensure the
32
33 subject reflects such norms and indeed embraces the female identity of a successful woman in
34
35 the neoliberal context (Lewis et al., 2019, Hirschmann, 2003). The blog post *Dress Codes*
36
37 *Redefined* suggests that:
38

39
40 Work dress codes are extremely confusing for women [...]. Here are the four main dress
41
42 codes I see today and the rules I have to follow. If you develop your professional style
43
44 within these rules, you should be in the clear.
45
46

47
48 Construed in a rule-following manner (Zerilli, 2005) around the narrative of a feminine
49
50 identity, conformity requires the application of these rules, and work by the subject to
51
52 accommodate the social world in order to be free to perform their work (see e.g. Mavin and
53
54 Grandy, 2016; Pullen and Simpson, 2009).
55

56
57 On the other hand, ‘imagination’ recasts how women may realise their freedom beyond
58
59 a normative understanding of work-life balance. Imagination aligns with Zerilli’s argument
60

1
2
3 that women's freedom should not depend on an ethical nature; making judgements means being
4
5 reflective about our experiences without accepting pre-given conclusions. For example, on
6
7 motherhood: 'We should proudly define our own style of motherhood!' Freedom is also
8
9 claimed to be something different from the struggle for equality:

10
11
12 For many years I was playing directly into the patriarchal game without ever noticing.
13
14 [...] Equality is not a fight. You are not small. Ladies, we have to prove nothing to
15
16 nobody. [...] So next time when you feel small, overwhelmed and confused, please
17
18 remember this: it is not who you are. There's an enormous deposit of energy and drive
19
20 inside of you. There's eternal brilliance wanting to burst out.
21
22

23
24 In a sense, it is claimed that freedom from patriarchy can be reached by not getting entangled
25
26 in struggles against that patriarchy; one's energy can instead be used elsewhere.
27

28
29 Freeing oneself from normative expectations also means not accepting pre-given
30
31 conclusions about what roles women are to play in the neoliberal economy, perhaps even to
32
33 transform it:

34
35 If we women were to collectively choose to invest into women just a fraction of the
36
37 money that we now have defaulted into investing in men, well, that could be hundreds
38
39 of billions of dollars of investments, supporting other women. Game. Changed.
40
41

42
43 Such claims are, in turn, backed by the need to follow women's desires in relation to objects
44
45 that are not related to their love or family life:

46
47 The new way [of investing]: Built for women, by women with hundreds of hours of
48
49 research, design and conversations with women about what they actually want. Brought
50
51 to you by a company populated by people more representative of what our country
52
53 actually looks like (since we're not 90% men).
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Finally, making a judgement about the world leads to reversing norms that are prevalent in the
4 workplace such as those concerning the masculine ideal of the leader (Meriläinen, Tienari and
5
6 Valtonen, 2015):
7
8

9
10 While the term ‘alpha’ is most commonly associated with ‘male’, it’s really a gender-
11 neutral designation for ‘leader’ in the animal world. In fact, with horses the alpha is
12 almost always female.
13
14
15

16
17 This rejoins Zerilli’s argument that sex difference is not to be destroyed or transcended but
18 resymbolised – transformed from a social cause of unfreedom to a cause of women’s freedom
19 (2005: 98). Women can thus free themselves from the heavy gender norms by adjudicating
20 themselves a ‘natural’ right to be an alpha; a leader.
21
22
23

24 25 26 *Dialectic 2: Performative care and relational care* 27

28 The second dialectic draws attention to the notion of care through which women may realise
29 their freedom. At one end, care manifests as a concern for the performance of the self through
30 the promotion of personal development and self-help resources. Following Arendt, Zerilli
31 argues that ‘the exclusive concern with the self is an expression of the ‘world-alienation that
32 characterises modernity’ (2005: 15). Questioning that alienation, the other side of the dialectic
33 represents a view of care as relational, not centred primarily on the subject but instead engaged
34 in worldliness.
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43

44 On the one hand, the emphasis on individual agency in ‘performative care’
45 demonstrates a view of freedom grounded in changes in performance through ‘the self’s
46 relation to itself’ (Zerilli, 2005). That view is aligned with the postfeminist sensibilities of self-
47 discipline and the ‘makeover paradigm’ (Gill, 2007), according to which identifiable barriers
48 must be lifted for women to exercise freedom at work and at home. Based on women’s assumed
49 inadequacies (McRobbie, 2013), several blog posts thus offer advice to women on what to eat,
50 what activities to do, how to manage time, what to be mindful of and how to (re)make
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 themselves into more adept leaders, managers or entrepreneurs or, even, better mothers. Some
4 such entries include: *5 Tips for Building Mindful Eating into Your Busy Day*, *4 Ways to Develop*
5 *Your Resilience to Stress* and *This Powerful Question Will Help You Better Manage Self-Doubt*.
6
7

8
9
10 The claims made in such blog posts are at the heart of the ‘therapeutic culture of the
11 self’ (Knudson, 2013: 213) that depoliticises structural problems (Hirschmann, 1996) and
12 foregrounds a view of freedom as negative liberty. Such unquestioned assumptions about
13 women’s multiple choices imply that women can exercise their freedom equally to men:
14
15
16
17

18
19 Women can choose like men – if they dare: The idea in a nutshell is that you can create
20 an online business and work from anywhere, whenever you want. Instead of working
21 hard now and waiting for retirement, you should start living the life you want – now.
22
23 Most people who have picked up this idea are men. Why? Perhaps because men are
24 (generally) more ready to take risks and jump to the unknown.
25
26
27
28
29

