

Utilizing Existing Postfeminist Framework to Explore a Sexualized Media Test Case: “Man Needs a Woman” by Maty Noyes

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Abstract

Postfeminism is simply referred to as the most recent wave of feminism, but feminist scholars have failed to reach a standardized definition that recognizes the nuances of sexuality, media, and culture present within the field. This paper utilizes the postfeminist framework of two prominent feminist scholars: Rosalind Gill and Feona Attwood. Specifically, this paper draws from Gill’s interpretation of postfeminism and Attwood’s interpretation of the sexualization of culture and the overlap between the two theories. Rather than attempt to offer a concrete definition in such a rapidly evolving field, this paper offers a music video from a lesser-known pop artist, Maty Noyes, as a test case to operationalize the theories of Gill and Attwood. The purpose of this work is to evaluate the applicative success of Gill and Attwood while offering an example of the evaluation of a media text as a postfeminism phenomenon.

1 INTRODUCTION

Western modes of political and independent thought have become inextricably tied to overwhelming amounts of daily media consumption. Feminism is not an exception to this transformation of thought processing. A new wave developed within the past decades has been termed “postfeminism,” which recognizes the individual as a neoliberal subject; this is in contrast to previous waves that centered on symbolic societal equality between the sexes. Rather than become passive agents of this change, feminists and feminist scholars alike must actively analyze the texts informing such a change. Therefore, this paper acts as a test case to apply the theories of Feona Attwood’s sexualization of media and Rosalind Gill’s postfeminism to a singular piece of media—the music video “Man Needs a Woman” by artist Maty Noyes. The purpose of such an application is to explore how a seemingly innocuous piece of media could be interpreted as a display of sexualized postfeminism. While other applications may apply to media pieces reaching wide audiences or deemed as culturally influential, this paper offers an analysis of an isolated media piece that could be applied to a wider range of similarly isolated texts.

One of the hallmark changes that occurred within academic discussions regarding feminism is the inclusion of the sexualization of media as a defining feature. While there is some dissensus among scholars as to what shape this new form of sexualization has

taken, there is general agreement about its results. At the most basic level, the sexualization of media is the mainstreaming of sex through the development of new forms of public intimacy that view sexual practices as a form of both play and pleasure¹. This newfound public intimacy stands in direct contrast to former views of sexual acts as inherently dirty, meant to be hidden and contained privately within heterosexual, monogamous partnerships.

While the direct impacts of public sexualization have not yet been empirically studied, theories surrounding long-lasting side effects have been presented. Feminist scholars, including Attwood and Gill, have compiled possible side effects, including the illusion of empowerment, self-surveillance, the inability to contest modern feminist viewpoints directly, and the resocialization of younger generations. This process of resocialization can be seen in the prominence of surgical alterations to fix what is deemed broken and by targeting children and adolescents with ads that flaunt sexuality as required for femininity—just two examples of the increasing prominence of sexualization in society heightened by media influence. The sexualization of culture has, therefore, made it more difficult to grasp what it means to be a woman outside of conventional displays.

The primary debate within modern feminism lies in relation to the restrictive nature of postfeminism. As Attwood explores in her work, current debates regarding sexualization highlight whether an increased

sexualized culture has the potential to democratize sexual discourse or reduce sexual pleasure to a commodified performance—"an impersonation of sex"¹. There lies a problem within this debate structure as it continues to categorize sexualization as fitting into an either/or response¹ without necessary extension beyond the binaries that feminism originally sought to deconstruct—man versus woman; masculine versus feminine; superior versus inferior; and now sexual versus sexualized.

Therefore, there needs to be contextual analyses of individual examples of sexualized media to understand the extent to which current debates lack a much-needed answer. The theoretical frameworks of Feona Attwood and Rosalind Gill offer a structured method to explore the intersection between sexualized media and postfeminism. Ultimately, this paper acts as a test case to apply such theoretical frameworks and determine the extent to which this particular media could be deemed postfeminist—offering a starting point and method to resolve existing debates.

