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**Framing Feminism: Shaping Women's**

**Representation through Magazine Visual Culture**



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**Magazine Visual Culture**

Dissertation, IADE, Universidade Europeia, Master in  
Design & Visual Culture, in Lisbon, Portugal.

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This thesis is dedicated to all the women, past and present, who have contributed to the ongoing struggle for gender equality. It honors the countless voices, actions, and movements that have shaped the feminist waves across generations and continue to inspire change today.



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**Key-words**

Design History; Magazine Design; Visual Culture; Feminist Media Representation; Feminist Theory

**Abstract**

The visual representation of women in magazines has played a central role in shaping public discussion around gender roles, identity, and rights and will be explored in this dissertation. The focus is primarily on the United States and the United Kingdom. The study draws on feminist theory, media studies, and design history to explore how visual culture and editorial choices within magazines affect public understanding and the feminist cause itself.

The research is conducted across five different design periods: the Victorian era, Fin de Siècle era, Modernism, Postmodernism, and Contemporaneity & Post-digital Era. The research examines how changes in visual language engage with political and social progress in women's rights. Previous analysis is combined with new findings through case studies, a survey of the reader, and an interview with the creator of *Pro.Vocazione*, an Italian feminist magazine.

By bridging feminist historiography and visual communication, the project highlights how editorial and visual choices have contributed to feminist dialog. It accentuates the magazine as a medium that not only reflects but actively shapes the cultural and political visibility of women. Through examination of both mainstream and alternative publications, the thesis aims to provide a nuanced analysis of the contribution of design to feminist discourse and public awareness.

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# Introduction

## Clarification of the Topic

The way women are represented in the media continues to influence society's understanding of gender roles, power, and equality. Magazines and media have played a substantial role in defining what it means to be a woman, often combining lifestyle, fashion, and politics on a single platform. They don't just reflect culture; they help create it. This is why examining magazines provides valuable insight into the development of women's rights, the progress we have made, and the areas where further change is still needed.

## Definition of the Object

This research focuses on mainstream women's magazines in the United Kingdom and the United States, including *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and *Cosmopolitan*. These magazines helped shape how women were seen and how they saw themselves. As they originated in countries at the center of many feminist movements, they provide a clear timeline of how ideas about womanhood in the Western hemisphere have evolved.

By examining how these magazines portray women visually and in writing, we can gain a better understanding of how gender roles were formed and challenged. These publications reveal what was expected of women, what was admired, and what was excluded.

This is important because real equality has yet to be achieved. In the Netherlands, for example, one in three women will experience sexual violence in their lifetime (CBS, 2023). In the UK and the US, women still earn less than men, have less access to leadership positions, and often face barriers in healthcare, especially regarding reproductive rights. Legal protection is not always robust enough, and women are still not equally safe at home, in the workplace, or public spaces. These issues are not just political; they're personal.

That's why it's important to look back. The media have always been a powerful force in shaping what is seen as 'normal'. To understand where inequality exists today, we must also understand how it was spread and perpetuated in the past.

This study aims to explore the role of women's magazines in shaping and reflecting the development of women's rights in the United Kingdom and the United States. By analyzing their content and design, the project will investigate how the media has portrayed women over time and the influence of these portrayals on societal views of gender, power, and identity. The project will trace the historical evolution of women's rights and reflect on how visual culture, including fashion, photography, illustration, and layout, has been used to either reinforce traditional gender roles or support feminist change. By comparing UK and US magazines, the research will highlight cultural similarities and differences while considering what we can learn from these narratives today. Understanding how these magazines constructed images of womanhood helps us to think critically about the role of the media in shaping public perception and how design and publishing can be used to improve the position of women in society today.

### **Research Problem and Objectives**

Although women's magazines have long played a visible role in shaping public life and culture, their deeper influence on gender roles, social expectations, and the fight for equality is often overlooked. These publications are cultural tools that have helped define what is seen as acceptable or desirable for women, and they are much more than just fashion or lifestyle. Yet studies combining visual analysis and feminist theory, providing a historical comparison to examine this influence, remain limited. There is still a lack of research that considers women not just as consumers, but also as subjects, creators, and agents, at the center of media history.

At the same time, there has been a renewed political backlash against gender and women's studies. In the United States, for example, legislative attacks on education and academic freedom under the Trump administration have already made it more difficult to openly discuss women's rights, identity, health, and history at universities. The fact that women's issues are being erased from the political agenda only underlines why it is urgent to keep talking about them. This research is a response to this climate, a reminder that women's rights were not simply *given* but fought for and continue to be defended today.

This research examines how women's magazines in the UK and the US have shaped and reflected ideas about gender over time. It seeks to understand the dual role of the media: as a platform for female visibility and representation, and as a space where traditional gender roles have been

reinforced. This duality is essential for understanding how culture, design, and representation can influence real-world power dynamics. Rather than if the media has always supported or hindered women's rights, this study aims to explore how and when these narratives have worked in favor of, or against, progress. Only by recognizing this tension can we better understand the logic behind gendered media and use visual culture more consciously as a tool for equality today.

### **Research question**

To frame the direction of this research and clarify its focus, the following central research question has been developed:

*How have the design and visual strategies of magazines shaped the representation of women, the communication of feminist ideas, and the discourse around women's rights from the late 19th century until nowadays in the U.S. and U.K., and how are these influences reflected and transformed in today's digital media?*

To explore this, several sub-questions will be addressed to gain a deeper understanding of the evolution of women's rights and the role magazines have played in shaping public discourse around gender equality. These include:

- How did early magazines (Victorian & Fin de Siècle) shape public views of women's roles through design, content, and politics?
- How do independent feminist magazines use design differently from mainstream titles, and what impact do those choices have on feminist discourse?
- Do present-day audiences recognize design choices in magazines as influential in shaping ideas about feminism and equality?
- To what extent have women's rights improved, from representation and safety to equality, and what key areas still require progress?

The research questions and analysis are based on the understanding that gender equality means equal rights and opportunities for women and men in all areas of life, including safety, healthcare, education, legal protections, and economic opportunities. These standard forms form the basis for

evaluating historical and contemporary portrayals of women, as well as the role of magazines in shaping public perceptions of gender equality.

## **Methodology**

This research takes a mixed-methods approach, combining literature-based analysis with quantitative and qualitative research. It examines how women's rights have been shaped, challenged, and communicated through the media. At its core is an in-depth literature review of academic sources and magazine case studies, both historical and contemporary, focusing on how visual and editorial strategies have reflected and influenced the cultural perception of women. Focus is given to the role of magazines in shaping public debate, visual language, and feminist discourse in the United Kingdom and the United States.

To complement this theoretical foundation, a written interview was conducted with Davide Ricchiuti, founder of Pro.Vocazione, an independent feminist magazine based in Italy. His reflections on editorial choices, design philosophy, and the magazine's cultural mission provide a contemporary, practical perspective on communicating feminist values through independent media.

Additionally, the research includes a survey distributed among a diverse group of participants. The aim was to gather personal insights into how people currently engage with magazines and digital media, and how these experiences influence their views on feminism and gender equality. The survey covers media habits, perceptions of women's rights, and the ongoing influence of visual culture on identity and representation.

## **Thesis structure overview**

This thesis is organized into five art and design eras, some of which naturally overlap. It shows how shifts in visual culture and media have shaped women's rights from the early 20th century to the present day. Each chapter focuses on a specific era of design history in chronological order and examines its relationship to the presentation and perception of women. The research is divided into three key themes: the historical and political developments that shaped societal perceptions of women and influenced their rights; how different design movements perceived women and

visually expressed these perspectives; and the role of magazines in shaping public dialogue, gender narratives, and the representation of women. In the literature review, I will examine the contexts of both the United Kingdom and the United States, beginning with whichever country was more influential at the time. Thus, the early chapters will focus on the UK, and when the US becomes the dominant force, the focus will shift first to the US and then back to the UK. This dynamic structure ensures that each section reflects the leading role of the relevant nation during the period under study.

After the literature review, the thesis provides an analysis of influential magazines that have either shaped public perceptions of women or played a crucial role in the advocacy of women's rights. Each case study is presented in written form first and then summarized in a comparative table (see Appendix A). This table highlights the similarities and differences in terms of feminist stance, editorial perspective, influence of design movements, and whether each publication was led by women or men. Additionally, this research includes an interview with Davide from the feminist magazine *Pro.Vocazione*, as well as a survey exploring contemporary perceptions of mainstream magazines. The discussion chapter will include a synthesis and critical examination of both qualitative and quantitative findings.

Together, these chapters aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the collective influence of visual strategies, feminist movements, and editorial platforms on the representation of women in society and how these influences continue to shape our media today. At the same time, the analysis points to areas where female representation and rights remain limited or stereotyped, demonstrating the ongoing need for critical reflection and progress.

## 1. Literature Review

The representation and visibility of women in society have always been connected to larger political, cultural, and technological developments. This literature review explores how these relationships have developed over time, examining them across five major historical eras: the Victorian era (1837–1901), the Fin de Siècle period (1880–1914), the Modernist era (1910–1970), the Postmodernist era (1960–2000), and the contemporary and Post-digital era (2000–present). Each section provides a historical overview of the period in question, examining key societal events and their impact on women’s rights and roles in the UK and the US. This is followed by an analysis of how design movements reacted to these changes through visual communication, helping to shape societal perceptions of women’s rights and gender roles in the process.

The representation of women in the US and UK has evolved continuously along with political and cultural shifts. This evolution began with the domestic ideals of the Victorian era, which confined women to private life, and continued with the introduction of the *New Woman* at the Fin de Siècle period, when feminist ideas began to appear more visibly in literature and print (Paz, 2017). Throughout the 20th century, world wars, suffrage victories, and waves of feminism reshaped gender roles and influenced how women were portrayed in visual culture. Design movements such as Modernism and Postmodernism created new spaces for women to contribute to visual culture while still reflecting the gender biases of their time (Clegg & Mayfield, 1999; Clemons, 2016; Place, 2023). In the Post-digital era, the rise of digital platforms and social media has intensified the visibility and complexity of feminist discourse. Visual activism now combines design with online communication to draw attention to ongoing issues surrounding identity, body image, and inclusivity (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Caldeira et al., 2021; Place, 2023; Vermeulen, 2025).

This framework provides a chronological overview of how feminist movements have used visual tools, including magazine design, to campaign for rights, challenge dominant narratives, and express identity. It also acknowledges the progress that has been made while highlighting the persistent gaps in achieving equal and authentic representation for all women.

## 1.1 Victorian era

### 1.1.1. Sociocultural context in the US and the UK

During the Victorian era, women in both the US and the UK were largely expected to remain in the private sphere, focusing on the home, family, and morality. This concept was influenced by the 'separate sphere' belief, which saw men as active participants in public life and women as caretakers at home (Welter, 1966; Fitzpatrick, 2015). Barbara Welter (1928 - 2022) described this ideal in her 1966 essay *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860*, explaining that women were expected to demonstrate piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. These expectations were promoted through popular magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, which portrayed women as 'angels of the house' (Welter, 1966; Purificato, 2024).

Those ideals were observed both in the UK and the US. Middle- and upper-class women were pushed to stay at home, support their husbands, and raise children. Queen Victoria (1819–1901) herself often spoke out against women entering politics, thereby strengthening the notion that a woman's place was in the home. However, the reality for working-class women in both countries was different: they often had to work in factories, textile mills, or as domestic servants in poor conditions for very low wages to survive. Furthermore, women in both the US and UK had very few legal rights: they could not vote, or own property independently once married, and they had no access to higher education and many professions (Davidoff & Hall, 1987; Boyd, 2019).

Historical gender roles were strengthened by political systems that excluded women from participation. Although both the UK and the US have long-standing democratic traditions, these democracies were designed by and for men for much of their history. Women were not granted the right to vote until the early 20th century. The political structures in both countries reflect liberal democratic ideals, such as freedom of speech and the press. This allowed feminist voices to be heard through media outlets such as magazines eventually. On the other side, these systems also upheld patriarchal norms, making it tough for women to gain political power or media visibility.

Politically speaking, the UK was a constitutional monarchy under Queen Victoria during what is known as the Victorian era, between 1837–1901. Executive power was exercised by the prime minister and parliament. Meanwhile, in the United States, the government operated as a federal republic, with power divided between the president, Congress, and the Supreme Court. Notable

presidents during this period were James K. Polk (1795–1849), Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885), and William McKinley (1843–1901).

Both the United Kingdom and the United States underwent rapid demographic and social changes because of industrialization and urbanization. In Britain, for example, the population increased from around 16 million in 1837 to over 30 million by 1901, with a notable movement of people from rural areas to industrial cities such as Manchester, Birmingham, and London (Pooley, 2013). Similarly, the US population increased from around 17 million in 1840 to approximately 76 million by 1900, driven by westward expansion and immigration (Haines, 2005). While most people in both countries initially lived in rural areas, urban living became more prevalent, particularly among the working class, by the end of the 19th century. Family sizes were generally large, averaging five to seven children. This began to decline slightly in the later decades due to changing economic conditions and greater access to contraception (Pooley, 2013). The period was shaped by major events, including the Irish Potato Famine (1845–1852), the American Civil War (1861–1865), the abolition of slavery in the U.S. in 1865, and the expansion of the British Empire. These developments influenced not only politics and the economy but also the roles and expectations placed on women, particularly regarding labor and family responsibilities.

### **1.1.2. Industrialization and its impact on women's lives and society**

Industrialization introduced new production methods, shifting economies from agrarian to factory-based systems. This transition influenced women, especially those from the working class. Factories and textile mills became workplaces for women, offering them the opportunity for paid employment outside the home for the first time. Although these jobs were often low-paying and physically demanding, women's participation in these industries marked a shift away from complete economic dependence on fathers or husbands. By the mid-19th century, women made up a substantial portion of the textile workforce in industrialized nations such as the UK and the US (Burnette, 2019).

The increase in women's participation in the workforce and their visibility in public spaces drew attention to their capabilities outside domestic limits. Activists began to encourage improved working conditions, equal pay, and more access to education for women, arguing that their contributions to the economy justified greater social respect (Holton, 1986; Sharpe, 2021).

In addition, the spread of urbanization associated with industrialization led to the development of new social and cultural spaces such as department stores, theatres, and public parks. These spaces offered middle- and upper-class women greater visibility and a degree of independence, within socially acceptable limits (Cott, 1977; Logan, 2022).

### **1.1.3. Beginning of the suffrage movement: first wave of feminism**

As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) started to question social norms in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*<sup>1</sup>, arguing for women's education and equality. Decades later, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–1858) took the ideas of the *Enlightenment*<sup>2</sup> further by openly criticizing gender inequalities and arguing for women's political representation. Their partnership resulted in *The Subjection of Women*, which was published in 1869 under John Stuart Mill's name. Social conventions of the time made it nearly impossible for Harriet to publish such arguments independently, so her contribution to the work was not recognized (Wilcox, 2009). Mary Wollstonecraft and the Mills were British thinkers, but their ideas about women's education and equality influenced feminist activism and social reform movements in the United States and around the world. This first wave of feminism primarily focused on legal inequalities, particularly regarding women's suffrage, education, and property rights. Although predominantly led by white, middle-class women, this wave of feminism set the stage for future movements by addressing the legal and political underpinnings of gender inequality (Rampton, 2015).

The organized *suffrage*<sup>3</sup> movement in the US began with the *Seneca Falls Convention* of 1848, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and Lucretia Mott (1793-1880). This convention was the first women's rights convention in the United States. The main goal of the convention was to address the social, civil, and religious inequalities women faced in America. It aimed to raise awareness of these issues and demand changes, particularly in the areas of women's legal rights,

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) argues for women's equality and access to education, challenging traditional gender roles.

<sup>2</sup> The Enlightenment was an intellectual and cultural movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that prioritized reason, science, individualism and skepticism of traditional authority. The movement promoted ideals such as liberty, progress and tolerance, as well as the belief that knowledge and education could improve society.

<sup>3</sup> Suffrage refers to the right to vote in political elections. Historically, the term is most often associated with movements advocating for the extension of voting rights to disenfranchised groups, especially women.

voting rights, and access to education and employment. It was the first step toward the *National Woman Suffrage Association* (NWSA). The NWSA was founded by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) in 1869 with the focus of discussing the issues further and aiming for change (Drago, 2022). At the same time, Lucy Stone (1818-1893) led the *American Woman Suffrage Association* (AWSA), also founded in 1869. The differences between these associations were their strategies for achieving women's suffrage. The AWSA advocated a state-by-state approach to securing the vote for women and was more modest in its tactics, focusing exclusively on suffrage. In contrast, the NWSA was more radical in its goals, often advocating for broader social reforms beyond suffrage. These differences led to a split in the suffrage movement, which was finally resolved when the two organizations merged in 1890 to form the *National American Woman Suffrage Association* (NAWS). After the merger, they became the leading suffrage organization in the United States (McConaughy, 2014; Buhle & Buhle, 2005).

As the suffrage debate gained ground in the United States, more discussions occurred, leading to the passage of the *15th Amendment* in 1870. This gave African American men the right to vote. But still excluded women and caused divisions within the suffrage movement. Stanton and Anthony criticized the amendment for prioritizing race over gender, while others, such as Stone, supported a more gradual approach (McConaughy, 2014). Even though this happened, suffrage did gain ground with victories at the state level. Wyoming became the first U.S. state to give women the right to vote in 1869, with Utah following in 1870. By 1900, four states, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho, granted full suffrage to women, demonstrating the growing impact of the movement. These successes at the state level helped build a force for national suffrage (Teele, 2025).

In the UK, organized suffrage efforts came later but were no less influential. In 1872, the *National Society for Women's Suffrage* (NSWS) was founded as the first national organization to campaign for the vote. One of the most well-known suffrage groups was *the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies* (NUWSS), which was established in 1897 by Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (1867-1954). Under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett (1847-1929), the NUWSS became the leading organization advocating for women's suffrage in Britain, focusing on peaceful, legal, and non-violent methods to secure the vote.

During this era, women also took their first real steps toward equal access to higher education. In the United Kingdom, institutions such as *Lady Margaret Hall*, founded in 1878, and *Somerville College*, founded in 1879, at the University of Oxford began admitting women, thus questioning prevailing gender norms and providing access to higher education (Schwartz, 2018). In the United States, the Seven Sisters Colleges, from Mount Holyoke, founded in 1837, to Barnard, founded in 1889, were established to provide women with an education comparable to that of the Ivy League (Hamilton & Johnson, 2009). These institutions paved the way for women to stand up academically and take on leadership roles in a variety of professional fields.

#### **1.1.4. The Arts and Crafts Movement**

The Arts and Crafts Movement, influencing art and design between 1880 and 1910, began as a reaction to the industrialization of production, advocating for a return to craftsmanship and quality materials. Led by William Morris (1834-1896) in England, the movement rejected mass production, which its artists argued dehumanized labor and led to poorer design. By shaping the decorative arts, especially in book design, textiles, and household objects, the Arts and Crafts movement established a design philosophy that fused aesthetic value with everyday utility (Drucker & McVarish, 2013). Furthermore, the Arts and Crafts movement was one of the first to create opportunities for women within the ‘ladylike’ fields. Valuing handmade work and design allowed women to contribute to areas such as textiles, bookbinding, and interior design. May Morris (1862–1938), daughter of William Morris, played a leading role in this change. In 1907, she founded the *Women's Guild of Arts*, providing women artists with a platform to showcase their work and gain professional recognition (Thomas, 2017). The overall view of women from the movement was complex. On the one hand, it supported traditional links between femininity and domestic life. On the other hand, it created new professional and creative opportunities. Valuing handcrafts and domestic arts aligned with socially accepted 'feminine' roles, making it more acceptable for women to pursue careers in fields such as embroidery, textile design, and bookbinding. This alignment provided women with an opportunity to professionalize skills that were often dismissed as merely decorative or hobbies (Kaplan, 2019). Yet participation was predominantly limited to middle- and upper-class women, and leadership roles remained male-dominated. Nevertheless, by considering applied arts as intellectually and culturally valuable, the

movement helped to legitimize women's contributions and laid the groundwork for greater gender equity in design education and practice.



**Figure 1** Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833–1898), *Laus Veneris* 1873–1878, Oil with gold paint on canvas, 122 x 183 cm (48 x 72 in), Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, <https://www.artchive.com/artwork/laus-veneris-1869-by-edward-burne-jones/>

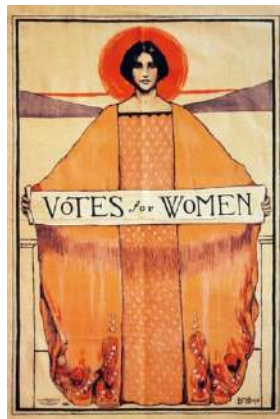
The educational opportunities were created by, for example, *The Central School of Arts and Crafts in London*, founded in 1896, with the principles of the movement in mind. It offered women formal training in disciplines such as textiles, bookbinding, and metalwork (Woodham, 2004). Another institution that became strongly associated with Arts and Crafts ideals, especially in the early 20th century, was *the Glasgow School of Art*, founded in 1845. It welcomed female students and teachers such as Ann Macbeth (1875–1948), who became a leading figure in textile design and helped shape the school's progressive reputation (Neyret-Tassan, 2024). These institutions legitimized women's artistic and professional development at a time when creative education was still largely dominated by men.

### **1.1.5. The impact of Lithography**

Lithography, a printing technique invented by Alois Senefelder (1771-1834) in 1796, revolutionized the world of printing and graphic design. Senefelder, a German playwright and actor, developed the process as a more efficient way of reproducing handwritten texts and drawings. Lithography made it possible to produce high-quality prints quickly and at relatively low cost, marking an important departure from earlier, more labor-intensive techniques such as engraving or woodblock printing. This led to new opportunities for commercial advertising,

editorial design, and poster making (Eskilson, 2019). It became the medium of choice for promoting products, events, and performances, and was particularly influential in Paris, the cultural center of the time. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864- 1901) and Jules Chéret (1836-1932) were two of the most famous artists to use lithography in their work, creating eye-catching posters for theatres, cabarets, and entertainment venues.

Lithography was also a powerful tool for women's advocacy and social movements. Feminists and suffragists used this technique to share messages about women's rights, education, and social reform in a visual and direct way (Carter, 2020). In the United Kingdom, artists such as Mary Lowndes and Emily Ford, who were both members of the *Artists' Suffrage League* (ASL), designed lithographic posters that were bold, elegant, and politically charged. They aimed to combine artistic expression with activism by creating posters that would catch the eye in public spaces and communicate the urgency of women's suffrage (Carter, 2020).



**Figure 2 & 3** Left: Boyé, Bertha Margaret, (1884–1930), *Votes for Women*, 1911, color lithograph on paper, Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento. [https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/votes-for-women-bertha-margaret-boyé/XgFXxAN0U\\_FEHA?hl=en](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/votes-for-women-bertha-margaret-boyé/XgFXxAN0U_FEHA?hl=en) Right: Lowndes, Mary (1856–1929), *From Prison to Citizenship*, 1911, applique banner with painted elements on fabric, Museum of London, London. <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/collections/v/object-455262/the-from-prison-to-citizenship-banner-on-the-womens-coronation-procession-17-june-1911/>

A notable example is Lowndes's *From Prison to Citizenship* banner, which was used in marches to protest the imprisonment of suffragettes. In the United States, figures such as Bertha Margaret Boyé (1884–1930) contributed to the movement by creating striking imagery. Her 1911 *Votes for Women* poster, created for the *San Francisco College Equal Suffrage League*, used lithography to depict a confident, forward-looking woman, symbolizing modernity and empowerment.

Lithography gave artists like Boyé the ability to reach large audiences through mass printing while maintaining a strong artistic identity (Carter, 2020).

## 1.2 Fin de Siècle

### 1.2.1. Sociocultural context in the US and UK

The Fin de Siècle period, meaning 'end of the century', is a period associated with the latter part of the 19th century, and the beginning of the 20th century (roughly between 1880 and 1914) marked by social, political, and cultural transformations in both the United Kingdom and the United States. In the United Kingdom, the waning years of the Victorian era saw the development of new cultural movements and social anxieties. The rapid pace of industrialization and urbanization led to concerns about the nation's moral and physical health. During this time, the concept of the *New Woman* came to the attention of the public, questioning traditional gender roles and advocating for greater educational and professional opportunities (Ledger & Luckhurst, 2000).

In the United States, the Gilded Age<sup>4</sup> transitioned into the Progressive Era, which was characterized by rapid economic growth, political corruption, and social reform. The influx of immigrants and the development of urban centers resulted in a diverse and often fragmented society. Progressive reformers wanted to address issues including labor rights, women's suffrage, and public health (Baker, 2020). The US also witnessed the rise of the *New Woman*, reflecting similar shifts in gender dynamics to those seen in the UK.

During the Fin de Siècle period, the United Kingdom remained a constitutional monarchy under Queen Victoria until her death in 1901. She was then succeeded by her son, King Edward VII (1841–1910). Political power was held by Parliament and the Prime Minister. The UK's political system continued to be shaped by its two-party structure, which was dominated by the Liberal and Conservative parties. At the same time, the United States was functioning as a federal republic, with a separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of

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<sup>4</sup> The Gilded Age refers to a period of rapid economic growth, industrialization, and social inequality in the United States, roughly spanning from the 1870s to about 1900. Coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their 1873 novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, the term critiques the era's surface-level prosperity, which masked deep political corruption, labor struggles, and stark class divisions

government. Notable presidents during this period included Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), played a central role in the reforms of the Progressive Era.

### **1.2.2. Rise of New Woman ideology, Gibson Girl, and Women in Academics**

The term *New Woman* was popularized by the Irish writer Sarah Grand (1854–1943) in her 1894 essay *The New Aspect of the Woman Question*, in which she described a woman who pursued independence, education, and self-fulfillment beyond traditional domestic roles. Although the concept of the *New Woman* was not yet widespread, it influenced educational reforms during this period. This wave of the *New Women* overlapped with suffrage campaigns, education reform, and early feminist literature. In contrast, the *Gibson Girl*, as created by the American illustrator Charles Dana Gibson (1867–1944), represented the ideal of the *New Woman*. Portraying a confident, educated, and fashionable woman who embraced aspects of modern femininity while upholding conventional beauty standards, she appeared in magazines such as *Life* and *Collier's* (Patterson, 2008). Unlike her British counterpart, the *Gibson Girl* was less politically outspoken, serving as a mass-media-friendly embodiment of women's evolving roles. While the British *New Woman* was often associated with literary debates and educational reforms, the American *Gibson Girl* popularized similar ideals through visual culture. Together, these figures contributed to the redefinition of women's identities at the turn of the century, highlighting the interplay between media representations and societal perceptions of femininity (Patterson, 2008).

Even as the *New Woman* and the *Gibson Girl* captured the public's imagination, women had already been fighting for academic recognition throughout the Victorian and Fin de Siècle periods. An important reminder of just how gradual educational reform can be is that it was only in 1920 that the University of Oxford finally began awarding degrees to women (University of Oxford, 2020). This is what inspired Sarah to speak up and use the term *New Women* in her essay. The *New Women* got a new round of attention in 1920 and were the source of inspiration to the second wave of feminism. Literature and magazines also helped to spread *New Woman* ideals. For example, Oscar Wilde's (1854–1900) editorship of *The Woman's World* magazine from 1887 to 1889 transformed it into a platform for women to express their opinions on literature, art, and modern life (Fitzsimons, z.d.). At the same time, the *New Woman* also faced backlash. Satirical illustrations in publications such as *Punch* mocked her as unfeminine and a threat to traditional family

structures. She was often depicted in exaggerated masculine attire or engaging in activities deemed inappropriate for women (Myers, 2014). This already happened from 1890 on and continued during the second wave of attention for the *New Women*.

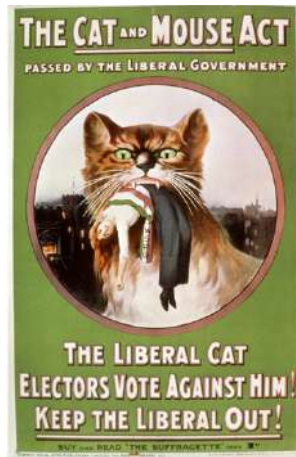


**Figure 4** du Maurier, George (1834–1896), 'The New Woman', 1895, illustration in *Punch*, Vol. 108, p. 282. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/cve/11788>

### 1.2.3. Women in public and intellectual life: gaining visibility

In this period women's suffrage in the UK developed further, inspired by earlier suffrage movements. Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) and her daughters founded the *Women's Social and Political Union* (WSPU) in 1903. The WSPU adopted more aggressive tactics in the fight for women's rights. An impactful strategy of this organization was the hunger strikes carried out in prison. When members were arrested for their suffrage activities, they would refuse food to protest their treatment and demand recognition as political prisoners. This attracted public sympathy and increased the visibility of the movement. The government was forced to respond, and under the 'Cat and Mouse Act'<sup>5</sup> of 1913, suffragettes on hunger strike were temporarily released, only to be re-arrested when they recovered. The WSPU also participated in other acts of civil disobedience, such as smashing windows, setting fires, and disrupting political meetings. These disruptive tactics, which contrasted strongly with the peaceful methods of the NUWSS, were aimed at forcing the government to act. With this, women entered the public field to fight for the right to vote (Hume, 2016; British History Hub, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> The Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act 1913, nicknamed the "Cat and Mouse Act," allowed the temporary release of hunger-striking suffragettes from prison, only to re-arrest them once they recovered.