30
31 On the other hand, that view of freedom grounded in performative care is intertwined
32 with a view of freedom as relational care. Relational care encompasses practices involving
33 relations with a plurality of other people in a public space created by action (Zerilli, 2005).
34 Relational care requires not only free will, or ‘I will’ in Arendtian terms, but also ‘I can’, which
35 entails interaction with others in the world. For example, claims about togetherness, reciprocity
36 and solidarity, as in ‘If you score, point to those who helped you. If someone else scores, rush
37 to them to celebrate their victory’, extricate the concept of freedom from performative and
38 antagonistic interpretations evidenced in performative care. Sharing and helping behaviour is
39 the way women, as a political entity, can exercise freedom:
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49

50
51 If you are not willing to help others in their search for success, how can you expect to
52 get a lift yourself? By sharing your journey and exposing your vulnerability you are
53 actually putting your experiences out there for others to learn from. It’s one of the
54 greatest ways to help others, so why shouldn’t you do that?
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 This collective, relational exercise of freedom is rooted in a commitment to human
4 community that stands in stark contrast to the predominance of individualistic and masculine
5 figures in the workplace:
6
7
8

9
10 This Is A Women's Network Based On Trust And Joy – We Are Creating A New Way
11 For Women: Are you tired of traditional structures of top-down hierarchy and me-first
12 competitive culture? The old patriarchal ways are falling down fast when women start
13 creating the kind of environments where they flourish and thrive.
14
15
16
17

18
19 Worldly things such as relational care then become a condition of women's existence through
20 action that unite them in a political arena and enable them to stand together as members of a
21 political community.
22
23
24

25 26 *Dialectic 3: Sameness and Openness*

27
28 The third dialectic illustrates the tension between claims that assume homogeneity among
29 WBN members, as reflected in the blog audience, and the world-opening efforts where claims
30 of freedom go beyond assumptions of the typical white, middle-class, postfeminist subject.
31 One end of the dialectical spectrum thus brings to light a series of claims associated with
32 'women and their interests' that define in advance a particular group of women as the blog
33 audience and that assume common wants and aims. That constitutes a 'denial of freedom'
34 (Zerilli, 2005) because those predefinitions are not exposed to others' judgements. At the other
35 end of that spectrum, we find efforts to 'do something in relation to whatever empirical
36 differences may exist' (Zerilli, 2005: 145).
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48

49 On the one hand, many claims made about how women can exercise their freedom
50 assume sameness, thus concealing differences and making privilege invisible (Nkomo, 1992).
51 Privilege encompasses benefits granted by particular group memberships or social identities,
52 thus cutting across notions such as gender, race and class. The invisibility of privilege notably
53 works to silence differences between white women and women of colour by assuming a
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 universality of struggles and needs (Geiger and Jordan, 2014). Research on postfeminism
4 underlines how the depoliticisation of gender issues leads to a general disengagement with the
5 question of privilege (Butler, 2013) and an implicit emphasis on the struggles of white, middle-
6 class, heterosexual women (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017).
7
8
9
10
11

12 In our blog data, we can observe for example how assumptions regarding material and
13 symbolic inequality are reproduced through class privilege:
14

15 Impact investing is quickly becoming mainstream. Women, in particular, report that it
16 is important to them that their money supports their values. In 2017, some 84% of
17 women said they would like to learn more about impact investing.
18
19
20
21
22

23 The reference to women's common interests denotes a means-end approach to freedom and
24 fails to address the fact that knowing about impact investing and having money to invest
25 mirrors the interests of a rather small group of women globally. In the same vein, the blog post
26 *The Advice I Wish I'd Had as a Grad* portrays a middle-class, educated woman who assumes
27 responsibility for career challenges and is able to reinvent herself:
28
29
30
31
32
33

34 Believe me, giving up that daily latte won't make you a millionaire, and life is too short
35 not to enjoy some creamy, delicious, warming coffee while you are slaying it and
36 stumbling and getting back up and hating your job and finding a new job and loving
37 your job and doing it all over again along the way.
38
39
40
41
42
43

44 Those examples demonstrate the invisibility of privilege by presupposing that the blog's target
45 audience is a(n) (upper) middle-class woman who epitomises the postfeminist subject (Genz,
46 2009) and who can realise her freedom without making too many sacrifices – perhaps by
47 refusing to renounce any of her desires altogether.
48
49
50
51
52

53 Even in calls for action and allyship that seem to display a consciousness of difference,
54 claims concern first and foremost the implicitly assumed membership of the WBN:
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Confront the conversation. Ask women of colour if they feel their gender and ethnicity
4 negatively affects their ability to make meaningful contributions and connections [...]

5
6
7 One of the biggest barriers to a thriving, diverse community is stereotype threat – the
8 unconscious tendency to fulfil the ‘prophecy’ of stereotypes held against them.
9

10
11
12 In this excerpt, while workplace barriers experienced by women of colour are acknowledged,
13 they are framed as resulting from internalised, unconscious bias, not from gendered structures.
14

15
16
17 Furthermore, women of colour are positioned as being ‘outside’ the WBN; there is mention of
18 them, rather than engagement with them.
19

20
21 On the other hand, the blogs also feature posts in which claims to freedom are extended
22 beyond the typical postfeminist subject. In this sense, equality is not seen ‘simply as a formal
23 condition of citizenship under law; not equality as a procedural rule [...] but equality as a
24 political relation that we create and sustain in and through taking account of plurality, daily’
25 (Zerilli, 2005: 146). For example, we find blog posts addressing privilege and disadvantages
26 with reference to intersectionality, a term and theory increasingly used by critical feminist
27 scholars and norm-critical practitioners (Villesèche, Muhr and Sliwa, 2018; Meliou and
28 Mallett, 2021):
29

