

Commodified State Feminism: The Entanglements of Feminist Commodity Activism and Feminist Politics in a Nordic Welfare State

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This article analyzes the entanglements of feminist commodity activism and state feminism. Feminist commodity activism refers to consumption and commodified communication as modes of feminist political participation. Earlier research on these topics has focused on the business sector and on media and popular culture, largely sidelining the state as a site of feminism. This article addresses the increasingly close relations between consumerism and state politics and asks how feminist commodity activism interacts with state feminism. It draws on two empirical cases in the Nordic welfare state of Finland. The first is Uhana Design, a small-scale fashion business, and its Girl Gang campaign that leans on state feminism. The second is Finland's former leading female politicians' engagements with feminist fashion. By analyzing these cases via three theoretical lenses, business, popular, and state feminism, this article develops the notion of commodified state feminism, paying attention to economic, cultural, and political dimensions of feminist commodity activism and state feminism. It also argues that commodified state feminism is emblematic of the current political context, in which the boundaries between market and politics have become blurred.

Cet article analyse les liens qui unissent étroitement la consommation engagée féministe au féminisme d'État. Dans des travaux de recherche antérieurs, la consommation engagée féministe fait référence à la consommation et la commercialisation de la communication comme mode de participation politique féministe. Ces discussions se sont concentrées sur le secteur commercial, les médias et la culture populaire, et ont majoritairement écarté l'État comme site de féminisme. Cet article traite des relations de plus en plus étroites entre le consumérisme et la politique de l'État, et s'intéresse aux interactions entre la consommation engagée féministe et le féminisme d'État. Il se fonde sur deux cas empiriques en Finlande, un État-providence nordique. D'abord, la campagne Girl Gand d'Uhana Design, une marque de mode à taille humaine, qui s'appuie sur le féminisme d'État. Ensuite, l'engagement des principales femmes politiques finlandaises à l'égard de la mode féministe. En adoptant trois points de vue théoriques différents pour analyser ces cas, le féminisme commercial, populaire et d'État, cet article développe la notion de féminisme d'État appliqué à la consommation, en tenant compte des dimensions économiques, culturelles et politiques de la consommation engagée

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féministe et du féminisme d'État. Il affirme par ailleurs que le féminisme d'État appliqué à la consommation est représentatif du contexte politique actuel, dans lequel les frontières entre le marché et la politique s'estompent.

Este artículo analiza los lazos de unión entre el activismo feminista mercantil y el feminismo de Estado. Existen investigaciones anteriores que, con activismo feminista mercantil, se han referido al consumo y a la comunicación mercantilizada como modo de participación política feminista. Estas discusiones han estado centradas en el sector empresarial, así como en los medios de comunicación y en la cultura popular, dejando de lado, en gran medida, al Estado como un lugar del feminismo. Este artículo aborda las relaciones cada vez más estrechas entre el consumismo y la política de Estado y se pregunta cómo interactúa el activismo feminista mercantil con el feminismo de Estado. El artículo se basa en dos casos empíricos procedentes de Finlandia, un Estado de bienestar nórdico. El primero es Uhana Design, una pequeña empresa de moda, y su campaña Girl Gang que se apoya en el feminismo estatal. El segundo es el compromiso de las principales mujeres políticas de Finlandia con la moda feminista. Este artículo desarrolla, mediante el análisis de estos casos a través de tres lentes teóricos: el feminismo empresarial, el feminismo popular y el feminismo de Estado, la noción de feminismo de Estado mercantilizado, prestando atención a las dimensiones económicas, culturales y políticas del activismo feminista mercantil y el feminismo de Estado. También argumenta que el feminismo de Estado mercantilizado es emblemático del contexto político actual, en el que los límites entre el mercado y la política se han difuminado.

Introduction

In recent years, feminism has become increasingly visible in a wide range of spheres from media to popular and corporate culture. One manifestation of this is what Jemima Repo (2020) has termed “feminist commodity activism,” consumption and commodified communication as mode of feminist political participation. Feminist commodity activism aligns with the emergence of commodity feminism and commodity activism, in which political engagement and brand culture have become entangled and consumption is presented as a viable form of political and social participation (Cole and Hribar 1995; Lazar 2006; Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee 2012; Roberts 2015). It also aligns with recent popular revival of feminist discourse (Banet-Weiser 2018; Rottenberg 2018). Feminist commodity activism varies from 750€ “We should all be feminists” Dior T-shirts to local entrepreneurs selling hand-made jewelry with feminist slogans; what makes them feminist commodity activism is that feminism itself is being marketed, and consumption is the default mode of political participation (Repo 2020). While commodification of political participation has been a topic of some recent research, less attention has been given to the increasingly close relations between consumerism and state politics. In this article, we analyze the entanglements between feminist commodity activism and state feminism, referring to the alliances between feminist and gender equality policy agencies and feminist movement, and their effectiveness in getting state responses to their demands (e.g., Hernes 1987). Our study is located in Finland, a Nordic welfare state with a long history of state feminism (Hollı 2006).

Recent research on state feminism in the Nordic context has stressed that as a result of economization of state and governance, state feminism has become compromised and co-opted (e.g., Elomäki et al. 2021; Kantola and Squires 2012; Stoltz 2021). While these studies have addressed various processes of economization of the

state, including new forms of governance, New Public Management, and weakening of state protection, they have paid less attention to the converging of consumerism and state politics. In the ongoing welfare state retrenchment, state protection is increasingly replaced with empowerment via consumption: Citizens are addressed as consumers and customers who can exercise their civil rights by choosing between private service producers (Clarke 2005) and enhance their human capital by making responsible choices in education and labor market (Brown 2015). In this article, we address these shifts and their effects on feminism by analyzing the entanglements of feminist commodity activism and state feminism.

We focus on fashion as a key site of feminist commodity activism and unfold its entanglements with state feminism via two empirical cases. The first considers the mobilization of state feminist discourses and images in the branding strategies of Uhana Design (hereafter Uhana), a small and sustainable Finnish clothing business. The second focuses on the connections between feminist fashion and feminist politics by focusing on the recent Finnish government, especially its five female ministers and party leaders. These cases demonstrate symbiosis between feminist businesses and feminist politicians, benefiting both parties by affirming and validating their commitment to feminism and gender equality policy.