**Figure 5** *The Cat and Mouse Act*, 1914, lithographic poster, designed by the Women's Social and Political Union, printed by David Allen & Sons Ltd., London. Museum of London.  
<https://shop.londonmuseum.org.uk/products/pod448358?srltid=AfmBOoq46LbHo4Zih2KdxEIFptualcGy6vzmM78i94wFOnaeYvSikPy&>

Industrialization and urbanization reshaped not only economies but also societal structures, leading to shifts in gender roles. Women increasingly moved into public life and professional sectors that had previously been dominated by men (Gray, 2013). Educational progress during this period increased women's access to learning, allowing them to pursue careers in various fields, including journalism. By 1891, census data in Britain recorded around 660 women who identified as authors, editors, or journalists, indicating a growing female presence in literary and journalistic circles (Gray, 2013). A similar trend developed in the United States, where women began to assert their voices through writing and editorial work.

Magazines and periodicals became platforms through which women could express their ideas and advocate for social change. In the UK, publications such as *The Englishwoman's Review* and *The Englishwoman's Journal* offered platforms for discussions on women's rights, employment, and education (Shelley, 2009). Prominent figures such as Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827–1891) and Jessie Boucherett (1825–1905) used these publications to challenge traditional gender roles and promote feminist ideals. In the United States, *the Woman's Journal*, founded by Lucy Stone and Henry Browne Blackwell (1825–1909), established itself as a leading voice in the women's suffrage movement. Contributors such as Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) used the publication to disseminate feminist ideas and foster support for women's rights (Gemberling, 2014c). These magazines informed readers and created communities where women could meet to discuss and act on issues of equality.

These magazines weren't just informational platforms; they were instrumental in prompting change. Inspired by the ideals of the first wave of feminism, women of this era began to speak more openly about their dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles and the limitations placed on their social and intellectual freedoms. Through the pages of progressive publications, they voiced their frustrations, challenged expectations, and forged a sense of solidarity with other women who shared their sentiments. This marked a turning point: it was no longer just about participating in public life but about reshaping it. Using print media as both their tool and their voice, women laid the foundations for a stronger, more visible feminist movement that demanded recognition, rights, and reform (Gemberling, 2014c).

#### **1.2.4. Art Nouveau**

Art Nouveau originated in the late 19th century as a reaction against traditional academic art and the mass production of industrial goods. The term 'Art Nouveau' was first introduced in 1884 by the Belgian art journal *L'Art Moderne*<sup>6</sup> to describe the work of the group of artists known as *Les Vingt*<sup>7</sup> (Artchive, 2023). The movement quickly spread across Europe and is characterized by organic lines, floral motifs, and a focus on craftsmanship. The term 'Art Nouveau' varies across countries. In France and Belgium, it was called 'Art Nouveau'; in the UK, particularly in Scotland, it was called the 'Modern Style'; and in Italy, it was called 'Stile Liberty'. This version of the movement drew on the values of the Arts and Crafts Movement, adopting a more restrained and structured aesthetic than its continental counterparts (MacCarthy, 2014; Waldek, 2020). In the United States, Art Nouveau found a characteristic expression in the 'Tiffany style', named after Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933), who gained international recognition for his pioneering stained-glass creations. His use of favrile glass, with its organic motifs and iridescent surface, offered a uniquely American interpretation of Art Nouveau aesthetics (Berlinghof, 2020).

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<sup>6</sup> L'Art Moderne, A Belgian art journal founded in Brussels in 1881, known for promoting modern art and ideas like Symbolism and Art Nouveau. It ran until 1914.

<sup>7</sup> Les Vingt, group of twenty avant-garde artists, formed in Brussels in 1883 by Octave Maus. They held annual exhibitions to showcase modern art and dissolved in 1893.



**Figure 6** Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939), *The Seasons: Spring*, 1896, color lithograph, 103 × 54 cm, printed by F. Champenois, Paris. Collection of the Mucha Trust. <https://www.muchafoundation.org/en/gallery/browse-works/object/81>

Although women were often visually central to Art Nouveau artworks, they were typically presented as decorative muses and confined to roles that reflected idealized notions of femininity. Portrayed with flowing hair, floral patterns, and curved poses, these figures symbolized beauty, sensuality, and emotional delicacy, blending into nature or ornamental surroundings. Rather than being shown as active participants, women were used as aesthetic motifs rather than agents of action or intellect (Silverman, 2020). This symbolic portrayal aligned with and promoted the dominant gender roles of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which associated women with the private, emotional, and domestic spheres. By continually presenting women as passive and decorative, Art Nouveau added to the cultural narrative that women's primary value lay in their appearance and emotional nature. This subtly limited perceptions of their social potential (Chadwick, 2020).

At the same time, the movement created new opportunities for women to become creators rather than subjects. These opportunities were often made possible by the growth of education in applied arts and the increasing acceptance of women in design schools and artistic guilds. In the UK, for example, the *Glasgow School of Art* became a supporter of female talent, with artists such as Margaret Macdonald (1865–1911). She was one of the leading figures in the Art Nouveau movement. Macdonald worked across media, including metalwork and textiles, but was most notable for her gesso panels, which she used to produce highly symbolic and stylized compositions. Works such as "The May Queen" (1900) and "The White Rose and the Red Rose"

(1902) were exhibited internationally, receiving praise for their originality and craftsmanship (Green, 2019). Macdonald was also part of the collaborative group 'The Four' alongside Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928), with whom she frequently exhibited. Although she was often overshadowed by her husband, her contributions were central to the visual language now associated with the interpretation of Art Nouveau (Tsalezere, 2025).



**Figure 7** Margaret Macdonald (1865–1911), *The White Rose and the Red Rose* (1902), <https://pixels.com/featured/the-white-rose-and-the-red-rose-margaret-macdonald-mackintosh-margaret-macdonald-mackintosh.html>

In the US, art and design schools such as the *Pratt Institute* and the *School of the Art Institute of Chicago* began admitting more women, offering them access to training and exhibitions. These women, however, were often overlooked in art history. Their work tends to be dismissed as 'decorative' or 'craft' rather than fine art, reflecting the gender biases of the time. It is only recently that the legacy of many female Art Nouveau artists has begun to receive the scholarly attention it deserves (Europeana, n.d.; Tsaleza, 2025).

Fashion during the Art Nouveau period began to change, getting more flowy. As society slowly began to accept women in non-domestic roles, fashion started to adapt to that new reality. Designers moved away from the stiff corsets that had defined Victorian fashion. Instead, they introduced lighter fabrics and flowing silhouettes inspired by nature, mirroring the organic lines that defined Art Nouveau itself. These changes weren't just about style, though; they were practical, too. Looser clothing gave women more freedom to move, work, and participate in public life. They were a visual reflection of the broader societal shift (Europeana, n.d.).



**Figure 8** Henry Van de Velde (1863–1957), *Woman's Reform Dresses*, ca. 1902, dress designs reproduced in printed fashion plate, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
<https://www.vandaimages.com/2006AN8783-Woman's-reform-dresses-designed-by-Professor-Henry.html>

Art Nouveau transformed not only women's fashion and aesthetics but also how women were represented and perceived in visual culture. The movement offered a more expressive and modern visual identity, seen in flowing garments, organic forms, and stylized illustrations, that contributed to the concept of the *New Woman*: an individual who was intellectually curious, socially active, and visually liberated (Iskin, 2020). However, this modern image was constructed through the narrow lens of traditional femininity, often idealizing women as graceful, decorative figures rather than complex individuals. Even as women gained greater access to education and artistic training, they were frequently overshadowed by male collaborators or dismissed as 'decorative' artists, reflecting the persistent gender hierarchy within the art world. As art historian Ruth Iskin explains, Art Nouveau's imagery of women often symbolized the conflict between tradition and autonomy, simultaneously signaling progress while also maintaining societal expectations (Iskin, 2020).

### **1.2.5. Aestheticism**

The Aesthetic Movement started in mid-19th-century UK as a cultural response to the strict moral codes and industrial mass production of Victorian society. Associated with figures such as Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) and James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), Aestheticism promoted the idea of 'art for art's sake', prioritizing beauty, sensuality, and individual expression over moral or political messages (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.). Unlike Art Nouveau, which integrated art into everyday objects and architecture, Aestheticism was more

introspective, focusing on personal taste and the appreciation of beauty as a means of rebelling against societal constraints.

In the UK, Aestheticism shaped literature, interior design, and fashion, providing an alternative to existing norms. In the US, the movement was popular among urban thinkers and artists who were looking for alternatives to mainstream cultural values. For women, Aestheticism provided both a mirror and a window: while they were often depicted as muses in art, they also became active participants and enthusiastic consumers of aesthetic culture. The movement's focus on beauty and personal preference allowed women to experiment with new forms of self-expression and question traditional roles and expectations. Fashion was a particularly important part of this change. Also stepped away from the corsets and heavy fabrics of Victorian clothing, just like the Art Nouveau. The aesthetic dress allowed movement and flowing lines, natural fabrics, and designs inspired by medieval and Eastern aesthetics. By wearing Aesthetic fashions, women indicated their support for a movement that valued personal freedom, artistic expression, and an alternative vision of femininity that did not conform to societal expectations (Monet, 2023).



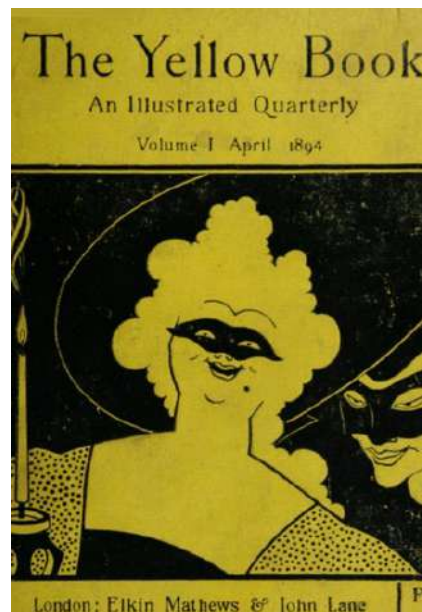
**Figure 9** William Powell (1819–1909). *A Private View at the Royal Academy*, 1881, oil on canvas, 60.5 × 114.5 cm, Royal Academy of Arts, London.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Private\\_View\\_at\\_the\\_Royal\\_Academy,\\_1881](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Private_View_at_the_Royal_Academy,_1881)

One of the most iconic symbols of Aestheticism in the UK was *The Yellow Book* (1894–1897), a literature and art journal published quarterly that questioned traditional Victorian values. With its distinctive yellow cover, a color associated with French decadence and modernism, it became a symbol of progressive thinking. Edited by Aubrey Beardsley and Henry Harland (1861–1905), the publication featured work by male and female writers and artists alike, including Ella D'Arcy (1857–1937) and Charlotte Mew (1869–1928), offering women rare visibility in a male-dominated

literary world (Baran, 2020). Rejecting moral Victorian norms, *The Yellow Book* embraced experimental forms, irony, and ambiguity, qualities that also resonated with women seeking space for alternative identities and creative freedom. Shaped largely by Beardsley, its visual aesthetic combined elegance and transgression, reflecting the movement's tension between beauty and rebellion (Baran, 2020).

US Aestheticism frequently expressed itself through the decorative arts, interior design, and women's literary circles. Middle- and upper-class women incorporated aesthetic ideals into their homes and personal style as a means of cultural engagement and subtle rebellion against rigid gender norms (R. Iskin, 2014). Publications such as *The Art Amateur* and *House Beautiful* offered guidance on creating refined and tasteful domestic spaces, linking beauty with morality and feminine intelligence. As in Britain, American women were both inspired and limited by Aestheticism: while it provided tools for creative and intellectual autonomy, it was still profoundly influenced by the gender norms of the time (Silverman, 2018).



**Figure 10** Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), *Cover Design for The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume I, April 1894, photomechanical reproduction on paper, 28.1 × 21.6 cm, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut. <https://archive.org/details/yellowapril189401uoft>

### 1.3 Modernism Era

### **1.3.1. Sociocultural context in the US and UK**

The early 20th century was a time of change in both the US and the UK. Events such as the First and Second World Wars, the Great Depression, and the start of the Cold War shaped society and changed women's lives forever. These events put pressure on traditional perceptions of what women could and should do. They influenced the types of jobs available to women and how gender roles were understood. Recognizing this helps understand why women's roles expanded and evolved during this period, setting the stage for future feminist movements (Evans, 2016; Smith, 2020).

The UK remained a constitutional monarchy under King George V (1865 - 1936), who reigned 1910–1936, followed by a brief abdication crisis and the accession of King George VI (1895 - 1952) in 1936. Political power remained with Parliament, and the country was governed by prominent political figures such as David Lloyd George (1863-1945), who led Britain through the end of the First World War, and Winston Churchill (1874-1965), who would later guide the country through the Second World War. The two-party system dominated, with the Conservative and Labor parties shaping most domestic policy by the 1930s.

In the United States, this period was characterized by strong presidential leadership, including Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) during the First World War and Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945), who served four terms from 1933 to 1945. The Democratic Party gained dominance during this period, while the Republican Party shifted towards business interests and isolationism in the interwar years. The Supreme Court played a contentious role, especially during Roosevelt's presidency, when it initially resisted many New Deal policies before shifting in favor of increased governmental powers.

### **1.3.2. The role of women during the Great Wars and the Great depression**

The First World War (1914-1918) was a global conflict that made people look at social structures and women's roles again. With millions of men called up for military service, women took on jobs that had previously been the preserve of men. In the UK, this led to many women working in munitions factories, agriculture, transport, and clerical positions. They also played an active role in military support organizations such as the *Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD)* and *Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC)*, serving as nurses, drivers, and clerks near the front lines

(Grayzel, 2020). By taking on these roles, women gained visibility and proved that they could do more than just housework. Many women started to earn their wages, fostering a sense of financial independence. The impact of women's wartime service was seen in the political reforms that followed. The war acted as a driving force behind women's suffrage, as governments could no longer justify excluding women from the political process. After the war ended and men came back from the front, many women found themselves once more stepping away from paid work or being pushed back into more traditional domestic roles (Pugh, 2015).

The media helped shape attitudes towards women's roles during the First World War. Magazines such as *Woman's Weekly* and *Votes for Women* presented women as patriotic and skilled, while illustrated publications such as *The War Illustrated* and *The Illustrated London News* portrayed women as national heroes. These views helped change public opinions by presenting women as active participants in society (Rayner, 2017; McKee, 2017).

In the US, the First World War also created new opportunities for women, although these differed somewhat from those in the UK. American women entered the workforce in industries, government offices, and agriculture, often through programs such as the *Women's Land Army*. Although fewer American women served near the front than their British counterparts, many contributed to the war effort through organizations such as the *American Red Cross* and the *Army Nurse Corps*, taking up roles in medical care, administration, and supply services (Grayzel, 2020). As in the UK, many women were encouraged, or forced, to leave paid employment once soldiers returned home, thus strengthening traditional gender norms despite the temporary expansion of women's roles during wartime (Pugh, 2015).

The Great Depression (1929 – c. 1939) also changed and shaped women's social roles. The event was a global economic crisis that started with the dramatic collapse of the US stock market on 24 October, known as Black Thursday. It triggered widespread financial instability, resulting in mass unemployment, poverty, and social disruption, the effects of which were felt worldwide (Ardan, 2023). The Great Depression put women in a difficult position. Many employers implemented 'marriage bans', restricting the employment opportunities for married women. These policies were based on the belief that men should have priority in the workforce during periods of high unemployment. Working women were often labelled selfish because they were seen as taking jobs from unemployed men (Bellou & Cardia, 2021). Although women were pushed out of 'higher'

jobs, the number of working women increased, mainly because they were cheaper to employ. While male-dominated industries suffered, sectors such as teaching, nursing, and clerical work remained stable or grew. This shift sometimes meant that women became the primary breadwinners, despite earning less than their male counterparts. Between 1930 and 1940, the number of working women in the US increased from 10.5 million to 13 million (Fishback, 2018b; Goldin, 2021; Bellou & Cardia, 2021).

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the New Deal in 1933, it reshaped not only the American economy but also opened new opportunities for women, especially in public life. Programs such as the *Works Progress Administration* (WPA) created jobs for millions, and while many roles remained gendered, women were employed in areas such as clerical work, gardening, food preparation, sewing, and running community centers. These roles were not merely about survival; they also helped women gain visibility in public service and economic recovery. A leading figure in this transformation was Frances Perkins (1880 - 1965), the first woman to serve in a U.S. presidential cabinet. Appointed *Secretary of Labor* by Roosevelt in 1933, she played a central role in shaping New Deal policies, including the Social Security Act, minimum wage laws, and unemployment insurance. Not only did her position influence national policies, but it also set a strong precedent for women's leadership in politics at a time when female political voices were still rare. By the late 1930s, increased military spending in preparation for the Second World War had helped to turn the economy around (Ware, 1987; Eichengreen, 2019; Steinkopf-Frank, 2020; Woodward, 2024b)

During the Great Depression, magazines shifted their focus to reflect the challenges of the economic crisis and its impact on women. Publications such as *Good Housekeeping* and *The Woman's Home Companion* highlighted women's roles as resourceful homemakers, offering practical advice on managing household budgets, cooking with limited resources, and supporting families through economic difficulties. These magazines often portrayed women as patient individuals who could maintain domestic stability despite immense financial stress. In contrast, feminist publications such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic* occasionally critiqued discriminatory practices such as 'marriage bars' and drew attention to the systemic inequalities that women faced during this period. By highlighting both resilience and injustice, magazines played a role in documenting and defining the experiences of women during this time. (Hackney, 2010)

The Great Depression also had far-reaching consequences in the UK, particularly in industrial regions such as Wales, northern England, and Scotland, where unemployment rates reached devastating levels. Unlike the United States, where the crash originated, Britain had already been experiencing economic instability in the 1920s. The global downturn exacerbated long-standing issues related to declining trade, overproduction, and poor working conditions (Roselli, 2012). By 1932, unemployment in the UK had peaked at over 2.5 million, with working-class communities bearing the brunt of the crisis.

For women, the crisis intensified existing social and economic inequalities. Although fewer formal 'marriage bars' existed in the UK than in the US, married women were still discouraged from working, particularly in civil service and teaching roles. As in the US, women were often accused of 'taking jobs from men' and pushed into poorly paid, gendered roles such as domestic service, textile work, and clerical labor. These sectors remained relatively stable during the economic downturn, and women were often preferred by employers because they could be paid less. Although some women became the main breadwinners, their economic contributions were frequently overlooked or obscured by narratives of sacrifice and thrift. Similarly, media coverage in Britain shifted to focus on domestic survival. Magazines such as *Home Chat* and *Woman's Journal* encouraged women to adapt to economic hardship by improving their homemaking and budgeting skills and drawing on their moral strength. This approach largely reaffirmed traditional gender roles rather than calling them into question (Hackney, 2006). Although feminist critique remained present, it was more subdued than in the US, and there was limited political momentum for systemic gender reform during the interwar years. Nevertheless, the Depression created a foundation for changes in public discourse regarding women's economic roles that would become more apparent during the Second World War.

The Second World War (1939-1945) took further steps in reshaping the social roles of women and the way they were seen in society. September 1, 1939, marked the start of the war, with the invasion of Poland by Germany. The United Kingdom and France then declared war on Germany in response, marking the beginning of a six-year conflict (Gilbert, 2024). The war had a lasting impact on the role of women in society. While men were enlisted in the military, women took on roles in factories, shipyards, and other industries that were essential for the war, a situation mirroring that of World War I. In the United States, *Rosie the Riveter*, created by Naomi Parker Fraley (1921 -

2018), became a cultural icon representing women's contributions to the industrial workforce. She represented the millions of women who took on roles traditionally held by men, demonstrating strength, resilience, and patriotism. Rosie's most famous image, portraying a woman in a red headscarf raising her arm with the slogan 'We Can Do It!', became a powerful symbol of female strength. In addition to industrial work, women played a more active role in military service. Many served in auxiliary branches such as the *Women's Army Corps* (WAC) in the United States and the *Women's Auxiliary Air Force* (WAAF) in the UK. After the war, returning soldiers reclaimed their jobs, and governments encouraged women to return to domestic roles, thus putting them back in a traditional role. While some women willingly left the workforce, others resisted, sparking conversations about gender equality once more. These conversations would later fuel feminist movements (Acemoglu et al., 2002; Brock et al., 2015; Rilla, 2016).



Figure 11 J. Miller Howard (1918–2004), *We Can Do It!*, (c. 1942), National Museum of American History. [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah\\_538122](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_538122)

In response to the horrors of the Second World War, world leaders wished to establish a global framework for peace and human dignity. This resulted in the formation of the *United Nations* (UN) in 1945, an organization dedicated to fostering peace, security, and collaboration between nations. One of its key priorities was establishing a global human rights framework, resulting in the drafting of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) in 1948. The UN played a critical role in shaping this document by bringing together representatives from a variety of cultural and political backgrounds, ensuring that it reflected universal values. Adopted in December 1948, the UDHR was the first international document to recognize the fundamental rights and freedoms of all

individuals. A key figure in drafting the UDHR was Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962), who chaired the UN Commission on Human Rights. She advocated strong, inclusive language that recognized the equal rights of women and men. Article 1 of the UDHR states that *'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'*, while Article 2 affirms that these rights apply *'without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion'*. For women, the UDHR gave international legitimacy to their demands for equal pay, education, and political participation. Subsequently, many countries reformed their laws to align with the UDHR's principles, leading to advances in women's suffrage, labor rights, and access to education (United Nations, z.d.; Glendon & Random House, 2001; Adami, 2018; United Nations, 2023).

The following years were affected by the growing political tensions between the world's two rising superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. This period, known as the Cold War, began in 1947 and was characterized by an ideological rivalry concerning governance, economics, and social structures, including gender roles (Ghodsee & Elsevier, 2009). In the capitalist West, particularly the United States, the idealized image of women centered on the suburban housewife, with a push to return to domesticity after the Second World War. Meanwhile, in communist countries such as the Soviet Union and China, women were encouraged to join the workforce, and gender equality was promoted as a core socialist ideal. The Soviet Union, for example, championed women's education, professional opportunities, and political participation; however, these advances were often limited by ongoing patriarchal structures (Reid, 2017).

In the United States, the Red Scare and the widespread fear of communism influenced the role of women in politics and activism. Those who advocated for progressive change and equal rights were sometimes labelled communist sympathizers, making it difficult to push for gender equality without facing political backlash (Ghodsee & Elsevier, 2009). Yet the Cold War also created opportunities for change. As the United States and the Soviet Union competed for global influence, human rights, including women's rights, became a crucial area of debate, raising the profile of equality issues on the international stage (Ghodsee & Elsevier, 2009).

Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom did not experience a widespread Red Scare. While there was some suspicion towards communists in unions and left-wing political groups, there were no major purges or public hysteria. Women involved in reformist or feminist activism were generally not labelled as subversive, and efforts to promote gender equality continued through

parliamentary and grassroots channels (Gerth, 2023). Nevertheless, the global tensions of the Cold War shaped the discourse. As the West positioned itself against the Soviet Union, women's rights became increasingly associated with democratic progress, raising the international profile of issues such as education, labor, and political participation (Ghodsee & Elsevier, 2009).

### **1.3.3. New Woman, Flapper Culture & Full Suffrage**

The concept of the *New Woman* gained popularity in the 20th century. Life after the First World War brought a growing sense of freedom for women. By 1920, the concept had become increasingly popular, representing a desire for education, political involvement, economic independence, and a broader worldview. Women appeared as a political force, actively advocating for their rights and greater freedom (Beaumont, 2020).

The concept of the *New Woman* developed in both the United States and the United Kingdom, although it was expressed differently in each country. In the US, she was most famously represented by the *Flapper*, a bold, urban figure associated with youth, nightlife, and consumer freedom. She became a cultural icon of modern femininity through popular magazines and film (Brady & SUNY Oneonta, 2019; Parker, 2019). In the UK, the *New Woman* was more often associated with education, suffrage activism, and entering professional life. Although she also rejected traditional roles, her image was less commercial and more politically focused (Hughes Johnson & Jenkins, 2011). While both versions broke with gender norms, the American *New Woman* was celebrated through fashion and the media, whereas her UK counterpart was often viewed with suspicion for defying social conventions.

The 1920s saw the appearance of the *Flapper*, a bold symbol of modern femininity whose fashion statement turned away from traditional gender norms. Known for their bobbed hair, short skirts, and loose, functional clothing, flappers rejected the restrictive fashions of the past. They embraced a rebellious spirit, openly engaging in activities once deemed inappropriate for women, such as smoking, drinking, dancing, and driving. Sports such as cycling and tennis became popular, symbolizing their physical and social emancipation. Women also increasingly occupied public spaces, frequenting cafés, theatres, and universities, thereby asserting their right to engage in environments that had previously been dominated by men (Zeit, 2006; Parker, 2019; Brady & SUNY Oneonta, 2019). Meanwhile, many in the older generations were uncomfortable with the

rise of the *New Woman* and the *Flapper*, fearing that women's growing independence would distract them from marriage and motherhood. Critics argued that the *Flapper Lifestyle*, characterized by social freedom, nightlife, and defiance of traditional roles, rendered women too reckless and irresponsible to hold political power. In the workplace, employers and male professionals viewed flappers as a threat because they sought economic independence rather than relying on men, thereby challenging long-standing gender dynamics (Brady & SUNY Oneonta, 2019). Support from modern magazines such as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, which praised the *Flapper* as a symbol of modernity and freedom, helped the movement overpower its critics. As the *Flapper Lifestyle* became more visible, it evolved from a simple statement of independence into a trend that many young, rebellious teenagers enthusiastically embraced. This growing popularity further strengthened the *Flapper's* influence, establishing her as a defining image of the Roaring Twenties, drowning out the voices of their traditionalist critics (Lachmansingh, 2010).

Following the First World War, three factors converged to make the achievement of full women's suffrage inevitable: the mass mobilization of women on the home front, the visibility of the *New Woman* and the *Flapper* as symbols of female agency, and decades of organized campaigning by suffrage societies. By 1918–1920, politicians could no longer ignore the fact that women had proven their capability and commitment, both in uniform and in cultural life, so granting them the vote became the only fitting way to recognize their contributions (Standford Report, 2020; Arnsbarger, 2023). Full suffrage was achieved in the United States with the passing of the *19th Amendment* in 1920, which granted women the right to vote nationwide. This victory was the result of almost a century of activism by individuals such as Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) and Ida B. Wells (1862–1931), and it was expedited by women's visible contributions during the First World War (DuBois, 2020). In the United Kingdom, the process was more gradual. *The Representation of the People Act* 1918 granted voting rights to women over 30 who met certain property requirements. It was not until the *Equal Franchise Act* of 1928, which allowed all women over 21 to vote regardless of income or property, that women gained equal voting rights with men (Pugh, 2015).

#### **1.3.4. Post-Suffrage challenges: the rise of the second wave of feminism**

The second wave of feminism started in the early 1960s during the Cold War, when women started demanding more than the governmental changes of the first wave. The second wave focused more

on workplace equality, reproductive rights, and broader personal freedoms. A defining moment for the movement was the publication of Betty Friedan's (1921-2006) *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. This revolutionary book exposed the deep dissatisfaction and unspoken frustration felt by many suburban housewives, despite living what was considered the 'ideal American life'. Drawing on extensive research, including interviews with women, psychological studies, and media analysis, Friedan confronted the idea that a woman's fulfilment should come solely from domestic life as a wife and mother. She argued that societal expectations confined women to domesticity and limited their personal and professional growth. The book is often credited with inspiring a new wave of feminist activism, leading to the formation of women's liberation movements across the Western world and laying the foundations for advances in women's rights. This led to the creation of important feminist organizations dedicated to advancing women's rights. One of the most influential was the *National Organization for Women* (NOW), founded in 1966 by Betty Friedan (1921–2006) and a group of activists frustrated by the slow progress in implementing anti-discrimination laws. Their goal was to achieve full equality for women in all aspects of society, including the workplace, education, and reproductive rights (Evans, 2016; Bingham, 2023).

NOW campaigned for the implementation of *Title VII of the Civil Rights Act* of 1964, which outlawed sex discrimination in employment, and pushed for the approval of the *Equal Rights Amendment* (ERA), which aimed to guarantee equal legal status regardless of gender (Evans, 2016). Reproductive freedom was another point for NOW: NOW lobbied Congress and state legislatures for access to contraception and abortion. This activism led to *Title IX of the Education Amendments* of 1972, which barred sex discrimination in federally funded education. It also increased support for the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision, which recognized a constitutional right to abortion (Rosen, 2002; Evans, 2016).