30
31
32 Let us define intersectionality first, which was originated by Kimberly Crenshaw. She
33 talked about intersectionality as the intersection of multiple-stigmatised identities. If
34 you are a woman of colour, you have dual-stigmatised identities. If you’re a queer
35 woman of colour, you have triple-stigmatised identities. Each one of those identities
36 carries its own level of implications, in terms of our ability to be authentic and treated
37 equitably. We are all intersectional. We all have multiple-intersecting identities that
38 bring varying degrees of challenge, depending on the situation.
39

40
41
42 That concern for different world views and their integration into the claims about how women
43 can realise their freedom can also be witnessed in the following excerpt:
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Each job has its own set of skills that you need to master to perform well in your role.
4
5 But if you want to rock your career, you need to do a lot more than simply mastering
6
7 your current role. In Jamaica, there is a commonly used word in the vernacular called
8
9 brawta. It means extra, a gift, a bonus. What brawta can you bring to the table? That's
10
11 what sets you apart and makes you more marketable to employers and more valuable
12
13 to yourself.
14
15

16
17 World-building by integrating differences is further foregrounded in claims regarding
18
19 a diverse set of role models for the WBN members:
20

21 Consider a few famous women who are considered multipotentialites: writer Maya
22
23 Angelou, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, activist Gloria Steinem, and astronaut Dr Mae
24
25 Jemison. They were curious, traversed a few worlds at the same time, were not
26
27 considered 'well-behaved' for their time, and ultimately changed the world.
28
29

30 Such emulation, it is claimed, can be reproduced in WBNs:
31

32
33 Every time I meet a group of driven women, I am struck by the wonderful variety of
34
35 experiences and characters, backgrounds and dreams they have. Exploring with them
36
37 what's been going on in their lives and where they're going next helps me to learn and
38
39 improve too.
40
41

42 Finally, via participation in WBNs and their blogs, feminist action for freedom may be
43
44 extended across time and geography: 'I would love to hear what other women are doing around
45
46 the world to claim our daughters' freedom in life to be who they really are'. In this claim, we
47
48 can see an explicit opening to the political, in the sense that a further plurality of claims is
49
50 invited in to be debated – perhaps to be refuted or to be rejoined.
51
52

53 **Discussion**

54
55 Our reconceptualisation of WBNs as political arenas, the operationalisation of Zerilli's political
56
57 theory of freedom-centred feminism and the empirical findings from our analysis significantly
58
59

1
2
3 extend our understanding of how WBNs can help to advance women's freedom and contribute
4 to research at the interface of freedom, feminism and work. We discuss those contributions
5 here vis-à-vis the related literature before moving to the conclusion.
6
7
8
9

10 First, we contribute to the literature on WBNs by reconceptualising them as political
11 arenas in which women's freedom can be realised and advanced. Existing work characterises
12 WBNs as postfeminist communities, which – even when their political character is
13 acknowledged – are considered to promote a view of freedom as negative liberty via accounts
14 of self-realisation and individual agency. That, it is argued, results in the erosion of feminism
15 and the stalling of change for women at work (e.g. Lewis, 2018, Petrucci, 2020). Adopting a
16 freedom-centred feminism perspective lets us consider how, in such an arena, specifically here
17 in the mediated form of WBN blogs, we can witness world-building that can help to advance
18 women's freedom. In our study, making claims on WBN blogs is a form of political action
19 where 'acting politically is about testing the limits of every claim to community' (Zerilli, 2016:
20 454). It is in this space of the common world that differences become meaningful and the newly
21 thinkable can appear (2005). Adopting such a perspective lets us contribute to research on
22 feminism at work considering where and how attempts of change are made, 'however informal
23 or imperfect' that change may be (Pullen, Lewis and Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019: 6). Also, to the best
24 of our knowledge, ours constitutes the first attempt at introducing Zerilli's political theory to
25 management and organisation studies.
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46

47 Does this mean that 'anything goes'? A freedom-centred feminist perspective on WBNs
48 certainly does not entail a romanticised view of politics and of the outcomes of acts of freedom.
49 In a public arena, such as WBNs and their blogs, women act as a political collective contesting
50 or engaging with claims about shared interests and concerns, albeit with an outcome we can
51 neither predict nor control. While there is no guarantee that more perspectives will result in a
52 more realistic account of how things stand in the world, without exposure to multiple
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 perspectives in public spaces of debate, new configurations of shared objects would not get off
4 the ground (Zerilli, 2016). For Zerilli, ‘there is simply no extrapolitical guarantee (e.g.,
5 epistemic privilege) that my judgement is valid or that it will be accepted by others, or that it
6 ought to be’ (2016: 183), i.e. we cannot decide in advance that our claims are true or false, right
7 or wrong. In other words, the outcomes of making claims cannot be predicted in advance; they
8 can lead to transformation, but also sedimentation of existing norms and discourses, including
9 the reproduction of postfeminist ideas. Whether particular claims made in the name of ‘women’
10 should be rejoined or contested is something to be judged in the ongoing process of world-
11 building. Thus, we need the ‘courage’ (2016: 179) to engage in such democratic deliberation
12 and give up the belief that we can decide in advance about the who, what and how of feminism.
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