2 MEDIA TEST CASE

With approximately 100,000 views on YouTube², "Man Needs a Woman" is not a particularly influential piece of media in comparison to music videos such as "Dark Horse" by Katy Perry or "WAP" by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, but it provides insight into a small celebrity's interpretation of sexuality, not yet entirely constrained by popular culture expectations. This intermediate boundary between celebrity and ordinary provides a unique, untouched insight into the effects of media sexualization.

The singer, Maty Noyes, rose to minor notoriety after being featured on The Weeknd's Grammy Award-winning song "Angel." Her most recent album, *The Feeling's Mutual*, released in September of 2021, focused on the exploration of romance as an individualized journey. In interviews discussing the release of her debut album, Noyes described music as an outlet to hyper-analyze her experiences, heal through things, and understand herself³. Her recent album specifically analyzes her experiences in relationships—both romantically and platonically.

One of the few songs from her debut album granted an accompanying music video, posted in 2021, is "Man Needs a Woman"². It centers on the conclusion of a recent relationship and a woman's feelings of being used. The song's lyrics lay out several transgressions committed by the male counterpart as he "only loved [her] for [her] body" and "only listen[s] when [she's] naked"⁴. Here, the singer positions herself as worthy of a relationship absent of sex and physical intimacy. Ultimately, Maty Noyes describes the relationship as a needed learning experience "because [she] learned so

many lessons from [his] love"⁴. The visual music video is where the majority of the overt sexualization occurs.

The video begins with Noyes laying seductively across the floor, surrounded by objects such as fruit, which she will later stroke while watching the camera; playing cards—of which she will later burn the king; flowers; an open clam shell with a pearl; and a large anaconda. Most of the objects seem to be related to commonly known symbols of femininity and womanhood, both good and bad, such as fruit representing fertility, flowers representing a traditional delicate woman, a clam representing natural aphrodisiacs, and a snake representing Eve's biblical transgressions (Figures 1 and 2). Alongside consistent symbolic allusions, there is a repetitive focus on certain aspects of Noyes's body. She changes clothing several times, but all the outfits are intentionally provocative and include sheer bodysuits, metallic panels, and emphasize her breasts and vagina. Only one outfit exclusively covers these regions.



Figure 1. A still photo from the opening scene of the music video.



Figure 2. A still photo from the opening credits of the music video.

The filming aesthetic is that of an amateur filmmaker, utilizing shaky zoom-ins, blurry movements, and a harkening to old film static, all of which is reminiscent of amateur-style pornographic filming—an element central to Attwood's discussion of the emerging prominence of porn-style imagery in mainstream media¹ (Figures 2 and 3). As the camera focuses on Noyes's

lips, breasts, and hips, she enhances her movements by spreading her legs, laying forward on her stomach, and stroking herself and the objects surrounding her (Figures 1 and 4). When her lips are included in close-up shots, she appears to gasp the lyrics as she sings, amplifying the sexual emphasis she places on certain words. Perhaps the most sexually explicit scenes are paired with running water as she dances seductively in a diamond thong with orchid flowers used as nipple coverings (Figure 5).

None of the near nudity appears crude, however, as it follows societal conventions by covering explicit sexual organs and is paired with “classy” diamonds emanating a sense of wealth (Figures 4 and 5). However, this interpretation of “crude” could be swayed by her positioning as a white woman, with women of color not given the same abilities to push the boundaries of “graceful” sexuality; unfortunately, Attwood and Gill do not delve directly into discussions of intersectionality in the texts used for this analysis.

The music video was directed and edited by Anastasia Velicescu, and the creative designer behind the concept was Paige Strabala, both women². The fact that the main creative individuals behind the concept and shooting of the video were women lends itself to both Gill and Attwood’s argument of self-sexualization—explored later in this paper. Maty Noyes has an Instagram following of around 150,000; although she does not have enough coverage to receive comments other than those praising her work regularly, it is notable to mention that the most interacted-with post leading up to the release of the single is one in which she is clad in the aforementioned diamond thong and flowers⁵ (Figure 5).



Figure 3. A still photo from the music video featuring a closeup of lips and artist name.



Figure 4. A still photo from the music video including Noyes in glitter bodysuit.



Figure 5. A still photo from the music video featuring Noyes in a diamond thong, stroking her body; the photo was posted on Instagram.