Similarly, in the UK, the *British Women's Liberation Movement* of the 1970s translated its energy into legal victories in Britain. Building on the momentum of early feminist conferences and publications, activists influenced Parliament to pass the *Abortion Act* 1967, which made abortion more accessible; the *Equal Pay Act* 1970, which guaranteed equal pay for equal work; and the *Sex Discrimination Act* 1975, which prohibited discrimination on the grounds of sex or marital status in employment and education (Binard, 2017). These laws represented the second wave of feminism's peak in the UK, reshaping social and professional life for millions of women.

### 1.3.5. Modernism: Redefining Visual Language

Modernism was a radical break with the decorative historicism of the 19th century, proposing a new visual language based on abstraction, functionalism, and the aesthetics of the machine. Its key values included: form follows function: design should serve real needs rather than ornament. It also prioritized the straightforward presentation of materials, allowing steel, concrete, and glass to showcase their structural and aesthetic qualities openly. Universalism, a belief that clear, rational design could improve life for all, dissolving class- and gender-based hierarchies. Because it promises progress and efficiency, Modernism quickly inspired a variety of offshoot movements, such as Constructivism in Russia, the Bauhaus in Germany, and De Stijl in the Netherlands. Each of these movements adapted the core principles of simplification and social purpose to their local contexts (Heynen, 2011; Britannica, 2025).

Modernism influenced everything from architecture to graphic and product design, quickly becoming the go-to style for creatives everywhere. Magazines soon adopted the trend, swapping flowery covers for minimalist grids and cleaner typography. Take *Vogue*, for example. Under the editorship of Dorothy Todd (1883–1966) in the late 1920s, the magazine shed its decorative past in favor of sharp, structured layouts. Todd also commissioned writers and photographers who treated the magazine as a 'study of the contemporary world', a platform not just for clothes, but also for modern ideas about work, politics, and women's lives (Lachmansingh, 2010b). *Harper's Bazaar* followed this trend, adopting asymmetrical spreads and bold typography to make each image and headline stand out. They also changed the way women were portrayed, shifting from passive models to confident individuals shaping their own stories (Tschichold, 2006; French & Whalen, 2021).

These formal shifts did more than refresh aesthetics; they shifted readers' focus towards women's evolving roles. This change is evident in every clean edge and open white space: *Vogue's* photo essays began to present images of women at typewriters, in factories, and in salons debating, while *Harper's Bazaar* ran interviews with female artists and activists, giving a spotlight to voices rather than just physical appearances (French & Whalen, 2021). The move to functional layouts mirrored women's push for real-world agency: no more unnecessary ornamentation, challenging readers to view women as active participants in a rapidly changing society.

Magazines didn't just reflect Modernism; they brought it into everyday life. Using their pages, they set the tone for homes, offices, and even public taste. As a mass medium, magazines popularized the clean lines and functional aesthetics of Modernism far beyond design circles, establishing minimalist grids and sans-serif typefaces as recognizable symbols of a modern lifestyle (Duignan, 2025). By adopting these visual rules, publications such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* sent a strong message. Modernism was not just a passing art trend, but a way of life that influenced everything from the furniture you bought and the clothes you wore to the roles you inhabited. Through their enormous reach, these magazines popularized contemporary ideals, promoting everything from Bauhaus-inspired furniture to presenting women's ambitions in the language of efficiency and clarity. In doing so, they helped to reshape societal expectations: readers came to value clean, minimalist environments, practical dress codes, and the embrace of individual agency. Experience Modernism not just as art, but as a new way of life (Morrisson, 2020; French & Whalen, 2021).



**Figure 12 & 13** Left: Eduardo Benito (1891–1981), *Cover of Vogue* (March 1, 1926), <https://archive.vogue.com/issue/19260301> Right: Unknown (staff under art director Alexey Brodovitch, 1898–1971), *Cover of Harper's Bazaar* – May 1930 (“New York Fashions”), <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/601441725243158669/>

While Modernism was characterized by spare functionalism, the Art Deco movement rose to prominence in the 1920s and '30s, offering a decorative counterpoint with geometric patterns, stepped forms, and luxurious materials (Britannica, 2025). Magazines quickly adopted these motifs to convey glamour and modernity. *Vogue*, for example, really embraced the Art Deco style under the direction of illustrator George Wolfe Plank (1883–1965). His cover design for the 1 November 1915 issue, framed by sharp chevrons and sunburst motifs, perfectly captured the era's sleek geometry and luxurious spirit. Plank's stylized figure, set against a backdrop of stepped forms

and metallic accents, did more than look glamorous; it signaled a newfound confidence in modern femininity that was as bold and forward-looking.



**Figure 14** George Wolfe Plank (1883–1965), *Vogue* cover, November 1915, <https://picryl.com/media/vogue-cover-november-1st-1915-by-george-wolfe-plank-c03196>

### 1.3.6. Constructivism

Constructivism originated in Russia around 1915 as the explicitly political wing of Modernism. It insisted that art should abandon the idea of 'art for art's sake' and instead become a functional tool for social change. While sharing Modernism's appreciation of abstraction and industrial materials, the Constructivists took it a step further by linking their work directly to the 'Bolshevik project'. They designed propaganda posters, public signage, and everyday objects that promoted revolutionary ideals (Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism, 2015). Although the movement proclaimed equality, women were often steered towards 'applied' fields such as textiles and book design, while men dominated architecture and large-scale sculpture. Nevertheless, pioneers such as Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958) and Liubov Popova (1889–1924) broke through these limitations. Stepanova's photomontage covers for the journal *LEF*, and her stage-costume designs established her as an artist and a political agent. Meanwhile, Popova's experimental fabric patterns translated Constructivist geometry into wearable form (Penev, 2019). '*LEF*' journal regularly featured women's writing and imagery, positioning female factory workers, engineers, and designers at the forefront of social transformation and challenging prevailing narratives about women's roles in society. Through their innovative practices, Stepanova and Popova advanced the

Constructivist agenda and laid the groundwork for feminist interventions in the art world (St, 2020).



**Figure 15 & 16** left: Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891–1956) and Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958), *Collage of L'ÉF journal covers*, No. 1–6 (1923–1925), Letterpress-printed photomechanical journal covers, 23 × 15.5 cm each, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, Departments of Drawings and Prints (Original editions); reproductions widely available, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/> Right: Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958), *Be Ready! (Будь готов)*, 1932, photomontage poster, Likely in Russian archives such as the Russian State Library; reproduced in Constructivist collections, <https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/665969863624808343/>

### 1.3.7. Bauhaus

Founded in 1919 by architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969) in Weimar, Germany, the Bauhaus established itself as a revolutionary institution with the aim of unifying art, craft, and technology. The school's philosophy focuses on simplicity and functionality, rejecting ornamentation and aligning with the modernist principles of the time (Charnley, 2020). While the Bauhaus professed ideals of gender equality, women often found themselves facing limitations within the institution in practice. Although the school initially attracted a significant number of female students, administrative policies eventually restricted their participation, directing many of them into disciplines considered appropriate for women, such as weaving and ceramics (European Parliament, 2021). Regardless of these limitations, several women made significant contributions to the Bauhaus legacy.

Anni Albers (1899–1994), for example, developed the weaving workshop into a center of innovation by combining traditional textile techniques with modernist design principles. Her work demonstrated the potential of textiles as a medium for artistic and functional expression (Kim, 2022). Marianne Brandt (1893–1983) broke barriers in the metal workshop, becoming its first female member and later its director. Her designs, characterized by geometric forms and practical

function, remain iconic representations of Bauhaus metalwork (Otto, 2013). Gunta Stölzl (1897–1983), another central figure, led the weaving workshop and played a defining role in raising the profile of textile design within the Bauhaus curriculum. She encouraged experimentation with materials and techniques.

In recent years, feminist scholars and curators have made efforts to reassess and acknowledge the contributions of women to the Bauhaus movement. This revision has questioned the traditional, male-centric narratives surrounding the Bauhaus and highlighted the fundamental roles played by women in shaping modernist design and education. The 2019 *Bauhaus imaginista* exhibition marked the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus, drawing attention to its international influence and the contributions of women, which are often overlooked. Organized by Marion von Osten (1963–2020) and Grant Watson (1966–), the exhibition presented the global dialogues and collaborations that the Bauhaus engaged in, with a particular focus on women artists and educators (Bittner, n.d.). Acknowledging the role of women in popularizing and adapting Bauhaus principles in different cultural contexts. In her seminal work, *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities and Radical Politics* (2019), provides a thorough analysis of the Bauhaus movement from a feminist perspective. She explores the school's relationship with themes such as gender diversity, queer identities and radical politics. Elizabeth Otto argues that Bauhaus women played a crucial role in advancing craft-based practices, such as textiles and metalwork, through teaching, editorial work, and material experimentation. In doing so, they confronted the patriarchal hierarchy that favored male-dominated fields such as painting and architecture over craft-based practices. Otto calls for a feminist re-evaluation of Bauhaus history that recognizes these women as foundational to the movement's legacy, rather than treating them as marginal figures (The MIT Press, 2020).



Figure 17 Bauhaus Imaginista. (n.d.). *Collected Research Tour*, 2019, Exhibition view. Retrieved from <https://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/events/3775/collected-research-tour>

## 1.4 Postmodernism

### 1.4.1 Sociocultural context in the US and the UK

During the postmodern era, which roughly spanned the 19660s through to the early 2000s, both the United Kingdom and the United States were governed by liberal democratic systems that focused on individual rights, electoral representation, and free-market capitalism. In the UK, this period began with the leadership of Margaret Thatcher (1925 - 2013), the first woman to hold the office of Prime Minister, serving from 1979 to 1990. Her government implemented neoliberal reforms such as privatization, reduced welfare spending, and made fewer regulations, thereby altering the role of the state in economic life and social provision. She was followed by John Major (1943-) and then Tony Blair (1953-), whose New Labor platform mixed social liberalism with market-friendly policies, maintaining the economic direction set by previous Conservative governments.

In the US, the era was defined by the presidencies of Ronald Reagan (1911 - 2004) and George H. W. Bush (1924 - 2018), both of whom championed 'Reaganomics', a domestic agenda focused on tax cuts, reduced government spending, and free-market economics. These policies continued under Bill Clinton (1946-), balancing neoliberal economics with moderate social reforms, including welfare restructuring and attempts at healthcare reform. Throughout this period, Congress and the Supreme Court remained influential in shaping social and economic policy, with the balance of power between the Democratic and Republican parties shifting and thereby influencing legislative directions.

Shaped by the Cold War, the Soviet Union presented itself as a leader in gender equality. Women had full legal rights and access to higher education and were employed across all sectors of society. State-supported childcare and maternity leave policies were designed to support working women and demonstrate the ideological superiority of socialism on the global stage (Ghodsee, 2019). In contrast, the United Kingdom and the United States were still grappling with inequality. Although

legal reforms had begun earlier in the century, the fight for equal pay, reproductive rights, and political and media representation was far from over.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of the Cold War and exposed the fragility of its gender equality model. Many women in post-communist states lost access to employment, childcare, and social protections as public institutions were dismantled. Meanwhile, in the UK and the US, conversations around feminism entered a new phase (Donert, 2023).

Alongside these cultural shifts, the media became more fragmented. From the 1980s onwards, the advent of cable television, specialized print magazines, and the advent of the internet provided readers with access to more personalized and segmented content. Women's magazines adapted by launching verticals and region-specific editions that catered to narrower audiences. Titles such as *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Harper's Bazaar* transitioned from general lifestyle publications to curated lifestyle brands, promoting identity through consumption and responding to the new logic of targeted marketing (Morrisson, 2020).

#### **1.4.2. The Sexual Liberation Movement**

*The Sexual Liberation movement* of the late 1960s to 1980s was based on second-wave feminism and aimed to overturn deeply rooted taboos surrounding sex and reproduction. Before the 1960s, numerous US states still criminalized the use or distribution of contraceptives, even among married couples, under Comstock-era legislation (Liao & Dollin, 2012; C. K. Myers, 2022). While the introduction of the contraceptive pill in the early 1960s was a medical revolution, it was the Supreme Court's ruling in *Griswold v. Connecticut* that finally legalized birth control for married couples, affirming the right to marital privacy and granting women unparalleled control over their bodies (C. K. Myers, 2022).

Inspired by these legal and medical advances, feminist health activists published the accessible guide to sexual health, contraception, and abortion, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, in 1970. The book encouraged women to claim pleasure and agency rather than accept shame. This era has been described by scholars as a 'revolution in sexual norms': debates over premarital sex, pornography, and homosexuality entered the public sphere, fueled by the work of individuals such as Gayle Rubin (1949–). In her 1984 essay *Thinking Sex*, Rubin theorized sexuality as a political

battleground and called for a radical rethinking of sexual rights. Carole Vance's (1941–) seminal anthology *Pleasure and Danger* (1984) shifted the focus from theoretical rights to real-life experiences, emphasizing the tension and potential for women's sexual pleasure in a patriarchal society (The Bristorian & Lace, 2021).

Even so, the feminist sex wars of the late 1970s and early 1980s exposed deep divisions: some activists feared that an uncritical embrace of 'sexual freedom' could perpetuate male-centered norms, while others insisted that complete liberation required the unashamed celebration of women's sexual desires. Overall, the Sexual Liberation movement transformed magazines, classrooms, and clinics into forums where women's pleasure, health, and autonomy were no longer off-limits, a change that resonated with broader struggles for equality and personal freedom (Attwood, 2006; Comella, 2015).



**Figure 18** Mari Tepper (1948 – 2025), *Hallelujah The Pill*, (1967), Poster. <https://rockposters.com/>

### **1.4.3. Inclusivity and expression: Third Wave of Feminism**

Third-wave feminism appeared in the early 1990s, offering a response to the second wave's limited focus on legal equality. It brought diversity, intersectionality, and individual freedom to the forefront. Leslie McCall (2005) argues that intersectionality, created by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1959–), with the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to create unique experiences of inequality, became a central analytical tool (McCall, 2005). Third-wave activists insisted that feminism should include the voices of women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and non-Western feminists. They rejected the movement's earlier tendency to prioritize the perspectives of white, middle-class individuals (McCall, 2005).

The first magazine to address the third wave of feminism was MS. Magazine. In Rebecca Walker's (1969–) declaration, *I am the Third Wave*, she urged women to harness their personal stories of race, class, sexuality, and more as the very fuel of feminist activism. By linking the movement to personal narratives, Walker shifted the focus from broad legal goals to the diverse lived experiences of women everywhere (Walker & MS. Magazine, 1992).

Drawing inspiration from the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos of punk, third-wave feminists transformed insults into instruments of resistance. Ringrose and Renold (2012) analyze how events such as 'SlutWalk' have reclaimed words such as 'slut', revealing how language has controlled women's bodies and transforming these terms into symbols of resistance against sexual double standards (Ringrose & Renold, 2012).

*The Riot Grrrl* movement of the early 1990s defined third-wave feminism in the United States through pop culture and grassroots activism. With its roots in punk music, the movement was driven by bands such as *Bikini Kill*, who leveraged their platform to raise awareness of issues like sexual assault, body autonomy, and gender inequality. The movement was also closely associated with zine culture, a form of self-published, low-cost media that allowed young women to share personal stories, manifestos, and feminist theory outside of traditional publishing structures. These DIY zines were anti-commercial, intimate, and often handwritten or photocopied, which made them highly accessible and personal (R. Snyder, 2008). Rejecting hierarchical politics, *Riot Grrrl* embraced a sex-positive, intersectional ethos, creating safe spaces for self-expression, particularly among younger women and queer communities.

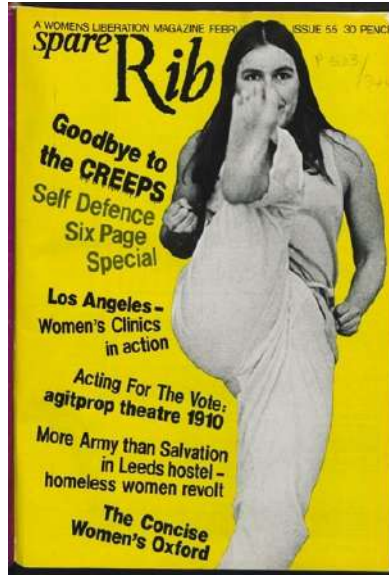
Feminist zine culture had already established itself in the UK by the late 1970s, as reflected in the publication of *Scarlet Women* (1976–1982). Created by a London-based feminist collective, this pioneering zine explored topics such as abortion rights, childcare, sexuality, and the voices of working-class women, areas often excluded from mainstream feminist discussion (Paja, 2021). Like *Riot Grrrl*, zines, and *Scarlet Women* were not only about sharing information, but also about creating community and dialogue. Although less closely linked to music than in the US, UK feminist zines played a key role in raising awareness, providing a platform for underrepresented voices, and promoting political action through accessible print culture.

Despite being rooted in different cultural contexts, both the US and UK zine movements reflected the DIY values and intersectional awareness of third-wave feminism. By the late 1990s, elements

of feminist messaging had been absorbed into mainstream media. Magazines such as *Vogue* and TV shows such as *Sex and the City* began to promote themes of body positivity, female pleasure, and economic empowerment. Still, many scholars have noted that this shift has led to a consumer-driven form of 'post-feminism', in which 'empowerment' is marketed more than realized (Gill, 2007). Nevertheless, the influence of zines and underground networks remained evident in the language, values, and visuals of 21st-century feminist debates.

#### **1.4.4. Postmodernism: Feminist Voices in Visual Expression**

Postmodern design started as a response to the strict functionalism of Modernism, embracing pluralism, irony, historical references, and playful pastiche (Atkinson, 2012). Rather than adhering to a single 'look', postmodernists recognized the value of combining different styles, such as layered typography, collage, vibrant color palettes, and unexpected contrasts, to challenge established narratives and encourage diverse interpretations (Atkinson, 2012). Women designers were at the forefront of this experimentation. In the US, for example, April Greiman (1948–) used early digital tools to combine photography, typography, and texture to create vibrant layouts expressing autonomy and technological potential (Barriga, 2016). Paula Scher (1948–) incorporated postmodern pastiche into her branding and editorial work by layering historical typefaces with contemporary color schemes, arguing that design could reflect and shape cultural conversations about identity. In the UK, the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* (1972–1993) incorporated collage techniques and deconstructed grids into its covers and interior pages, transforming each edition into a visual manifesto that represented women as active participants rather than passive subjects (Ruggiero, 2024).



**Figure 19** Anonymous editorial collective, *Spare Rib* cover, Issue No. 55, (February 1977), Retrieved from: <https://bl.uk/spare-rib/articles/spare-rib-issue-55>

The playful tactics of postmodern design, such as irony, deconstruction, and mashup, became a tool for feminist activism, transforming graphic expression into direct political critique. In the UK, *Spare Rib* and, later, *Women's Review* used collage covers and layered typography to draw attention to issues such as workplace discrimination and reproductive rights. In the US, zines such as 'Subterranean Activist' adopted anarchic layouts to circulate grassroots manifestos and organize local actions, demonstrating the potential of postmodern form to fuel on-the-ground campaigns. (Ruggiero, 2024; Jolly, 2024)

The Guerrilla Girls (1985–) are a prime example of postmodern feminist activism in design. Since 1985, they have produced street posters and museum interventions using bold stencils, fluorescent colors, and sarcastic data to expose sexism and racism in the art world. Their work, which was always anonymous and adopted the personas of deceased female artists, relied on postmodern techniques of appropriation and parody to dismantle institutional structures of power and promote public engagement (St John, 2018; The Art Story, n.d.).



**Figure 20** Guerrilla Girls, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?*, (1989), Offset lithograph on paper, Tate Museum Collection. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>

#### 1.4.5. Pop art

Pop art appeared in Britain and the United States in the mid-1950s as a reaction against the seriousness of Abstract Expressionism. Rather than focusing on serious subjects, it used everyday imagery from advertising, comic books, and consumer goods to create a celebration of popular culture (Tate, 2004). Defined by techniques such as silkscreen printing, bold color repetition, and flat, graphic form, Pop art blurred the line between 'high' art and mass culture by utilizing commercial processes to transform everyday objects into works of art. While male artists such as Andy Warhol (1928–1987) and Richard Hamilton (1922–2011) are traditionally considered the dominant figures in pop art, women artists also played valuable roles. In the UK, for example, Pauline Boty (1938–1966) critiqued celebrity culture and gender stereotypes through vibrant paintings incorporating film stills and magazine clippings (Tate, 2004). In the US, Marisol Escobar (1930–2016) combined Pop's silkscreen aesthetic with sculpture to explore identity and social norms, portraying women as multidimensional subjects rather than decorative objects (Kidder, 2014).

In her 2014 thesis, *Women Artists in Pop: Connections to Feminism in Non-Feminist Art*, Alana D. Kidder (1974–) explores how female artists used Pop Art techniques to quietly criticize gender roles, considering the movement's wider association with male artists and commercial culture. She argues that artists such as Jennifer Bartlett (1941–2022) and Elizabeth Murray (1940–2007) adopted visual strategies typical of Pop Art, such as repetition, flat graphic forms, and references

to mass-produced objects, to highlight the undervaluation of women's domestic labor. Their works often transformed everyday household items into subjects of artistic enquiry, reimagining the kitchen and domestic space as places of both constraint and creative potential. Through this lens, Pop Art became a medium for feminist commentary, even when the artists themselves were not explicitly associated with feminist movements (Kidder, 2014).



**Figure 21 & 22** Left: Marisol Escobar (1930–2016), *Women and Dog* (1963–1964), Assembled wood figures with mixed media, Displayed in Buffalo AKG Art Museum and MoMA collections, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/1533> Right: Pauline Boty (1938–1966), *The Only Blonde in the World* (1963), Oil on canvas, Tate Modern, London <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/boty-the-only-blonde-in-the-world-t07496>

## 1.5 Contemporaneity & Post-digital Era

### 1.5.1. Sociocultural context in the US and UK

Between 2009 and 2017, the administration of President Barack Obama (1961-) marked a turning point in US sociocultural policy, focusing on economic recovery, healthcare access, and social justice. *The landmark Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act* of 2009, for example, extended the period for filing pay discrimination claims and tackled the persistent gender pay gap (The White House, 2009; Smith, 2014). *The Affordable Care Act*, passed in 2010, furthered women's health equity by ensuring coverage for preventive services such as contraception and maternity care, and by prohibiting gender-based insurance pricing (The White House, 2010). Obama's appointment of Sonia Sotomayor (1954 -), in 2009, and Elena Kagan (1960 -), in 2010, to the Supreme Court increased the number of women on the bench to three, demonstrating a broader commitment to diversity (Blake, 2022). Standing next to President Obama was First Lady Michelle Obama (1964

-), whose own initiatives achieved real progress for women and girls. In 2010, she launched *Let's Move!* to combat childhood obesity, reframing health as an issue of family and community strength. In 2014, she established Reach Higher to encourage teenagers, particularly young women of color, to pursue further education (Britannica, 2021). Through high-profile speeches, school visits, and social media campaigns, she challenged gender and racial stereotypes directly, showing women's leadership, and inspired a generation to think bigger about their future (Britannica, 2021).

In the United Kingdom, the Brexit vote in June 2016 raised questions not only about trade and independence, but also about vital social and economic safeguards, particularly for women in low-paid jobs. Many of these roles, such as care work, hospitality, and agriculture, depend on EU funding streams and regional development grants that support training, childcare services, and wage top-ups (J. Green & Shorrocks, 2021). Meanwhile, Britain's equality framework was based on EU directives that set minimum standards for maternity leave, equal pay, and protection against workplace discrimination. Leaving the EU means that the UK must either replicate these rules domestically or risk weakening some of these protections, leaving women in vulnerable sectors even more exposed (The Scottish Government, 2020; J. Green & Shorrocks, 2021).

The global pandemic of the Coronavirus in 2020 has exposed and increased gender inequalities on both sides of the Atlantic. Women, who are overrepresented in the healthcare and retail sectors, creating a 'double burden' of frontline work and increased domestic responsibilities. This led many to reduce their hours or leave their jobs (Wenham et al., 2020; Heggeness, 2020). Incidents of domestic violence spiked during lockdowns, highlighting the need to treat violence against women as a public health priority (Peterman et al., 2020). At the same time, the crisis showed female leadership, most notably in countries led by women, and accelerated calls for supportive policies such as paid family leave and flexible working.

Between 2016 and 2025, there was a sharp swing in U.S. politics between conservative and progressive approaches to women's rights. Donald Trump's (1946 -) victory in the 2016 election, built on nationalist and 'America First' rhetoric, brought rapid policy changes that concerned gender equality organizations. On his first day in office, Trump restored and broadened the *Mexico City Policy*, cutting US funding to international NGOs that provide or discuss abortion services (Roberts & Galway, 2017). Domestically, his administration repeatedly sought to repeal or weaken the *Affordable Care Act*, threatening coverage for contraceptives and maternity services (KFF,

2024). Meanwhile, Trump's public persona, marked by misogynistic remarks and multiple allegations of sexual misconduct, stood in stark contrast to his professed support for 'traditional family values', raising questions about the sincerity of his gender policy messaging (Cohen, 2024). The backlash was swift: the 2017 Women's March drew an estimated five million participants worldwide, becoming one of the largest single-day protests in American history and bringing renewed energy to the fight for reproductive and workplace rights (Nicolini & Hansen, 2018).

Joe Biden's (1942 -) election in 2020 alongside Vice President Kamala Harris (1964 -), the first woman, the first Black person, and the first South Asian to hold that office, marked a return to expanded gender equality initiatives. The Biden-Harris administration swiftly restored funding for reproductive health services and revoked the expanded *Mexico City Policy*. They also reauthorized and strengthened the *Violence Against Women Act*, extending protections to LGBTQ+ survivors and Native American women (Kemper & Sacco, 2023; Garcia & Patel, 2022). Harris's visible advocacy for intersectional feminism, focusing on the intersection of race, gender, and class, helped to broaden the policy solutions of the feminist movement (Grown et al., 2023).

In January 2025, Trump's return to the presidency led to an immediate backlash when he ordered the removal of contraceptive information from government websites. This sparked a new wave of digital and on-the-ground activism, as well as legal protests from reproductive rights groups. This ongoing tension between Trump and feminist movements will likely continue in the coming years (Timms & Wolfe, 2025).

### **1.5.2. Digital activism: The Fourth Wave of Feminism**

The fourth wave of feminism was built on the achievements of second and third-wave feminism, but with a stronger focus on inclusivity, technology, and activism against systemic inequalities. Issues such as sexual harassment, gender-based violence, reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and LGBTQ+ inclusion have become topics in feminist discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2018). A defining feature of the movement is its use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to organize protests, share experiences, and mobilize global support for gender equality. Campaigns such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, #EverydaySexism, and #HeForShe have demonstrated how digital activism can hold powerful institutions accountable and give a voice to marginalized groups. Originally founded by Tarana Burke (1973-) in 2006, the

#MeToo movement gained international traction in 2017 when survivors of sexual harassment and abuse, particularly in the entertainment industry, used the hashtag to share their experiences. This led to high-profile legal cases, including that against Harvey Weinstein (1952-), and led to widespread conversations about workplace harassment, consent, and power dynamics (Mendes et al., 2018). The downside of online activism is that it can lead to 'clicktivism', whereby people show symbolic support without taking concrete action. Furthermore, feminist movements continue to face backlash from conservative groups, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ rights, access to abortion, and gender-inclusive policies (Mendes et al., 2018). Online hate comments are quickly made and create a diverse scene for all types of opinions, which can either deter people from sharing their views or create a hostile atmosphere (Munro, 2013).

As fourth-wave feminism drew attention to social issues online, exposing harassment, demanding diversity, and focusing on body positivity, traditional women's magazines came under fire. While their online editions began to include more diverse imagery, long-standing editorial practices and narrow beauty ideals fueled criticism that they were slow to change (Perloff, 2014). Magazines have utilized their online platforms to try and highlight body positivity movements and feature a more diverse range of shapes, ages, and ethnicities. For example, *Vogue's* 2018 digital cover featuring Ashley Graham (1987-) was viewed by millions within hours, far surpassing print circulation, and signaled a new commitment to size inclusivity. Even though magazines are trying to be more inclusive with these types of covers, they still rely heavily on Photoshop to airbrush, shape, and blend images, creating an unrealistic reflection of the real world. By setting a standard that can only be achieved with heavy makeup or plastic surgery, these images leave readers questioning their authenticity (Perloff, 2014b).