26 Those are necessary conditions for recovering the ‘lost treasure of feminism’: the claim
27 for political freedom, which needs to be constantly practised and can never be proved as truth.
28 That fragile endeavour is how ‘apparently settled and stark differences of value, especially
29 when it comes to the varying situations of women in a global context, can be disturbed and
30 reconfigured in productive new ways, giving form to new shared objects of judgement and
31 meaning’ (2016, p.183). If we, instead, succumb to the fear of relativism, we risk reducing
32 feminism to being a means to an end based on the affirmation of values or criteria for judgment
33 that we decide in advance and that we assume are shared by all women. Zerilli argues that,
34 despite today’s broad acknowledgement of the differences that exist under the term ‘women’
35 and of the notion of standpoint, losing sight of plurality in politics and trying to define feminist
36 judgment criteria in advance leads to a ‘new universalism’ (2016, p. 167) that reaffirms the
37 dominant, Western feminist values. In turn, that prevents us from radically questioning
38 universalism and from seizing the transformative promises of imagining new worlds
39 collectively.
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Second, our findings have implications for the theoretical work of Zerilli (2005; 2016).
4
5 We demonstrate the fruitfulness of a freedom-centred feminism perspective when investigating
6
7 women-only groups that gather around concerns related to work and by operationalising it to
8
9 examine empirical materials. As we explain in the methods section, we do that by identifying
10
11 the objects of common interest and concern across the four WBN blogs before examining the
12
13 claims made about those topics. We thus make an ancillary methodological contribution by
14
15 employing topic modeling as a starting phase of an inductive analytical strategy, thus joining
16
17 recent conversations and suggestions in management and organisation studies (Aranda et al.,
18
19 2021; Brookes and McEnery, 2019; Hanigan et al., 2019). Our analytical approach to WBN
20
21 blogs allows us to examine claims from a freedom-centred perspective and identify both
22
23 postfeminist claims and different, new forms of change and transformation that can help to
24
25 advance women's freedom. Our findings thus show the political plurality of claims made in
26
27 such a setting, compared to what is found in previous work on postfeminist communities
28
29 (Petrucci, 2020). The three dialectics we outline let us show how WBNs act as sites where
30
31 feminism is realised 'as the fragile achievement of practices of freedom' (Zerilli, 2005: 37).
32
33
34
35
36

37 From Zerilli's perspective, claims at both ends of the dialectics constitute an exercise
38
39 of freedom, as in both cases we have claims being made in a public arena in the name of women
40
41 who work and in relation to common objects of interest. However, at the same time, the
42
43 postfeminist claims we identify fall short to what Zerilli argues is necessary to unleash the
44
45 transformational potential of politics: to put the world, rather than the subject, at the centre and
46
47 thus engage in world-building – based on claims such as the ones we discuss at the other end
48
49 of each dialectic. Specifically, in the first dialectic, 'conformity and imagination', we show
50
51 how claims that do not question the status quo, including traditional gender roles, are in tension
52
53 with claims that delineate ways to go beyond it. The second dialectic, 'performative care and
54
55 relational care', lets us locate relational care within a web of relations that presupposes
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 generalised regard for others as virtuous and necessary, in contrast with the individualistic
4 expressions of performative care typical of postfeminism. Finally, in the third dialectic of
5
6 expressions of 'sameness and openness', expressions of sameness centred around the positions and
7
8 experiences of white, middle-class women are in tension with claims of including 'others' in
9
10 the practice of world-building. Our dialectics thus alert us to the 'renegotiation of power and
11
12 organising' (Putnam and Ashcraft, 2017) that happens unceasingly, albeit not always in radical
13
14 ways (Lewis et al., 2019).
15
16
17
18

19 Relatedly, our study is a rare example of focusing on what happens in business-centred,
20
21 bottom-up initiatives for women by women (Dennissen et al., 2020; Villesèche and Josserand,
22
23 2017) and goes beyond a focus on instrumental gains such as career development. Our study
24
25 suggests that claims made in WBN blogs are not limited to an individualised, negative
26
27 conception of freedom and that public engagement in WBNs gives a possibility for change and
28
29 transformation to get off the ground. That is quite remarkable given that, while the WBNs
30
31 whose blogs we studied have international chapters, they were all founded in the United
32
33 Kingdom and the United States, where the ideological focus is on the Anglo-Saxon free
34
35 economic model naturalising a view of freedom as self-realisation (Mackenzie and McKinlay,
36
37 2020). At the same time, excluding postfeminist claims from such arena would not be desirable
38
39 as it is only by having them in public view that we can position ourselves for or against (or
40
41 anything in between) them and make other claims – thus continuously (re)building our
42
43 common world. Our study thus joins recent efforts to understand how differences and tensions
44
45 in the feminist movement may nurture action (Ozkanzanc-Pan, 2019). WBN membership, here
46
47 via blogs, creates opportunities for collective engagement and opens imaginaries for advocacy
48
49 work involving WBN and their members (Villesèche and Josserand, 2017).
50
51
52
53
54
55

56 More broadly, grounded in a conception of freedom as non-sovereignty and public
57
58 engagement in political arenas such as WBNs as the practice of freedom, our findings let us
59
60

1
2
3 reaffirm that the capacity to act – the Arendtian ‘I can’ – ‘belongs to women as a political
4 collectivity’ (Zerilli, 2005: 180), rather than to women as a sociological group based on sex or
5 gender. Accepting the ‘queer’ claim that we can only see and change our shared world if we
6 do not judge in advance what is right and just opens up new possibilities for contesting and
7 transforming norms, including that of sexual difference (Zerilli, 2016), with the ensuing
8 gendered and intersectional experiences of inequality, and the idea that WBNs may be a part
9 of such world-building.

