POSTFEMINIST FEMININITY IN POP CULTURE DISCOURSES OF THE 1990s AND 2000s

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The concept of postfeminism has become one of the central and most important concepts in feminist cultural studies continually raising a lot of debates and discussions. As an important social and cultural phenomenon, postfeminism has extensively invaded popcultural and media spaces at the turn of the last century, and by doing so has drastically (re)shaped the very concept of femininity in mass culture of the 1990s and early 2000s. The controversial nature of postfeminism has created a new concept of femininity, which was located outside of both patriarchal and feminist discourses. The purpose of this article is to analyse postfeminist femininity in various popular TV series and films of the time, locate their representations of femininity within the existing contemporary postfeminist discourse and trace its impacts on the modern understanding of womanhood. The research methodology consists of comparative analysis and synthesis methods, which have made it possible to identify the main features and key concepts of postfeminism as socio-cultural phenomenon. The historical and cultural approaches as well as the systemic method have allowed us to understand the influence of postfeminism on pop-culture as well as to trace its multifaceted relations to public media discourses. The elements of critical and content analyses, as well as the complex processes decomposition method, were used for the assessment of postfeminist theory as a concept-methodological basis for the further analysis of media products in their relation to postfeminist discourses. The scientific novelty lies in analysing the unique sensibilities typical for postfeminism and applying this theoretical knowledge to reinvent female images in pop culture discourses, thus offering a new approach to understanding femininity outside the patriarchal narratives as well as second- and third-wave feminism. Conclusions. The findings of the article provide a new perspective on popular and well-known products of the media industry of the 1990s and 2000s, re-read them within the scope of the postfeminist framework, and offer a new angle of interpretation of femininity at the turn of the last century.

Keywords: feminism; postfeminism; femininity; popular culture; media

THEORY AND HISTORY OF CULTURE

ISSN 2410-1915 (Print) • Culture and Arts in the Modern World. Issue 23 • ISSN 2616-423X (Online)

Introduction

The notion of postfeminism has become one of the central and most important concepts in feminist cultural studies. However, till nowadays there is surprisingly little agreement about how to explain what postfeminism is, the term having been overburdened with different meanings. As Rosalind Gill (2007) argues, "the term [postfeminism] is used variously and contradictorily to signal a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the Second Wave, or a regressive political stance" (pp. 147–148). Some feminist theorists and researchers have declared feminism to be dead (Kai Ebeling) or, as Wendy Kamminer (1993) claims, to be experiencing an "identity crisis". Other feminist scholars (Susan Faludi and Imelda Whelehan) regard postfeminism as a negative reaction to feminist ideas of the Second Wave — the so-called *backlash*, which was based on the (rather misleading) claim that gender equality has already been achieved and discrimination against women no longer exists, and therefore feminism as a social and political worldview has become obsolete and outdated in the contemporary world. Hence, postfeminism can be interpreted as a rejection of feminism's attempts to create a space for women outside the patriarchal system and as a desire to find women's place within the existing power structure.

If First Wave feminism had focused on the fight for women's political power (women's suffrage and property rights), and Second Wave feminism had expanded the debate on the topics of female sexuality, reproductive rights, and attitudes towards women in families and at workplaces, postfeminism had not developed an explicit socio-political agenda. Women in the media and private spaces have emphasised their non-involvement in political life due to the anxiety of being associated with feminism as a political movement, which in the 1990s and the early 2000s had acquired a rather negative connotation. Many women refused to identify with the movement and tried to distance themselves from it — the popular phrase I am not a feminist became a slogan of the postfeminist era. Susan Bolotin (1982) observes and analyses this tendency in her article "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation", which she based on a series of interviews she had conducted with a number of women who commonly concurred with the goals of feminism, but for various reasons did not identify themselves as feminists: due to the fear of being misunderstood by a partner, stigmatised as a lesbian and male-hater, rejected by the previous generation of Second-Wavers, or out of a desire to return to the usual socially acceptable model of a relationship initiated and led by a man.