The algorithm-driven worlds of Instagram and TikTok have also helped to set the tone for edited images and influencer culture, intensifying comparisons and fueling body dissatisfaction among young women (Perloff, 2014b; Gupra et al., 2022). Studies have linked exposure to idealized social media feeds with rising rates of anxiety, eating disorders, and self-objectification (Brown & Davis, 2020; Gupra et al., 2022). Digital platforms also provide tools for resistance. Hashtags such as #BodyPositivity and #NoFilter give influencers a way of showing different types of bodies to create a more realistic view, trying to change the narrow beauty standard of today (Eagan, 2022). While influencers and magazines try to be more inclusive in this way, other questions arise, such

as what represents a healthy body. Critics argue that glorifying both underweight and overweight bodies in both magazines and online may unintentionally promote an unhealthy lifestyle. Therefore, the only portrayal of models who are extremely thin or the recent promotion of plus-size models does not reflect the real world and is not a healthy example in either case (Andrew, 2018).

The rise of plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures has added another layer to the conversation. Influencers and celebrities often document their experiences with cosmetic treatments. Some argue that transparency helps to clarify these choices, while others claim that it sets unrealistic expectations for young viewers. This duality reflects wider tensions in society, balancing the promotion of individual freedom with the tempering of the potential influence of idealized bodies on impressionable audiences (Jones & Heyes, 2021).

### **1.5.3. Current situation on women's rights**

Women's rights have come a long way in the past century, with big victories in areas like voting, education, health, and financial equality. Still, it's important to keep protecting these achievements and pushing for more progress. Recent events show that progress isn't the same everywhere and isn't always guaranteed. For example, legal access to abortion has increased in many countries, but practical barriers remain.

In the United States, recent legal changes, especially the Supreme Court's 2022 decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, a crucial law that protected the constitutional right to abortion for nearly 50 years, have led to stricter abortion laws, even in cases of rape or medical risk (UNFPA, 2022). In the 14 states with near-total abortion bans, approximately 65,000 rape-related pregnancies occurred between July 2022 and January 2024, many of which involved individuals who sought abortions but were denied access due to strict state laws. As a result, fewer than 10 legal abortions were reported each month, highlighting how legal exceptions often fail to provide meaningful access to care (Harris, 2024; Lewis, 2024). Many survivors face barriers such as mandatory reporting to the police or narrow time limits that discourage them from seeking care (KFF, 2023). Medical exemptions are also unclear, leading doctors to delay treatment for fear of legal repercussions (OHCHR, 2023). As a result, nearly one in five people now travel out of state for abortion care, almost doubling the 2020 rate (Guttmacher Institute, 2023).

A notable example is a 10-year-old rape victim from Ohio who, unable to get an abortion due to her state's six-week ban, traveled to Indiana for the procedure. Dr. Caitlin Bernard provided the abortion and spoke publicly about the challenges minors face under strict abortion laws. In response, Indiana's Medical Licensing Board fined Dr. Bernard \$3,000 for alleged privacy violations, despite her claim that she did not disclose identifying information and was highlighting the impact of these laws. This shows how much effort is made to suppress such stories to uphold strict abortion laws (McCammon, 2023).

These restrictions have major health implications; globally, unsafe abortion accounts for about 13% of all maternal deaths, with 47,000 women dying from complications related to unsafe procedures in 2008 (WHO, 2024). In addition, unsafe abortion results in the hospitalization of about 7 million women annually, placing a considerable social and financial burden on communities and health systems (UNFPA, 2022).

The gender pay gap is also still a reality. In the United States, women earn about 18% less than men, meaning that women earn only 82 cents for every dollar earned by a man (US Census Bureau, 2024). This is particularly remarkable given that women consistently outperform men academically. In the US, women have higher high school graduation rates and are more likely than men to enroll in and graduate from college (US Census Bureau, 2024). In addition, women now make up 58% of all college students, a significant increase from 56.6% six years earlier (Nietzel, 2024).

As of today, women continue to face disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence, including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, rape, and femicide. Reports suggest that one in three women worldwide will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (UN Women, 2024a). In the Netherlands, recent data indicates that 41 women were victims of femicide in 2023, the highest rate in Europe (NL Times, 2024). This is particularly concerning given that 60% of these cases involved intimate partners. The victim-blaming attitudes and a lack of support systems often worsen the trauma experienced by survivors and discourage the reporting of such incidents (UN Women, 2022).

A study analyzing online media coverage of female homicide victims found that such reporting practices often shift blame to victims and excuse perpetrators, strengthening harmful stereotypes and minimizing the seriousness of such crimes (Easteal et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2025). This

contributes to the 'normalization' of violence and has a chilling effect on victims considering coming forward (UN Women & UNICEF, 2022). Legal protections for women remain inconsistent across the globe. Many countries still lack comprehensive laws addressing key issues like domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and reproductive rights, with weak enforcement or limited access to justice often hindering their effectiveness. This leaves many women vulnerable and in need of stronger legal frameworks to ensure their rights are fully protected (UN Women, 2025).

While women's rights have significantly improved and come a long way since the first feminist movement, the data make it clear that true equality is still out of reach. The examples in this chapter illustrate how women continue to face systemic inequality and threats to their rights, health, and safety, problems that exist not only in specific regions but across the globe (UN Women, 2025).

#### **1.5.4. Post-internet aesthetic**

The term Post-internet was introduced by the artist and curator Marisa Olson (1977–) to describe art reflecting the impact of the internet on aesthetics, culture, and society. Rather than indicating a period after the internet, the term refers to a state in which the internet is deeply ingrained in everyday life and artistic practice (Olson, as cited in Artspace, 2014). Originating in the mid-2000s and evolving from the Net Art movement of the 1990s, this movement is characterized by artworks that exist both online and offline, blending digital and physical experiences. Figures in this movement include Artie Vierkant (1986–), whose essay *The Image Object Post-Internet* (Vierkant, 2010) explores how digital images can be manipulated and disseminated, calling into question traditional ideas of originality and authorship. Amalie Ulman's (1989–) Instagram performance, 'Excellences & Perfections' (2014), satirized the construction of femininity on social media platforms and drew attention to the role of feminism in the digital age (Gusman, 2020b). The DIS collective blurs the lines between consumer culture, fashion, technology, and art, further representing the *post-Internet aesthetic*.

The *post-internet aesthetic* has influenced how women are represented in the media and in art. Artists such as Molly Soda (1989–) and Signe Pierce (1988–) use digital platforms to explore themes of femininity, self-representation, and online culture. Molly Soda's work critiques online vulnerability, hyper-femininity, and internet beauty standards, while Signe Pierce's performances and videos explore the complex interplay of bodies, sexuality, self-representation, and strength in

the digital age (ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY, 2024). By offering more diverse and inclusive representations, these artists present an alternative to traditional narratives and question conventional portrayals of women. They also critique the expectation of digital perfection and the way women are objectified in online culture. Through their use of digital tools, they expose and critique how platforms treat women as commodities and aestheticize them, thereby drawing attention to the performative nature of gender online.

Feminist collectives such as the *Feminist Internet* explore how digital tools can promote gender equality by creating artworks and interventions that question patriarchal structures within technology and society (R. Williams, 2018). These examples demonstrate how the post-internet aesthetic provides a platform for feminist discourse, allowing artists and designers to challenge and reshape the visual culture surrounding women's identities.



**Figure 23 & 24** Amalia Ulman (1989), *Excellences & Perfections*, (2014), Instagram performance; later exhibited as C-type prints mounted on aluminum, <https://elephant.art/sunday-read-excellences-perfections/>

### 1.5.5. Design in the post-digital age

Post-digital design is another movement that originated in the early 21st century when digital technologies became deeply ingrained in personal and professional life. Although both respond to the influence of digital culture, this approach is different from the Post-internet aesthetic. While the Post-internet aesthetic focuses on how the internet, its platforms, interfaces, and visual culture, shapes our identities and visual language, Post-digital design is more concerned with how digital tools are integrated into the design process itself. Post-internet artists often create works that

comment on or mimic online experiences, using visual styles such as glitches, screenshots, or social media filters to reflect digital life (Vierkant, 2010; Gusman, 2020).

The term Post-digital was first introduced in the context of music and media art. Notably, Kim Cascone (1955–) used the term in his 2000 essay *The Aesthetics of Failure*, in which he described how digital tools had become so prevalent that their breakdowns and artefacts had become integral to the artistic process. In design, this concept developed into an acknowledgement that digital methods were no longer novel or revolutionary; they had simply become the norm (Cascone, 2000). By the 2010s, scholars and practitioners had started to use the term Post-digital to describe an approach that integrates analogue and digital media in fluid, and often unnoticeable, ways (Conrad et al., 2019). Designers now work across media, screen and print, software and pen, algorithm and hand, to produce outcomes that focus more on intent and context than on the tool. This hybridity is especially visible in contemporary graphic and editorial design. Magazines such as *Womenkind* and *The Outpost*, for example, blend physical, analogue-inspired layouts with digital production methods and global digital distribution. These works do not prioritize either the digital or the analogue, but instead embrace both, a core principle of the post-digital mindset (Vermeulen, 2024). Founded in 2014 by Antonia Case (n.d.) and Zan Boag (n.d.), *Womankind* is an independent, ad-free magazine focusing on themes of self, identity, and meaning in modern society. The magazine maintains editorial independence, enabling it to explore topics such as philosophy, psychology, and global cultures without commercial influence. Each 132-page issue combines high-quality journalism with artistic visuals, offering readers an alternative, more in-depth perspective on issues that matter to women. The magazine's design strategy reflects a post-digital ethos, integrating digital tools into the production process while prioritizing the tactile experience of print media. For example, the covers feature intricate mosaic illustrations created by designer Charis Tsevis (1967–) using digital techniques to produce artwork reminiscent of traditional craftsmanship (Charis Tsevis - Womankind Magazine, n.d.). This approach highlights the magazine's dedication to blending digital innovation with analogue sensibilities (Papaefstathiou, 2017).



**Figure 25 & 26** Left: *Womankind*, Issue 14: Giraffe – *The merits of positive self-talk*, (2017), <https://magculture.com/blogs/journal/antonia-case-womankind> Right: Krutikova, S, *Ra-Ra Rebel zine cover collage*, (2021) School of Art + Art History + Design, University of Washington. Retrieved from <https://art.washington.edu/news/2021/06/03/ra-ra-rebel-zine-modernizes-90s-riot-grrrl-movement-its-emphasis-inclusivity>

A notable feature of feminist post-digital design is the renewed focus on zine culture, which has long offered an alternative platform for expression and feminist activism. Zines, short for 'magazines' or 'fanzines', originated in the punk and Riot Grrrl movements of the 1970s and 1990s onwards. These self-published, low-budget booklets allowed underrepresented voices to reach audiences beyond mainstream media channels. Zine-making provides individuals, particularly women and queer creators, with the means to take control of their narratives through DIY production, collage aesthetics, handwritten text and raw, authentic layouts (Matich et al., 2023).

In the post-digital context, zines maintain an anti-institutional spirit, yet they are now frequently produced using digital tools such as InDesign, Photoshop, or Canva before being printed in small local batches or distributed as PDFs online. This hybrid approach combines analogue tactility with digital accessibility. Themes frequently explored in these zines include body politics, queer identity, racial justice and reproductive rights. Using bold typography, disruptive compositions, and hand-scanned elements, they forge a visual language of resistance (Adobe Graphic Design Team, 2019). For feminist designers, zine culture offers a decentralized, inclusive platform where content takes priority over presentation. It allows experimentation to go beyond market-driven aesthetics, which aligns with feminist design objectives such as autonomy, inclusivity, and dismantling power hierarchies (Jenkins, 2014). Thus, the feminist zine becomes both a design object and a political act, calling into question the norms of traditional editorial design and instead embracing community-driven, flexible, and accessible post-digital strategies.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Instruments and Procedures

This research takes a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative strategies to explore how feminist ideas are received, interpreted, and represented in women's magazines. The aim is to understand general patterns of media consumption (quantitative) and the deeper meanings and motivations behind the production and reception of feminist media (qualitative).

Four main tools were used:

1. Literature Review: Before gathering new data, this research explored a variety of studies on the history of feminist movements and the impact of design on society's perception of women, focusing on the UK and the US. By tracing debates from early suffrage pamphlets and turn-of-the-century journals to today's digital platforms, I gained a comprehensive understanding of how feminist ideas and visual culture have evolved together, influencing and reacting to each other. This groundwork enabled me to gain an understanding of the broader context before moving on to interviews, surveys, and magazine analyses.

2. Historical magazine analysis: To understand the development of feminist discourse over time, this research includes an analysis of selected women's and feminist magazines from five key cultural periods: the Victorian era (1837–1901), the fin de siècle (1880–1914), the modernist era (1910–1970), the postmodernist era (1960–2000) and the contemporary/post-digital era (2000–present). The magazines were selected based on their relevance to feminist thought, cultural influence, and representativeness within their respective periods. While many publications exist from each period, this selection focuses on those that significantly impacted feminist media narratives or reflected pivotal shifts in feminist ideology. This step provides historical and cultural context for the reception and evolution of feminist messages in print and digital media. In addition to the written part there is a table overview of the magazines in appendix A.

2. Interview: An interview was arranged with Davide Ricchiuti, co-founder of the feminist magazine ProVocazione. The interview explores his views on feminist publishing, the challenges of independent media and how feminism is expressed or compromised in today's media landscape. The full interview you can find in appendix B.

3. Online survey: To supplement the historical and qualitative data, an online survey was distributed to a diverse group of 196 respondents. The questionnaire collected data on participants' media habits, their awareness of feminist magazines, and their attitudes towards feminism in popular culture. This method helped identify broader patterns of consumption and perception among people with diverse backgrounds, interests, and levels of media exposure. The full survey answers and questions can be found in appendix C.

Participation in both the survey and the interview was fully voluntary, and in the case of the survey, anonymous, based on informed consent.

## **2.2. Historical magazine analysis**

### **2.2.1. Magazines created during the Victorian era**

#### **Harper's Bazaar, United States, 1867**

##### **Origins and Editorial Leadership**

Harper's Bazaar was founded in the United States in 1867 by Harper & Brothers, a big publishing house in New York (Baxter, 2019). Created as a weekly newspaper, it was eventually transformed into a monthly fashion magazine that was provided to upper-class and elite women. The magazine was first edited by Mary Louise Booth (1831–1889), making it one of the first American publications to be edited by a woman (Steele, 2010). Over time, Harper's Bazaar remained a female-led publication, with influential women such as Carmel Snow (1887–1961), working from 1934 to 1958, and Diana Vreeland (1903–1989) working from 1962 to 1971 (Nelson Best, 2017).

##### **Fashion Through the Decades**

In the early 20th century, Harper's Bazaar positioned itself as a luxury fashion magazine, featuring designs from top European fashion houses such as Chanel, Lanvin, and Schiaparelli (Mears, 2015). The 1900s and 1910s featured 'Edwardian styles', characterized by corseted silhouettes, high necklines, small waists, exaggerated curves, a tall, elegant posture, and long skirts. These styles were considered epitomes of femininity, modesty, and upper-class elegance. While the hourglass figure was idealized, corsets were still the primary method of achieving this shape, rather than extreme dieting. (Steele, 2010). The 1920s saw a shift, reflecting the influence of the flapper movement and Art Deco. Harper's Bazaar included modernity with shorter hemlines, lower waistlines, looser dresses, a thin, boyish figure with a flat chest, narrow hips, and long limbs that allowed women more mobility and freedom (Mears, 2015). This change symbolized the changing role of women in society, moving away from stiff Victorian ideals towards more independence. In the 1930s, fashion in Harper's Bazaar became more sophisticated and glamorous, influenced by Hollywood cinema. Evening gowns, bias-cut dresses, and tailored suits reflected a balance between elegance and practicality during the Great Depression (Nelson Best, 2017). As fashion moved towards elegance, the ideal woman became taller and more athletic. While the magazine's

focus was on fashion, it also started to include literature, art, and travel (Steele, 2010; Baxter, 2019).

### **Shaping the Feminine Ideal**

Some early and mid-20th-century issues of Harper's Bazaar included 'health and beauty' sections featuring diet tips, slimming exercises, and routines aimed at maintaining a youthful, slim appearance (Baxter, 2019). Although these messages were often presented as 'empowering' or 'aspirational', they subtly reinforced a narrow standard of femininity. While the language was not initially overtly body-shaming, the consistent association of beauty with discipline, control, and slimness established the ideal body as a key expectation for women. This era marked the beginning of the influence of fashion media on body image, where thinness, elegance, and youthfulness were consistently presented as the ultimate feminine ideals.

Over time, particularly in the late 20th century and early 2000s, these messages became more aggressive. Magazine covers and editorials began directly associating thinness with success, desirability, and self-worth, often using anxiety-inducing headlines about weight loss, detoxing, and 'problem areas'. This intensified focus led to widespread criticism from scholars, feminist activists, and media watchdogs. By around 2010, under mounting public and academic pressure, many fashion magazines, including Harper's Bazaar, began to shift their messaging. Although gradual, there was a noticeable shift towards promoting health and 'wellness' over mere thinness, as well as the cautious inclusion of more diverse body types and beauty standards. This shift reflected a broader cultural reassessment of the harmful impact of the fashion industry on body image and self-perception, particularly among young women (Gill, 2016; Keyser-Verreault, 2018).

### **Visual Language**

As for its graphic design, Harper's Bazaar experienced changes in its cover layout, typography, and imagery, reflecting development in fashion, graphic design and society. From the early 1900s to the 1910s, Harper's Bazaar covers were characterized by hand-drawn illustrations. These illustrations often reflected the 'Edwardian ideal of beauty'. The typography used during this

period was ornate and serif-heavy, with elements of script fonts. An example of this is the font Century Expanded Font Family which was designed by Linn Boyd Benton (1844–1932) and Morris Fuller Benton (1872–1948), and published by Bitstream (Steele, 2010).

## Century Expanded Bold

**Figure 27** Linn Boyd Benton, Morris Fuller Benton, *Century Expanded Bold Font*, and published by Bitstream, Jan 1, 2000, <https://www.myfonts.com/collections/century-expanded-font-bitstream?srsId=AfmBOoqp-TVvSIKDf1174sXZcCnBVxIngqJVApA143uEfFKZo6bjUZW2bitstream?srsId=AfmBOoqp-TVvSIKDf1174sXZcCnBVxIngqJVApA143uEfFKZo6bjUZW2>

In the 1920s, the magazine was influenced by the Art Deco movement. The covers of this period featured geometric shapes, bold lines, and high-contrast colors, a marked departure from the delicate, feminine illustrations of previous decades. The portrayal of women also changed to *The New Women* (Mears, 2015; Vintage Everyday, 2024). In the early 1930s, more photo covers started to appear, reflecting the rise of Hollywood glamour and celebrity culture. Cover models were now presented as elegant and graceful, often styled after the Hollywood actresses of this time. Typography in this area combined bold serif fonts with modernist elements, creating a balance between tradition and contemporary luxury. Its most famous font is Didot, created by the French typographer Firmin Didot 1764-1836), back in the 18th century. This font became a defining typeface for Harper's Bazaar in the 1930s. Moving from typography to cover design, a great example of this era is the 1937 Harper's Bazaar cover featuring a black-and-white photograph of Toni Sorel (n.d.). The image, which showcases a woman in a long satin gown, uses soft lighting and a cinematic aesthetic that became symbolic of the time (Nelson Best, 2017; *Typography in fashion*, 2020).



**Figure 28** George Platt Lynes (1907 – 1955), Model: Toni Sorel, *Fashion Photograph for Harper's Bazaar*, (1937), The Met, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/268747>

## Influence of Design Movements

Harper's Bazaar has always reflected the style of its time. In its early years, the November 1889 Thanksgiving cover featured women framed by soft, swirling vines and floral patterns, the work of illustrator Eugène Grasset (1845–1917). This simple decoration quietly telling the story, here is a woman who belongs in the world beyond the home. By the late 1920s, editor Dorothy Todd (1883–1966) had swapped that flourished look for crisp grids and clean sans-serif typefaces, treating each issue as a window into modern life: women at work, women in debate, and women taking up space. A few years later, designer Erté (Romain de Tiroff, 1892–1990) brought the glamour of Art Deco to the magazine with bold chevrons, sunburst lines, and metallic touches on the November 1933 cover. Today, Harper's Bazaar continues this tradition online, using flexible, card-based layouts and fonts such as GT Super and Lora to guide readers from desktop to mobile.



**Figure 29, 30 & 31** Left: Eugène Grasset (1845–1917), *Harper's Bazaar* cover, (1889), Art Nouveau, <https://www.ebay.com/itm/126706660080> Middel: Under editor Dorothy Todd (1883–1966), *Harper's Bazaar* cover, (January 1922), Art Deco, [https://www.etsy.com/nl/listing/1818175575/harpers-bazaar-magazine-erte-cover?show\\_sold\\_out\\_detail=1&ref=nla\\_listing\\_details](https://www.etsy.com/nl/listing/1818175575/harpers-bazaar-magazine-erte-cover?show_sold_out_detail=1&ref=nla_listing_details) Right: Erté (1892–1990), *Harper's Bazaar* cover, (November 1933), Modernism, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a19768/1920s-bazaar-excerpts/>

## Feminism and Cultural Influence

Harper's Bazaar has never been an explicitly feminist magazine, but it has consistently reflected evolving ideas of womanhood and independence, mainly through fashion and representation. Yet, its feminist impact is more symbolic than radical (Best, 2017). According to scholars, Harper's Bazaar promotes what Banet-Weiser (2018) terms popular feminism, portraying strong, stylish

women while avoiding any meaningful critique of deeper gender inequalities. While the magazine promotes self-expression and ambition, it often does so within elite, beauty-centered frameworks (Banet-Weiser, 2018). A content analysis by Peterson and Lewis (2016) found that less than 10% of its content directly discusses feminist issues such as gender equality and reproductive rights. Instead, most articles focus on fashion, lifestyle, and celebrity culture, occasionally featuring inspirational stories about women in business or the arts. McRobbie (2009) describes this approach as feminism considered: feminism is acknowledged, but only to suggest that gender issues have already been resolved. Consequently, Harper's Bazaar provides visibility and style while avoiding political critique. In short, while the magazine supports the presence and voice of women in culture, its approach to feminism remains aesthetic and selective, more about individual success than collective change (McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

## **Vogue, United States, 1892**

### **Origins and Editorial Leadership**

Vogue was founded in New York in 1892 by Arthur Baldwin Turner (n.d.) as a weekly magazine focused on high society, fashion, and culture. After Condé Nast (1873-1942) bought Vogue in 1909, the magazine evolved into a global fashion authority, shaping trends and redefining femininity under editors like Diana Vreeland (1903-1989), Grace Mirabella (1929-2021), and Anna Wintour (1949-) (Alberto et al., 2006). Although originally founded by a man, Vogue has been formed by the creative vision of female editors. Vogue editions are now published in over 27 countries. It covers high fashion, beauty, celebrity culture, and lifestyle, and has occasionally addressed political and social issues, particularly under Anna Wintour's leadership, often featuring topics such as feminism, sustainability, and diversity. (Fogg, 2021). As one of the most widely read fashion publications, Vogue has enormous global influence. It is available in markets across Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, with localized editions reflecting regional cultures while maintaining the magazine's signature style. The annual September issue is particularly renowned for setting the fashion agenda for the coming year.

## Fashion Through the Decades

From its earliest years, Vogue has played a role in defining standards of beauty. The magazine often features tall, slim models with Eurocentric features as the ‘peak of beauty’. Throughout the mid-20th century, the ideal Vogue woman was elegant and mostly white, reflecting the biases of the fashion industry. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Vogue was frequently criticized for its role in idealizing unrealistic body standards. The magazine often favored extremely thin models, many of whom later revealed struggles with eating disorders, and openly promoted diet culture through articles on weight loss, detoxes, and restrictive eating habits (Clements, 2013). The famous phrase 'heroin chic' developed in the 1990s, referring to the ultra-thin, pale, and androgynous look popularized by models such as Kate Moss (1974-) and prominently featured in Vogue (Helmore, 2019).



**Figure 32** Corinne Day (1962 – 2010), *British Vogue*, heroin chic, June 1993 issue, Kate Moss (1974 -), <https://www.untouchableblog.com/blog/why-cant-i-get-over-that-photo-of-kate-moss-by-corinne-day-for-british-vogues-june-1993-issue>

## Visual language

Vogue’s visual identity has long been synonymous with elegance, luxury, and exclusivity. The magazine’s headline is set in a Didone typeface, a variation of Bodoni that was originally designed by Giambattista Bodoni in the late 18th century. Vogue adopted this font in 1920. The typeface has remained largely unchanged since its introduction in the headlines, reinforcing Vogue’s influence and its strong connection to high fashion (Lupton, 2016).

# Bodoni Moda

Figure 33 Owen Earl, *Bodoni Moda Font*, <https://fonts.google.com/specimen/Bodoni+Moda>

Photography plays a role in shaping Vogue's aesthetic, transforming the magazine into an art form rather than just a fashion publication. In the early years, illustrated covers were the norm, but by the mid-20th century, photography had become the dominant medium. These images were not just about showing clothes but telling stories, stories that talk about beauty, strength, and aspiration. Over time, Vogue covers evolved to reflect changing ideals of femininity. While early covers often featured glamorous, poised models, more modern editions have included a wider range of subjects, including activists, politicians, and athletes, creating a more inclusive vision of womanhood. Throughout the decades, Vogue has favored clean, minimalist spreads with photography at the center. Text is placed carefully to avoid overwhelming the imagery, often appearing in narrow columns that guide the reader through the narrative without distraction. The use of negative space enhances the sense of luxury and allows each element, whether a bold headline or a dramatic photograph. This resonates with the ideals of modernism. The evolution of Vogue's design reflects its ever-changing role in society, but it has always stayed true to its original style (Alberto et al., 2006).

## **Influence of Design Movements**

Vogue's covers have always reflected the style of the era in which they were created. In 1910, Helen Dryden (1882–1972) illustrated a figure wrapped in flowing vines and flowers, soft and ornate details that captured the essence of the era, following the Art Nouveau principles. By 1922, Georges Lepape (1887–1971) had moved on to the Art Deco style, framing his models with sharp angles and sunbursts that mirrored the glamour of the machine age and skyscrapers. In 1943, Irving Penn (1917–2009) opted for a more minimalist and modernistic approach, using stark, high-contrast portraits and space to allow form and light to take center stage. Fast forward to May 1966, and David Bailey (1938 - n.d.) photographed Jean Shrimpton (1942 - n.d.) in the style of Pop Art,

bringing the style of Pop Art right into high fashion. Today, Vogue continues this tradition online with a responsive, card-based layout and elegant serif headlines, ensuring the magazine remains fresh wherever you are viewing it (Editorial Newslab, 2024).



**Figure 34, 35, 36 & 37** Left: Helen Dryden (1882–1972), *Vogue* cover, (January 1910), Art Nouveau, Next: Georges Lepape (1887–1971), *Vogue* cover, (July 1922), Art Deco, Next: Irving Penn (1917–2009), *Vogue* cover, (December 1943), Modernism, Right: David Bailey (1938 - n.d.), *Vogue* cover, (May 1966), Pop Art, All from: <https://archive.vogue.com>

## Feminism and Cultural Influence

Vogue's feminist stance is complex. While Vogue has helped provide a platform for women, especially in fashion, film, and politics, it often does so within narrow, appearance-driven parameters (Bordo, 2003). According to scholars such as Rosalind Gill (2007), magazines like Vogue represent postfeminist media culture, celebrating women's liberation through consumption and beauty while rarely questioning systemic gender inequality. Here, we can use the same term used for Harper's Bazaar: 'popular feminism'. That is, visually appealing, but politically cautious. A clear example of this is Vogue's ongoing influence on beauty standards. From the 1990s to the early 2000s, the magazine strongly promoted the 'heroin chic' look, ultra-thin, pale, and androgynous, which contributed to the normalization of unhealthy body ideals (Helmore, 2019). Although recent issues have included more racial and body diversity, these changes often appear to be merely symbolic rather than representing any real structural shifts. Vogue rarely covers reproductive rights, gender-based violence, or wage inequality. Instead, feminism is often incorporated into lifestyle pieces that offer personal development, but avoid collective critique (McRobbie, 2009).

## 2.2.2. Magazines created during the Fin de Siècle era

### Votes for Women, United Kingdom, 1907 – 1918

#### Origins and Editorial Leadership

Votes for Women, founded in 1907 by the *Women's Social and Political Union* (WSPU), was a British suffrage magazine that became one of the most important publications of its time in promoting the cause of women's suffrage. It was founded in London under the editorial direction of Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel Pankhurst, two of the leading figures in the suffrage movement. The magazine served as the main publication of the WSPU, whose members, known as suffragettes, were involved in radical activism intended at securing the vote for women in the UK. The creation of the magazine was a strategic move to strengthen the voices of the suffragettes, draw wider attention to the cause, and mobilize women to become politically active (Purvis, 2003). The magazine featured articles on women's rights, legal reforms, and reports on the suffragette movement. It also provided a platform for feminist and prominent suffragists to present their arguments for why women should have the right to vote, emphasizing the moral and public necessity of women's participation in politics. Through its pages, the magazine advocated radical forms of activism such as hunger strikes, civil disobedience, and public protests, which were often the subject of its coverage. The magazine's bold stance on direct action and its focus on the more militant suffragette movement set it apart from other suffrage publications of the time, which were often more moderate in their approach. Votes for Women also highlighted the bravery and sacrifice of suffragettes who suffered imprisonment, force-feeding during hunger strikes, and other forms of state repression (Purvis, 2003). The magazine's publications played an integral role in the politicization of women in the early 20th century, not only in Britain but also globally. It contributed to the international suffrage discourse and inspired suffrage movements in other countries, including the United States, where suffragettes drew on the example of the WSPU's militant tactics to inform their campaigns (Purvis, 2003).