By analyzing these cases via three theoretical lenses, *business*, *popular*, and *state feminism*, we develop the notion of “commodified state feminism.” It refers to the entanglements of feminist commodity activism and state feminism and their economic, cultural, and political dimensions. With commodified state feminism, we stress that changes in state feminism interact with broader changes in economy–society relations, including popular and media culture. In doing so, it takes different forms in different contexts. We also stress that feminist commodity activism is not automatically depoliticized, as is often suggested, but can, at least in some cases, address structural inequalities and engage with state politics. We argue that commodified state feminism is emblematic of the current political context, in which the boundaries between market and politics have become increasingly blurred.

By shedding light on commodified state feminism, we expand previous literature on feminist commodity activism by focusing on two previously underexamined groups: feminist small-scale entrepreneurs and feminist politicians. Earlier research has concluded that the transformative potential of feminist commodity activism is diluted, and collective struggles against oppressive structures are replaced with individualized and corporatized feminist goals (e.g., Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee 2012; Repo 2020). It has also shown how especially big transnational fashion corporations and designer brands co-opt feminist slogans to sell their commodities produced by poor women in the Global South (Cole and Hribar 1995; Roberts 2015). A growing body of research has focused on feminist small-scale businesses that emphasize socially and environmentally sustainable production and ethical consumption, showing how producing feminist commodities is paired with an individualized and depoliticized understanding of feminism (e.g., Lauri 2021).

We complicate this dominant interpretation by showing that marketization of feminism does not automatically foreclose the possibility for collective struggles against structural inequalities. Feminist businesses have not only used their branding strategies for selling their products but also for promoting individualized and market-friendly feminist projects such as women’s self-esteem. They have also, sometimes, drawn attention to pressing structural gender equality problems, including gender inequality in the labor market, violence against women, and structural racism. Feminist commodity activism is also not restricted on businesses and media and popular culture, but has engaged with state politics. We analyze the engagements between feminist-branded businesses, women politicians and state feminism. We ask, first, how feminist commodity activism interacts with state feminism. Second, we ask how commodified state feminism reflects the current political context, especially the entanglements of consumerism and politics.

In what follows, we discuss our theoretical framework: business feminism, popular feminism, and state feminism, and develop a notion on commodified state feminism. After that, we present our two empirical cases and situate them in the Finnish context. We analyze first Uhana's Girl Gang campaign, and second the government's leading politicians' engagements with feminist fashion. In Conclusion, we discuss commodified state feminism, drawing attention to its open-ended, context-specific, and dynamic nature.

Economic, Cultural, and Political Dimensions of Commodified Feminism

Our theoretical framework draws from three distinct but interconnected feminist discussions that have addressed political engagement via consumption. They are business feminism, which we locate in feminist political economies; popular feminism, which we locate in feminist media and cultural studies; and state feminism, which we locate in feminist political sciences. From these discussions, we develop the notion of commodified state feminism, paying attention to economic, cultural, and political dimensions of feminist commodity activism and state feminism.

Business Feminism

First, we draw from discussions concerning business feminism to pay attention to the economic aspects of commodified feminism. A broad body of feminist political economy literature has analyzed how feminism in the context of neoliberal capitalism has allied with market forces. Nancy Fraser (2013: 217–223) has suggested that in this process, feminism has become watered down, co-opted and “a strange shadowy version of itself” (ibid. 224), as women's emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation. More specifically, discussions on business feminism have unpacked how financial institutions and the corporate sector have co-opted feminist objectives and ethos. Adrienne Roberts (2015) has coined the term “transnational business feminism” to depict the growth of a pro-capitalist and business-oriented feminism. Feminism and gender equality have been employed by transnational economic organizations, institutions, and corporations such as the World Economic Forum (Elias 2013), Goldman Sachs and the World Bank (Roberts and Soederberg 2012). Since the 2000s, these economic actors have taken an interest in issues related to gender equality and women's empowerment, developing programs and projects encouraging women to be entrepreneurs or develop their human capital. In this framing, key feminist values like empowerment have been reinterpreted as a way to encourage privileged women to “lean in” and seek leadership in previously masculine domains such as the financial sector (True 2016). Business feminism reproduces and consolidates an economized view of feminism and gender equality, harnessing them into the promotion of market-led forms of economic growth while ignoring racial and class inequalities and how their own practices reproduce gender inequalities (Roberts and Soederberg 2012; Elias 2013; Roberts 2015).

Feminism is also deployed by businesses to generate profit as global companies market their products with implicit, feminist-sounding promises of self-empowerment, self-esteem, and self-acceptance (Cole and Hribar 1995; Roberts 2015). More recently, companies have also started to explicitly embrace the word “feminism” in their marketing, although they typically refrain from addressing the power structures that have caused women's oppression in the first place or the gendered unequal conditions of commodity production and consumption (Banet-Weiser 2018; Repo 2020). In addition to global corporations, business feminism also concerns self-proclaimed feminists with small-scale businesses selling feminist commodities. Feminism in their business refers to enhancing sisterhood in business, producing commodities ethically, and donating to charity. This local and

small-scale business feminism is, in many respects, different from mass-production of feminist commodities in the sweatshops of the Global South. Still, commodity feminism forecloses capitalist consumerism as an object of critique and target of intervention (Lauri 2021).

Business feminism also concerns commodity activism, in which ethical and political stances are rendered marketable in the form of consumer products, often accompanied by ethical production and charity (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee 2012; Hawkins 2012). In its feminist form commodity activism renders commodities and consumption as empowering for women. Rather than selling items with feminist-sounding promises, feminism itself is being marketed: consumers can take part in a feminist movement and protest by buying products that are branded feminist (Repo 2020). In our analysis, we complicate the concept of feminist commodity activism by showing that instead of being restricted in the sphere of consumption, it can also address and promote gender equality policies within the state.

Popular Feminism

Second, we draw from scholarship on popular feminism to pay attention to the cultural aspects of commodified feminism. The analyses of business feminism have sometimes been accompanied by the concept of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018; Banet-Weiser et al. 2020). Together, they illustrate recent popular and corporate-friendly revivals of feminist discourse. Particularly in the digital media culture and among young women, feminism has emerged as a cool and fashionable self-identification (Favaro and Gill 2018). Popular feminism is distinctively individualized, as it calls for a subject who identifies as feminist and is aware of current gender inequalities, but accepts responsibility for overcoming them (Rottenberg 2018). Commodified feminism aligns with such individualizing imperatives of self-realization and self-improvement through consumption and neoliberal feminist subjectivity: autonomous, individual, and choice-making.