Nevertheless, postfeminism should not be reduced to a simple backlash to the feminist rhetoric — it is a much more complex phenomenon that "constructs an articulation or suture between feminist and anti-feminist ideas" (Gill, 2007, p. 162). Gill (2007) offers a new definition of postfeminism and suggests that it can be best understood as a "distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes" (p. 147): the understanding of femininity as a bodily property; an emphasis upon self-surveillance and self-improvement practices; a domination of individualism and personal choice; a pronounced sexualisation of culture; and a prominence of consumerist behaviour (p. 149). These themes have actively circulated in pop culture and mass media since the early 1990s and almost until the mid-2000s. They can be found in romantic comedies like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) or erotic thrillers like *Basic Instinct* (1992), in the comedy-drama series *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), or the supernatural drama *Buffy the Vampire*

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ISSN 2410-1915 (Print) • Culture and Arts in the Modern World. Issue 23 • ISSN 2616-423X (Online)

Slayer (1997–2003), not to mention various talk shows, magazines, the so-called *chick lit* — a genre of mass literature, the main audience of which mostly consisted of young women between 20 and 30 years old — and various forms of advertising.

Purpose of the article

The main purpose of this article is to analyse how the concept of postfeminist femininity developed in the media space, based on three *self*: women's *self-surveillance*, competitive *self-improvement* in the continuous pursuit of an ideal (female) body, and "transgressive" *self-love* that develops from female individuality which is located at the heart of postfeminist discourse. Engaging with the cultural study of famous films and series that circulated in popular culture from the early 1990s till the mid-2000s, I hope to offer a new — postfeminist — perspective of looking at well-known products of the media market.

Main research material

As defined by Gill (2007), "[o]ne of the most striking aspects of postfeminist media culture is its obsessional preoccupation with the body" (p. 149). Bringing the female body into the spotlight of postfeminist discourse has redefined femininity as "a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one" (Gill, 2007, p. 149). In other words, postfeminism has reinvented markers of femininity, shifting the focus from the role of women primarily as mothers — a role that has been dominating social discourse for centuries — and focusing first and foremost on the bodily aspect. Thus, the sexually attractive body and its compulsory attributes like long hair and its absolute absence in certain places is presented as "women's key (if not sole) source of identity" (Gill, 2007, p. 149). Moreover, such a body is regarded simultaneously as "women's source of power and as always already unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling [...] in order to conform to ever-narrower judgments of female attractiveness" (Gill, 2007, p. 149). Self-monitoring and self-surveillance have now become necessary requirements for the successful performance of millennial femininity and are marked by three distinctive features: "increased intensity", "extensiveness" and "focus upon the psychological" — the need to transform one's interior life as well as one's exterior look (Gill, 2007, p. 155).

The urge for constant self-surveillance has penetrated the postfeminist media space and can be found in various chick magazines, television shows, and films. In one of the most iconic postfeminist films, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the protagonist — Bridget — demonstrates the whole spectrum of activities associated with self-surveillance: she keeps a diary, she monitors her fluctuating weight, she tracks her calories and the cigarettes she has smoked, she makes plans and projects and still is very uncertain about her future. In the age of technological advancement, female self-monitoring is intensified more than ever due to the extensive popularity of beauty and self-tracking apps, which enable "metricised and forensic scrutiny of the female body [...] mediated by the mobile phone" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 60). The postfeminist woman is framed as a par-

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adoxical phenomenon, which functions both as a subject and as an object of her own self-monitoring gaze, and thus is located in the middle of the Foucauldian panopticon, monitoring and being monitored by the others. Sandra Lee Bartky (1998) compares such a woman to a prisoner of postfeminist self-surveillance practices:

"The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self-committed to a relentless self-surveillance" (p. 42).