## Fashion Through the Decades

Votes for Women was launched at the end of the 19th century and hints at the fashionable styles of that era, but its focus was firmly on political advocacy rather than couture.

## Visual language

Although Votes for Women was driven by political passion rather than visuals, its visual language was impactful. The masthead, written in bold block capitals, asserted the publication's purpose briefly. Inside, woodcut-style illustrations accompanied articles, simple yet powerful sketches of suffrage rallies and portraits of women organizers. The color scheme of purple, white, and green, associated with the WSPU, was used throughout the publication to create a recognizable visual identity. Purple symbolized loyalty and dignity, white purity, and green hope (Purvis, 2003). which all served to humanize the movement and draw readers into the cause. The covers of *Votes for Women* typically featured strong images of suffragettes, often during public demonstrations or in defiant poses that underlined their commitment to the cause. These images were intended not only to depict the bravery of the women involved in the movement but also to serve as visual calls to action, encouraging other women to join the fight for political equality. Photographs of women in chains or on hunger strikes were often used as poignant visual representations of the sacrifices and struggles of the suffragette movement.



Figure 38 Left: Votes for Women, cartoon: 'Why not votes for two as well as jobs for two?', (10 December 1915)

<https://digital.nls.uk/suffragettes/sources/source-48.html> Middle: Cover from July 2, 1915.

<https://www.meisterdrucke.uk/fine-art-prints/English-School/50961/Bravo,-N.U.R!,-front-cover-of-%27Votes-for-Women%27,-July-2nd-1915.html> Right: Cover from January 27, 1911.

<https://imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/157581/>

## **Influence of Design Movements**

Votes for Women did not draw on the Art Nouveau style or the geometric patterns of Art Deco. Instead, it embraced the aesthetic of protest posters long before clarity became a guiding principle of Modernism. It recalls the Arts and Crafts movement's emphasis on hand-crafted imagery but is stripped of ornament to serve a clear political message. In other words, rather than echoing any single art movement, Votes for Women forged its functional rallying-cry style, proof that the strongest design influence is sometimes simply the urgency of the cause.

## **Feminism and Cultural Influence**

The political impact of Votes for Women was considerable. As well as documenting the efforts of the suffragette movement. Perhaps the most famous event in the history of *Votes for Women* was the *Black Friday* incident of 1910, when suffragettes were violently confronted by the police during a demonstration outside the British Parliament. The event was covered extensively in *Votes for Women*, helping to publicize the brutal tactics used against the suffragettes and generating further support for their cause. The magazine also gave extensive coverage to the 1913 *Women's Social and Political Union march*. These demonstrations helped to raise the visibility of the movement. Votes for Women was more than just a record of events; it was an authentic feminist publication created specifically to support the Women's Social and Political Union's suffrage campaigns.

## **The Anti-Suffrage Review, from 1908 to 1918,**

### **Origins and Editorial Leadership**

*The Anti-Suffrage Review*, from 1908 to 1918, offered a sharply contrasting narrative. Published by the *Women's National Anti-Suffrage League*, the magazine promoted the idea that women's political involvement would jeopardize social order and erode their moral authority. The Anti-Suffrage Review portrayed female suffrage as both unnecessary and dangerous. Anti-suffragists claimed that women were better suited to domestic life, arguing that political participation would make them more masculine and cause them to neglect their families (Hughes Johnson & Jenkins,

2011). The magazine often portrayed suffragettes as disruptive, unfeminine, and socially irresponsible.

The contrast between these two publications illustrates the polarized discourse surrounding women's rights at the time. Women led both publications, yet they took opposing views on the issue, revealing the diversity of female opinion on suffrage. These conflicting voices were not limited to the United Kingdom. In the United States, for example, pro-suffrage magazines like *The Woman's Journal* faced opposition from anti-suffrage publications like *The Remonstrance*, which argued that most women neither wanted nor needed the vote. Together, *Votes for Women* and *The Anti-Suffrage Review* represent the extremes of a broader cultural and ideological struggle. They remind us that the history of feminism is not a straightforward narrative of progress, but rather a debated topic influenced by both activism and opposition.

### **Fashion Through the Decades**

Anti-suffrage reviews stuck strictly to political and moral arguments, so fashion was not showcased in the magazine.

### **Visual language**

The anti-suffrage review's pages are all business: plain serif typography, dense columns of text and hardly any decorative art or fashion illustrations. Headlines are understated and uniform; illustrations, when they appear, are small moralizing woodcuts rather than stylish; and there is very little white space or flourish. Its muted, text-heavy, austere appearance underscores its serious, argumentative tone rather than offering any nod to style or glamour.



**Figure 39** Left: The Anti-Suffrage Review, nos. 1-48 bound in 1 vol., *Women's National Anti-Suffrage League; National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage*, (December 1908), <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/29249/lot/91/anti-suffrage-review-the-anti-suffrage-review-nos-1-48-bound-in-1-vol-womens-national-anti-suffrage-league-national-league-for-opposing-woman-suffrage-december-1908-october-1912/> Right: Cover from 1903. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/IOYp3pGjRhWk0uODfS17VQ>

## Influence of Design Movements

The Anti-Suffrage Review consciously avoided any trendy visual style. Its pages feature no decorative motifs, illustrative flourishes, or references to prevailing art movements. Instead, it relied on a strictly practical layout of dense serif text in uniform columns that communicated the idea that politics lay outside the proper sphere for women.

## Feminism and Cultural Influence

The Anti-Suffrage Review sent out a clear message: that political engagement was inappropriate for women. By presenting opposition to women's suffrage in calm, reasoned prose and avoiding any visual cues suggesting dynamism or public presence, the magazine promoted the notion that women's place was in the private, domestic sphere. In doing so, it shaped cultural attitudes, presenting anti-suffrage sentiment as both measured and mainstream and countering the suffragettes' energetic appeal with a veneer of 'rational' conservatism.

### 2.2.3. Magazines created during the Modernism era

#### **Glamour, United States, 1939**

##### **Origins and Editorial Leadership**

Glamour was born in 1939 when Condé Nast (1873–1942) decided to create a sister publication to Vogue that would speak directly to everyday women. Art director Cipe Pineles (1908–1991) immediately made her mark with playful, eye-catching layouts. Then, in 1962, Ruth Whitney (1928–1999) became the first female editor and steered the magazine towards stories about personal growth and climbing the career ladder. By the late 1960s and 1970s, Glamour was discussing sexual health or advocating for workplace equality, though it tended to present these issues as stories of personal strength rather than political battles. But what really set Glamour apart was that it was run by women, for women, a rare thing in the magazine world back then.

##### **Shaping the Feminine Ideal**

The portrayal of women in Glamour has evolved over the years. Initially, the magazine promoted the idealized slender body type, often featuring young, thin models. When the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s gained force, Glamour began to include more progressive content about women's rights and political participation. Even though they promoted beauty standards tied to thinness and diet culture in earlier years, Glamour has made a shift towards body diversity, especially in its more recent issues. *The Women of the Year award*<sup>8</sup>, introduced in 1990, further strengthened Glamour's role in advocating for social change by recognizing women who had made important contributions to politics, social justice, and women's rights (Field, 2009; Moeslein & Rosa, 2021).

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<sup>8</sup> Glamour magazine's Women of the Year award, launched in 1990, honors women who have made contributions across various fields, including entertainment, politics, and activism. Notable recipients include Oprah Winfrey, Beyoncé, and Malala Yousafzai.

## **Fashion Through the Decades**

Since its first issue in April 1939, when it was called *Glamour of Hollywood*, *Glamour* magazine has tracked and shaped women's wardrobes in step with the times. In the 1940s, the magazine promoted utilitarian elegance in the form of tailored suits for working women and the softly cinched waists and full skirts of Dior's New Look (Buckley & Fawcett, 2002). By the 1960s, *Glamour* had embraced youth culture, showcasing miniskirts, bold prints, and go-go boots, and featuring Mary Quant and Twiggy's slim silhouettes. The 1970s brought a bohemian flair, with flowing peasant blouses, flared trousers and ethnic-inspired motifs mirroring the era's free-spirited vibe. The 1980s saw power dressing take center stage, with *Glamour* showcasing sharply tailored blazers, shoulder pads and vibrant color blocking to reflect the expanding careers of women (Buckley & Fawcett, 2002). The 1990s saw a move towards minimalism, with slip dresses, simple slip-on loafers and a neutral color palette reflecting "quiet luxury". In the 2000s and 2010s, *Glamour* embraced street style and athleisure, mixing skinny jeans, bomber jackets, and trainers with high-low designer pairings, before most recently adopting sustainable and inclusive fashion as its cover motto.

## **Visual Language**

*Glamour*'s cover design changed from soft pastel colors and elegant layouts in its early years to bold photography with bright, contrasting colors. Compared to *Vogue*, which kept a more 'polished look', *Glamour* took a bolder, more down-to-earth approach, fitting the audience of the middle class. By the 1970s and 1980s, eye-catching photos and strong color contrasts became fundamental, reflecting new fashion trends and the growing presence of women in public life. This shift helped *Glamour* stand out as both inspirational and relatable

## **Influence of Design Movements**

Since its launch in 1939, *Glamour* has adopted Modernist principles, such as clean layouts, sans-serif headlines, and ample white space. This is most evident in the early art direction of Cipe Pineles (1908–1991), who paired bold typography with simplified photographic collages to

emphasize both fashion and function. By the 1960s, the magazine was experimenting with Pop Art, with special issues featuring vivid color blocks and playful graphic motifs that echoed the era's enthusiasm for primary hues and mass-culture imagery. In the 1980s and '90s, postmodern design elements such as eclectic type combinations, layered patterns, and decorative flourishes appeared in Glamour's pages, celebrating consumer culture while hinting at irony. Today, Glamour carries these legacies into the post-digital era with a responsive web design featuring modular grids, dynamic typography, and interactive visuals, ensuring that the magazine's signature blend of glamour and practicality continues to be seen on screens.



Figure 40, 41, 42 & 43 Left: Cipe Pineles (1908–1991), *Glamour* cover, (November 1942), Modernism, <https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-xQ2yB99sGgM/YEc03hyhqvI/AAAAAAAAALsY/Rws-VdySn0A4GR0LUJsa-J3vflWJYBERAClCBGAsYHQ/s861/glamour-cover-1940s-03.jpg> and *Glamour* cover, (November 1960), Pop Art, <https://www.gettyimages.ca/photos/glamour-vintage-magazines-cover> Right: *Glamour* cover, (November 1987), <https://www.ebay.com/itm/376038880730> and interior (n.d.) <https://www.pinkhouse.co.uk/>

## Feminism and Cultural Influence

Glamour can once again be categorized as *popular feminism*, as described by Banet-Weiser (2018). Rather than confronting oppressive systems, Glamour provides its readers with a sense of empowerment through self-improvement and consumption, promoting the idea that women can find strength in their individuality by shopping smartly, dressing well, and advancing in their careers (Cohen, 2013). By taking this approach, it stays more appealing to the public, but at the same time, this approach often sidelines more radical or collective political critiques of structural issues such as wage inequality or systemic sexism in workplaces and institutions (A. McRobbie, 2008b). Compared to Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, Glamour appears slightly more inclusive, particularly in terms of voice and representation. While Vogue and Harper's Bazaar have historically targeted elite, upper-class women, focusing on aspirational luxury, Glamour has

positioned itself as more relatable. It engages with issues affecting everyday women, such as sexual health, working life, and body image. From the 1960s onwards, it also addressed feminist topics more openly and directly, although still within a lifestyle framework (Friedlander, 2019).

## **Cosmopolitan, United States, 1886, relevant from 1965**

### **Origins and Editorial Leadership**

Cosmopolitan magazine, originally founded in 1886 as a family literary publication, underwent a major transformation in 1965 under the leadership of Helen Gurley Brown (1922-2012), *author of Sex and the Single Girl* (1962). As the magazine's first female editor-in-chief, Brown redefined Cosmopolitan to cater exclusively to the interests of young women and introduced the motto "fun, fearless, feminine". This motto aligned with second-wave feminist ideas of personal freedom and sexual liberation, but with a commercial twist. While the magazine gave visibility to female desire and ambition, its feminism was filtered through a lens of glamour and self-styling (Maslow, 2015). Even though their content was filtered, people still saw Cosmopolitan as 'too much'. For example, during the 1968 Miss America protests, demonstrators symbolically threw copies of Cosmopolitan into a 'Freedom Trash Can' to protest the magazine's portrayal of women (Maslow, 2015). Throughout the 1970s and beyond, Cosmopolitan was renowned for its candid sex advice, dating tips, and career guidance, all of which were designed to help women succeed in a male-dominated world while maintaining their desirability. This blend of practical advice and focus on appearance shaped its cultural impact. Yet feminist critics argued that Cosmopolitan's focus on pleasing men and beautifying oneself undermined its feminist message (Hunsberger, 2017).

### **Shaping the Feminine Ideal**

In terms of body image, Cosmopolitan has come under criticism for promoting a limited standard of beauty. Studies have shown that the magazine often features images of thin, young, and predominantly white women, which contributes to unrealistic beauty standards and body dissatisfaction among readers (Maslow, 2015). While Cosmopolitan has made efforts to be more

body-positive in recent years, including featuring plus-size models on its covers, the magazine's historical content has been associated with the strengthening of harmful body ideals.

### **Fashion Through the Decades**

Cosmopolitan has long played a role in chronicling and shaping women's style as it evolves with the times. In the 1960s, Helen Gurley Brown popularized miniskirts, bold prints, and swimsuits as everyday wear, reflecting the era's spirit of sexual liberation (Pages, 2010). The 1970s saw the rise of both bohemian maxi dresses and glittering disco glamour, reflecting back-to-nature feminism as well as nightlife culture. The 1980s saw power dressing take center stage, with shoulder-padded blazers and tailored suits symbolizing women's growing professional ambitions. The 1990s saw a return to minimalist slip dresses and 'quiet luxury', although grunge accessories such as chokers also made an appearance (Pages, 2010). By the 2000s, low-rise jeans, crop tops, and branded collaborations had become popular, highlighting the crossover between street style and celebrity influence. In the 2010s and 2020s, the focus has shifted towards oversized outerwear, dad sneakers, and sustainable fashion. Throughout this time, Cosmo has not only reflected cultural shifts through fashion but also provided readers with a toolkit for expressing their place in a changing world.

### **Visual Language**

The magazine is known for its bold, eye-catching covers, typically featuring glamorous images of female celebrities or models. These covers often use vibrant color palettes and provocative imagery to attract attention and convey the magazine's themes of confidence and allure. The Cosmopolitan logo uses Franklin Gothic Extra Condensed, a sans-serif font designed by Morris Fuller Benton (1872–1948) in 1902. Its bold, low-contrast style gives the magazine a modern and confident look, setting it apart from titles like Vogue or Glamour that use elegant, high-contrast serif fonts. Together, typography and imagery create a confident, approachable style that defines Cosmopolitan's visual identity.

# Franklin Gothic Extra Condensed .

Figure 44 Morris Fuller Benton (1872–1948), Font: *Franklin Gothic Extra Condensed*, (1902), <https://fontsgEEK.com/fonts/Franklin-Gothic-Extra-Condensed>

## Influence of Design Movements

Cosmopolitan's visual style underwent a different shift in line with notable design trends, beginning in the mid-1960s. In 1965, the magazine adopted the bold graphics of Pop Art: covers featured flat, saturated color fields and oversized sans-serif headlines in the style of Lichtenstein and Warhol, making each issue a bright, attention-grabbing visual statement. By the postmodern era of the 1980s, Cosmo's art direction incorporated eclectic typefaces, photographic cut-outs, and vibrant patterns in playful collage layouts, an approach that celebrated consumer culture while also subtly critiquing its excesses. In the post-digital age, Cosmopolitan continues to carry these legacies onto the screen with responsive web design. Modular card grids, dynamic micro-animations and variable-weight typographic systems.



Figure 45 & 46 Left: *Cosmopolitan* cover, (August 1958), Pop Art, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/g38993732/helen-gurley-brown-famous-cosmopolitan-covers/> Right: *Cosmopolitan* cover, (January 1987), Postmodernism, <https://www.etsy.com/listing/4308802940/vintage-cosmopolitan-magazine-january> and interior example. <https://creativepro.com/cosmopolitan-magazine-redesigns/>

## **Feminism and Cultural Influence**

Again, *Cosmopolitan* reflects what Banet-Weiser (2018) refers to as 'popular feminism'. While it promotes individual agency and challenges certain taboos, it avoids more radical or collective political critique. Unlike *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*, which have traditionally catered to elite audiences, *Cosmopolitan* has reached a broader demographic thanks to its more accessible tone and bolder topics. Compared to *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan* was earlier and louder in discussing sexual liberation but was also more controversial in its representations of femininity. In summary, *Cosmopolitan* can be seen as feminist in its intention to normalize female pleasure and ambition; yet it remains limited by its focus on appearance, consumption and heteronormative ideals. While it had a positive impact on its readers, it rarely pushed for structural or activist feminist change, instead endorsing individual empowerment through consumerism rather than collective action (McRobbie, 2009).

### **2.2.4. Magazines created during the Postmodernism era**

#### **Essence, United States, 1968**

##### **Origins and Editorial Leadership**

Founded in 1968 by Edward Lewis (1919–2019), Clarence O. Smith (1933–2025), Cecil Hollingsworth (1906–1972), and Jonathan Blount (n.d.), *Essence* was officially launched in May 1970 as a lifestyle publication for African American women. It aimed to fill a critical void in media representation by providing content that spoke directly to the experiences and aspirations of black women (Dixon, 2022b). While the magazine's founders were male, *Essence* quickly became a platform where black women played leading editorial roles. Most notably, Susan L. Taylor (1946) served as editor-in-chief from 1981 to 2000, shaping the magazine's voice and influence for nearly two decades (Dixon, 2022b). Throughout its history, *Essence* has influenced African American women by praising their beauty, culture, and achievements. Unlike mainstream publications that often promoted Eurocentric standards of beauty, *Essence* highlighted the diverse and rich representations of black womanhood (Woodard & Mastin, 2005). The magazine served as an important archive of black women lived experiences and cultural contributions, helping to redefine and normalize positive images of black beauty in the media (Mingo, 2024).

## **Shaping the Feminine Ideal**

Essence covers a range of topics, including fashion, beauty, culture, and entertainment, all written to appeal to African American women. Beyond lifestyle content, it has also addressed critical issues such as health, education, and social justice, ensuring that its readers receive a well-rounded perspective on issues that matter to them. Unlike many mainstream women's magazines, which have historically promoted restrictive beauty ideals, Essence has been a strong promoter of the inclusion of diverse body types, skin tones, and hair textures. While the magazine has featured health and wellness content, it has generally avoided harmful diet culture narratives, instead promoting self-love and holistic well-being (Mingo, 2024).

## **Fashion Through the Decades**

Since its debut in 1970, Essence has charted, and often led, the evolution of Black women's style. In the 1970s, the magazine celebrated Afrocentric pride through natural hairstyles, dashikis and flowing caftans that reflected both Pan-African identity and the decade's bohemian spirit. The 1980s saw the rise of power dressing: shoulder-padded blazers, bold prints and statement jewelry emphasized the growing professional visibility of Black women (Hargrove, 2024). In the 1990s, Essence embraced urban streetwear, such as baggy jeans, crop tops and hoop earrings, capturing the era's R&B and hip-hop influences. The 2000s saw a fusion of high fashion and pop culture, with the magazine spotlighting glamorous red-carpet looks, designer–celebrity collaborations and sophisticated braiding styles. Today, Essence continues to highlight sustainable and inclusive fashion, from eco-friendly brands to size-diverse campaigns, thus continuing its legacy of reflecting and shaping the real wardrobes of Black women (Hargrove, 2024).

## **Visual language**

Essence is known for its bubbly and modern design, with bold photography and layouts that highlight the beauty and strength of black women. The magazine's visual storytelling uses strong colors, elegant typography, and dynamic imagery to create an engaging and empowering reading experience. Its covers have often featured influential black women, further cementing its role in

shaping positive representations of black beauty and success (Essence, n.d.). Essence combines bold sans-serif headlines with clean, humanist body text, frequently employing high-contrast weights for emphasis. This combination reflects the magazine's focus on strength and approachability (Essence Magazine, 2023).

## Influence of Design Movements

From its first issue in 1970, Essence embraced Modernist principles, incorporating clean, grid-based layouts, generous white space, and bold sans-serif headlines that showcased its photography centered around Black women. In the 1990s, the magazine experimented with postmodern collage techniques, such as layered typography, color overlays, and playful pattern swatches, which echoed the era's eclectic aesthetics while celebrating black cultural styles. In the post-digital age, Essence continues to carry these legacies online, adopting a responsive, card-based design with dynamic micro-animations and a warm accent palette. The magazine often pairs the geometric sans-serif font "Rizoma L" for headlines with the humanist serif font "Lora" for body text, ensuring the brand's voice continues every screen.



Figure 47 & 48 Left: *Essence* cover, (May 1975), Modernism, <https://www.essence.com/entertainment/time-of-essence-revisiting-magazine-debut-decade-1970/> Right: *Essence* cover, (September 1994), Post Modernism, <https://wonderclub.com/ESSENCE199409> and interior example. <https://fontsinuse.com/uses/61016/essence-magazine-2024>

## **Feminism and Cultural Influence**

Essence can be considered a feminist publication, particularly within the framework of intersectional feminism. It centers the voices and needs of Black women, a group that has been historically excluded from both mainstream feminism and the mainstream media. While it combines lifestyle content with consumerism, its consistent focus on racial justice, community development, and body positivity demonstrates a form of feminism that is culturally rooted and socially impactful (Nash, 2013). Compared to magazines such as Vogue or Cosmopolitan, Essence has been far more inclusive in terms of racial representation and has taken a more active stance in addressing systemic inequality. While its tone may not always be radical, Essence's long-standing commitment to representing Black women establishes it as one of the most culturally relevant feminist publications in the US media.

## **Ms. Magazine, United States, 1972**

### **Origins and Editorial Leadership**

Founded in 1972, *Ms. Magazine* was a game-changing publication that brought feminist conversation into the mainstream media. Co-founded by journalist and activist Gloria Steinem (1934 -) and Patricia Carbine (1931-), Ms. was the first national American feminist magazine to be run predominantly by women. The editorial team included feminists such as Letty Cottin Pogrebin (1939-), Mary Thom (1944 - 2013), Joanne Edgar (n.d.), Nina Finkelstein (n.d.), Mary Peacock (n.d.), and Margaret Sloan-Hunter (1947 – 2021), strengthening its mission of centering women's voices (Black, 2019).

The magazine's origins can be traced back to spring 1972, when a preview issue was published as a special insert in *New York magazine*. The cover, illustrated by Miriam Wosk, depicted a multi-armed woman juggling multiple responsibilities, symbolizing the evolving role of women in modern society. The immense success of the supplement, which sold 300,000 copies in three days and generated 26,000 subscriptions, demonstrated the strong demand for a feminist publication that addressed contemporary women's issues (Doherty & Yale, 2024).

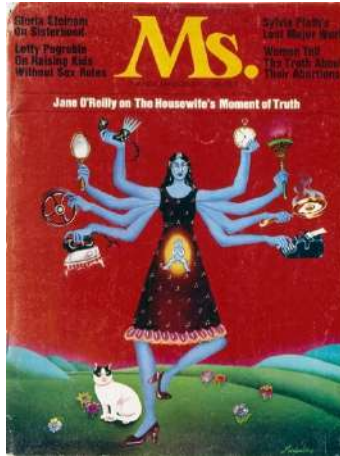


Figure 49 Miriam Wosk (1947–2010), *Ms. Cover*, (Spring 1972), <https://yalereview.org/article/closer-look-ms-magazine>

### Shaping the Feminine Ideal

*Ms. magazine* became an important platform for discussing issues largely ignored by the mainstream media, including reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, domestic violence, and political participation. It gave a voice to women fighting systemic oppression and openly challenged societal norms. One of its most influential early pieces, *'We Have Had Abortions'*, featured a petition signed by 53 women, including high-profile figures, who publicly declared their experiences with abortion, a bold statement at a time when abortion was still illegal in many parts of the United States (Black, 2019). The magazine contributed to lawmaking and cultural changes regarding women's rights. It played a role in advocating for policies such as the *Equal Rights Amendment* (ERA) and *Title IX*, both of which aimed to ensure gender equality in education and employment. By bringing issues such as sexual harassment and pay inequality into the public discourse, *Ms.* influenced national conversations about gender equality and inspired generations of activists (Walden University, 2021).



Figure 50 Ms. Magazine, *We have had abortions*, (Spring 1972), <https://msmagazine.com/2022/01/13/we-have-had-abortions-ms-winter-2022-roe-v-wade-equal-rights-amendment/>

## Fashion Through the Decades

Ms. has never been a fashion magazine; instead, its pages have shone the spotlight on activism and ideas rather than couture. While other magazines parade seasonal trends, Ms. has occasionally used fashion as shorthand for strength. In the 1970s, for example, protest T-shirts and jeans were featured alongside calls for the Equal Rights Amendment. The 1980s saw women in sharp, tailored suits storming corporate boardrooms, while the 1990s showed casual, 'everyday' looks such as chambray shirts and minimal accessories, which emphasized the magazine's grassroots approach. In the 2000s and 2010s, photos of speakers at rallies wearing bright blazers or block-heeled shoes were featured, but always in the context of their message. Throughout every decade, Ms. used clothing to signal purpose and power, rather than style for style's sake.

## Visual language

Ms. magazine's visual identity was as bold and unapologetic as its editorial stance. From its very first independent issue in January 1972, which featured Wonder Woman on the cover as an unmistakable symbol of female empowerment, the publication employed large, uppercase, sans-serif headlines, often set in Futura Bold or Helvetica Inserat, that demanded attention. These were paired with clean, serif body text to balance readability and gravitas (Britannica, n.d.). Its signature black, white, and red color scheme, inspired by radical protest posters, heightened the impact of calls to action, while ample white space and a strict grid system ensured layouts remained both tidy and powerful. Photographs ran full-bleed and were closely cropped, centering women's faces

or hands in moments of strength and solidarity. These design choices reflected a postmodernist aesthetic, visually communicating the magazine's radical stance on gender and power dynamics and transforming each issue into a graphic manifesto for equality (People's Graphic Design Archive, n.d.).



Figure 51 & 52 Left: *Ms. Magazine* cover, (July 1972), <https://psmag.com/social-justice/ms-magazine-helped-make-wonder-woman-a-feminist-icon/> Right: *Ms. Magazine* cover, (October 1984), Swiss Style, <https://www.ebay.com/itm/167308619574>

## Influence of Design Movements

*Ms. Magazine* reflects different design approaches, from the sixties' imagery referring to Hindu deities (as in Figure 49) to Pop-art-like imagery in cover layouts (as in Figure 51). By the 1980s, *Ms.* began incorporating some elements of the International Style (Swiss Style), featuring more tight grids, asymmetric text alignment, and more restrained use of color to ensure clear hierarchy and maximum readability. In today's post-digital environment, *Ms.* carries those visual legacies online with a responsive layout, modular article cards, and variable-width fonts, maintaining its manifesto-like clarity while adapting to any screen.

## Feminism and Cultural Influence

Although *Ms. Magazine* is one of the most influential feminist publications in the United States, it has never achieved the same level of cultural popularity as mainstream fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. Launched in 1972, *Ms.* entered the media scene

decades after these glossy titles had already become firmly established, which made it more difficult for *Ms.* to compete for visibility within the commercial publishing world. Consequently, many people, even those actively engaged in feminist discussions, remain unaware of its existence or historical significance. Regardless of its innovative content and impact on gender politics, *Ms.* has remained a niche publication with a dedicated but comparatively smaller readership. Unlike mass-market magazines that blend feminism with consumerism, *Ms.* focuses on political activism and structural critique, which makes it less commercially appealing but more ideologically radical (Walden University, 2021). Consequently, it remains a critical platform for feminist journalism, operating outside the high-circulation media ecosystem dominated by fashion and lifestyle brands.