3 FRAMEWORK: ROSALIND GILL POSTFEMINIST MEDIA

This paper specifically utilizes the 2007 work of Rosalind Gill titled *Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility*. While published almost seventeen years ago, the piece is a hallmark analysis of postfeminism by providing a unique definition continuously used in contemporary discussions of feminism, particularly in relation to media texts. Gill specializes in analyzing the interplay between psychology, media studies, and feminist theory to provide a longstanding method of analysis for media texts, ranging from social media posts to movies. Her most recently published works, not utilized in this paper, explore both the expansive definition of postfeminist media and the meaning of an increasingly sexualized culture by using media as the moderating piece between the two fields—providing a successful example of the application of her early scholarship explored in this paper. Therefore, her initial analysis of postfeminism, alongside her application to feminist media, provides a strong theoretical framework for studying the specific media text in this paper.

Gill begins her definition of postfeminism by analyzing the existing causes of dissensus among scholars, namely the way it has been used to describe a theoretical position, the birth of a new form of feminism, and/or a regressive political stance. Previous scholars have been unable to provide a holistic definition of postfeminism that avoids ignoring the arguments of one aspect or utilizing the arguments of two contradictory aspects. For example, postfeminism cannot exist as a practiced political stance while simultaneously existing as a theoretical framework. Similarly, postfeminism cannot be defined as a purely theoretical position without actively ignoring its implications outside of academia. Therefore, rather than trying to fit postmodern feminism into one of the existing categories, Gill proposes a new way to imagine postfeminism: as a sensibility. Here, Gill uses the term sensibility to mean a cultural or emotional way to perceive the world via feelings, experiences, and perceptions. Within this framework, postfeminism is not a fixed ideology—as other scholars have attempted to define it—but rather an evolving method of coping with and understanding modern gender ideologies.

Gill also ventures into the concept of sexualization and provides a stable definition for analysis. She defines sexualization as two-fold. The first aspect refers to the proliferation of discourse surrounding sex and sexuality, particularly by media. The second aspect is the presentation of erotic female bodies in public spaces, once again proliferated by media. Therefore, sexualization has infiltrated both the discussions and physical manifestations of media.

A defining feature of postfeminism and modern sexualization centers around the articulation of sexualization as an empowering choice. Previous modes of feminism have posited sexualization as something to abhor—a coerced manipulation of the body. In contrast, postmodern feminism depicts sexualization as a form of power rather than oppression, representing a shift in the operation of power from an external, uniquely male gaze to a self-policing gaze inherent to the woman⁶.

Gill connects postfeminism and a false sense of power by arguing that postfeminism operates as a form of neoliberalism. Gill argues that postfeminism operates between articulations of feminism and anti-feminism, distinctly dependent on a language of individualism inherent to neoliberalism⁶. Gill is articulating a direct connection between the illusion of power provided to the subject in both neoliberalism and postfeminism.

Gill defines neoliberalism as a type of governmentality that emphasizes free will, individualism, and empowerment at the expense of recognizing societal inequities⁶. Postfeminism operates within neoliberalism as it utilizes the concept of free will and individualism to exploit gendered expectations placed on women. For example, popular culture expects women to fit within a

binary of accepted femininity while deceptively displaying it as a choice. As Gill posits, if women are following individually and autonomously generated desires, why does the desired final result look so similar⁶? Therefore, the “ideal disciplinary subject of neoliberalism is feminine” as male bodies are not expected to conform to the same social scripts as female bodies⁶. Postfeminism victimizes the submissive subject under the guise of self-empowerment.

Ultimately, Gill outlines eight stable features of postfeminism within her definition as a sensibility: (1) femininity as bodily property; (2) a shift from objectification to subjectification; (3) emphasis on self-surveillance; (4) focus on individualism and empowerment; (5) a makeover paradigm; (6) resurgence of natural sexual difference; (7) sexualization of culture; (8) consumerism and commodification. This paper will emphasize Gill’s first, second, third, and fourth pillars of postfeminism to analyze the media text while maintaining her seventh pillar as a connecting thread to Attwood.