In postfeminist discourse, such kind of constant self-control is *never* excessive. Moreover, self-monitoring in this context becomes a required necessity, since postfeminism views the body as a woman's greatest source of power and, as a consequence, as a major value for measuring female success. A woman, who does not know how to monitor and discipline her body, eventually will not be able to successfully reproduce postfeminist femininity, and thus will be immediately punished for her negligence. For example, in the third episode of the fifth season of "Sex and the City" Miranda, whose body has not yet fully recovered after giving birth to her child, faces misogynistic attacks and aggression from men, one of whom tells her to "move your fat ass!". The whole situation undoubtedly hurts Miranda, who is constantly reflecting on how her body has changed and never ceases to compare herself both with her female friends who match the contemporary beauty standards and with her own "version" before childbirth. Being publicly humiliated, Miranda is forced to go through painful embarrassment, which in postfeminist context can be viewed as an immediate punishment for her incompetent self-monitoring due to her pregnancy. In postfeminist discourse, the responsibility for the possible failure lies only with the female self (McRobbie, 2009, p. 358), which is to blame for the inability to accomplish the norms of millennial femininity, and thus disgraced Miranda returns to her hotel room and readily accepts the fact that she deserves such a treatment.

Therefore, the woman finds herself under the magnifying glass of the society and — what is even more important — under the forensic scrutinizing gaze of her own self. The female body is perceived as the one being unruly, and thus demanding constant self-disciplining and self-surveillance in order to successfully perform postfeminist femininity. In postfeminist media culture the female self, represented mainly through the woman's body, has become an individualistic project to be measured, monitored, and constantly encouraged to be improved. This leads me to the next part of this paper, in which I am going to discuss female competitive self-improvement.

Female self-improvement is a distinctive feature of the postfeminist understanding of femininity. Postfeminism advocates self-improvement as an act of female empowerment, since a woman is the only one who has agency and control over her body: "a well-groomed, sexual, feminine body is a site of [female] liberation [...] [which] is marked by girls' self-centred attitudes and use of autonomous decision making about the female body and sexuality for the sake of their own pleasure" (Bae, 2011, p. 30). Such self-improvement is believed "to provide girls with the power that comes from achieving social distinction and attracting male attention" (Bae, 2011, p. 30) and can be secured through the variety of beautifying practices: makeup routine, cosmetic or spa

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ISSN 2410-1915 (Print) • Culture and Arts in the Modern World. Issue 23 • ISSN 2616-423X (Online)

treatment, plastic surgery or even virtual appearance enhancing techniques offered by beauty apps or Instagram masks.

Female self-improvement is a typical scenario of the post-feminist era, which is often presented on the screen in a form of the makeover paradigm based on a "complete" change of a heroine's appearance. This trope can be easily traced in many films: "Death Becomes Her" (1992), "She's All That" (1999), "Miss Congeniality" (2000), "The Princess Diaries" (2001), "13 Going on 30" (2004), "The Devil Wears Prada" (2006) and even the dystopian action film "The Hunger Games" (2012), when the protagonist — Katniss Everdeen — appears in a new feminine look at the opening ceremony of the Games and this is what gains her the love of the public and support from the sponsors. The heroine's makeover in these films is a common postfeminist strategy, which is based on a magic of transformation, when taking off glasses and straightening hair drastically changes the female character's appearance and marks the beginning of her journey to the inevitable success. The makeover element is also very typical for the iconic American TV project "America's Next Top Model" (2003–2018), which has developed into one of the most successful broadcasting franchises. The makeover episode is one of the most popular and highest-rated of the show and always receives a lot of attention from the audiences.

In the TV series format, female transformation is (probably) depicted best and most detailed in the original Colombian telenovela "Yo soy Betty, la fea" ("Ugly Betty", 1999–2001). In each version of the soap opera, the physical external transformations of the main character are presented as a main source of her agency that helps her regain control over her life — typically, along with the appearance changes comes success in professional and personal life. However, the self-improvement as presented in the telenovela is primarily motivated by a need to meet the patriarchal standards of beauty — the beauty of white, heterosexual, and physically attractive young women belonging to the middle class. Heroines who do not fit into this paradigm find themselves under the scrutinising gaze of their colleagues, friends, and families, and thus achieving the "beauty ideal" means for them to regain their privacy and evade the policing gaze directed at them.