Popular feminism places feminism in an economy of visibility, where feminist slogans and commodities circulate widely. This visibility is particularly highlighted in digital spaces and in social media platforms, where aestheticized and mediatized versions of feminism have become widespread. Popular feminism has been criticized for stopping with visibility and failing to challenge structural inequalities or channel feminist aesthetics into activism in a meaningful way. (Banet-Weiser 2018) Such an aestheticized feminism, however, contributes to the commodification of feminism. Popular feminism helps capturing central dynamics of commodified feminism, including how feminist practices, from marches and hashtag activism to feminist commodities, become accessible to the broader public. Popular feminism is also associated with a distinct affective register: While feminist struggles for social justice and gender equality might be seen as stemming from anger and frustration with unequal societal structures, popular feminism avoids provoking negative feelings and emphasizes happy, upbeat feminism, making popular feminism lucrative for corporations seeking to enhance sales (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020). We employ the concept of popular feminism to understand changing state feminism in the wider cultural context, in which feminism circulates in a visible, happy, and non-threatening form.

State Feminism

Third, we draw from scholarship on state feminism to pay attention to the political aspects of commodified feminism. The discussions around business feminism and popular feminism have focused on the business sector and on media and popular culture, largely sidelining the state as a site of feminism. State feminism refers broadly to alliances between women's policy agencies and women's movements within the state to achieve feminist outcomes. State feminism has different

meanings, forms, and contents in different political contexts (e.g., [Hattem 1992](#); [Mazur and McBride 2007](#)). We use the Nordic conceptualization of state feminism, coined by Helga Hernes in 1987. She identified state feminism as both a product and a driver of a woman-centered approach to state-society relations, emphasizing the role of the state in fighting gender injustices in the state, society and economy, and policy reforms as instruments of change. The notion of state feminism in the Nordic countries has been associated with “women-friendly” welfare state, which was seen as a result of the combined impact of a mobilization of women from below and the institutionalization of gender equality from above ([Hernes 1987](#)).

In the Nordic context, feminist actors have historically allied with the state to promote gender equality, and the state-centered approach has achieved many successes ([Hollı 2006](#)). However, this approach has made feminism vulnerable to changes in state and governance. In recent decades, Finland and the other Nordic countries have taken up mainstays of a neoliberal state reform: They have, for example, embraced New Public Management, privatized state functions, enrolled economic actors into policy-making processes, and enhanced budget discipline (e.g., [Ylöstalo and Adkins 2020](#); [Ylönen and Kuusela 2019](#)).

The substantial feminist discussion around changes in state and governance in the Nordic context have paid attention to how feminism and gender equality policy have adapted to these changes, making co-optation a fundamental question of Nordic state feminism ([Stoltz 2021](#)). It has shown how feminism and gender equality policy have become economized: Claims that are complicit with a market agenda (such as women’s employment) are granted primacy, and gender equality is increasingly represented as a contribution to economic growth and national competitiveness ([Kantola and Squires 2012](#); [Elomäki 2015](#); [Ylöstalo 2022](#)). Gender equality policy has adopted tactics and tools (such as audits, best practices, and indicators) that fit in with the prevalent logic of neoliberal governance, making gender equality policy a technocratic, administrative enterprise ([Rönblom 2017](#)). Consequently, state feminism has been markedly silent about the gendered underpinnings of neoliberal governance, focusing instead on supporting institutional measures to enhance women’s participation in politics and economic life. Gender equality is also increasingly being promoted by publicly funded projects, and market actors (such as consultants and transnational institutions) have become key partners of states in promoting gender equality ([Olivius and Rönblom 2019](#)). We employ the concept of state feminism to understand the historical and political underpinnings of feminism in Finland.

Commodified State Feminism

Drawing on discussions around business, popular, and state feminism, we develop a notion on commodified state feminism. While earlier research has convincingly demonstrated how economization of state and governance have changed state feminism, it has tended to focus on certain aspects of these changes: For example, how new forms of governance have changed state feminism (e.g., [Kantola and Squires 2012](#)). These aspects are also important for understanding the entanglements of feminist commodity activism and state feminism. However, in our analysis, we also address the converging of consumerism and state politics, which has not been widely discussed in the literature on changing state feminism. As part of the welfare state retrenchment, citizens are increasingly addressed as active and responsible consumers and customers. Similar to commodity activism, these notions bring together pleasurable consumerism and active, responsible citizenship, prescribing consumption as empowering and responsible, despite the fact that it involves the systematic stripping of citizen power and state protection ([Clarke 2005](#)). By drawing on these discussions, we highlight that consumerism is seen as a viable form of political engagement also in state politics.

With commodified state feminism, we also address economic, cultural, and political aspects of feminist commodity activism and state feminism. Discussions around business and popular feminism have focused on business sector and popular and media culture, sidelining the state as a site of feminism. Discussions around state feminism have focused on state policies and practices, sidelining broader cultural context. With commodified state feminism, we stress that state feminism interacts with broader economy–society relations, and with popular and media culture.

We employ commodified state feminism in our analysis in two ways. First, we pay attention to the ambivalences and multifacetedness of feminist commodity activism by focusing on small-scale feminist businesses and their entanglements with state feminism. We show that feminist commodity activism is not automatically detached from state politics and structural change but can serve as driver of it. Having said that, the symbiotic alliances between feminist businesses, popular culture and state feminism are far from unproblematic, and we also pay attention to these aspects. Second, we pay attention to both transnational and context-specific features of feminist commodity activism by showing how it is shaped by the Nordic state feminist context. Despite that feminist commodity activism draws from transnational business and marketing strategies and global popular and media culture, its manifestations are shaped by different histories of feminist movements in different societies. We show that our empirical examples of feminist commodity activism in Finland tap into Nordic state feminism, in which the alliances between feminist movement and the state have been historically strong and where the state is seen as a viable partner in promoting feminist causes. We also show that changes in not only state and governance but also business and popular culture shape state feminism. With commodified state feminism, we emphasize that neither feminist commodity activism nor state feminism are static and predetermined but embedded in their broader historical, political, economic and cultural context. As such, feminism itself remains open to change as its meaning, ideas, and goals are constantly reworked and renegotiated.