19 **Conclusion, limitations and research avenues**

21 At the intersection of freedom, feminism and work, this study draws on the political theory of
22 freedom-centred feminism (Zerilli, 2005) to investigate how WBNs can help to advance
23 women’s freedom and examine the claims made in relation to shared topics of interest and
24 concern in WBN blogs. As our findings show, uncertain and contradictory ways of defining
25 and engaging with women’s freedom can emerge through claim-making. The fragility of the
26 process and its outcomes are, then, what can move feminism forward.

35 While our study contributes significantly to research at the intersection of feminism,
36 work and freedom, it has several limitations that open up further avenues for research.
37 Importantly, we acknowledge that we engage with WBNs via a particular mediated form –
38 blogs – that allows for specific modes of meaning-making. Future work could pay more
39 attention to how affordances of different media may impact the plurality of claims made and
40 what can be learnt from those various studies. Moreover, although it is relatively large, our
41 sample is limited to four WBN blogs and is Anglo-Saxon centred. Relatedly, the dialectics
42 observed here are only indicative of the possibilities that a freedom-centred perspective may
43 generate. They are not representative of what could be found in other WBNs or other types of
44 organisations focusing on gender and work. Therefore, we encourage future research to
45 consider claims beyond this context and in other types of encounters, such as face-to-face
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 meetings, in which different sets of claims and dialectics may surface. We believe that adopting
4 our operationalisation of Zerilli's theory could be of help in doing so. Future work may also
5 want to investigate dialectics between more than two poles or discourses to be more precise
6 about 'the mechanisms that organise difference across time and place' (Ashcraft, 2014: 145).
7
8
9

10
11
12 Finally, we acknowledge the concern that, without an appropriate appreciation of the
13 statistical and theoretical underpinnings and implications, analytical tools such as topic
14 modeling might become a 'technical black box' (Hannigan et al., 2019) focusing too much on
15 data corpus size and too little on theoretical development. However, we believe that we
16 mitigate that risk by employing topic modeling in line with recent recommendations (Aranda
17 et al., 2021; Brookes and McEnery, 2019; Hanigan et al., 2019). Rather, we hope that our
18 original research design can inspire further work that engages with a large corpus of textual
19 data while seeking to derive qualitative findings. Given the rise in the use of multimedia
20 platforms by individuals and organisations, such methods have significant potential to generate
21 insights for management and organisation studies at large.
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37

38 **Acknowledgments**

39 Our most sincere thanks to SI editors Michelle Greenwood and James Chamberlain as well as
40 to the anonymous reviewers - we would like to continue this conversation with you, so please
41 do contact us when you read this! We also thank colleagues who commented on successive
42 versions of this article during seminars and conferences, notably Ana Alakovska, Milena
43 Leybold, and Mustafa Özbilgin.
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53

54 **References**

55
56
57
58
59
60

- 1
2
3 Avdelidou-Fischer, N and Kirton, G (2016) Beyond burned bras and purple dungarees: feminist
4 orientations within working women's networks. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 23(2):
5
6 124-139.
7
8
9
10 Adamson, M and Kelan, EK (2019) 'Female Heroes': Celebrity Executives as Postfeminist
11 Role Models. *British Journal of Management*. 30 (4): 981-996.
12
13
14 Alvesson, M, & Kärreman, D (2000) Taking the linguistic turn in organizational research:
15 Challenges, responses, consequences. *The journal of applied behavioral science*, 36(2), 136-
16
17 158.
18
19
20
21 Aranda, A M, Sele, K, Etchanchu, H, Guyt, JY, & Vaara, E (2021) From Big Data to Rich
22 Theory: Integrating Critical Discourse Analysis with Structural Topic Modeling. *European*
23
24 *Management Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12452>
25
26
27
28 Aronson, P (2017) The Dynamics and Causes of Gender and Feminist Consciousness and
29 Feminist Identities. *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. Women's Social Movement Activism*, 335-
30
31 353.
32
33
34
35 Ashcraft, K (2014) Feminist Theory. *The SAGE handbook of organizational communication:*
36
37 *Advances in theory, research, and methods*, 127-150.
38
39
40 Bail, C A (2014) The cultural environment: measuring culture with big data. *Theory and*
41
42 *Society*, 43(3): 465-482.
43
44
45 Baker, D T and Kelan, E.K. (2019) Splitting and blaming: The psychic life of neoliberal
46 executive women. *Human Relations*. 72 (1): 69-97.
47
48
49 Bakhtin, M M (1981) *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, University of
50
51 Texas Press.
52
53
54 Berlin, I (1958) *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
55
56
57 Blei, D M (2012) Probabilistic topic models. *Communications of the ACM*, 55(4): 77-84.
58
59
60