Critics of postfeminism often denounce the postfeminist concept of self-improvement as a forceful imposition of patriarchal standards of beauty on women and the perception of femininity through the prism of the male gaze. Proponents of postfeminism, on the other hand, view it as a manifestation of woman's agency referring to Foucault's idea of aesthetic self-stylisation, which, according to the philosopher, is the highest manifestation of freedom. In postfeminism, the self becomes a "phenomenon of choices and options" (Giddens, 1991, p. 8), which can be (re)modified and (re)fashioned with the help of cosmetic procedures, medical inventions, and plastic surgery. Although postfeminist discourse encourages women to seek self-improvement and surgically alter their bodies, there is no unanimous agreement in modern academia about the nature of elective cosmetic surgery. Thus, while some scholars (Sandra Bartky, Peta Tait) argue that "beauty practices, including cosmetic surgery, subordinate and oppress women by coercing them to resculpt their bodies to fit a male-defined vision of femininity", others (Abigail Brooks) advocate female agency in their decision to undergo surgery (Pecot-Hebert & Hennik-Kaminski, 2012, p. 78). I myself believe that woman's manipulations with her body involve both agency and subordination, self-empowerment, and a need to follow the socially constructed aesthetic paradigm.

One more aspect I would like to discuss in this part is the phenomenon of self-help. As argued by Elias and Gill, "the makeover paradigm is a key part of the contemporary postfeminist sensibility — demanding work on, careful styling of and reinvention of the body" as well as constant improvement of "*psychic life*" (Elias & Gill, 2018, p. 64) in order to align the outer female self with her inner self. Such improvement includes developing self-confidence and self-esteem, which has resulted in the extremely profitable self-help industry. Although the first-ever self-help book *Self-Help* (1859) by Samuel Smiles was written for men, from this time onwards "self-help became a predominantly feminised genre" (Riley et al., 2012, p. 8), whereby "women are often positioned as particularly in need of help to become [an] ideal individualist self" (Riley et al., 2012, p. 4).

In the fourth episode (season five) of "Sex and the City", Charlotte is in a bookstore looking for a self-help book "Starting Over Yet Again". At the bookshelves with self-help literature, she meets two women — one of them is incessantly crying, and the other is nervously chewing her hair. This scene frightens Charlotte, especially after one of the women says that this book has *actually* helped her, which raises the question of how the women were feeling before if even now they are still in a state of such a perceptible distress? When Miranda asks her which book she was looking for, the embarrassed Charlotte does not reply anything since admitting that she needs a self-help book means recognising that she has failed to perform an image of successful millennial femininity. Nevertheless, at home then, when no one is watching her, Charlotte orders one copy on Amazon. The platform immediately starts recommending her other books according to the previous purchase, thus related to the topic of self-help: "Lonely Women No Men", "I'm Fine, Now" and "Reservations for One". Throughout the entire process of choosing and buying a book Charlotte feels shame for her feeling of inability to manage her own life — "however much work they put in themselves, women can never be confident that they have got it right" (Riley et al., 2012, p. 10).

In the postfeminist era self-improvement is regarded as a vital part of successful femininity and "not to work on the self risks [is] being understood as a [failure of femininity]" (Riley et al., 2012, p. 10). Women are caught in a constant rivalry upgrading their looks and trying to discover self-confidence. Popular culture reflects on these postfeminist practices for self-improvement by offering grotesque exaggerations of the socially approved (if not required) femininity norms, and thus questions and challenges their authoritative status.

Women's empowerment through external beauty practices and self-improvement has shattered "the conventional power hierarchy between male and female" (Bae, 2011), since in the age of postfeminism women are encouraged to pursue beauty as the essence of femininity, not for the male approval, but to get the aesthetic satisfaction and confidence themselves. Therefore, the female body can no longer be positioned as an object designed to satisfy male desire and experiences a revolutionary shift in its perception "from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze" (Gill, 2007, p. 151), which becomes an ultimate manifestation of female self-love.

The notion of narcissism as a key psychoanalytic concept was first fully developed in Freud's essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914), in which he states that "a primary narcissism is necessary for individual consciousness, the ego to be "born" (Tyler, 2005, p. 27). Although Freud's discovery is no doubt ground-breaking and highly influential in terms of psychoanalysis and study of the human psyche, his definition of

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ISSN 2410-1915 (Print) • Culture and Arts in the Modern World. Issue 23 • ISSN 2616-423X (Online)

narcissism is eminently gendered and biased. According to Freud, women have "a biological propensity to narcissism" (Tyler, 2005, p. 29), since for some "highly complicated biological reasons" women (unlike men) are unable of giving up their narcissism and reaching the "highest state of development… the state of being in love" (Tyler, 2005, p. 28). Freud argues that narcissism is the root of female neurosis and hysteria and uses narcissism and its derogatory connotations "to reinforce, rather than question, the patriarchal, familial and middle-class [femininity] ideals of the early 20th century [...]" (Tyler, 2005, p. 28) and to frame women as passive objects, which need constant patriarchal control.