## **2.2.5. Magazines representing the Contemporaneity & Post-digital Era**

### **Refinery19, United States, 2005**

#### **Origins and Editorial Leadership**

*Refinery29* was founded in New York City in 2005 by Justin Stefano (1984-), Philippe von Borries (1978-), Piera Gelardi b. (1980-), and Christene Barberic (1981-). Initially focused on independent fashion boutiques and trends in New York, but the platform quickly grew into a global media brand for young women (CBS News, 2017). Unlike many traditional magazines, *Refinery29* was created in the digital age and is primarily an online platform. While it occasionally releases special print editions or collaborates on limited-run publications, its focus remains on digital content, offering articles, videos, and interactive media centered around lifestyle, fashion, and social issues (Luo, 2021).

#### **Shaping the Feminine Ideal**

What sets *Refinery29* apart is its daring content on political and social issues. The platform regularly covers reproductive rights, gender identity, LGBTQ+ issues, and racial justice. The creation of *Unbothered* in 2017, a digital platform primarily on Instagram, marked *Refinery29*'s

commitment to diversifying media narratives. Designed for and by Black millennial women, this initiative gave a voice to communities that have long been underrepresented in mainstream publishing (Owen, n.d.). One of its most progressive initiatives is *'The 67% Project'*, which was launched in 2016 in response to the fact that 67% of American women are plus size yet drastically underrepresented in media. *Refinery29* sought to redress this imbalance by committing to increasing the visibility and positive representation of plus-size women across its channels. The project included partnerships with Getty Images to create inclusive stock photography collections to enlarge their representation (Wang & Gavillet, 2016).



Figure 53 & 54 *Refinery29, The 67% Project* (2017), : <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/host-your-own-67-project> & <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2017/10/177989/67-project-recommit-plus-size-women>

## Fashion Through the Decades

Although *Refinery29* was founded in 2005, long after many classic fashion eras, it has consistently traced and celebrated style movements from the past to the present day. Early on, it revived vintage silhouettes through features such as 'My Favorite Fashion Decade: The '50s', which spotlighted Audrey Hepburn's hourglass figure and Sophia Loren's glamorous style (Kia, 2018). During the 2010s, the website promoted street style and festival fashion, showcasing everything from boho chic at Coachella to the bold prints of Afropunk and demonstrating how subcultures influence mainstream fashion (Dumais, 2019). More recently still, *Refinery29* has popularized the athleisure trend, blending trainers and sportswear into everyday outfits, and has promoted sustainable brands that combine eco-friendly design with modern cuts (Wang, 2011). Throughout its coverage,

Refinery29 employs concise slideshows, interactive infographics and expert commentary to connect past trends with today's fashion, making every decade feel relevant and immediate.

## Visual language

Refinery29's digital-first identity relies on a flexible grid system, bright accent colors, and strong sans-serif headlines that immediately grab the reader's attention. These are paired with clean, humanist body text to ensure readability (Lin, n.d.; Grimm, 2016). Their layouts are dynamic, images often run edge-to-edge, and typography varies in weight and scale to create rhythm and hierarchy across desktop and mobile views. The '67% Project' is a prime example of these strategies: interactive infographics framed by vibrant typography not only inform but also challenge body image norms, using design to reshape audience expectations and promote body positivity (Grimm, 2016). Through a combination of engaging photography, expressive typography, and modular layouts, Refinery29 creates a visual language that feels immediate, inclusive, and empowering. Refinery29's typographic palette combines bold geometric sans serifs, such as Gotham or Avenir, for headlines with humanist sans serifs, such as Myriad or Whitney, for body copy. This creates a clear hierarchy and energetic rhythm across the page.

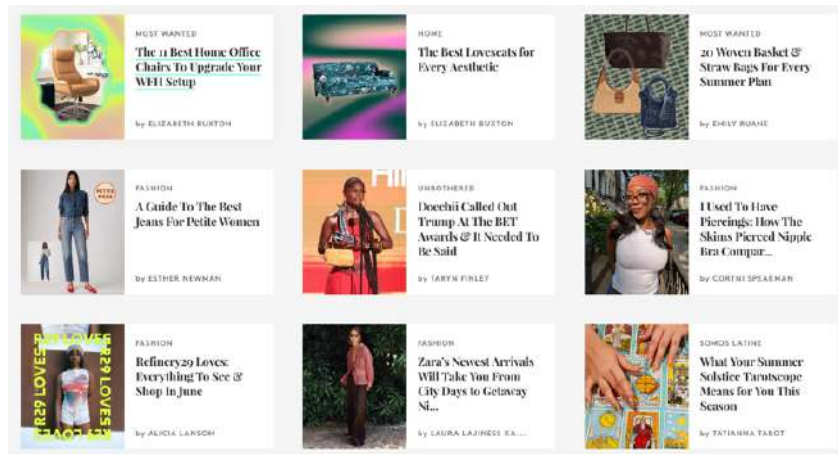


Figure 55 Screenshot of the Refinery29 website, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us>

## **Influence of Design Movements**

Although born in the post-digital era, Refinery29 draws on two key design traditions. Firstly, its early web layouts inherit the International Style (Swiss Style): a strict eight-column grid, left-aligned sans-serif headlines, often Gotham or Avenir, and a restrained color scheme prioritizing white space and clarity. This grid-driven approach ensures that articles and images adapt smoothly to different screen sizes. Secondly, Refinery29 has embraced Flat Design, the Web 2.0 trend of the 2010s characterized by solid color blocks, simple iconography, and minimal drop shadows, as seen in features such as 'The 67% Project', where vibrant typography and flat yet playful illustrations frame interactive infographics to promote body positivity. By combining Swiss-inspired structure with flat, expressive accents, Refinery29 creates a visual language that feels both rigorous and welcoming, perfectly suited to its blend of serious journalism and lifestyle storytelling.

## **Feminism and Cultural Influence**

*Refinery29* can be considered a feminist publication thanks to its inclusive, intersectional and digitally native approach to women's media (Xiao, 2022). It consistently prioritizes the representation of marginalized identities, questions traditional beauty standards and addresses urgent socio-political issues that are often avoided by more established publications. Compared to *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* or *Glamour*, *Refinery29* is more progressive in its editorial choices and commitment to social responsibility. However, like other platforms operating within capitalist media systems, its feminist approach is not immune to criticism. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that, while popular feminist media promote visibility, they can also create a 'funhouse mirror' of empowerment that emphasizes individualism and marketability over collective change. This tension became particularly visible in 2020 when Refinery29 faced backlash from employees of color who revealed internal inequities and performative allyship (Jennings, 2020). Nevertheless, Refinery29 continues to be a prominent feminist voice in contemporary digital media, particularly among Gen Z and millennial readers (Stienstra, 2021; Xiao, 2022), as it navigates the contradictions of visibility, corporate sponsorship, and activist rhetoric.

## **Jezebel, United States, 2007**

### **Origins and Editorial Leadership**

*Jezebel* was launched in 2007 by Anna Holmes (n.d.) under the umbrella of New York City-based Gawker Media. The website was created as a response to the shallow coverage of women's rights and interests in newspapers and media. Anna Holmes, a former journalist, visualized a platform that would blend cultural critique with feminist politics (NPR Staff, 2013). From the start, *Jezebel* positioned itself as fiercely feminist, openly progressive, and critical of traditional media portrayals of women. It covered a wide range of topics, including politics, reproductive rights, workplace inequality, celebrities, and race. The online magazine quickly became known for its sharp, witty tone and sarcastic headlines, often using humor to dismantle patriarchal norms and media supremacy (Mehta et al., 2023).

### **Shaping the Feminine Ideal**

The platform often served as a first responder to sexist double standards, and its writers prided themselves on calling out both media and political figures. *Jezebel's* political stance became even more pronounced after 2016, when the Trump presidency sparked a new wave of digital feminist activism. Through in-depth reporting and first-person essays, *Jezebel* became a space where millennial and Gen Z women felt seen (Smith, 2017). *Jezebel* faced difficulties in maintaining its voice within mainstream media. Financial struggles, combined with changes in ownership and editorial direction, nearly caused the platform to lose its voice. This shows how hard it is to battle the mainstream media and stand out in the hectic digital world of today. *Jezebel* has worked to retain its relevance and continue its mission of promoting feminist ideals and critiquing the mainstream media's portrayal of women (Gladstone, 2023).

### **Fashion Through the Decades**

*Jezebel* may not be a fashion magazine, but it has never shied away from critiquing style trends as cultural statements. Rather than reporting on the latest catwalk trends, *Jezebel* highlights the intersection of clothing and beauty norms with power. Examples include its 2017 piece on #MeToo

protest T-shirts transforming garments into activism and its analysis of the obsession with skinny jeans as a marker of millennial identity. Through its 'Fashion' tag, Jezebel treats every hemline and beauty hack as a lens through which to view gender politics, reminding readers that what we wear is never just about style.

## Visual language

Jezebel is an online-only publication. The site uses a flexible, card-based layout that adapts smoothly from desktop to mobile, placing content at the forefront without any glossy 'cover' getting in the way. Strong editorial grids keep stories organized, while bold sans-serif headlines and clean body text ensure readability. Jezebel uses high-contrast images, meme-style graphics and minimalist accents — often just a splash of color against plenty of white space, to match its sharp, sarcastic tone (Wazny, 2010). Rather than telling stories through fashion photography, Jezebel relies on hard-hitting journalism and witty commentary to convey its message. By doing this, Jezebel has created a distinctively feminist online space, using web-native design and layout to amplify voices that challenge the status quo.

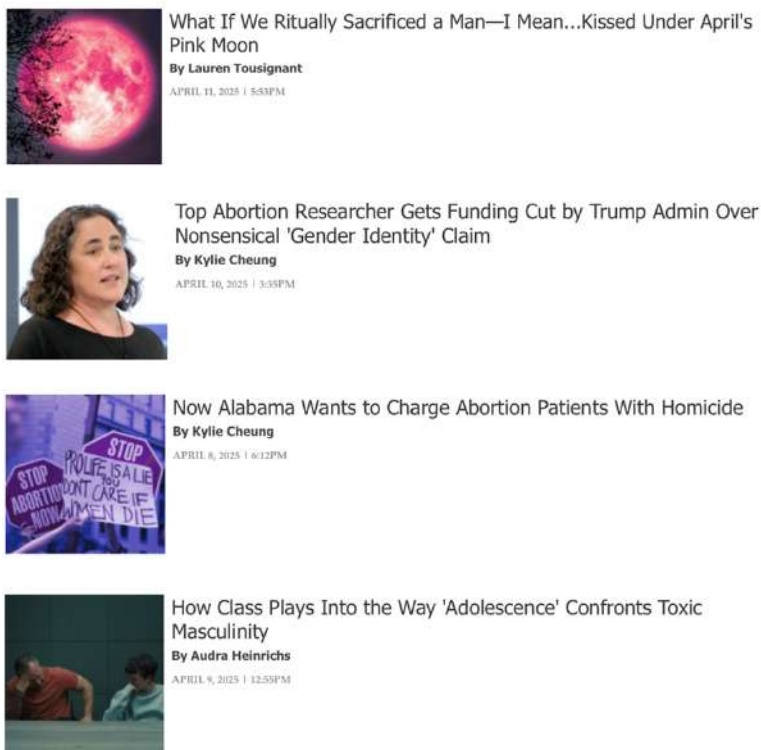


Figure 56 Screenshot website Jezebel, <https://www.jezebel.com> viewed on: 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2025.

## Influence of Design Movements

Since its launch in 2007, Jezebel's digital-first identity has been shaped by two foundational design movements. Firstly, it channels the International Style (Swiss Style) through its rigid, multi-column grid; left-aligned, neo-grotesque headlines; and ample white space. These choices keep its incisive journalism front and center. Secondly, Jezebel embraces Flat Design principles, such as bold color accents, simple iconography and subtle layering on its article cards, to ensure clarity and usability across devices. By combining Swiss-inspired structure with flat, interactive elements, Jezebel maintains an authoritative yet approachable visual language that supports its sharp, feminist voice in today's crowded media landscape.

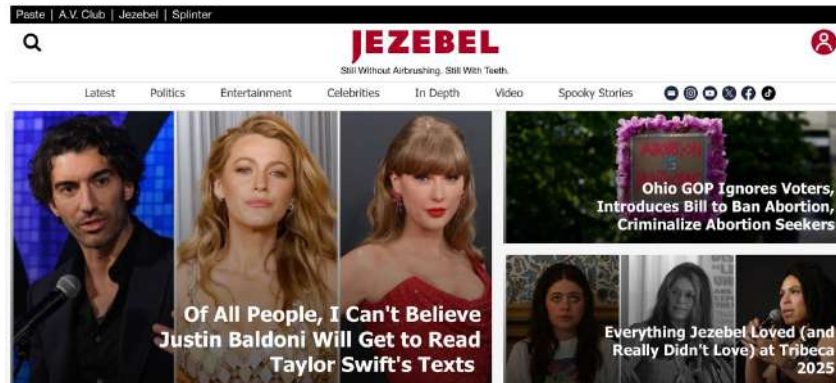


Figure 57 Screenshot website Jezebel, <https://www.jezebel.com> viewed on: 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2025.

## Feminism and Cultural Influence

Jezebel has been much more than just a gossip site; it has reshaped mainstream conversations around gender, power, and representation. By combining sharp investigative reporting with a sarcastic and unapologetic tone, Jezebel has brought feminist critiques of celebrity culture, body politics, and workplace abuse into the digital spotlight. Its coverage of high-profile scandals, such as its early exposés of Harvey Weinstein, helped lay the groundwork for the #MeToo movement, demonstrating the site's ability to translate online discourse into real-world change. In doing so, Jezebel has forged a cultural space in which feminist ideas can spread rapidly, challenge dominant narratives, and mobilize readers towards collective action.

### 2.2.6. Comparison Analysis

This section presents a series of case studies examining nine magazines and digital publications: Harper's Bazaar, Vogue, Votes for Women, Glamour, Cosmopolitan, Essence, Ms. Magazine, Refinery29, and Jezebel. Each publication is analyzed through four lenses: its general cultural and historical context; its editorial content; its graphic and visual design strategies; and its relationship to feminist discourse. Focus is given to how each medium navigates the boundary between popular feminism, as defined by Banet-Weiser (2018) as a market-driven, individualized form of feminism, and more politically involved or collective forms of feminism. By comparing legacy print magazines and digital-first platforms, this section aims to reveal how feminism is communicated visually and ideologically within mainstream and alternative media.

Magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar* can be categorized as operating largely within the framework of popular feminism, as defined by Banet-Weiser (2018). These publications tend to prioritize themes such as personal fulfilment, self-care, beauty, success, and consumer choice. Here, feminism is often reduced to a lifestyle choice, promoting the idea that women can feel empowered through purchasing, confidence, and self-expression rather than advocating political action or collective resistance. *Cosmopolitan*, for example, reframes sexual liberation as a form of personal branding, while *Glamour* promotes workplace power through individual success stories rather than systemic inequality critiques (Cohen, 2013). This framing is effective and appealing to a broad, predominantly middle-class audience because it enables them to engage with feminism without questioning the systems in which they live. As McRobbie (2008) notes, postfeminist media often offer a 'double entanglement', whereby feminist ideas are referenced but simultaneously neutralized through their absorption into consumer culture. These magazines sell the idea of progress and choice within safe, non-disruptive parameters (A. McRobbie, 2008c).

In contrast, publications such as Ms. Magazine, Votes for Women, Essence, Refinery29 and Jezebel take a more critical approach to the structural roots of inequality. These media forms are more closely aligned with radical or systemic feminism, aiming to expose and change the systems that produce gender inequality. Radical feminist media platforms remain less visible and harder to access within the wider mainstream media industry. This is largely due to their lack of commercial backing and limited distribution networks, as well as their incompatibility with advertiser-driven

business models. Radical feminism critiques the systems that support consumer culture, which makes it difficult for such platforms to survive, let alone succeed, within that system (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Moreover, these outlets often lack the marketing strategies and promotional budgets required to increase their visibility. In a digital culture driven by algorithms, branding and influencer culture, they find it hard to 'win the game' against commercial publications with significant resources. Even among politically aware readers, encountering such feminist outlets can be difficult. Their limited presence in the media means many people are unaware of their existence, even though their voices are highly relevant and valuable in contemporary society (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

The visual and graphic design of a magazine plays a role in determining how its feminist message is perceived. Many commercially driven publications, such as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Cosmopolitan*, center their design aesthetics on luxury, beauty and aspiration, using high-gloss photography, minimalist layouts, and fashion-focused imagery. While these visuals appeal to mainstream audiences and contribute to a polished, desirable brand identity, they also risk conflicting with feminist values by promoting narrow beauty standards, consumerism, and elitism (Gill, 2007). In these contexts, feminism is often visualized through stylish, confident, heteronormative women, suggesting that empowerment is tied to appearance and consumption.

In contrast, platforms such as *Ms. Magazine*, *Jezebel*, and *Votes for Women* use design as a tool for resistance and communication rather than for achieving aesthetic perfection. *Ms.* featured bold typography, activist imagery, and illustrated covers that aligned with its political stance and editorial voice. *Votes for Women*, printed in black and white with text-heavy layouts, prioritized function over form, favoring information and mobilization over visual appeal. Similarly, *Jezebel's* web design rejects hyper-polished digital branding, instead choosing a raw, accessible aesthetic that resonates with its critical and irreverent tone. These examples demonstrate how design can strengthen feminist messaging. Meanwhile, there are also hybrid models. *Refinery29* and *Essence*, for instance, uses modern, accessible editorial-style layouts that integrate content on race, gender identity, and body politics. This balance between appealing design and intersectional content shows that feminist media does not have to reject aesthetics entirely, but must consider how visual choices reflect, or undermine, the publication's ideological commitments.

To conclude this analysis, we will take one final look at how feminism is represented in the magazines discussed, but this time we will adopt a broader perspective. Rather than considering the presence or absence of feminism in the media, it is more useful to think of it as a spectrum. These publications, ranging from commercial fashion magazines to activist platforms, vary greatly in how deeply they connect with feminist ideas. By dividing them into four groups, postfeminist/commercial media, popular feminism, intersectional feminism and radical feminism, we gain a clearer understanding of the messages these platforms deliver and who they speak to.

Firstly, postfeminist or commercial media largely disconnect feminism from its political roots. In magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, for example, empowerment is often visual and aesthetic rather than ideological. They celebrate femininity through luxury, beauty, and exclusivity. While they occasionally feature 'strong women', they rarely question the systems that define power (Gill, 2007). Here, feminism is more of a vibe, a lifestyle accessory that fits neatly into the branding of wealth, elegance, and high fashion.

Taking another step towards feminism in action, we get into popular feminism, best represented by magazines such as *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*. These magazines promote independence, confidence and sexual liberation, often marketing themselves as supporters of women's freedom. Yet this so-called empowerment typically amounts to little more than personal choice, self-care, or climbing the career ladder within existing structures, rather than opposing them. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, popular feminism thrives in consumer culture because it feels good, sells well and causes minimal disruption. It is feminist enough to resonate with readers, yet safe enough not to offend advertisers.

Between the commercial and the political lies what is known as intersectional feminism, which deepens the conversation by looking at how gender overlaps with race, class, sexuality, and identity. *Essence*, *Refinery29*, and *Jezebel* fall into this category. While still navigating the pressures of digital media and marketability, these platforms intentionally prioritize diverse voices and systemic critique. They explore topics such as racism in fashion, queer identity, body politics, and economic inequality, thereby making space for conversations that do not always fit into the glossy world of mainstream publishing.

At the other end of the spectrum is radical feminism, where the media is used as a tool for social change rather than for entertainment or branding purposes. *Votes for Women* and *Ms. Magazine*

are examples of media outlets that directly question social systems. Their aim is not just to represent women, but to mobilize them. Their content focuses on collective action, political education, and transforming institutions, often without concern for visual polish or mainstream appeal. These platforms don't merely "include" feminism; they are feminist in their mission, voice, and intention.

Of course, this categorization isn't fixed. Media shifts over time, adapts to culture, and sometimes crosses categories. Thinking in terms of this broader spectrum, then, allows us to ask deeper questions, not just 'Is this feminist?', but 'What kind of feminism is being promoted, and why?' This approach also helps to explain why certain feminist voices are more visible than others. Commercial media have the tools to reach the masses, but they often lack depth. Radical and intersectional media carry the critical weight of feminism but struggle to gain traction without marketing budgets or algorithmic visibility. Ultimately, people's exposure to certain media determines their perception of feminism. This raises an important question: What do readers want from feminist media, comfort or critique?

### **2.3. Interview with Davide Ricchiuti**

In addition to the case study analysis, this research includes an interview with Davide Ricchiuti, the founder of the Italian feminist magazine *ProVocazione*. Although this study focuses on publications from UK and US, Davide offers a valuable outsider insight, particularly given his role as a male editor working in feminist publishing. This raises questions about allyship, editorial responsibility, and how feminist media can be influenced by individuals from outside the typical audience. Rather than limiting the conversation, this perspective helps expand it. The interview focused on themes such as the challenges of independent feminist publishing, the use of visual design in activist media, and the influence of mainstream magazines.

Davide Ricchiuti founded *Pro.Vocazione* during the pandemic lockdowns, motivated by his frustration at the frequent reports of femicide in Italy and the striking lack of male involvement in addressing this crisis. This motivation reflects a broader global reality. According to UN Women and the UNODC, approximately 51,100 women and girls were killed by an intimate partner or family member in 2023, averaging 140 deaths per day worldwide. This makes femicide an

epidemic that affects women globally, rather than a series of isolated tragedies. The situation was exacerbated by lockdown measures imposed during the pandemic, which UN agencies have described as a “shadow pandemic” of violence against women.

Ricchiuti's response to the crisis was personal and literary. Influenced by authors such as Sylvia Plath and Anaïs Nin and shaped by early experiences that had challenged his perception of masculinity and gender roles, he came to view feminism as an essential framework for comprehending society, not merely for women, but for all individuals. This commitment is evident in his role on the editorial team at Pro.Vocazione, where he openly states:

*“I am the only man on the editorial team, and I openly declare myself a straight, white, cisgender man. This explicit declaration serves to signal to other straight, white, cisgender men that it is possible to deal with feminism even if you are not a woman or have a non-binary identity.”*

What stands out is Davide’s horizontal approach to publishing. Rather than positioning himself as a rescuer or leader of feminist ideas, he sees himself as a facilitator who provides space and actively listens.

*“Women know and have always known how to take their own space... The approach I use as a publisher is a horizontal one. This means that I listen to women and their stories.”*

The magazine carefully combines visual design with activism, using illustration and photography to communicate feminist ideas in a subtle yet powerful way. Davide refers to this approach as a 'gentle revolution'. The concept of women asserting their presence through cultural expression has deep historical roots. As seen in the early suffrage movements, women have long fought to be heard and recognized as equals. Pro.Vocazione acknowledges this legacy by recognizing that feminist resistance has always existed, not only in protests, but also in the creative strategies women use to assert their presence and power.

*“The revolution Pro.Vocazione proposes is a gentle revolution, not armed, except for words and images that develop critical thinking.”*

Responses to Pro.Vocazione have been mixed but revealing. Although some radical feminists question the magazine's authenticity because it is led by a man, Davide has highlighted examples of genuine self-reflection and change among readers. During a presentation, one man publicly admitted that Davide's words had caused him to reevaluate his own discriminatory behaviors towards women, an important example of the magazine's impact.

Davide's primary aim is clear: to use literature and visual culture to raise awareness among men who rarely think about feminism, and to encourage them to question their unconscious biases and their sense of privilege. As he explained:

*“If Pro.Vocazione could make straight cis men understand that their discriminatory behaviors, even the less aware ones, are part of patriarchy, and I would be happy. Being aware is the first step to changing them.”*

This perspective reveals an important yet frequently overlooked facet of feminism: it's not just about advocating for women; it's also about prompting men to reflect critically on their role and the systems they support. His voice is unique within feminist media and valuable in demonstrating that meaningful change requires the engagement of all genders. As long as gender-based violence remains widespread, structural change must involve empowering women and challenging men to unlearn patriarchal behaviors. As Davide emphasizes, awareness is the first step towards a more equal society.

In summary, this interview offers valuable insights into the potential of independent feminist media to influence perspectives and attitudes, particularly among traditionally resistant audiences. Davide's perspective as a male feminist ally shows how even small-scale publishing projects like Pro.Vocazione can effect genuine transformation.

## **2.4. Survey**

To gain a better understanding of perceptions of women's magazines and their evolving cultural role, an online survey was conducted using Google Forms. The survey received 196 responses from participants of 40 different nationalities, providing a diverse and international sample.

Of all the respondents, 126 identified as female, 67 as male, and two as another gender identity. This gender breakdown provides valuable insight into how different identities engage with feminist media and visual culture. The largest group of participants came from the Netherlands (97), followed by smaller groups from Portugal, Norway, and the UK. The respondents were primarily aged 18–30, representing a generation that is most active in digital media spaces. A total of 56.6% of respondents reported having completed higher education, including a Bachelor's, Master's, or PhD degree.

The participants do not regularly engage with magazines, but they are highly involved with news media. On a scale of 1 to 5, the average score for regularly reading magazines was 2.3, whereas the average score for keeping up with the news, whether through websites, newspapers, TV or social media, was much higher at 4.1. This suggests a clear shift in media habits: people are interacting more with digital news platforms than with traditional magazine formats.

That said, when participants do read magazines, most say they prefer the printed version. The average score for print preference was 3.5, and 71 out of 177 respondents mentioned reasons such as wanting to disconnect from their phone, enjoying the feel of paper or simply liking the experience of holding a magazine. Therefore, although magazines may be read less frequently, the sensory and intentional quality of print still resonates with many readers (see Figure C1 in Appendix C).

When asked whether they actively seek out news outlets focused on women's rights or gender-related perspectives, women scored much higher on a 5-point scale: 35.7% agreed, while 75.8% of men disagreed. This suggests not only that women are more aware of gender issues in the media but also that they are more intentional about finding platforms that reflect feminist values. In contrast, men's higher percentage of disagreeing with the statement (75,8%) highlights the different ways in which men and women participate in and prioritize gender discussion.

This supports the argument that the mainstream media already centers male perspectives, leaving men with a lesser perceived need to look beyond what is readily available. Meanwhile, women often need to seek out alternative media to see their experiences and rights accurately represented. This underlines the importance of independent feminist publications such as Pro.Vocazione, which aims to create more inclusive and reflective narratives.

When asked if they had ever read women's mainstream magazines, either in print or digital form, 44.1% of participants responded "yes". The 86 respondents who identified as female gained access to the more in-depth, 'exclusive' section of the survey, which explored feminist discourse, media continuity and visual design. Of those who moved on to the next section, 74 identified as female, 10 as male and 2 as other. This suggests that women are far more likely to engage with women's magazines, even casually, and therefore more likely to access and consider feminist media narratives. The relatively small number of men who progressed to the later stages of the survey supports the broader finding that men are less engaged with women's-based media.

Most participants were highly familiar with mainstream women's magazines such as Vogue and Elle, demonstrating their significant cultural visibility. In contrast, awareness of feminist publications such as Ms. Magazine, Jezebel and Rebellious Magazine was much lower. This suggests that even those interested in gender-related media are often unaware of where to find it, highlighting a disconnect between demand for feminist content and accessibility of platforms offering it. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) describes this phenomenon as part of an 'economy of visibility', in which mainstream, brand-friendly feminism is amplified through the media and advertising, while more independent and critical voices remain less visible. The survey findings reflect this: the most accessible content is not necessarily the most critical. As Banet-Weiser argues, the louder, more marketable versions of feminism often overshadow the deeper, more transformative ones (see figure C2 in appendix C).

Although most participants are familiar with mainstream women's magazines, they do not consider them to be realistic or progressive. On average (70,9%), respondents disagreed that these magazines accurately portray women, often citing the influence of editing and unrealistic body standards. At the same time, they agreed more strongly (47,7%) that these magazines reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. This tension reveals that, although these publications are culturally visible, they are also considered outdated or superficial in their portrayal of women (see figure C3 in appendix C).

Participants recognized that magazine design plays an important role in shaping perceptions of women. On average, they agreed that visual elements, such as photography, layout, and body representation, have a considerable influence on gender perception. They also recognized a link

between changes in design and wider societal shifts, confirming that visual culture is closely connected to feminist progress.

Next, participants recognized not only how magazines use design to shape perceptions, but also their deeper cultural influence. The majority agreed that changes in beauty standards over time have been influenced by these publications, which promote specific ideals around body image, appearance, and femininity. Similarly, many participants felt that magazines have played a role in shaping the social roles and expectations placed on women. This suggests that the media doesn't just reflect culture, it actively helps to construct it. These responses illustrate the impact of visual and editorial content on how gender is perceived and enacted in society (see figure C4 in appendix C). While participants acknowledge the influence of mainstream magazines, they also identify a gap between this influence and the magazines' actual representation of gender. Most respondents (80,2%) agreed that these magazines should promote gender equality, discuss political issues, and embrace diversity to be responsible to their readers.