- 1
2
3 Blei, D M, Ng, A Y and Jordan, M I (2003) Latent Dirichlet Allocation. *Journal of Machine*
4
5 *Learning Research*, 3: 993–1022.
6
7
8 Bowring, F (2015) Negative and Positive Freedom: Lessons from, and to, Sociology.
9
10 *Sociology*, (2015), 156-171, 49(1)
11
12 Brookes, G, & McEnery, T (2019) The utility of topic modelling for discourse studies: A
13
14 critical evaluation. *Discourse Studies*, 21(1): 3-21.
15
16
17 Butler, J (1990) *Gender trouble*. Routledge.
18
19 Butler, J (2013) For white girls only? Postfeminism and the politics of inclusion. *Feminist*
20
21 *Formations*, 35-58.
22
23
24 Dennissen M, Benschop, Y and van den Brink, M (2020) Rethinking Diversity Management:
25
26 An Intersectional Analysis of Diversity Networks, *Organization Studies*, 41(2): 219–240.
27
28 DiMaggio, P, Nag, M and Blei, D (2013) Exploiting affinities between topic modeling and the
29
30 sociological perspective on culture: Application to newspaper coverage of U.S. government
31
32 arts funding. *Poetics*, 41(6): 570-606.
33
34
35 Donnellon, A. and Langowitz, N. (2009) Leveraging women’s networks for strategic value.
36
37 *Strategy & Leadership*, 37(3): 29-36.
38
39
40 Edwards, G, Hawkins, B and Schedlitzki, D (2019) Bringing the ugly back: A dialogic
41
42 exploration of ethics in leadership through an ethno-narrative re-reading of the Enron case
43
44 *Human Relations*, 72(4): 733–754.
45
46
47 Elliott, C and Stead, V (2018) Constructing Women’s Leadership Representation in the U.K.
48
49 Press During a Time of Financial Crisis: Gender capitals and dialectical tensions, *Organization*
50
51 *Studies*, 39(1): 19–45.
52
53
54 Geiger, K. and Jordan, C. (2014) The role of societal privilege in the definitions and practices
55
56 of inclusion. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 33(3): 261-274.
57
58
59
60

- 1
2
3 Gill, R (2007) Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of*
4
5 *Cultural Studies*, 10(2): 147–166.
6
7
8 Gill, R, Kelan, E and Scharff, C (2017) A postfeminist sensibility at work. *Gender, Work &*
9
10 *Organization* 24(3): 226–244.
11
12 Graves, L (2007) The Affordances of Blogging: A case study in culture and technological
13
14 effects. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 31(4), 331-346.
15
16
17 Hannigan, TR, Haans, RF, Vakili, K, Tchalian, H, Glaser, VL, Wang, MS, ... & Jennings, PD
18
19 (2019) Topic modeling in management research: Rendering new theory from textual data.
20
21 *Academy of Management Annals*, 13(2), 586-632.
22
23
24 Hellgren, B, Löwstedt J, Puttonen L, Tienari, J, Vaara, E and Werr, A (2002) How issues
25
26 become (re)constructed in the media: Discursive practices in the AstraZeneca merger. *British*
27
28 *Journal of Management*, 123-140, 13(2).
29
30
31 Hirschmann, N (1996) Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom. *Political Theory*, 24(1):46-67.
32
33
34 Hirschmann, N (2013) Berlin, Feminism, and Positive Liberty. Isaiah Berlin and the Politics
35
36 of Freedom.
37
38 Hookway, N (2008) Entering the blogosphere: some strategies for using blogs in social
39
40 research', *Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications. U.K.: London, England, 8(1): 91–113.
41
42
43 Jha, H K and Beckman, C M (2017) A Patchwork of Identities: Emergence of Charter Schools
44
45 as a New Organizational Form. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations (Emergence)*, 50:
46
47 69-107.
48
49
50 Knudson, S (2013) Crash courses and lifelong journeys: modes of reading non-fiction advice
51
52 in a North American audience. *Poetics*, 41(3): 211–35.
53
54
55 Lewis, P (2014) Postfeminism, femininities and organization studies: Exploring a new agenda.
56
57 *Organization Studies*, 35(12): 1845–1866.
58
59
60

- 1
2
3 Lewis, P (2018) Postfeminism and gendered (im)mobilities. In P. Lewis, Y. Benschop, & R.
4 Simpson (Eds.), *Postfeminism and organization* (pp. 21–42). New York, NY: Routledge.
5
6
7 Lewis, P, Adamson, M, Biese, I and Kelan, E (2019) Introduction to special issue: Exploring
8 the emergence of moderate feminism(s) in contemporary organizations, *Gender Work and*
9
10
11
12
13 *Organizations*, 26: 1063–1072.
14
15 Mavin, S and Grandy, G (2016) A theory of abject appearance: Women elite leaders' intra-
16 gender 'management' of bodies and appearance. *Human relations*, 69(5): 1095-1120.
17
18 Mackenzie, J (2018) 'Good mums don't, apparently, wear make-up': negotiating discourses of
19 gendered parenthood in Mumsnet Talk. *Gender and Language*, 12(1), 114-135.
20
21
22
23 Mackenzie, E and McKinlay, A (2020) Hope labour and the psychic life of cultural work,
24
25
26
27 *Human Relations*, 0018726720940777.
28
29 McRobbie, A (2009) *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*,
30 London: Sage.
31
32 McRobbie, A (2013) Feminism, the family and the new 'mediated' maternalism. *New*
33
34
35
36 *Formations*, 80: 119-137.
37
38 Meliou, E and Mallett, O (2021) Negotiating gendered ageing: Intersectional reflexivity and
39 experiences of incongruity of self-employed older women. *Work, Employment and Society*,
40
41
42
43 *online first* 0950017021994489.
44
45 Meriläinen, S, Tienari, J and Valtonen, A (2015) Headhunters and the 'ideal' executive body.
46
47
48 *Organization*, 22(1): 3–22.
49
50 Mohr, JW and Bogdanov P (2013) Introduction—Topic models: What they are and why they
51 matter. *Poetics*, 41(6): 545-569.
52
53
54 Mohr, J W, Wagner-Pacifici, R, Breiger, R L, and Bogdanov, P (2013) Graphing the grammar
55 of motives in National Security Strategies: Cultural interpretation, automated text analysis and
56
57
58
59 the drama of global politics. *Poetics*, 41(6): 670-700.
60

