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Problems of Definition in the Feminist Movement

One of the biggest roadblocks for the feminist movement is people who have a misconception of what it means to be feminist, as is clearly demonstrated in the Tumblr page “Women Against Feminism.” People cannot come to a consensus on the definition of feminism, what it means to be a feminist, and who can call themselves a feminist. This problem of definition extends further into aspects of the feminist movement, especially in terms of the word “slut” and “choice” in regards to women’s bodies. For this paper, my definition of feminism is one that promotes the values of choice, mutual respect, inclusivity, anti-sexism, and equality. Until people are educated on what feminism is and until women stop attacking each other for their choices, specifically in regards to their bodies, the feminist movement will continue to suffer. A reworking of definitions within a framework of feminist values needs to occur in order for the feminist movement to be a cohesive and proactive movement. Jenna Marbles’s use of the words “slut” and “choice” in her video “Things I Don’t Understand About Girls Part 2: Slut Edition” highlights the problems of definition that these words create in terms of the feminist movement.

Marbles is a 28 year old from Upstate New York who publishes YouTube videos every Wednesday. She has been called a modern feminist by some and an example of internalized misogyny by others. In these videos, she presents herself sitting in her bedroom in front of a blank wall, talking about topics including sex, boys, and makeup. These videos really resonated with viewers because they appealed to her viewers’ sense of pathos and made them connect with issues surrounding gender roles by making them

laugh about it. She tackles gender stereotypes in an incredibly ironic, light-hearted, sarcastic, blunt, and self-mocking manner and plays on the ideas that society has formed around what it means to be feminine vs. masculine. Her videos receive more praise than criticism because her humor is seen as more self-deprecating than as legitimate criticism, which makes her appear all the more relatable and genuine to her audience (O'Neil).

This comedic take on social commentary makes it hard to decipher how the average viewer feels about the issues that she brings up. For some, it could raise awareness of these stereotypes and make them think about breaking them down. However, for others, this type of poking fun at stereotypes could serve to promote these stereotypical behaviors and the negative connotations that are drawn from them. It is impossible to guess what Marbles's intentions were when creating these videos, but her audience could certainly draw very different rhetorical meanings from them.

The audience that Marbles's videos attract is 75% women, majority of whom are between the ages of 13 and 17. However, men watch her videos as well. According to Katie O'Neil, Marbles is able to transcend audiences because her physical appearance attracts males, while her jokes attract females. If she was just a pretty face giving out makeup and boy advice, then women wouldn't necessarily relate to her videos as much, and if she wasn't viewed as attractive, then her grotesque humor probably wouldn't be received very well from both men and women. This analysis is drawn from the fact that most of the comments on her videos from males are in relation to her physical appearance and her comments from females are about how "spot on" her social commentary is.

YouTube is the perfect medium for someone such as Jenna Marbles, who didn't start off promoting a website or a brand, but simply making videos that are easily

accessible, easily shareable, and have a low production cost (Harper). Unlike television, her channel can be accessed by viewers at any time and can be shared via social media, embedded, and emailed with the simple click of a button that is located right under the video. Also, unlike with television or movies, YouTube gives her complete freedom to say whatever she wants, because she doesn't need to gain permission from a producer. The low profile and low budget style of her videos is another key aspect of what makes her relatable; to her viewers she is just a girl sitting in her room talking to a camera. YouTube was the perfect platform for someone like her to garner a dedicated fan base in order to start growing a business.

In the video "Things I Don't Understand About Girls Part 2: Slut Edition," Marbles takes on what her definition of a slut is, which she defines as "a girl who has a lot of casual sex," although she can't define what a "lot" is. This inability to define a term creates a lot of problems with the usage of it. She starts out by saying that she doesn't understand how girls think one night stands are good because all girls "have fucking body issues" and it doesn't sound fun to "get ass-naked with a stranger and do sex things to him." She is making a claim here that all women are uncomfortable with their bodies. This promotes sexist thought and sexist stereotypes and does not uphold feminist values. All women don't feel vulnerable when naked and all women don't hate their bodies, even though society might promote this idea. My definition of feminism promotes the idea that women should be able to choose to embrace their sexuality and their bodies and be comfortable in their own skin.