This creates another gap between what readers want and what is being delivered. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, popular feminism prioritizes marketable, superficial empowerment over deeper systemic critique. The survey results suggest that audiences are craving something more: representation that is meaningful as well as visible. The question, then, is whether magazines truly reflect their readers' values or are stuck in a version of feminism shaped more by branding than justice (see figure C5 in appendix C).

At the same time, it is interesting that most participants (65,5%) expressed trust in women's magazines to address serious issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and workplace inequality. This suggests that readers believe these platforms have the potential to contribute to meaningful social conversations beyond mere entertainment. Yet this optimism may not align with reality.

As Banet-Weiser (2018) points out, popular feminism is often influenced by branding and marketability, which restricts how far mainstream media can go in addressing structural issues. Many of these magazines rely heavily on advertisers and corporate sponsorships, which can discourage the publication of bold political content. The trust expressed by readers may therefore reflect hope or expectation rather than a consistent track record. There is a tension between what

readers believe magazines should do and what commercial pressures allow them to do in practice (see figure C6 in appendix C).

The survey results demonstrate the ongoing influence of mainstream women's magazines. Participants clearly recognized the role that these magazines have played, both historically and in the present day, in shaping beauty standards, gender roles and social expectations, through both written content and visual design. Whether in print or online, these platforms continue to influence how women are perceived in society.

Participants also expressed a strong desire for magazines to do more: they should promote gender equality, celebrate diversity, and address complex issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and inequality. This demonstrates that readers are not passive consumers; they expect more from the media with which they engage. Although the desire for better representation is clear, the question remains: do mainstream magazines deliver? Drawing on the work of Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018), we can see that the most visible form of feminism is often a branded one that easily fits into advertising and commercial narratives. While this kind of feminism may appear empowering at first glance, it rarely challenges the underlying systems of power. Although readers may trust these magazines to take a stand, the reality is that commercial interests often limit how far they can go. The most notable aspect is the gap between what readers are looking for and what they find. Although many participants said they were interested in gender-based content, few (12,8%) were familiar with independent feminist platforms such as Ms. Magazine, Jezebel, and Rebellious Magazine. These are the kinds of media that offer more critical and inclusive perspectives, yet they remain largely invisible to the public. This matters not just because readers are missing out, but also because the voices doing the most meaningful work are often the least visible.

### **3. Discussion**

#### **3.1. The Role of Magazine Design in Shaping Women's Representation**

The survey analysis and the literary review made it clear that women's magazines continue to influence culture, not only through the stories they tell, but also through their appearance. Design, layout, photography, typography, and color are not neutral choices; they are visual strategies that influence readers' understanding of womanhood. Participants in the survey acknowledged that the visual design of women's magazines influences their perception of gender roles. Many respondents felt that mainstream magazines do not portray women realistically, suggesting that these visual choices often present narrow or unattainable ideals of beauty. Our magazine analysis corroborates this finding, revealing that visual representations in mainstream titles perpetuate restrictive beauty standards for women. Interestingly, participants also viewed design as reflective of broader social changes. They recognized that visual styles had evolved in line with changes in women's rights and public roles over time. This suggests that magazine design not only reflects society but can also signal and shape progress. This stands in contrast to deeper criticism: magazines may be visually powerful, but they are not always representative. This tension is consistent with Banet-Weiser's (2018) critique of 'popular feminism'. While magazines may include superficial nods to empowerment through imagery, they rarely challenge the systems that cause inequality. The focus on beauty, image, and branding means visual design often serves commercial goals more than feminist ones. Therefore, even when magazine design appears progressive, it may still subtly uphold traditional expectations.

In response to the limitations of mainstream visual representation, there is a growing need for independent feminist publications such as Jezebel, Ms. Magazine, and Pro.Vocazione. These platforms offer space for more diverse, critical, and inclusive narratives, often questioning deeper systems of power and inequality beyond aesthetics. Yet the challenge remains: how to increase their visibility. Unlike long-established titles such as Vogue or Harper's Bazaar, feminist publications have not had the same visibility, resources, or media infrastructure with which to build a wide readership. Many survey respondents were entirely unfamiliar with them, even when they expressed interest in gender-based media. This lack of awareness demonstrates how much feminist media remains underground or inaccessible to broader audiences, not due to a lack of

relevance, but because they have never been given the same opportunity to grow. Without mainstream platforms promoting them or systems supporting their expansion, these critical voices struggle to be heard above the noise of popular, commercial feminism.

In this way, magazine design is a double-edged sword. It can shape cultural values, but it is also shaped by the commercial and social structures within which it exists. It is not only important to consider what we see in magazines, but also why we see it and who decides how women are visually represented. This opens a broader conversation about responsibility, audience expectations, and the difference between visibility and representation.

### **3.2. Magazine design and representation of women**

Over time, women's magazines have played a key role in shaping how femininity is portrayed and understood. Participants in the survey were clear in their responses: while they know magazines such as *Vogue* and *Elle*, they also acknowledged that these publications have long promoted strict and unrealistic beauty standards. From idealized body types to heavily edited images and advice columns promoting extreme diets, magazines have historically promoted narrow definitions of womanhood. These visual and editorial strategies do not exist in isolation; they reflect and maintain wider gender norms, often subtly suggesting how women should look, behave, and aim to be.

Participants also said that, although some progress has been made, many magazines are still stuck in a version of popular feminism that offers empowerment in the form of slogans or self-care routines rather than structural critique. This kind of feminism feels safe for advertisers and brands, but it rarely addresses the deeper inequalities that shape women's lives. This raises a key question: Is the progress we have seen enough? Can we call it progress if the core ideals still revolve around appearance, consumption, and individualism?

This concern is not new. During the early feminist and suffrage movements, feminist publications, as in the case of *Votes for Women*, played a crucial role in organizing, informing, and inspiring women. The magazines and literary journals of the early era were often highly political, using literature as a means of campaigning for the right to vote, access education, and challenge patriarchal systems. The power of literature in feminist activism was undeniable; words became

action, and publishing became protest. Feminist publications remain essential today, which is why outlets like *Pro.Vocazione* and *Ms.* still matter so much. They bring the same energy into the world like *Votes for Women* did before them.

Yet today, in a media world dominated by algorithms and visual overstimulation, those same feminist voices are finding it hard to be heard. While critical magazines such as *Ms. Magazine* and *Pro.Vocazione* still exist, they often go unseen, buried under the constant stream of digital content. Although feminist media used to be concentrated and powerful, the shift to digital has made things both more accessible and chaotic. Social media platforms and digital magazines have multiplied voices but also amplified pressure, particularly around the discussion and judgements of women's bodies. Content that once appeared in a glossy monthly issue is now visible 24/7 on our phones, shaping beauty standards and gender norms in more immediate and invasive ways.

So, are magazines listening to their readers? Do they provide the realistic, unedited representation that so many contributors crave, or are they still more influenced by brand partnerships and sales targets than genuine audience needs? Our analysis of magazines and survey results makes it clear that most titles continue to prioritize glossy visuals and advertiser-friendly content over authentic diversity, following the logic of popular feminism and market trends. Rather than reflecting the real voices of their readers, they often reinforce polished ideals, leaving the demand for an honest and inclusive portrayal unmet.

### **3.3. From Print to Post-Digital: changes in women's social roles, rights, and activism through time**

Over the past century, print publications such as *Votes for Women* and early suffrage journals have used clear and focused messaging to encourage their female readers and allies to campaign for voting rights, education and legal equality. The editors of these publications treated every issue as a graphic manifesto, and survey respondents still sense that clarity in the archives today.

Fast forward to our interview with Davide Ricchiuti of *Pro.Vocazione*, who describes his 'gentle revolution' approach: a horizontal editorial style that amplifies women's voices by listening first. He asserts that “being aware is the first step to change” (2025). His project echoes that early print

activism was small-scale, deeply political, and driven by unfiltered stories rather than brand imperatives.

Nevertheless, our survey data indicates that in the post-digital age, readers feel caught between two extremes. While 80,2% of respondents agree that mainstream magazines have a responsibility to promote gender equality, only 12,8% are familiar with any feminist titles other than Vogue or Elle. When asked if they actively seek out gender-based news, 35,7% of women responded positively, compared to just 9,1% of men, a gap that highlights who still dominates public discourse. Participants crave unedited, authentic representation, yet most magazine pages remain glossy, advertiser-friendly showcases rather than platforms for systemic critique.

Our magazine analysis confirms this misalignment. Mainstream titles have shifted from pastel illustrations to bold photography and high contrast palettes but rarely go beyond individual 'empowerment' features. Discussions of reproductive rights, workplace inequality, or gender-based violence are usually presented as personal stories rather than being connected to structural change. This mirrors what survey respondents refer to as 'popular feminism' rather than a genuine commitment to the cause.

Print publications taught us the power of consistency, pairing bold, repeatable designs with an unwavering editorial voice that readers could rally behind. Consider Votes for Women's recognizable front page or Ms. magazine's protest-poster color scheme; these visual choices were not just decoration, but tools for organizing and uniting movements.

The digital era offers a different kind of strength, as demonstrated by Davide Ricchiuti's work with Pro.Vocazione. By listening horizontally and giving space to every contributor, as well as using inclusive, adaptable layouts, online platforms can foster a genuine sense community. But in today's crowded feeds, even the most thoughtful sites can get lost in the noise, with their messages scattered across clicks and shares.

Our survey makes one thing clear: readers want magazines that really listen to them. They crave the same clarity and conviction of early feminist print design that signals purpose, and content that refuses to shy away from hard truths, combined with the participatory energy of digital media, where audiences can respond, remix, and join the conversation. Only by combining these two legacies can feminist media reclaim visibility and impact.

The question isn't whether change is happening; it's whether it's happening in the right places and in the right way. We need platforms that combine the organizational power of print activism with the accessibility of digital design and the authentic community building exemplified by voices such as Pro.Vocazione and Ms. Otherwise, we risk letting commercial trends drown out the progress that previous generations fought to secure.

A comparison of the literature review with today's reality makes it clear that full equality has not yet been achieved. Women around the world still face threats to their safety, rights, and bodily autonomy. In this context, it is more important than ever to keep standing up and speaking out, and to refuse to allow marketing goals or profit motives to drown out these critical structural issues. Feminist media must remain true to its activist roots and use every design and editorial decision to amplify demands for real change rather than glossy distractions.

## Conclusions

Magazines and feminist publications have driven much of the progress in women's rights, especially during the Victorian and Fin de Siècle periods, by using design as a powerful advocacy tool. Breakthroughs often occurred during times of crisis: during both World Wars and the Great Depression, for example, women took on new roles and proved their abilities, only to be nudged back into domestic life once things 'returned to normal'. These events demonstrated how swiftly hard-won rights can be lost. The shift into digital media has given countless new voices a platform, providing a megaphone for both progress and pushback. Right now, we have taken huge steps forward, yet true equality still lies ahead.

Looking at today's glossy magazines, we can see obvious changes: more diverse body types, strong visuals, and occasionally addressing inequality. Yet much of this remains 'popular feminism': neat, sponsor-friendly stories that focus on individual empowerment, *buy this product* or *adopt this mindset*, rather than addressing the systems that hold women back. Independent zines and smaller feminist websites still ask the hard questions, but without the marketing power of Vogue or Harper's Bazaar, their important critiques often go unnoticed even, when necessary, in this time.

Davide refers to his work as a 'gentle revolution', and with good reason. By prioritizing women's stories and encouraging men to listen, really listen, he demonstrates how a small magazine can have a bigger impact. His reflections confirm what our survey and analysis both highlight: the mainstream media still overlooks the systemic issues that readers care about. For him, real allyship starts with awareness, and that's exactly what publications like Pro.Vocazione strive to build.

At the same time, we can conclude that people are done with airbrushed perfection. They want unfiltered, inclusive representation, faces and bodies that look like real people. Although the participants of the survey agreed that magazines should promote equity and diversity, most of them didn't have any knowledge of feminist-oriented publications. Women are four times more likely than men to seek out gender-based media, highlighting who still have a strong voice. These figures confirm the key finding that audiences are hungry for depth, yet mainstream outlets continue to offer only superficial content.

## **Answering the research questions**

In this final section, we will summarize our findings to answer the main research question and its supporting sub-questions, which were first set out in the introduction. By revisiting each strand of the study, we will demonstrate how magazine design and visual strategy have influenced the representation of women and feminist discourse from the late 19th century to the present day.

*How have the design and visual strategies of magazines shaped the representation of women, the communication of feminist ideas, and the discourse around women's rights from the late 19th century until nowadays in the U.S. and U.K., and how are these influences reflected and transformed in today's digital media?*

Over the past century and a half, magazine design and visual strategy have played a fundamental role in shaping perceptions of women and disseminating feminist ideas, from the bold typography of Victorian suffrage movement pamphlets to the responsive, card-based layouts of modern websites. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, publications such as *Votes for Women* used clear headlines, strong illustrations, and consistent page layouts to encourage readers to support women's right to vote and their participation in public life. As fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Glamour* gained popularity, they increased women's visibility with pastel covers and high contrast photography but often portrayed empowerment as a personal consumer choice. The launch of *Ms.* in the 1970s reclaimed design, black, white, and red palettes, full-bleed portraits, and bold sans-serif headers, as a tool for systemic critique rather than glossy 'popular feminism'. Today, digital platforms such as *Jezebel* and *Pro.Vocazione* continue that legacy with flexible, responsive grids and expressive typography, encouraging horizontal listening and community engagement. Yet they still compete against corporate-backed 'economies of visibility' and algorithmic noise. Our survey shows that readers now demand authenticity and depth, real stories, not just polished images, and our interview with Davide Ricchiuti stresses the importance of small, independent outlets that truly listen to and amplify women's voices. By combining these historical and contemporary elements, it is evident that the future of feminist media lies in uniting the clarity and collective power of print activism with the participatory promise of digital design. This approach ensures that representation and critique go hand in hand, rather than heading in different directions.

*How did early magazines (Victorian & Fin de Siècle) shape public views of women's roles through design, content, and politics?*

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both feminist and mainstream women's magazines used all aspects of design, such as mastheads, illustrations, fonts, and layouts, to convey clear political messages. Suffrage journals such as *Votes for Women* employed striking mastheads and monochrome color schemes to encourage readers to support women's right to vote. Fin de siècle periodicals paired dramatic illustrations of women in public roles with essays that challenged the idea of domestic confinement. Even periodicals such as *The Yellow Book* incorporated subtle critiques of gender norms into their opulent layouts, suggesting that women's creativity and intellect belonged in the public sphere rather than just the drawing room.

*How do independent feminist magazines use design differently from mainstream titles, and what impact do those choices have on feminist discourse?*

Independent outlets such as *Ms.*, *Jezebel* and *Pro.Vocazione* (the latter in Italy) leans into design as activism. *Ms.* magazine uses a palette of black, white, and red in the style of protest posters, alongside full-bleed close-up portraits and bold sans-serif headers, to demand systemic change. Online, *Jezebel* uses a responsive, card-based grid with high-contrast imagery and meme-style graphics to prioritize sharp critique over glossy aesthetics. *Pro.Vocazione's* 'gentle revolution', on the other hand uses minimalist layouts and user-driven visuals to encourage active listening. These choices separate genuine feminist discourse, which is rooted in collective action, from 'popular feminism', which only focuses on individual empowerment and consumerism.

*Do present-day audiences recognize design choices in magazines as influential in shaping ideas about feminism and equality?*

The survey shows that 76% of respondents agree that magazine design influences their perception of the representation of women, and 68% believe that the layout and imagery reflect broader social changes. On average, women scored these questions slightly higher than men (4.2 vs. 3.9 out of 5), indicating a high level of audience awareness of the power of visuals. However, only 12,8% are familiar with one or more independent feminist

magazines, suggesting that awareness of design tactics does not necessarily lead to the search for more critical content or just not aware that this content is available.

*To what extent have women's rights improved, from representation and safety to equality, and what key areas still require progress?*

The literature and statistics tell a mixed story. Women's suffrage and legal protections, such as voting rights, access to education, and property rights, are now fundamental. At the same time, gender-based violence remains pervasive, with one in three women worldwide experiencing physical or sexual violence, and access to safe abortion is still uneven. The high femicide rates and the ongoing pay gap highlight that formal rights do not automatically lead to equality in practice. Magazines have mirrored these shifts by expanding visual diversity and occasionally addressing difficult issues, but they often stop short of structural critique. True progress will require both legal advances and media that consistently hold power to account.

### **Reflection on Limitations: Navigating Bias and Visibility**

Like any research project, this one faced several limitations that shaped its scope and outcomes. One key constraint was time: the project was developed within ten months, so careful prioritization was required. Consequently, some topics were either simplified or excluded to maintain focus and manageability.

The thesis also provided an overview of feminist design and media in the UK and US. While this provided an overview of key developments, it meant that other countries or regions could not be explored in depth. Similarly, the selection of magazines was curated rather than comprehensive, with some influential titles omitted due to time constraints, limited space, or restricted archival access.

Access to materials was another challenge. Although many sources are now digitized, some older or independent feminist publications remain difficult to locate, particularly in the absence of physical archives. This inevitably shaped the historical narrative presented.

As a Dutch researcher writing in English, my cultural background and education have influenced my interpretation of the material. While I have aimed to be thoughtful and reflective, it is impossible to be completely neutral, especially in a field as personal and political as feminism. I see this positionality as adding value to the work, rather than being a flaw.

Lastly, as the thesis was written in English and relied on UK and US sources, it may not accurately reflect feminist media in non-English or non-Western contexts. Nevertheless, it provides a basis for further research into more diverse and localized feminist media practices.

### **Further Research Suggestions**

This study has revealed several gaps that will be interesting to address in future work. Firstly, our literature review was limited to the UK and the US. It would be interesting to examine how magazine design shapes public perceptions of women in other regions, such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia, to see which visual strategies transcend cultural boundaries and which are unique to specific regions. Secondly, rather than surveying a long timeline at a broad level, more in-depth, period-by-period analyses could reveal how specific moments, such as the postwar years of the 1920s or the third-wave era of the 1990s, used distinct design tropes to advance or hinder feminist ideas. Thirdly, while this thesis focused on a curated list of key titles, many more publications deserve investigation for their unique contributions to feminist discourse, including regional women's weeklies, niche zines, and non-English publications. Finally, speaking to someone in a senior position at a mainstream magazine, such as an editor, art director, or publisher, would provide insight into how 'popular feminism' is conceived and negotiated behind the scenes, and whether those decision-makers view their layouts and cover choices as activism or merely a marketing strategy. Addressing these gaps in geographic scope, historical focus, magazine sampling, and industry insider perspectives will enable future research to deepen our understanding of the intersection between design and feminism and help chart more effective paths towards equality.

In practice, we need hands-on design strategies that transform feminist media research into everyday reality. One powerful approach is to update the suffragists' tactic of occupying public spaces for the modern era. Imagine coordinated poster and mural campaigns in transport hubs,

university campuses, and community centers featuring bold visuals and QR codes linking to independent magazines such as Pro.Vocazione and Ms. These interventions could run alongside digital billboards and social media 'takeovers', ensuring the same message is seen both on the street and in people's feeds.

Another approach would be to develop a shared visual identity system, a modular toolkit comprising logos, color palettes, iconography, and layout templates that any feminist publication could adopt. When publications such as Jezebel, Pro.Vocazione, Ms., and others use the same graphic elements, they instantly become recognizable as part of a broader movement. This collective branding amplifies each outlet's reach and sends a unified signal of solidarity: feminist media stands together.

Finally, we could create interactive, city-wide 'zine trails' or pop-up reading rooms, physical and virtual maps that guide people to feminist publications, events, and discussion spaces. Using geolocated posters or NFC-enabled flyers, readers could be led from a café poster to an online article or a local feminist workshop, for example. By merging the physical and digital spheres, these multi-platform design initiatives can bridge the gap between curious readers and the critical content they crave, transforming passive interest into active engagement.

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Appendix A  
Overview of magazine analysis

	Publication year	Publication location	Standing on Feminism	Female or Male dominated contributors	Narrative and Purpose	Influence of Design Movements
<b>Harper's Bazaar</b>	1867 – now	United States, New York City	Popular feminism	Predominantly female-led.	fashion and lifestyle magazine targeting elite women, featuring high-end fashion, beauty tips, and culture.	Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Modernism,
<b>Vogue</b>	1892 - Now	United States, New York City	Popular feminism	Predominantly female-led	Fashion and lifestyle magazine catering to elite and fashion-conscious audiences.	Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Modernism, Pop Art
<b>Votes for Women</b>	1907 – 1918	United Kingdom	Radical feminism	Mainly female led	The official newspaper of the Women's Social and Political Union from 1907 until 1912, it acted as a militant suffrage platform, reporting on direct actions and internal debates.	-
<b>The Anti-Suffrage Review</b>	1908 – 1918	United Kingdom, London	Anti-feminism	Mainly female led Mainly female led inly female led	Issued by the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage, these documents systematically presented arguments against women's voting rights. They defended traditional gender roles, coordinated petitions, and attempted to sway Parliament and public opinion against suffrage.	-
<b>Glamour</b>	1939 – Now	United States, New York City	Popular feminism	Mainly female led	Promoted conventional beauty standards, thin body ideals, and perfectionist images of femininity. More inclusive from 2010 on.	Modernism, Pop Art,
<b>Cosmopolitan</b>	1886 (relevant from 1965 – Now)	United States, New York City	Popular feminism	Predominantly female-led editorial teams.	Focus on women's lifestyle, relationships, and a different perspective through a sex-positive, career-driven lens.	Pop Art, Postmodernism

<b>Essence</b>	1970 - Now	United States, New York City	Intersectional feminism	Female-dominated (esp. Black women writers, editors)	Focus on black women by covering beauty, culture, health, and politics from a Black perspective	Modernism, Postmodernism
<b>Ms. Magazine</b>	1971- Now	United States, New York City	Radical feminism	Female-dominated, founded by feminists incl. Gloria Steinem	To increase feminist voices, challenge patriarchy, and advocate for gender equality and women's rights	Pop Art, Swiss Style
<b>Refinery29</b>	2005- Now	United States, New York City	Intersectional feminism	Female-led editorially, diverse contributor base	To speak to millennial women with content on fashion, politics, body image, and identity	Swiss Style, Flat Design
<b>Jezebell</b>	2007 – Now	United States, New York City	Intersectional feminism	Female-led, with feminist editorial voice	To critique pop culture and media through a feminist lens, with humor and sharp commentary	Swiss Style, Flat Design

## Appendix B

### Full interview with Davide from Pro.Vocazione

*1. Could you briefly introduce yourself, your background, studies, and professional journey?*

My name is Davide Ricchiuti. I graduated in moral philosophy at the University of Padua, and I made my debut in the literary field as an author in 2019. Since then, I have published short stories, essays, and articles in literary magazines and anthologies, and participated in readings and presentations throughout Italy. In 2021, I founded a literary magazine that I called Pro.Vocazione in which I publish only female authors who deal with contemporary feminist issues in the form of short stories, poems, essays, and interviews. The magazine's editorial staff comprises only women, professionals in the publishing sector, who have joined the project. I am the only man, and I openly declare myself a straight, white, cisgender man. This explicit declaration serves to signal to other straight, white, cisgender men that it is possible to deal with feminism even if you are not a woman or have a non-binary identity.

*2. What experiences or influences shaped your interest in feminism and media?*

I created Pro.Vocazione during the isolation measures imposed by Covid in 2021, after reading a tweet by Milena Gabanelli, an Italian investigative journalist, who, after yet another femicide, wondered why it was always and only women who demonstrated against feminicides. At that time, I was living in Lisbon and was unable to return to Italy, due to the restrictions of COVID, and I realized that the only way to make my voice heard was to send a signal through my main interest in life, namely literature. Up until that point, I had not had much contact with feminist issues, but I realized that, since I was a teenager, most of the books I had read were mainly by authors such as Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Marguerite Duras, Anais Nin, and Wislawa Szymborska. Furthermore, some small episodes of my life as a teenager made me understand that the patriarchal logic of our society acts not only on women, but also on men. As a child, I preferred to play sports like volleyball, a sport dominated by women, instead of sports like football, and for this reason, I was mocked and bullied by friends and schoolmates. I also remember the speeches of my maternal

grandmother Emma, of peasant origins, when she told me how, for her five daughters to become financially independent from potential future husbands, she decided to use the money that would have been due as a wedding gift (when the daughters came of age) to pay for their further studies, to get a job. My grandmother lived in a rural area of southern Italy in the 1950s. In this region, women were destined to marry early and to take care only of the house and the husband, without any financial independence. Her decision broke a centuries-old patriarchal tradition. I remember that this story greatly influenced my vision of life.

3. *What inspired you to create Pro.Vocazione?*

In 2021, I took an online publishing course with an Italian publishing house, and I was starting to have the basics to create and set up an editorial line for a literary magazine. In the same period, I read the tweet by Milena Gabanelli, an Italian investigative journalist I talked about in point 2. The publishing course was attended, among others, by a journalist who wrote reviews only of books written by women in a column for the Huffington Post newspaper, and when I had the idea of founding Pro.Vocazione, I asked her to collaborate with me. The journalist accepted.

4. *What motivated you personally to start a feminist magazine, especially as a man in this space?*

The creation of the magazine was motivated by the personal indignation I felt towards straight cis men who practiced femicide against their partners, interpreting the love relationship as a form of possession of the man over the woman. My cultural background (such as the readings made as a teenager of the authors mentioned in point 2) and my social background (such as that of my grandmother and the episode of bullying received because of the choice to play a sport like volleyball instead of soccer) were the substrate that allowed me to reach a greater awareness of my position as a straight cisgender man in the world. This greater awareness also went hand in hand with the deepening of the knowledge of myself as a person during the integral yoga meditation practices undertaken in the same period.

5. *What was the initial vision or message you wanted to convey through the magazine?*

In the first months after the foundation of the magazine Pro.Vocazione I did not yet openly declare myself a feminist. This choice came after having studied feminism through many readings of contemporary feminist authors, but also of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and after having understood that feminism is not a fixed and stereotyped movement, but in continuous ferment and movement. Feminism carries out a continuous criticism of society based on the recognition of behavioral distortions and discriminations operated even unconsciously, today, in our daily lives. The message I want to give to the readers of the magazine is a sign of openness to listening by cisgender heterosexual men to feminist issues. The approach I take with Pro.Vocazione is not vertical, that is, I do not place myself in a position of superiority as a publisher who wants to give space to women, because women know and have always known how to take their own space when they deemed it necessary, even by fighting. The approach I use as a publisher is a horizontal approach. This means that I listen to women and their stories. The provocation alluded to in the title of the magazine consists in the reversal of perspective with respect to past events in which, for example, writers like the Brontë sisters, had to create a male pseudonym so that their novels (valid regardless of whether the author was a man or a woman) could be published by a publisher. And it is a way to reevaluate the life of figures like Olympe de Gouges, who died in 1793, killed by Robespierre and the French revolutionaries, supporters of Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. De Gouges was killed by supporters of liberty for having written a book in which she claimed the right to citizenship for women in France, calling for political and social equality for women and men in the new government structure.

6. *How do you see the state of female representation in Italian mainstream media today?*

In the mainstream media, women are always underrepresented. When writing the headlines of newspaper articles in the main Italian newspapers, when it is a woman who achieves any kind of success, the woman is mentioned only by her first name or is presented as the “wife of”, the “sister of” etc., instead of by her first and last name. On television, women are often present half-naked as assistants or companions of male presenters: this happens because the programs are often written by men and designed for a male audience.

7. *From your perspective as a man, how do you view gender equality in Italy?*

Gender equality in Italy today does not exist. Recent reports by the ILO and WHO, for example, show that women are underpaid compared to men, even though they perform the same job as men and have the same level of education. Furthermore, I know women who, simply because they are women, have suffered stalking and mobbing in the workplace, and catcalling towards girls who walk down the street alone or in company is still widespread. As a man, I realize that when I return home in the evening after going out with friends, I have no problem walking alone in poorly lit cities or suburban streets, but for women, the same path is often a source of anxiety due to the violence they could encounter. Although as a man I have never raped a woman, I realize that the male gender has perpetuated abusive behaviors towards women over the centuries, so much as to instill an underlying anxiety in women, anxiety that suppresses or affects women's freedom of movement on various levels.

8. *What kind of reactions have you received (positive or negative) from the Italian public or media industry regarding Pro.Vocazione?*

There have been many reactions to Pro.Vocazione. Radical transfeminists criticize the project because it is being led by a straight cisgender man. Most straight cisgender men do not appreciate this project because they feel their power is wavering. Since to accept declaring oneself a feminist, one must develop a historical and social awareness of the oppressive and discriminatory role of men over women over the centuries, it is not easy for the common man to take a step back from the privileges of patriarchal culture in which he was raised since childhood, with precise social mechanisms that advantage the straight cis white man over, for example, a black lesbian woman who perhaps practices a non-dominant religion in Italy. That said, during the presentations I have given in schools, festivals, and bookstores throughout Italy, I have also received positive feedback. During a debate, I was invited to the province of Benevento to present the Pro.Vocazione project, a man in the audience raised his hand and told everyone present that after listening to the words of a straight cis man who declared himself a feminist, he had understood that he, at work and in his daily life, had implemented discriminatory behavior towards women. He said that the fact of

having understood this had made him feel disgusted with the person he had been until then, but he was afraid of being isolated from his male friends, who continued to behave in that way. Also, during a presentation of the magazine in a school in Lombardy, a student took the floor to share his point of view on how oppressive mechanisms can also be passed down through language. He said that when he argued with other male classmates, it often happened that in order to offend his classmate, he would offend his mother. Expressions like these, said without thinking, show how immersed we are in a patriarchal language almost without realizing it.