- 1
2
3 Nkomo, S M (1992) The emperor has no clothes: rewriting 'race' in organizations. *Academy*
4 *of Management Review*, 17(3): 487-513.
5
6
7
8 Ozkazanc-Pan, B (2019) On agency and empowerment in a #MeToo world, *Gender, Work and*
9 *Organization*, 26(8): 1212–1220.
10
11
12 Pedersen, S (2020) *The Politicization of Mumsnet*. Howard House, Emerald Group Publishing.
13
14 Petrucci, L (2020) Theorizing postfeminist communities: How gender-inclusive meetups
15 address gender inequity in high-tech industries. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 545-564,
16 27(4).
17
18
19
20
21 Projansky, S (2001) *Watching rape: Film and television in postfeminist culture*. NYU Press.
22
23
24 Pullen, A and Simpson, R (2009) Managing difference in feminized work: Men, otherness and
25 social practice. *Human relations*, 62(4): 561-587.
26
27
28 Pullen, A, Lewis, P and Ozkazanc-Pan, B (2019). A critical moment: 25 years of Gender, Work
29 and Organization. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 26(1): 1-8.
30
31
32
33 Putnam, L L and Ashcraft K L (2017) Gender and Organizational Paradox, in Smith, W. K. et
34 al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Paradox*. Oxford University Press, 1–21.
35
36
37 Rottenberg, C (2017) Neoliberal feminism and the future of human capital. *Signs: Journal of*
38 *Women in Culture and Society*, 42(2), 329-348.
39
40
41
42 Rottenberg, C (2018) *The rise of neoliberal feminism*. New York, NY: Oxford University
43 Press.
44
45
46
47 Rottenberg, C (2019) Women Who Work: The limits of the neoliberal feminist
48 paradigm. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 26(8), 1073-1082.
49
50
51
52 Scharff, C (2015) The psychic life of neoliberalism: Mapping the contours of entrepreneurial
53 subjectivity. *Theory, Culture & Society* 33(6): 107–122.
54
55
56 Showden CR (2009) What's political about the new feminisms? *Frontiers: A Journal of*
57 *Women Studies* 30(2): 166–198.
58
59
60

1
2
3 Sullivan, K R and Delaney, H (2017) A femininity that “giveth and taketh away”: The
4 prosperity gospel and postfeminism in the neoliberal economy, *Human Relations*, 70(7): 836–
5
6 859.
7
8

9
10 Swan, E (2017) Postfeminist Stylistics, Work Femininities and Coaching: a Multimodal Study
11 of a Website, *Gender, Work and Organization*, 24(3): 274–296.
12

13
14 Villesèche, F and Josserand, E (2017) Formal Women-Only Networks: Literature review and
15 propositions, *Personnel Review*, 46(5): 1004–1018.
16

17
18 Villesèche, F, Muhr, S L and Sliwa M (2018) From radical black feminism to postfeminist
19 hashtags: reclaiming intersectionality, *Ephemera*, 18(1): 1–17.
20
21

22
23 Zerilli, L M (2005) *Feminism and The Abyss of Freedom*. Chicago, IL: The University of
24 Chicago Press.
25

26
27 Zerilli, L M (2016) *A democratic theory of judgment*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago
28 Press.
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

Table 1. Sample composition

WBN	No. of blog posts downloaded	Blog starting year	Member profile	Mission and example of activities	Founded in/Intl chapters	Social media presence (followers)
A	350	2013	Change of career, freelancers, business owners, entrepreneurs, homemakers	<i>Our mission is to help ambitious women to reach their goals and dreams, fast.</i> Lifeworking groups, workshops, annual conference	United Kingdom/ Switzerland, France, Australia, United States, India, Portugal	Facebook: 11 641 Twitter: 3 870 LinkedIn: 945
B	429	2006	Entrepreneurs, dreamers	<i>Inspiring and empowering women from around the world to turn their ideas into a reality, build wildly successful businesses.</i> Courses, retreats, workshops, mentoring	United Kingdom/ global reach (no detailed info available)	Facebook: 698 275 Instagram: 121 000 YouTube: 44 200 LinkedIn: 4 639
C	578	2013	Executives, entrepreneurs, managers, rising leaders, career changers	<i>We believe that when ambitious professional women get more opportunity it ultimately benefits everyone and leads to a more equal world. We're committed to giving these ambitious professional women the community they need to take the next step in their careers – whatever that means to each of them.</i>	United States/ United Kingdom, Spain, United Arab Emirates, India, Brazil, Canada	Facebook: 24 681 Twitter: 67 400 LinkedIn: 30 654

				Workshops, virtual roundtables, mentoring, local meetups		
D	173	2014	Businesswomen <i>The average member supervises 5 people and has a four-year college degree</i>	<i>[Network D] is one of the country's largest associations for women professionals and business owners, provides resources – through education, networking and public advocacy- to empower its members to achieve both career and personal success.</i> Training, networking events, quarterly magazine	United States	Facebook: 299 997 Twitter: 2 671

Peer Review Version

Table 2. Summary titles for the discussion topics²

Topics #	Topic titles (interpreted from topic vocabularies)
1	Motherhood and work challenges
2	Believe in your true and best self
3	Online business marketing
4	Career change and interview skills
5	Leadership skills and managing teams
6	Empowerment and allies
7	Writing and Verbal communication strategies
8	Flexible working practices
9	Financial investment, power and gender
10	Developing communities and doing good
12	Key skills to acquire and unique skillsets
13	Fashion and the fashion business
14	Setting goals and networking
15	Dream and vision of success
16	Time management tips
17	Body and health
18	Moving into self-employment/Becoming self-employed
19	Gaining confidence, embracing vulnerability
20	Find passion and happiness for success
21	Change and success
22	Mind and body work
24	Self-help/Personal development resources
26	Fight misogyny and be authentic
27	How to overcome stress and negativity
28	Work–life balance and negotiation skills
29	Gender equity and change movements

² Please note that the numbering of interpreted topics follows the numbering in the 30-topic solution available in the Appendix (from 0 to 29). We dismissed topics 0, 11, 23 and 25 in the interpretation process.