Second Wave feminism is marked by the notion of "*political narcissism*" (Tyler, 2005, p. 32), as women began to act narcissistically — to speak about their personal concerns in public under the second-wave feminism slogan "the personal is political". As a consequence, the 1970s were proclaimed the decade of the new narcissism, and feminists and other equal rights supporters were framed as narcissistic and destructively self-absorbed, and thus to be blamed for the ills affecting the society — the "demise of traditional social roles for men, divorce and the subsequent breakdown of father-headed households [and] the increasing number of (middle-class) women going to work" (Tyler, 2005, p. 36).

Postfeminism, however, transforms this gendered narcissism into a tool of female emancipation and establishes self-love as an essential part of the millennial woman. This switch to the ultimate self-love, which has liberated women from the limitations of male (and male desire) centred world, is marked by a change of women's media tone from judgmental and exposing in chick magazines or television programmes to "a more affirmative discourse that emphasises the ways women need to love themselves" (Riley et al., 2012, p. 9) and a shift in consumer culture, which promotes an image of the liberated woman as the one who loves and appreciates herself. Moreover, because postfeminism is divorced from any political discourses, women can identify themselves as *already liberated* without the fear of being marginalised as "selfish" feminists (Tyler, 2005, p. 38). Paradoxically, postfeminism does the very thing for which the feminism of the Second Wave was criticised — encouraging women to be narcissistic and to find empowerment in their self-love (Tyler, 2005, p. 38).

One of the episodes of the British comedy sketch show Smack the Pony[1] features two women: one is conducting a survey for the customer database of her company, and the other agrees to take part in it and invites her to the house. In the room where the women are sitting, the walls are adorned with naked portraits of the owner of the house, who voices a request which is rather strange in this situation: "I'd rather you didn't look at the pictures if that's ok". The employee of the company agrees and promises not to pay any attention to the pictures, but it seems that keeping her word is not an easy task — the portraits depicting the naked body constantly distract her, confusing her thoughts and disturbing the interview process. The owner of the paintings repeats her request several times, emphasising especially not to look at the portrait that demonstrates her "massive minge". However, despite her ostentatious (or even fake) reluctance to show her portraits, the woman seems to be rather happy to receive all the attention: she proudly exhibits the paintings in her living room, invites a stranger to

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[1] Smack the pony — euphemistic phrase for the female masturbation.

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her house, and repeatedly demands not to look at her nude portraits, which only draws and channels more attention and provokes more curiosity of the beholder. Such hyperbolised female behaviour is a product of postfeminist discourse, which celebrates woman's self-love and willingness to demonstrate it to others. The heroine of the sketch is not ashamed of her nudity in the paintings — she enjoys her sexuality as well as she enjoys her body, which now becomes the centre not of the male (as it is in patriarchal discourse), but of her own *female gaze*.

Postfeminist narcissism also (re)shapes the dynamics of heteronormative romance, since instead of fulfilling their male partners' expectations from such a relationship, women concentrate on their selves and their body image. In the third episode (season five) of "Sex and the City", Samantha, suspecting her fiancé of cheating on her, breaks up with him. His claims that he loves her and would never betray her again Samantha meets with the reply: "I love you too, Richard. But I love myself more". By doing this Samantha makes a statement that she is ready to defend her boundaries and prioritises her own comfort over the existing relationship and perspective of future marriage. Her actions break with patriarchal expectations of toleration of male infidelity and turn female self-love into a weapon against the existing ideology.