4 APPLICATION OF GILL

4.1 Femininity as Bodily Property and Objectification to Subjectification

Beginning with femininity as bodily property, Gill recognizes a recent belief of possessing a freely sexualized body as a crucial source of self-identity, which parallels Attwood’s later discussion of sex being central to the creation of self. Gill explores this theory through the lens of the body as an artistic canvas that creates an image having little to do with how one feels. Inside the text, this concept is supported by the discrepancy between the delicate, emotional intensity of the song paired with a sexualized image of the singer. Noyes’s original lyrically emotional intimacy is replaced with a visual sexual façade. The question arises as to why the creative direction of the video adopted this form. Gill supplies an answer through her second concept of a shift from objectification to subjectification. Postfeminism offers an interpretation of female sexuality as a transition from being sex objects to desiring sexual subjects:

Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so” which “represents a shift in the way that power operates from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze⁶.

Noyes embodies this through her decision to pair an intimate song with sexualized images. She pairs the statement that the sexual manipulation and abuse she

experienced throughout the relationship caused her to “[seek] help ‘cause [he] put [her] through hell” alongside imagery of her spread legs². Rather than recover from the trauma of forced sexualization that occurs while being used for her body, she gives into the gaze and attempts to utilize it to her advantage.

By being labeled “active agents,” Gill explores the phenomena of women becoming monitors of sexual and emotional relationships⁶. Here, she is employing the concept that women, rather than men, are the actors that must maintain purity regarding sexual acts—such as avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases—as well as guard their sexual reputations and partners’ sexual self-esteem. Noyes becomes a monitor since she “learned so many lessons from [his] love”⁴ and is responsible for growing from them. Despite the unloving and arguably abusive relationship Noyes experienced, she was still expected to grow and learn from the experience to become—what Gill terms—a new ethical self. This point is further emphasized as Noyes repeatedly states that she will become a better woman for another future relationship, indicating that the search for a new ethical self is for an external entity—another man—rather than for her personal growth.

4.2 Self-Surveillance

Gill describes self-surveillance as not only surveillance of the body but of what constitutes womanhood and femininity, with postfeminism exhibiting an increased intensity of self-surveillance, surveillance in new spheres of life, and the requirement to transform interior life. Surveillance, in this case, relates to Maty Noyes’s decision to display her private feelings, emotions, and experiences for a general audience as a highly unnatural human act. Noyes’s work has a multitude of examples pertaining to the rising intensity of self-surveillance as she employs societal principles expected of women. Through her lyrics, Noyes states that she did not love him for his money—so she was morally intact, not desiring sex—a constant idea that women must restrain the desires of men and that she learned from the love—which implies that she needed the lesson regardless of its impact. At times, she appears almost apologetic in nature, falling into the status quo of a respectable, surveilled woman.

The creation of the song and accompanying music video pertain to postfeminism’s surveillance in new spheres of life. As Noyes has mentioned in interviews³, her purpose for writing the song was to explore and understand her past relationships. Therefore, the music video acts as a publicly open-ended exploration into Noyes’ personal life, possible only in a society built on prolific media distribution. The third concept of transforming interior life is seen in Noyes’ self-made requirement to learn from the relationship and the earlier dis-

cussed necessity to become a new ethical self.

4.3 Individualism and Empowerment

A unique aspect of postfeminism is the shift from femininity as a sociocultural concept to one defined by bodily property. This shift culminates in an understanding of sexuality as a source of innate power within feminine bodies. Noyes displays her body as a method of liberation from a past relationship. The sexualization of her body through poses and clothing acts as a message of liberation and freedom from both her past relationship and societal expectations of how she should present herself. However, the feminine body is only allowed to be a source of unruly power within certain limitations set by the societal norms Noyes aims to evade.

As Gill mentions in her work, women’s bodies are scrutinized to a larger extent than men’s bodies and become at constant risk of “failing.” A feminine body can either operate successfully under societal expectations or ineffectually while transcending expectations. Therefore, the body as a source of innate power is an illusion; it is either afforded power within a patriarchal system or stripped of power outside of one. Noyes presents her body openly to display her innate feminine power. Yet, certain areas must remain covered—lest her video be deemed pornographic—and her body is displayed in a specific way to please the audience. Alongside the further implication of self-surveillance, Gill points out that postfeminism has constructed the female body as “a window to the individual’s interior life,” thus further deconstructing the idea of the body as individual power⁶.