Appendix

Table A1: Topic modelling solution - 30 topics (# 0 to 29; rows) and top 20 words (1 to 20; columns)

Topic#	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
0	it's	don't	i'm	life	i've	can't	didn't	start	doesn't	that's
1	children	family	home	kids	mother	husband	parents	women	school	child
2	people	time	make	things	feel	find	good	work	don	great
3	people	media	audience	content	social	business	website	brand	blog	online
4	career	job	company	experience	role	interview	mentor	find	work	questions
5	team	work	leadership	related	important	management	leaders	organization	culture	make
6	women	men	female	woman	gender	male	diversity	companies	work	power
7	person	conversation	don	relationship	meeting	professional	colleagues	meetings	words	good
8	work	office	working	balance	work-life	vacation	summer	time	company	travel
9	money	financial	investing	invest	wealth	fund	investment	tax	pay	income
10	community	support	ellevate	network	program	social	world	local	events	members
11	change	digital	big	story	habit	world	timing	achievers	michelle	game
12	learn	skills	ideas	information	knowledge	future	practice	learning	thinking	makes
13	fashion	shoes	dress	love	style	wear	design	brand	designer	clothes
14	goals	year	networking	plan	event	goal	network	set	events	make
15	things	business	make	success	create	dream	action	life	vision	big
16	time	day	work	week	tasks	hours	list	schedule	minutes	set
17	health	burnout	food	eat	mental	stress	eating	energy	wellness	body
18	business	running	challenges	love	biggest	motivated	work	start	started	clients
19	fear	confidence	success	people	experience	comfort	learn	failure	mindset	zone
20	life	purpose	world	live	lives	happiness	create	living	power	joy
21	women	drivenwoman	group	success	change	dream	journey	dreams	idea	career
22	body	yoga	mind	practice	meditation	exercise	space	present	intuition	brain
23	business	clients	entrepreneurs	company	client	businesses	industry	small	market	money
24	book	writing	read	books	reading	write	personal	great	list	love

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46

25	years	started	didn	made	felt	wanted	back	thought	life	decided
26	anger	play	fight	system	world	blame	young	playing	fear	truth
27	feel	positive	change	negative	situation	feeling	control	thoughts	thinking	stress
28	work	employees	boss	company	job	employee	salary	leave	working	workplace
29	pay	gap	percent	gender	equal	year	harassment	sexual	girls	equity

Table A1: Continued

Topic#	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
0	there's	miisa	you're	things	simply	good	thinking	sunday	difficult	i'd
1	mom	mothers	daughter	life	age	moms	years	leave	partner	young
2	start	give	thing	lot	important	making	love	big	long	put
3	create	share	post	build	don	marketing	facebook	building	site	great
4	skills	advice	current	don	related	professional	position	jobs	years	side
5	leader	people	skills	company	change	employees	feedback	understand	key	career
6	research	workplace	leadership	color	equality	make	white	bias	allies	careers
7	questions	give	speak	conversations	talking	colleague	boss	relationships	point	language
8	formularen	holiday	days	trip	home	remote	team	taking	family	side
9	retirement	plan	finances	funds	savings	future	advisor	don	debt	assets
10	squad	programs	girls	organizations	communities	people	giving	join	creating	space
11	empathetic	leap	lies	obama	house	cycle	narrative	dad	driver	cup
12	problem	related	idea	presentation	speaking	creative	research	technology	pitch	skill restauran t
13	shop	pair	beautiful	jewellery	made	black	shopping	wardrobe	store	t
14	people	meet	achieve	planning	reach	time	setting	stay	connections	end
15	write	day	dreams	goals	month	successful	achieve	start	happen	back
16	spend	morning	important	working	make	home	task	things	habits	daily
17	healthy	sugar	diet	day	physical	sleep	positive	water	morning	fitness
18	challenge	favourite	advice	overcome	give	customers	day	working	time	back
19	successful	show	trust	project	confident	fears	mistakes	learning	opportunity	succeed
20	personal	love	day	balance	feel	energy	values	heart	present	happy

21	london	start	years	small	sunday	bigger	world	action	share	step
22	music	experience	mindfulness	quiet	retreat	awareness	anxiety	creative	physical	introverts
23	making	don	entrepreneur	customers	companies	sales	services	time	plan	service
24	blog	stories	ideas	development	written	writer	author	podcast	project	finding
25	needed	knew	story	year	months	found	day	wasn	learned	ago
26	girl	behavior	angry	approval	powerful	respect	heard	act	shame	brilliance emotiona l
27	energy	back	emotions	focus	time	move	related employer s	problem	feelings	you're
28	companies	pay	employer	percent	benefits	time	s	study	fairygodboss	increase
29	years	study	economic	u.s	street	times	issues	states	history	