Feminist Commodity Activism Meets State Feminism: The Finnish Context

The context of our study is Finland, a Nordic welfare state with a strong state feminist tradition. The feminist movement in Finland has relied on institutionalized cross-party collaboration between women's organizations, feminist politicians, state-based gender equality officials, and gender equality researchers (Holli 2006). Among the feminist actors, public debate, and feminist research, there has been a belief in the woman-friendly Nordic welfare state as a partner in advancing gender equality. While the state-centered approach has enabled successes, the downside has been that the Finnish feminist movement has relied heavily on state discourses and practices (Elomäki et al. 2021; Stoltz 2021).

Over the past decade, the rise of conservatism, nationalism, the anti-gender movement, right-wing populism in Europe and Finland (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Elomäki and Kantola 2018), neoliberal and austerity politics (Elomäki 2019; Ylöstalo 2022), and the general popularization of feminism has also changed state feminism in Finland, and the close bonds between the state and feminists have loosened. After the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, Finland and other EU countries adopted significant cuts in public spending, intensifying the retrenchment of the welfare state and increasing gendered economic inequality. The political context in the 2010s was also underpinned by populist conservatism, emerging as resistance towards gender equality policies (Elomäki and Kantola 2018). When the populist, nationalist, and openly anti-feminist Finns party entered the government in 2015 and again in 2023, Finland's gender equality policy was significantly weakened, and the state lost some of its status as a reliable partner to feminists. However, the dire political situation has had the paradoxical effect of strengthening rather than

undermining feminist struggles in Finland, and the visibility of feminism in public debates has increased in the 2010s (Elomäki et al. 2021), along with broader popularization of feminism.

We draw on two conjoined empirical cases in Finland. Our first case is a Finnish small-scale clothing business Uhana and its Girl Gang campaign (GGC). Led by two Finnish female designers, Uhana manufactures high-quality clothing and is particularly known for its floral patterns. The company aims for ethical and sustainable production: it emphasizes fair production and a transparent supply chain, locates the production in Finland and other European countries, uses recycled materials, and provides caring instructions for their products to prolong their life. Uhana has also represented diversity in their advertising by using as models women of different sizes, brown women, men (to model women's clothing), disabled women, and transgender women. Uhana's social media and their collections' names reference vocabularies of hope, self-care, boldness, attitude, girl power, empowerment, and social responsibility, while feminism is explicitly mentioned only occasionally. With its campaigns and special collections, Uhana also connects explicitly with feminism.

Our analysis focuses on one such occasion: the Girl Gang campaign, launched in Uhana's Facebook and Instagram accounts in 2017. The campaign promotes Uhana's Girl Gang collection of unisex T-shirts, pins, and jewelry with "Girl Gang" and "GRLPWR" prints. One euro of each product sold was donated to a non-profit organization working to stop gendered violence. Rather than centering on the clothing, the GGC focused on Uhana's Girl Gang: a group of 12 "amazing" (as stated in the campaign) women whose words and actions inspired Uhana's entrepreneurs in their work. The GGC showcased illustrations of the Girl Gang, who are activists, influencers, journalists, politicians, and artists, working to promote varied versions of gender equality or feminism. Each illustration was accompanied with a caption explaining how they had inspired Uhana, followed by the hashtags #feminism, #grlpwr, #girlgang, #powerwoman, and sometimes #equality. In our analysis, we pay attention to the mobilization of state feminist discourses and images in the GGC.

Our second case is Finland's previous government (2019–2023) and their engagements with feminist fashion. We focus on five women party leaders and core ministers given the nickname *The Five* by the media. After parliamentary election in spring 2023 only one of them has continued as minister in the new right-populist government, but we focus on the time that *The Five* were in the government. *The Five* consisted of Sanna Marin (Prime Minister and leader of the Social Democratic Party), Li Andersson (Minister of Education and the leader of the Left Alliance), Anna-Maja Henriksson (Minister of Justice and the leader of the Swedish People's Party of Finland), Maria Ohisalo (Minister of the Environment and leader of the Greens), and Annika Saarikko (Minister of Finance and the leader of the Centre Party). All but Henriksson were aged under 40 while in government. Even though women's political representation in Finland has for a long time been among the highest in the world, young women in leading political positions are still an exception. Marin is the third woman as Prime Minister and the youngest Prime Minister ever in Finland. The government had progressive gender equality policy: It allocated funding for gender equality initiatives and implemented policies that have been on state feminist agenda for a long time. In what follows, we analyze the government's representation as feminist, paying attention to the role of feminist commodities.

The primary empirical materials of our first case comprise the social media campaign posts of the GGC. This data was complemented with public Instagram posts by other Instagram users employing the campaign hashtag #uhanagirlgang. In the second case, we draw on media and social media discussion around *The Five*.

The Girl Gang: Uhana Design's Feminist Ethos

We examine Uhana's GGC as an example of feminist commodity activism that conjoins with state feminism. We analyze Uhana as a new partner of state feminism in the context of weakening alliances between feminist movement and the state in Finland, and the collectivist state feminist ethos of the GGC.

Feminist Commodity Activism with State-Feminist Content

One of the 12 women presented in the GGC was Finnish female programmer Linda Liukas. An internationally acclaimed programmer, Liukas was introduced as follows:

Now, we present the lovely Linda Liukas. "I decided that I'm never going to apologize for trying too hard." We hail Linda Liukas, children's book author and programmer, for making sure that when world-defining code is written, girls, too, are included.

The excerpt demonstrates the structure of each campaign post: an illustration of the Girl Gang member paired with a caption describing how the chosen person has inspired Uhana's entrepreneurs. Each caption also included an inspirational quote from the Girl Gang member. The caption above implicitly refers to Liukas as the founder of the international *Rails Girls* program as well as her children's book *Hello Ruby*, both encouraging girls to learn programming.