She also lays out her criteria for judging girls: "you can look like a slut, act like a slut, but I would only judge you in how many dicks you put in your **body** on a regular

basis of whose names you have no idea.” She is inferring here that it is fine to have a choice in how you present yourself, but not in what you do with your body. She is half upholding the feminist value of choice, but sticking in her own parameters about when it is okay to have a choice. In this way, she is excluding women who have casual sex from being embraced by feminists and feminist ideology. Choice is a feminist value that most often is brought up in regards to women having a choice in what happens to their bodies, but Marbles is saying that this is the one instance in which she will judge women for their choices.

She even goes as far to say that humans have logic and therefore shouldn't give in to their “animalistic desires” to have sex:

We have this big thing, and it controls logic and reasoning and it functions differently than other animals... And so the idea behind monogamy is that, it's almost a state of higher evolution... it takes some logic and reasoning to be like, I think I'm just going to be with one person (“Things I Don't Understand About Girls Part 2: Slut Edition”).

She is attempting to make an appeal to logos here by claiming that monogamy is the logical option. She dehumanizes women who have casual sex by calling them stupid and animal-like and praising monogamous women with terms such as logical, reasonable, and highly evolved. She is perpetuating the stereotype that women who have a lot of sex do not deserve respect, therefore allowing men to disrespect them more, and she is inferring that monogamy is the more valued path. She states that only women with low self-esteem have sex with a lot of partners. She doesn't even consider that some women have casual sex simply because they enjoy sex, which is a choice, and therefore should not be

degraded. Once again, she has removed the feminist value of choice from women who participate in what she deems to be inappropriate sexual activity by creating her own definition of what choice means and what makes you a slut.

Her final move is an appeal to ethos, where she urges women to help other women make “less bad, slutty decisions” because that is the moral and right thing to do. She asks women to try to discourage blackout drunk women from going home with guys they don’t know. While her message is good, her wording creates a big problem. When a man has sex with a woman that is incapacitated that is often rape, not a “slutty decision.” Her attacks on “dumb sluts making bad decisions” is only encouraging victim blaming and discouraging women from speaking out and reporting assaults because of the shame that they may feel from their “decisions” (Hoover). The definition of “slutty” is a huge problem and it perpetuates rape culture because women are afraid speak out and be labeled a slut. It also causes women to fall into the idea that “slutty behavior” makes them responsible for being raped.

In response to the comments on this video, Chelsea Fagan comments that “The focus seems to be on the idea that the comments coming from Jenna herself are ones that society has told her she is right in thinking, and ones that needs to be dealt with on a cultural level, through education, instead of more shaming.” This idea really resonated with me, they way that women and men view and talk about each other and gender roles arises from societal norms. These societal norms need to be questioned and thought about in depth, these problems need to be tackled instead of the name-calling, judgment, and knocking down of individual’s opinions and actions that is currently occurring in the

world of feminism. The definitions that our patriarchal society has instilled in us do not work anymore and they need to be reworked in a feminist context.

An example of this attempt to rework definitions in a feminist context is the idea of reclaiming words. In almost all of her videos, Marbles uses words such as slut, whore, and bitch when referring to women. While some feminists are disgusted and outraged by her use of these words, other third-wave feminists see this as an attempt to reclaim these words that were once used against women in a hostile manner and make them empowering instead of degrading (Matovich). The idea behind this is that if women make these words their own by taking away the derogatory meaning behind them and giving them positive connotations, then victim blaming and slut shaming will decrease.

After analyzing this video and feminist responses to it, it is clear that the problems that women have with each other and the feminist movement as a whole arise out of problems of definition. Just as Marbles had a hard time defining exactly what makes you a slut and what the value of choice means, society has a hard time defining what feminism is and how it should be properly displayed and fought for. Third wave feminism touts ideas of inclusivity and choice, however feminists keep calling out other women for their actions and opinions, specifically in regards to their bodies and their sexuality. A reworking and a general consensus of the definitions of feminist concepts in terms of feminist values would fix these divisions and lead to a more cohesive and powerful feminist movement.

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