Gill ironically utilizes the text of a colleague who states, “If a thong makes you feel fabulous, wear it”⁷ to provide an example of the illusion of empowerment defined by the watchful eye of male desire. Noyes explicitly falls into this trap as she wears a thong to appear sexually empowered, but thongs have no innate correlation to self-empowerment; rather, they are a marketed commodity made to sexualize women in the bedroom. Her disillusion is displayed by her contradictory self-empowerment paired with lyrics stating that she still needs a man, just not this one⁴.

5 FRAMEWORK: FEONA ATTWOOD

This paper specifically utilizes excerpts from Feona Attwood’s 2009 work *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*. Feona Attwood is a professor of media and culture studies with published work emphasizing the interplay between media texts—specifically porn studies—and the increased sexualization of culture. Attwood loosely defines sexualization of culture as the proliferation of visible sexuality and sex within mainstream culture. She includes a unique perspective

regarding the impact of technology within the space of sexualized media by exploring how technology has been particularly influential in accelerated distribution.

Attwood explores the transformation of sexualization and culture through a similar vein of sensibilities as Gill. Attwood argues that sex has absorbed a new meaning outside of cultivating a relationship between two individuals. Sex now exists, she argues, as a form of self-expression and transient pleasure—a unique facet of modern feminism. Attwood’s articulation of the sexualization of media is presented in contrast to existing discussions of sexualization as a social problem. Defining it as a social problem, Attwood argues, ignores its complexity, cultural context, and risks moral panic and censorship. Sexualized media should instead be approached as the complex and implicative concept it is.

The purpose of her development of an alternative framework is to dive further into the discussion of cultural sexualization as a method for reading media texts such as the one explored in this paper. Her understanding of postfeminism aligns with Gill’s as she agrees with the concept of overlapping neoliberalism and postfeminist understandings of empowerment. Similar to Gill, Attwood explores the context of neoliberalism as a false form of individualism parallel to modern feminism. However, she also offers a further exploration through the concept of sexual citizenship, and she warns against abandoning media as a site for contextualizing sex and disrupting narratives of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ sex. In other words, Attwood explores an alternative to inevitable neoliberalism by offering it as an existing pathway to the development of informed citizenship and expansion of sexual conceptions beyond academia to produce informed sexual media consumers. This paper’s utilization of Attwood’s framework is less structured than Gill’s, but it offers an expanded exploration into the specifically sexualized nature of the media text.

6 APPLICATION OF ATTWOOD

6.1 Pornographic Imagery

Attwood forefronts the argument that sex has become a weakened form of self-pleasure, and there needs to be a reimagining of sexual ethics applicable to recurring discussions of media sexualization. She stresses the idea that a pure rejection of sexualization would be a failure to the advancement of feminist studies in an effort to remind her readers that sexualization is an inescapable part of modern media. Aversion amplifies negative consequences operating through ignorance.

She supports this thesis by discussing the proliferation of pornographic styles within mainstream media, including music videos. As mentioned in the exploration of the test case, the filming style of the music

video recalls amateur pornography with shaky zoom-ins, homemade video static, and overly zoomed-into segments of Noyes’ naked body. Furthermore, Noyes utilizes a “porn look” in her video by including images of sexualized symbols, wearing clothing that would have once been relegated to sex workers, and dancing seductively for a general audience.

The music video follows Attwood’s idea of commercial sex being gentrified within the “high street”¹. Noyes is extraordinarily successful at presenting her sexuality as something that avidly avoids disgraceful connotations of nudity by covering societally “crude” body parts and adorning her body with objects of wealth. Although she is wearing a thong, it is made of individual diamond stones and paired with gold rings complimenting her “tasteful” makeup and flowery pasties. She is afforded the ability to present her sexuality in this way with little pushback and gentrify porn-like clothing into symbols of wealth and status due to her operation within white feminism.