In line with a popular feminist ethos, the campaign's affective register focuses on inspiration and empowerment instead of negative feelings (see Gill and Orgad 2017). This inspirational mood is sustained through the use of adjectives like lovely, bold, gorgeous, fantastic and empowering. Occasionally, the heart emoji and the biceps emoji are used to consolidate the positive can-do spirit of the campaign. The campaign suggests a popular feminist feeling rule (cf. Hochschild 1983/2012), a normative, culturally shared idea of how a person should feel: instead of feeling sadness, anger, or frustration, one should respond to the issues raised by the GGC by becoming inspired. A focus on good feelings is at the heart of popular feminism: to be safely affirmed by the broader public, feminism must be associated with good feelings rather than becoming a killjoy (Ahmed 2010; Banet-Weiser et al. 2020). In line with this feeling rule, the captions usually refrain from mentioning overtly "negative" issues. The above post, for example, falls silent about misogyny in the tech industry.

Because of its affective register of good feelings and empowerment, at first sight, the GGC seems like a paradigmatic example of business feminism, focusing on raising inspiration and invoking feminist identification (see Roberts 2015; Favaro and Gill 2018). However, the campaign posts address also issues that have been focal for state feminism. The post above addresses the gender disparity in dominant economic and corporate spheres, such as the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. Apart from aligning with popular feminism's general focus on girls' and women's inclusion in technology, the post also connects with long-standing state feminist battles to diminish gender segregation in the labor market and the associated gendered pay gap. Encouraging girls and women to pursue careers in the STEM fields has been identified in Finnish education and gender equality policy as a key means to end labor market segregation (Brunila 2009).

While previous analyses of business and popular feminisms have rarely focused on the state, the GGC frequently connects with state-feminist themes, including women's representation in politics. It also challenges the culturally widespread idea of gender equality as already achieved or linearly progressing, which characterizes both postfeminist and long-standing Finnish policy discourses around gender equality (see Larsen 2021). Uhana brings forward Li Andersson, a politician who, at the time of the GGC, had just been elected the leader of the Left Alliance, and who later became a member of *The Five*. In the GGC, Andersson is quoted saying: "The

biggest threat to gender equality in the 2010s is the widespread belief that it has already been achieved.” The caption concludes, “We, like Li, think there remains a whole lot to be done.” The GGC’s state-feminist orientation is further illustrated in a post celebrating Uhana’s “Ultimate Girl Gang”: Minna Canth, a nineteenth-century author and women’s rights activist, Tarja Halonen, Finland’s first woman President, and Tove Jansson, an author and visual artist. Canth is introduced as follows: “Thanks to Minna Canth’s braveness, women’s lives have progressed enormously in Finland, and we can honor her work by making sure that the progress will not be reversed.” Halonen, who was President of Finland from 2000 to 2012, has inspired Uhana by “breaking the glass ceiling in politics” and with her ongoing work for gender equality and human rights. The captions provide little background information about these Ultimate Girl Gang members’ work. Canth is mostly known for her writing and activism for working class women’s and children’s rights. Halonen, during her presidency, was an avid advocate of women’s rights globally, and during the 1980s, she served as the chairperson of the Finnish LGBT organization Seta. Halonen especially represents an exemplary state feminist who has not only broken the glass ceiling in politics but also promoted feminist objectives via state policies in collaboration with feminist movement actors.

By introducing figures like Halonen, Andersson, and Canth, the GGC addresses ongoing struggles related to state feminism while presenting state politics in a depoliticized manner. The aforementioned politicians endorsed in the GGC are leftist, but Uhana’s captions do not mention ideological divides that are central to parliamentary politics. Hence, the GGC retains a consensual and noncontroversial tone when addressing politics. Simultaneously, Uhana’s feminism retains its consensual and inspirational tone, typical of corporate-friendly, popular feminism that seeks to appeal to broad audiences (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020: 12). Even when addressing state politics and structural inequalities, GGC mirrors feminist commodity activism’s happy, empowering spirit.

Businesses and Feminists Unite in the GGC’s Collectivist Ethos

The GGC took place in Finland at a time characterized by weakening state-led gender equality policies, an emergence of new types of feminist activism and state feminist alliances, and the strengthening of intersectional and antiracist feminisms (Elomäki et al. 2021; Keskinen 2021). Connected to the broader proliferation of intersectional feminism in the digital media culture (Kanai 2021), social media has become one of the key platforms for these feminisms. Businesses like Uhana have allied with new generations of feminist activists by including them in its Girl Gang. Many of these activists can be perceived as part of the strengthening of intersectional, antiracist, and decolonial feminisms in Finland.

One of the Girl Gang members was Koko Hubara, founder of the media platform *Ruskeat tytöt* [Brown Girls]. Hubara is a prominent activist who has, among other things, addressed gendered racism in Finland. She is introduced in the GGC as follows:

Koko Hubara is known as a translator and a writer and for her *Brown Girls* blog: “I am a brown girl 24/7, and I would like that to be a good thing. Or not good, but commonplace. Beautiful. I’d like to remind others of that.” Uhana Design, too, wants to remind people that being a girl is a gorgeously diverse thing, as well as about intervening in everyday racism. Racism will not end unless its structures are dismantled.

In addition to Hubara, the GGC features other activists and their work, such as Jenni Laiti, Sámi artist and activist. The way of presenting activists mirrors the warm and enthusiastic, popular-feminist tone, yet the issues raised are structural and societal. Racial inequality has been largely sidelined by Nordic state feminism (Stoltz 2021). Addressing structural racism makes Uhana’s branding strategy

different from some business and popular feminism that performatively affirm feminist identity yet are hollowed out of feminist content (see [Rottenberg 2018](#)). Members of Uhana's Girl Gang, like the activists mentioned above, have also responded to Uhana's endorsements by posting pictures of themselves wearing Girl Gang T-shirts and including hashtags of the campaign on their social media. In July 2017 Uhana Design reposted on Instagram a picture of Hubara wearing a Girl Gang T-shirt. In the caption, Hubara expressed her support for Uhana Design.

Thank you @uhanadesign for inviting me to be a part of the #uhanagirlgang. These [products] are now in stores, and a donation to @naistenlinja [a non-profit organization that helps victims of gendered intimate violence], who has also helped me in a difficult situation, is made for each piece of clothing sold. Full support!