Another example of postfeminist self-love is Robin from the comedy series "How I Met Your Mother" (2005–2014). Robin repeatedly rejects her suitor Ted, who stubbornly tries to convince her that she is the girl of his dreams. Robin, however, goes against the patriarchal expectations that Ted projects on her and does not start a relationship with him the very moment he confesses his love to her. Instead, Robin focuses on her career, self-development, and travelling — a life, which she has always wanted to lead and which Ted's manipulation and his excessive obsession with romance will only hinder. Robyn's tragedy is that eventually she cannot escape the normalising heterosexual practices and in the final episode of the series is shown to recommence the paused relationship with Ted — this decision being not her own, but rather imposed on her by a patriarchal society, Ted functioning as its living embodiment.

The shift of the female gaze from her (male) partner to her own self menaces heterosexual relationship as well as undermines patriarchal family values, and thus is to be punished in a form of female singlehood — not only Samantha and Robin, but also other female characters that have emerged out of post-feminist discourse pay a high price for their self-love in a form of female singlehood. Patriarchal society regards female self-love as a deviation from the fixed norms of femininity, and therefore stigmatises self-loving women as selfish coquettes, cold and unemotional careerists, aggressive ladettes, heavy drinkers, or just promiscuous "bitches". Postfeminism uses narcissism to contemplate on the changes in the gender power structure that empower women through their self-love. These women know about their sexuality and are proud of it; they are active sexual actors who are unwilling to compromise their own standards and reject fears projected on them by society.

Conclusion

Postfeminism is a highly controversial social and cultural phenomenon, which is referred to as a backlash against the ideas of second-wave feminism as well as a rad-

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ically new way of interacting with feminist theory and rethinking femininity and the female body. I believe that postfeminism has to be understood as a paradoxical concept, which is standing at the intersection of feminist and anti-feminist discourses. Postfeminism fetishises the female body — fit, healthy, and sexually appealing — and proclaims it as the new source of women's empowerment. The body is located at the centre of postfeminist discourse and reflects the controversies of its polemics: it is both an active subject and a sexual object, it possesses agency and is a source of female empowerment and, simultaneously, finds itself under hostile (self-)surveillance and needs constant improvement.

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ПОСТФЕМІНІСТИЧНА ЖІНОЧНІСТЬ У ПОПКУЛЬТУРНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ 1990-Х І 2000-Х РОКІВ

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Поняття постфемінізму давно стало одним із центральних і найважливіших у феміністичній теорії і досі є джерелом багатьох дискусій, обговорень та дебатів. Як важливий соціальний і культурний феномен постфемінізм активно заполонив попкультурний та медіапростір на рубежі минулого століття і одразу кардинально (пере)осмислив саму концепцію жіночності в масовій культурі 1990-х і початку 2000-х років. Суперечливий характер постфемінізму створив нову концепцію фемінності, яка перебувала поза межами як патріархального, так і феміністичного дискурсів. Мета статті — проаналізувати постфеміністичну жіночність у різних популярних телесеріалах і фільмах того часу, локалізувати їхню інтерпретацію жіночності в існуючому на той час постфеміністичному дискурсі та простежити його вплив на сучасне розуміння фемінності. Методологія дослідження складається з методів порівняльного аналізу та синтезу, які дозволили виявити основні риси та ключові поняття постфемінізму як соціокультурного явища. Історико-культурний підхід, а також системний метод дозволили зрозуміти вплив постфемінізму на масову культуру і відслідкувати його взаємозв'язки з публічними медіадискурсами. Елементи критичного та контент-аналізу, а також метод декомпозиції комплексних процесів були використані для оцінки постфеміністичної теорії як концептуально-методологічної основи для подальшого аналізу медіапродуктів у їхньому взаємозв'язку з постфеміністичними дискурсами. Наукова новизна полягає в аналізі унікального набору чуттєвостей, характерних для постфемінізму, і застосуванні цих теоретичних знань для переосмислення жіночих образів у дискурсах поп-культури, пропонуючи таким чином новий підхід до розуміння жіночності за межами як патріархальних наративів, так і фемінізму другої і третьої хвиль. Висновки статті дають новий погляд на популярні та відомі продукти медіаіндустрії 1990-х і 2000-х років, «переглядають» їх у рамках постфеміністичного підходу та пропонують новий ракурс інтерпретації фемінності на рубежі минулого століття.

Ключові слова: фемінізм; постфемінізм; жіночність; поп-культура; медіа