6.2 Sexualized Self-Value

The sexualization of media has resulted in the publicization of intimacy in a way that forces individuals to rely on their sexualized bodies for self-value:

Whether it is domesticated in intimate relationships between couples or let loose in hedonistic and uncommitted sexual episodes, sex is often now seen as central to the creation and expression of an individual’s self¹.

Noyes embodies both situations explained by Attwood. Noyes describes the story of an intimate, domesticated relationship where the male partner used his girlfriend as a source of consistent sexual pleasure. She would give him what he desired as a way to feel loved and in control since he would “only listen when [she’s] naked”⁴. The sex expected of her from her partner became a direct method of her self-expression as it was a necessary precursor for her to share her otherwise ignored emotions. The visuals of the music video approach Attwood’s other example of uncommitted sexual episodes as Noyes strokes her body and publicly displays her sexuality to regain control of the “self.”

Attwood’s point about the dangers of finding individuality through explicit sexuality is solidified by Noyes stating that she will “be the woman for someone who’s nothing like you”⁴. This is where it becomes apparent that Noyes was simply relying on the illusion of self-empowerment as she is still committed to finding a new relationship in which she can define herself through mutual sexuality once again. Therefore, Noyes falls into the consequence that Attwood outlines as the disciplined, sexy female body becoming the key display of women’s

power within modern feminism, which, rather than empowering, requires an internalization of an unattainable and oppressive view of female sexuality¹.

At the most basic level, Noyes's display of sexuality is a display for the male gaze to spite her former lover and attract the next. The sexualization of media calls for the incorporation of sexualized bodies in spaces that they did not previously occupy. While Noyes may feel privately empowered by her body, her display of it alongside the lyrics in the video calls into question the reason for including the images of her body. This is where the text becomes a test case for the debate within postfeminism: to either advocate for an anti-porn stance to avoid unnecessary sexualization of bodies or to advocate for a pro-porn stance to correlate bodies with empowerment. Ultimately, Attwood argues that both cases fail to recognize the nuances of texts such as "Man Needs a Woman." Attwood offers a solution to the issues she presents in her work—to "analyze the role of porn industry in the mainstreaming of sex"¹ and its subsequent consequences. Thus, recognizing the façade of sexual power presented in this music video becomes a first step in the application of Attwood's theory.

7 CONCLUSION

The proliferation of sexualized media has undoubtedly transformed the discourse within modern feminism, and it has resulted in a new wave of feminism that struggles to articulate a solidified stance regarding such media. Some feminist scholars view widespread sexualization as a form of oppression and degradation of women. However, other scholars believe such arguments operate under the category of "prudish" as there is a blurred line drawn between correct and incorrect forms of sexual liberty. Ultimately, the combination of Rosalind Gill's and Feona Attwood's works surrounding postfeminism and the sexualization of media offer a new way of understanding texts such as "Man Needs a Woman."

It is not the display of sexuality within the music video that presents a problem; it is the underlying reason for this display. This is why both Gill and Attwood forefront the concept of postfeminism as a sensibility and exploration into how existing social structures, expectations, and the history of feminism are necessary confounding factors in the creation of sexualized media texts. The music video explored in this paper does not exist within a vacuum of overt versus covert sexuality. Rather, it operates within the complex ways women have come to understand their sexuality and choose to display it.

Ultimately, "Man Needs a Woman" can be understood as a postfeminism text—through the framework of Gill—that operates within the sexualization of me-

dia—through the framework of Attwood. It is through the exploration of singular pieces of texts that feminist scholars can begin to resolve the vast divide between anti-feminist prude and pro-porn liberation as they search for the underlying reasons for displays of public sexuality and how such displays ultimately affect the individual. Further explorations into similar media texts, both influential and isolated, should utilize a more robust collection of existing feminist scholarship to develop a conversation between scholars and continue to expand the debate.

8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper began as a paper written for Dr. Rachel Liberman's "Media, Power, and Sexualization" undergraduate course. It makes no value statement regarding the media test case but, instead, offers it as the basis for a method of exploring existing postfeminist frameworks.

9 EDITOR'S NOTES

This article was peer-reviewed.

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