The original campaign post and the Girl Gang members' responses to it show how feminist businesses and activists form a reciprocal alliance, reinforcing each other's commitment to feminism. Previous research has shown that donating to charity is one means by which feminist businesses handle the contradictions related to profiting from feminism ([Lauri 2021](#): 92). Hubara's caption also implies that donating to feminist charity makes Uhana a credible ally for feminist activists. The alliances between businesses and activists also show how feminist commodity activism is embedded in the capitalist and corporate architectures of social platforms like Instagram ([Banet-Weiser et al. 2020](#)). The GGC shows that feminist commodities provide a way for activists to signal their commitment to ethical and responsible consumerism as well as to the campaign's feminist message. Fashion brands like Uhana can position themselves as important allies for the causes that activists are fighting for. The platforms and hashtags like #uhanagirlgang play an important role in shaping feminist relationships that are not necessarily state-centered. As functions of Instagram enable users to effortlessly repost content made by others, the alliances between activists and brands became even more visible. Simultaneously, feminist content posted on these platforms also becomes a way for social media giants to reap profits (cf. [Fuchs 2010](#)).

Rather than positioning feminism as an individualized pursuit, the GGC's appeals in the positive connotations with feminism as a collective cause. The GGC presents its chosen Girl Gang members as a collective working to achieve a feminist future, concomitantly inviting consumers to "join the gang" of strong women. Buying the products is presented as a way for customers to support feminism, feminist causes, and feminist politics. Despite Uhana's left-leaning endorsements of feminist politicians, its sustainably produced products are highly priced, and thus its class politics are bound to be exclusionary. Uhana speaks to a group of relatively wealthy consumers who can afford to buy their sustainably produced clothing and, in this way, can increase their personal value in a cultural context where feminist identifications have become legitimate ([Repo 2020](#): 226–227). However, the GGC does not at any stage suggest that collective feminist politics should be displaced with consumption. Rather, the campaign is presented as a way for a feminist small business to do its share by drawing attention to feminist struggles that take place outside the sphere of consumption, including state feminism.

Girl Power in the Government

Our second case concerns alliances between *The Five*, Finland's five female ministers and party leaders, and Finnish feminist fashion brands, including Uhana. We focus on the role of feminist commodities in the government's politics of representation and the increasingly close relationship between consumerism and state politics.

Government Girl Gang

When Sanna Marin, 34 years old at the time, became the Prime Minister of Finland in 2019, it was depicted nationally and internationally as a realization of a feminist utopia. Four other leading ministers and party leaders in her government were also women, three of them under the age of 40. Twelve out of the 19 ministers in her government were also women. Finland's new government and especially its leading ministers, *The Five*, became global news, giving rise to headlines like "Women in their thirties now have the power" (Nalbantoglu 2019). Politicians across the world congratulated the new government, including Hillary Clinton, who tweeted: "When she was sworn in as Finland's new prime minister yesterday, @marinsanna became the world's youngest prime minister—and the head of a coalition government led entirely by women. Hyvä Suomi [Go Finland]!" The government was also depicted as feminist by the media: "Feminism comes of age in Finland as female coalition takes the reins," titled an article by *The Guardian* (Graham-Harrison 2019). *Forbes* referred to Finland's recurring success in the World Economic Forum's Annual Gender Gap Report Index and stated that "Finland has reason to celebrate an overall impressive pipeline of female politicians" and "the culture of gender diversity is key [to female leadership]," referring to state policies that support women's leadership and gender equality (Niethammer 2019).

One specific photo, collated by journalist Tuomas Niskakangas, became viral in social media: a composition of *The Five* with parties and ages written on their pictures. It was shared, among others, by Finland's former Prime Minister and current President Alexander Stubb with the following text:

My party is not in government, but I rejoice that the leaders of the five parties in government are female. Shows that #Finland is a modern and progressive country.
[...]

The government led by young women was portrayed as progressive and feminist despite the fact that nobody knew how feminist its policies would be. The government was progressive in terms of women's political representation, which is an important achievement in itself as women continue to be underrepresented in parliaments and political leadership (Dahlerup 2017), but women as political leaders are not the silver bullet for gender equality (see True 2016). The enthusiasm towards "young women having the power" reflects the importance of the state as a site of feminism, but it can also be understood in the wider context of popular feminism, in which representation and visibility become political and feminist acts in themselves (Hamad and Taylor 2015; Mahoney 2020). The politics of representation has a longer history and wider scope than popular feminism: its broader meaning refers to struggle in society over the meaning of images and depictions in a specific culture (Ghosh 2016). The image of *The Five* and its circulation in media and social media entails politics of representation in two senses: it makes women visible in the highest political positions possible, and it makes visible the masculine hegemony of politics, demonstrating how unusual a government ruled by women is.

The Five, especially Prime Minister Marin, have visibly broken the conservative and masculine code of politics by highlighting their femininity. *The Five*, in their public appearances, often wear feminine clothing such as colorful floral dresses. Notably, *The Five* tend to wear Finnish designer clothing brands. Uhana has become known for its popularity amongst ministers and particularly Marin. This has also been noted by journalists, who have written several articles about Marin's fascination with Uhana, especially after she posed in *Vogue* wearing Uhana's dress (e.g., Kanerva 2020).

By wearing feminine, colorful dresses, government politicians visibly break the masculine and middle-aged norms and conventions of politics. They address women's representation in politics, but not by typical state feminist instruments like

policy reforms. Instead, they increase the visibility of feminist projects in the public sphere through politics of representation, although in a moderate and likeable way, characteristic of popular feminism. These clothes are branded as feminist, so wearing them enables *The Five* to represent themselves as not only women politicians but also feminist women politicians. Wearing feminist-branded clothing is a subtle and discreet form of feminist activism, suitable for a parliamentary politics that sets visible and invisible boundaries for appropriate behavior. For example, Green MP Jenni Pitko was scolded in 2020 by the Speaker of the Parliament after wearing a T-shirt with the slogan “The future is feminist” to the parliament’s plenary session in honor of the pride week. This broke the dress code of the parliament as the representatives are expected to dress in a “dignified manner” and to refrain from taking a stance with their clothing (Lehto 2020). The space for breaking gendered norms in the conservative context of parliamentary politics is narrow, and wearing feminist brands like Uhana fits into those frames while stretching the masculine boundaries of dignified clothing and the gendered image of a political leader.

The Five are not just represented as individual feminists; they are represented as a feminist group, a girl gang. The reporting about Finland’s feminist government was grounded on a group of women having the power, and the viral group photo also highlighted that their feminism derives from the collective. The government politicians have utilized the imagery of friendship between women to signal unity between the governing parties. This follows the Finnish state feminist tradition, in which successes have been enabled by shared framings of political problems and solutions by key feminist actors (Holli 2006). It also follows from new forms of governance, in which governments are expected to set their political differences aside and work together towards a common goal (Elomäki 2019).

On Instagram, the government politicians have posted group pictures with the hashtag #viisikko (*The Five* in Finnish) and shared each other’s group photos. In June 2021, Sanna Marin posted a smiling group selfie of *The Five* from the Prime Minister’s official residence with the caption “Having sauna and spending relaxed time together” and the hashtag #viisikko (Ripaoja 2021). In Finland’s multi-party governments maintaining unity between governing parties has been a continuous struggle, as governments cannot implement their policies without consensus (Ylöstalo and Adkins 2020). *The Five* represent and maintain unity by tapping into popular feminist culture and especially one of its features: girlfriendliness, an emerging normative condition of youthful femininity, in which feminism is incorporated and instrumentalized in pleasing, smart and relatable ways. The key to girlfriendliness is representing oneself as being liked by other women and being relatable to other women, which is also conflated with a feminist stance of being supportive of women in general (Kanai 2017; Crepax 2020). Girlfriendliness provides government politicians a way to represent themselves as feminist politicians who set their ideological differences aside for a common goal, like state feminists have done in feminist issues. Feminist commodities play an important role in girlfriendliness: similar clothing creates an image of a group of like-minded girlfriends, like Uhana’s Girl Gang.

The reverse side of girlfriendliness is that sameness exists on the basis of the suppression of difference (Kanai 2017). *The Five* become visible as a group of white, middle class, cis-gendered, heterosexual, and youthful women. A disturbing example of this is that when Marin’s government took office, in some of the social media pictures, the Minister of Justice and Swedish People’s Party leader Anna-Maja Henriksson, aged 55 at the time, was left out of the picture. MP Juhana Vartiainen retweeted one of these pictures, commenting: “I think it’s nice if Finland is known as a country where women are in power. But why is Anna-Maja Henriksson left out of these and many other group pictures that also circulate in Finland?” Henriksson did not seamlessly fit with the youthful sameness of Finland’s feminist government, even though her party has a long record of supporting gender equality policy reforms.

The Centre Party, on its behalf, is a value-conservative party whose representatives have opposed family leave reforms and same-sex marriage. However, its leader at the time Marin's government took office was Katri Kulmuni, and her place in feminist government was never questioned as her young age (32 at the time) and Uhana dresses fit perfectly into Marin's girl gang. This resembles the controversial politics of inclusion and exclusion in state feminism, where promoting gender equality has often benefited heterosexual working mothers, and excluded, for example, racialized women's interests (Stoltz 2021).

Although the government has utilized business and popular feminist imaginary that represents feminism as likeable and somewhat harmless, it does not follow that the government policies are reduced to watered-down versions of feminism. Against the critical claim that business or popular feminism "does not, for instance, call for paternity leave, better maternity pay, free child care, stronger welfare safety nets, or unionization" (Foster 2015 in Repo 2020: 220), this is exactly what *The Five* has done. The government has extended the fathers' family leave quota and earnings-related parental leave in its family leave reform, implemented a free child-care policy experiment, extended free education to upper secondary education, and invested in policies to prevent gendered violence. The Marin government's feminist politics is not limited to the politics of representation: the government has had exceptionally ambitious gender equality policies and has implemented gender equality reforms that have been either blocked or sidelined by previous Finnish governments. Despite its symbolic closeness with women fashion entrepreneurs, the left-leaning Marin government was not particularly entrepreneur-friendly, and its gender equality policies in working life have been the weakest link in its gender equality policy (Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2023).

Commodified State Feminism

Earlier research on changing state feminism has pointed out that feminist movement and policy agencies have not only been embedded in state practices but have also converged with the corporate world and business interests (Kantola and Squires 2012). This is characteristic of neoliberal state reform and new forms of governance, involving a passage from traditional top-down bureaucracy to governance through networks and markets, and a greater reliance on non-elected actors in the design, implementation, and evaluation of policy (Rönneblom 2017). Alliances between feminist fashion brands and *The Five* should be understood in this broader context.

Uhana and most Finnish brands favored by *The Five* are owned by independent female entrepreneurs. They are domestic companies and local businesses, and their commodities are produced in certified factories in Europe, often by using recycled materials. In effect, by wearing these brands, politicians can support entrepreneurship and local businesses, show that they are responsible and ethical consumers, and support likeable and safe feminist causes. In state feminist context, where societal alliances with in the corporate sector have become increasingly important (Kantola and Squires 2012), local feminist entrepreneurs provide a credible ally in the business world for leftist and green feminist politicians. This can also reflect broader gendered economic relations in politics: men get big donations from big corporations, while women get smaller donations but from more individuals (e.g., Feo et al. 2021). For these reasons, small feminist companies can be plausible allies for women politicians.

The relationship between politicians and fashion brands is reciprocal and symbiotic. The brands verify the politicians' values and ideologies regarding social responsibility, whereas the politicians give enormous visibility to the brands and validate them as feminist, with the help of media that make news of the female politicians' clothing. In March 2020, Sanna Marin was photographed for the cover of British

Vogue wearing Uhana, and in an interview published in US *Vogue*, her style was part of the story:

For her own wardrobe Marin sticks to Finnish brands like Marimekko (of course), Uhana, Papu (its labels read “Designed with love in Finland; made with care in the EU”), and Nouki. “It’s important for me that the clothes I’m wearing are ethical, so they’re not produced by child labor or in an environmentally unsustainable way,” she tells me. (Donadio 2020)

The media employ and perpetuate gender stereotypes when representing female politicians. Male politicians are allocated more speaking time, while female political leaders’ appearance and wardrobe choices are paid more attention. (Liu 2019) Although Marin plays along with the well-trodden narrative, she also uses the media to make a point about fair trade, and to give publicity to small Finnish fashion brands. Marin’s appearance in *Vogue* became news in Finland, and the makers of her clothes got their share of publicity. The Uhana entrepreneurs were interviewed in a newspaper article entitled “Sanna Marin posed for *Vogue* wearing a dress from a clothing brand from Tampere—This is what Uhana is like” (Kanerva 2020). In the article, they revealed that their sales had increased after the Prime Minister’s appearance in *Vogue* and that she had also worn their clothing for interviews before. “It has been really pleasant for us,” the Uhana entrepreneur said (Kanerva 2020). The article gives a lot of space to Uhana’s values, including “responsibility, equality, and transparent business” (Kanerva 2020). In this way, the politicians and companies give each other visibility and strengthen each other’s brands.

The fashion companies have also given visibility to the politicians by sharing social media pictures of them wearing their clothes and publicly supporting them. In 2021, Marin showed in her Instagram story her new backpack from a local business Pihka Collection (also owned by young women), saying “I have a fine new backpack by Finnish [company] Pihka, which I am wearing for the first time today” (Lehtonen 2021). This evoked some public criticism as in the Finnish political culture politicians should refrain from promoting companies. The owners of Pihka, however, were enthusiastic about the Prime Minister’s video: “It’s great. It’s really wonderful that she acknowledged [Pihka] in this way. We are overwhelmed by this,” said the owner to a Finnish journal. She continued: “It’s great that the Prime Minister wants to support domestic products, work and know-how” (Lehtonen 2021). The relationship between companies and politicians is symbiotic: young politicians whose own brands include social and environmental responsibility and feminism give visibility to the companies and validate them as feminist and ethical. The companies strengthen the politicians’ own brands as green, entrepreneur-friendly, and feminist, despite the fact that Marin government policy has not been particularly entrepreneur-friendly.

In Finland, businesses have recently participated in state politics by supporting gender equality policies such as equal pay. A Finnish textile company, Finlayson, launched a campaign in 2017 titled “Woman’s Euro.” It refers to the feminist slogan “Woman’s Euro is 80 cents,” reflecting the persistent pay gap between women and men in Finland. During the campaign, those who defined themselves as women paid 20 percent less for their purchases from Finlayson. The purpose of the campaign was to make visible the pay gap that the state policies have not narrowed. In this way, feminist branding campaigns in Finland reflect the reorganization of state feminism in Finland and the increasing presence of market actors in promoting political aims, including gender equality (Elomäki et al. 2021).

The symbiosis between politics and fashion companies also reflects the convergence of consumerism and state politics. Similar to process by which citizens become consumers, in commodified state feminism, empowerment is intimately connected to neoliberal political economies where “to be empowered is to be a better economic subject” (Banet-Weiser 2018: 155). Even though commodified state

feminism does not shut out feminist political reforms, the increasing closeness between business and politics as well as market and social change tends to change the relationships between economy, society, and the state to the greater advantage of neoliberal capitalism.

Conclusions: State Feminism Under Neoliberal Capitalism

In this article, we have analyzed the entanglements of feminist commodity activism and state feminism. We have expanded earlier research on changing state feminism by drawing attention to convergence of consumerism and politics. We have also expanded earlier research on feminist commodity activism by drawing attention to using commodities as a form of political and social participation in state politics. We have coined the term commodified state feminism to shed light on the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of feminist commodity activism and state feminism, and their entanglements in the current political context, in which the boundaries between market and politics have become increasingly blurred. With commodified state feminism we stress that changes in state feminism interact with broader changes in economy–society relations, and with transnational business, popular, and media culture. We also stress that manifestations of feminist commodity activism are shaped by different histories of feminist movements in different societies. Feminist commodity activism can, at least in some cases, address structural inequalities and engage with state politics. Given its entanglements with broader economy, culture, and politics, it is important to empirically investigate feminist commodity activism in different contexts.

We have complicated earlier critical notions of feminist commodity activism as a capitalist-friendly, individualized, and somewhat diluted version of feminism by demonstrating the multiple faces of feminist commodity activism, highlighting its context-specificity. By analyzing commodified state feminism in Finland, we have shown that fashion and state feminism converge in times when the former alliances between established feminist actors and the Nordic welfare state are loosening, and the feminist movement is reorganizing. Rather than replacing feminist state politics, however, feminist commodity activism conjoins with it to promote state feminism. By tapping into popular feminist culture, feminist fashion brands and feminist-leaning politicians reproduce feminism in a form that is voter-friendly and easily commercialized: attractive, young, cool, happy, and safe. However, as we have shown, commodified state feminism has also drawn attention to persistent structural inequalities. When politicians brand themselves as feminists, it also makes them politically responsible for promoting gender equality. Unlike previous governments, Marin government's gender equality policies have been under the public eye, adding political pressure to their effective implementation.

There is also a subtext in our analysis that concerns feminism as a subject of feminist theorizing. We have followed the path of some earlier scholarly work that warns against too-straightforward feminist stories about the relations between feminism and neoliberal capitalism (e.g., [Hemmings 2010](#); [Prügl 2015](#); [Ferguson 2017](#)). Previous research has provided important and creditable analyses of feminism being depoliticized and co-opted by neoliberal capitalism but paid less attention to the broader context of cultural and political reform in which it emerges and is affected. By analyzing the convergences between feminist commodity activism and state feminism, we have placed commodified state feminism in the broader context of political reform, in which the model of the market becomes the mode of rationality for the state and society ([Brown 2015](#)). In this context, commodity feminism and feminist commodity activism are not detached from state feminism. Instead, they are driven by the same logic: extending the model of the market to all spheres of life, from subject formation to consumer choices to citizenship to state politics.

Finally, we highlight the importance of seeing commodified state feminism as a newly emergent variant of feminist political ideology. As such, it is an outgrowth of earlier feminisms, not their evil sister or impostor of allegedly real feminisms (cf. Ferguson 2017). Thus, we can see that commodified state feminism also contains the possibility to resist depoliticization, co-optation, or being swallowed by neoliberal capitalism. Any form of feminism, be it business, popular, or state feminism, or their convergence into commodified state feminism, is contingent. Fashion entrepreneurs, users of their products, and feminist politicians are not only produced by, but also producers of economic, cultural and political relations that shape commodified state feminism. Hence, they, as well as feminism as a social movement and political ideology, are subject to variation, contestation, and change.

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