*9. What role do you believe independent magazines like Pro.Vocazione can play in shaping social change?*

Magazines like Pro.Vocazione, circulating in independent bookstores and underground circles, have always historically had great impact on the countercultural ferment of society. Let's think about when, in the 1960s, an underground fanzine called San Francisco Oracle, circulating in the streets from hand to hand, brought together thirty thousand people in Golden Gate Park for a protest event that had been talked about in its pages: the Human Be-In. In that case, poets like Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and bands like Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead took part in the event launched only through the fanzine. And that event changed the history of American puritan morality in the 1960s. Pro.Vocazione, with her own means, tries to change the mentality of the straight cis man by trying to make him aware of belonging to a gender that, for centuries, has taken away the power to vote, access to education, and legal citizenship from women.

*10. Why did you choose the magazine format as your medium for this message?*

I chose to create a literary magazine because literature is the way I feel most comfortable expressing my ideas in the world we live in, and to express the ideas and stories of the authors I publish. I also chose the form of the magazine because it includes not only text, but also visual design as a means to convey messages. Visual design as such has an immediate visual impact that goes beyond words and linguistic differences between states, and therefore gives a status of universality to the message.

*11. What was your design approach for Pro.Vocazione? How did you use visual elements to support the feminist message?*

The design approach of Pro.Vocazione aims not to be didactic in the choice of scenes to tell through images and, given the reduced format in the number of pages, to try to tell a story in a single frame or on a single page. The magazine contains illustrations, but also photographs that reinforce the message conveyed through the words. The illustrations are always original, while the photographs are stock photographs carefully selected both on the basis of aesthetic issues relating to the scenes of the stories, and based on the idea of women's power.

*12. What is your favorite part of the magazine's design, whether in layout, typography, imagery, or overall aesthetic?*

My favorite parts of Pro.Vocazione are the cover, which always contains an illustration/photo related to the stories on that specific issue, and the third page of the magazine which lists the magazine's credits because it is always very minimal and clean.

*13. How do you ensure the design and visuals reflect inclusivity and diverse representations of women?*

This is an interesting question, but our designer and creative director can answer it in more detail because she is the one who takes care of the visual part.

*14. How do you balance aesthetics with activism in your design decisions?*

In Pro.Vocazione, there is a particular balance between design and activism. I believe that the revolution of perspective that Pro.Vocazione proposes is a gentle revolution, not armed, except for words and images that contribute to developing critical thinking and increasing awareness of belonging to a binary or non-binary gender that is educated as such from birth. The design is, therefore, a design that is essentially clean, clear, that arouses curiosity, but never violence.

*15. What is your ultimate goal with Pro.Vocazione, what do you hope readers take away from it?*

I hope readers will appreciate the aesthetics as much as the contents of the magazine. What I am interested in is conveying a message that aims at gender self-awareness and self-criticism by straight cisgender men regarding their oppressive behaviors towards women, but also towards those men who do not conform to the expectations of gender performance, understanding gender here as Judith Butler meant it in her essay *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, that is, as a reiteration of behaviors that satisfy social expectations based on the biological sex with which one was born. If Pro.Vocazione could make straight cis men understand that their discriminatory behaviors, even the less aware ones, are triggered by the different stratifications of patriarchal culture, I would be happy. Being aware of this is the first step to being able to change them.

*16. What advice would you give to young designers or creatives who want to use visual culture to advocate for gender equality?*

Again, it is more correct for the designer to give this answer, but what matters in the end for me is knowing how to use color, image, and typography together in a balanced way to create a strong identity that attracts the attention of readers.

# Appendix B

## Full results of the survey

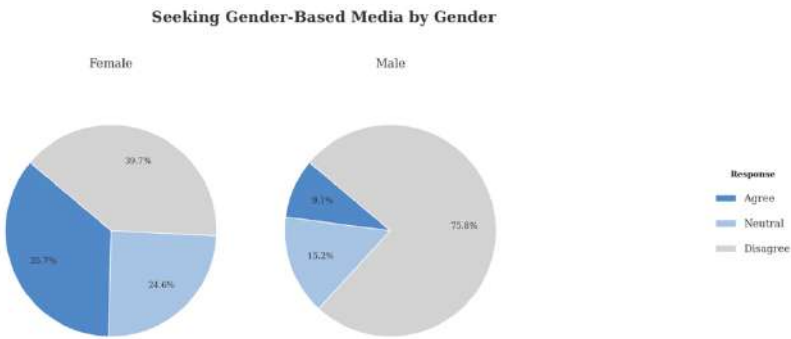


Figure C1

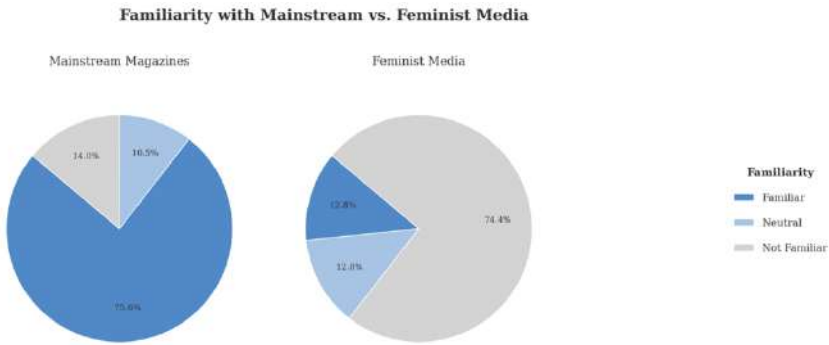


Figure C2

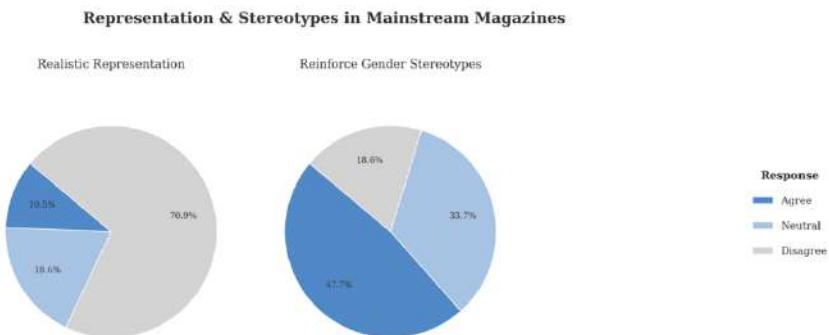


Figure C3

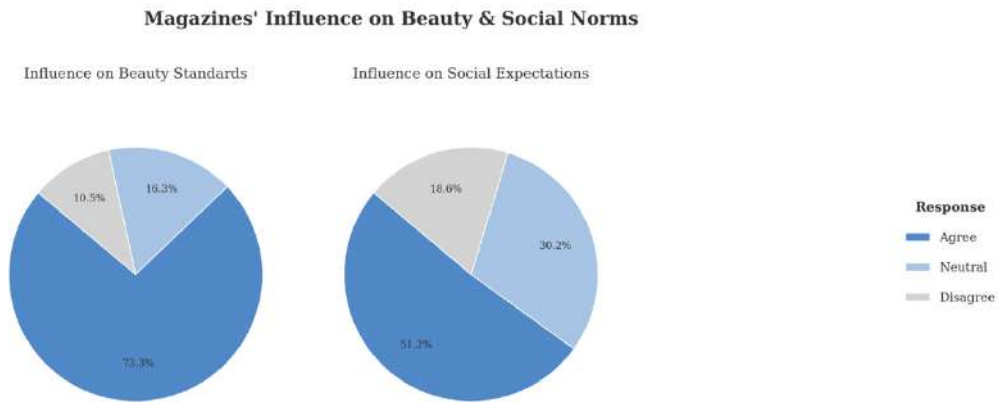


Figure C4

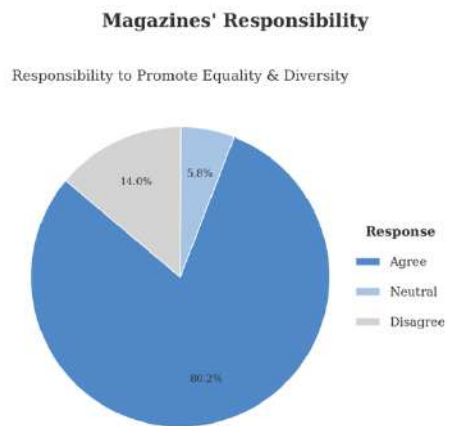


Figure C5

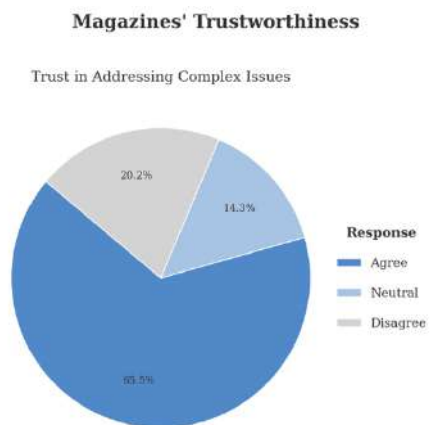
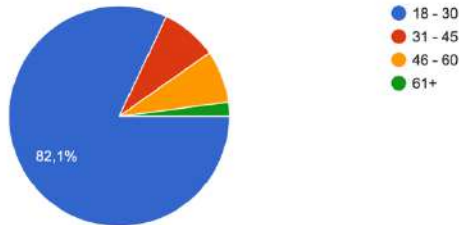


Figure C6

Remaining

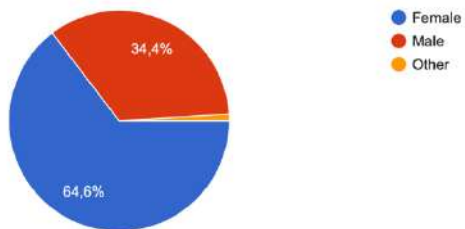
How old are you?

195 antwoorden



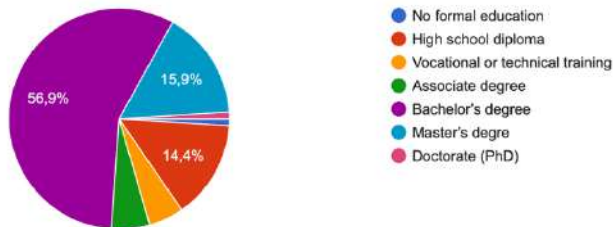
What gender do you identify with?

195 antwoorden



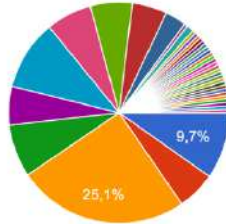
What is your highest level of education completed?

195 antwoorden



### What is your current field of work or study?

195 antwoorden

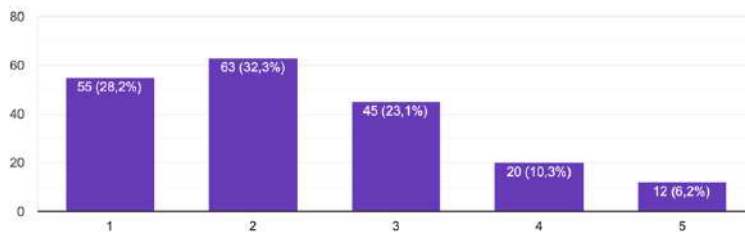


- Art, Design & Architecture
- Media, Communication & Journalism
- Marketing, Business & Economics
- Engineering & Technology
- Information Technology (IT) & Comput...
- Health & Medical
- Education & Academia
- Law & Political Science

▲ 1/5 ▼

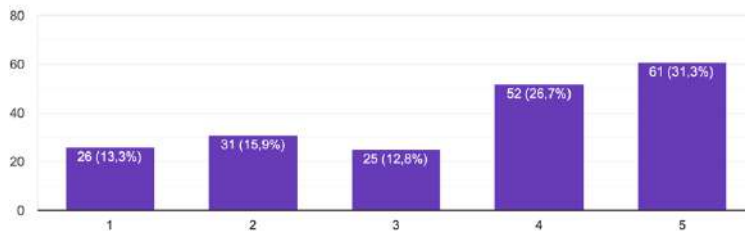
### I regularly read magazines, either in print or digital format.

195 antwoorden



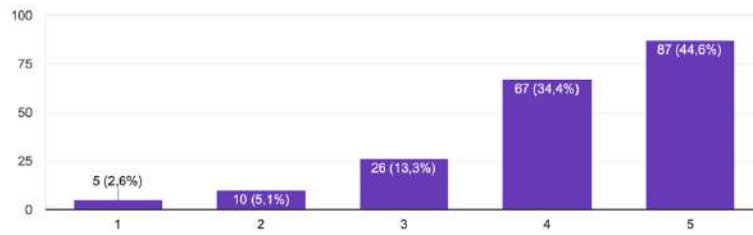
### If a magazine I like offers both print and digital formats, I usually prefer the print version.

195 antwoorden



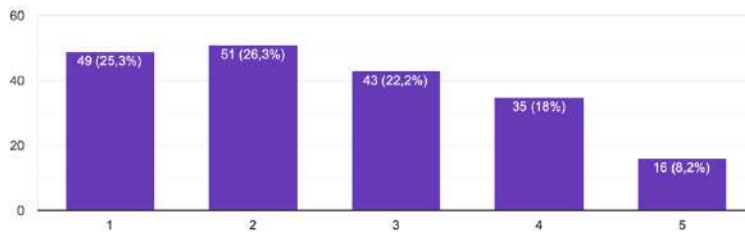
I frequently follow the news via websites, newspapers, TV, or social media.

195 antwoorden



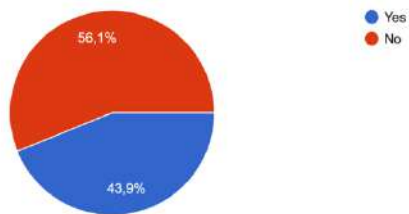
I actively seek out news outlets that focus on women's rights or gender-related perspectives.

194 antwoorden



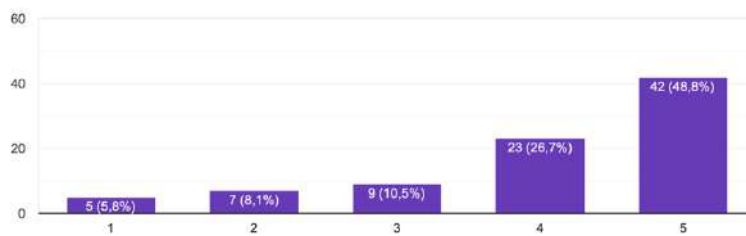
Are you a consumer of women's mainstream magazines, or have read something even if just once?  
(On Instagram, digital reader, or paper reader)

196 antwoorden



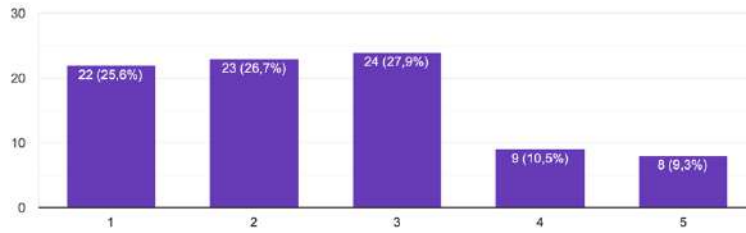
I am familiar with mainstream women's magazines like Vogue, Elle, or Harper's Bazaar.

86 antwoorden



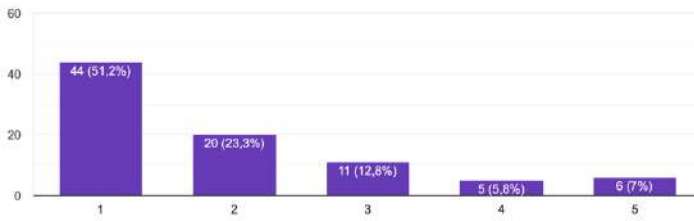
I read mainstream women's magazines like Vogue, Elle, or Harper's Bazaar.

86 antwoorden



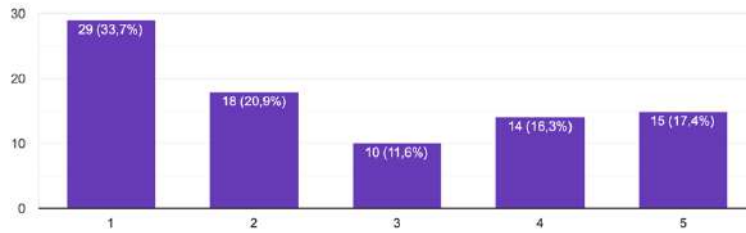
I am familiar with feminist-oriented magazines or media platforms like Jezebel, Ms. Magazine, FEM News Magazine, or Rebellious Magazine

86 antwoorden



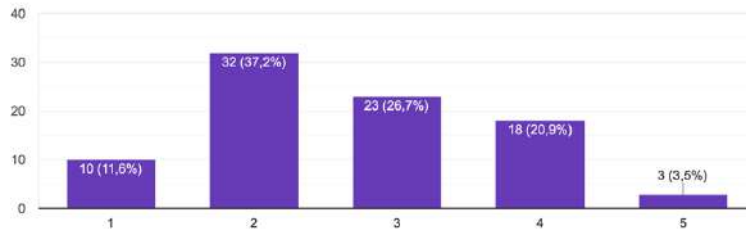
I read feminist-oriented magazines or news sites like those mentioned above.

86 antwoorden



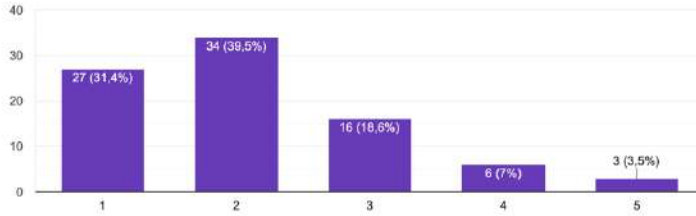
Women's mainstream magazines present beauty standards that reflect the diversity of women.

86 antwoorden



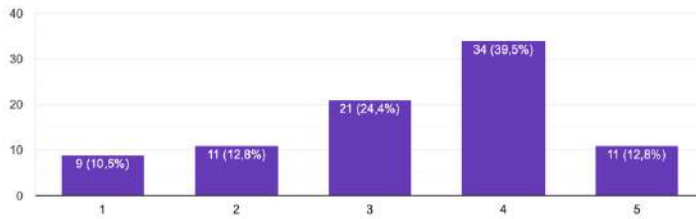
Women are physically represented in realistic ways in women's mainstream magazines (instead of editing processes – e.g., Photoshop).

86 antwoorden



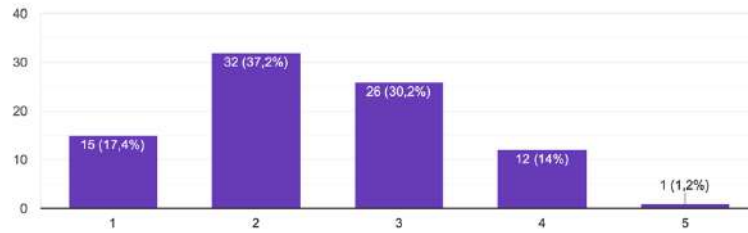
Women's mainstream magazines influence how I perceive the representation of women through their visual style and design (e.g., photography, colors, layout, body types shown).

86 antwoorden



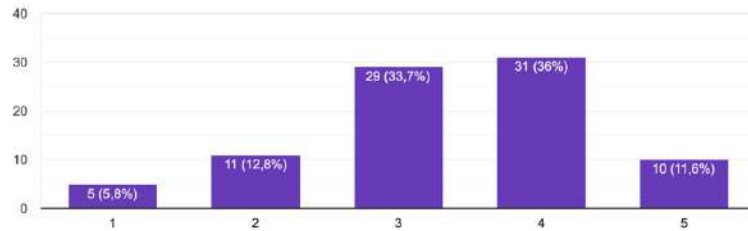
Women's mainstream magazines challenge traditional gender stereotypes.

86 antwoorden



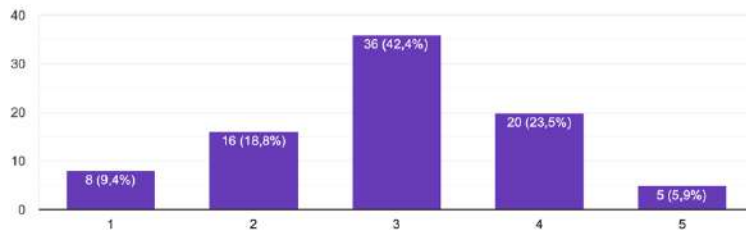
Women's mainstream magazines reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.

86 antwoorden



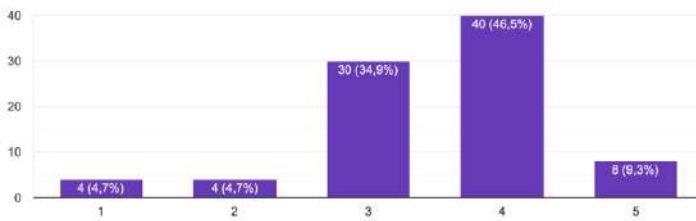
Women's mainstream magazines have helped women gain more rights in the last two decades.

85 antwoorden



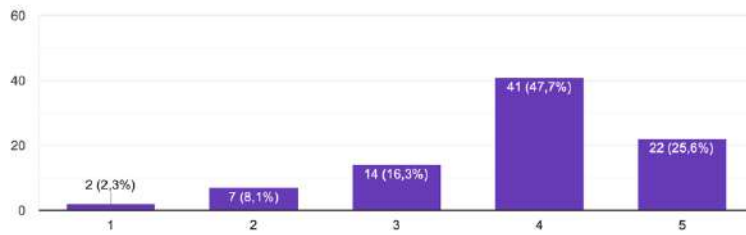
Changes in design and visual style in magazines reflect and accompany changes in women's rights and social representation over time.

86 antwoorden



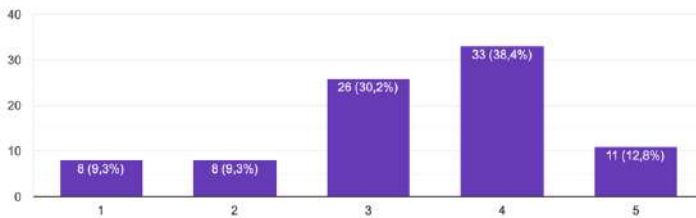
Changes in beauty standards over time have been influenced by women's mainstream magazines.

86 antwoorden



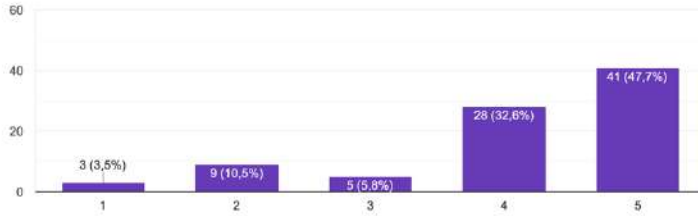
Changes in social roles and expectations of women were influenced by women's mainstream magazines.

86 antwoorden



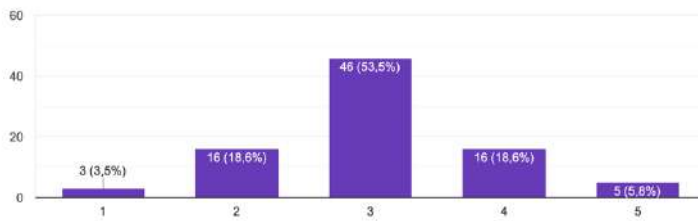
I believe that women's mainstream magazines have a responsibility to promote gender equality, discuss politics, and represent diversity.

86 antwoorden



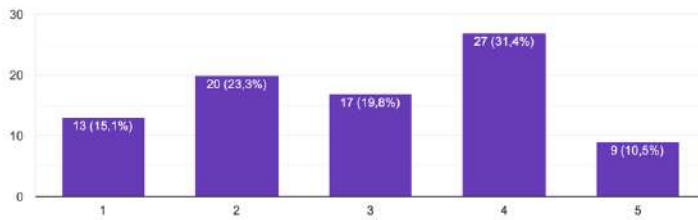
Women's mainstream magazines have acted as a channel for women's activism in the last two decades.

86 antwoorden



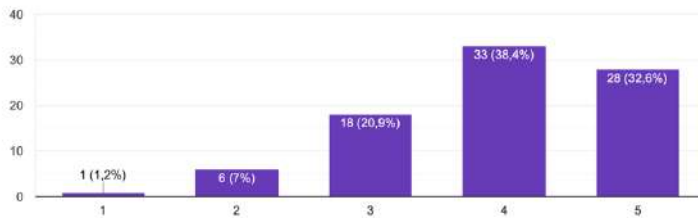
The editorial choices of women's magazines influence the way I perceive the role of women in society.

86 antwoorden



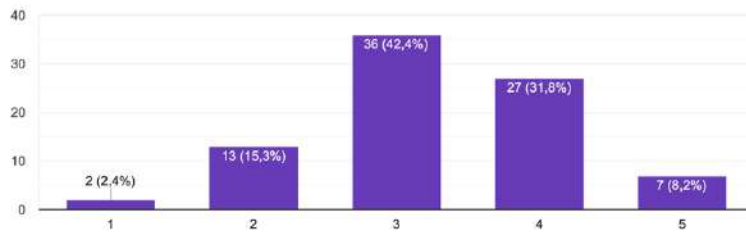
Magazines that present feminist ideas or address women's issues play an important role in shaping public consciousness.

86 antwoorden



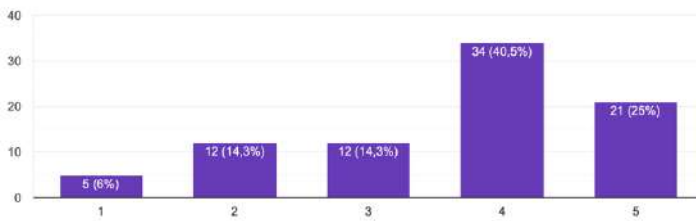
I have noticed a shift in the editorial tone of women's magazines towards greater gender equality.

85 antwoorden



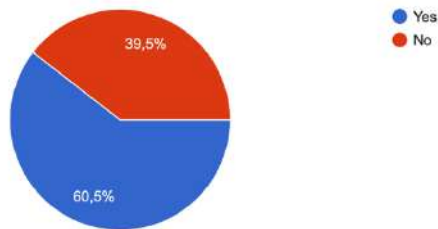
I trust that women's magazines can address complex issues like gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and workplace inequality.

84 antwoorden



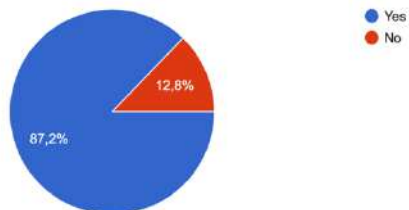
Did you know that some women's magazines, like Vogue and Cosmopolitan, are over 100 years old?

86 antwoorden



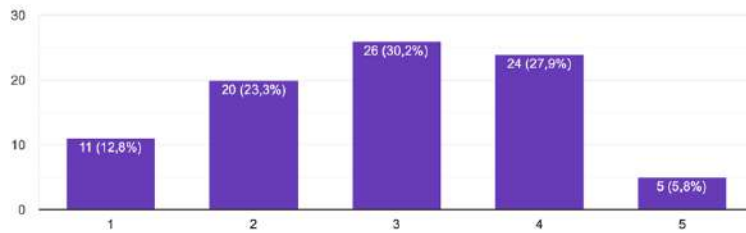
Did you know that women's magazines, such as Vogue and Cosmopolitan, have millions of readers through print and digital editions, as well as social media?

86 antwoorden



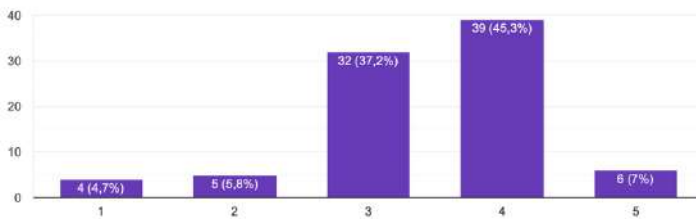
I have had regular contact with women's magazines (print or digital) for the past 10 years.

86 antwoorden



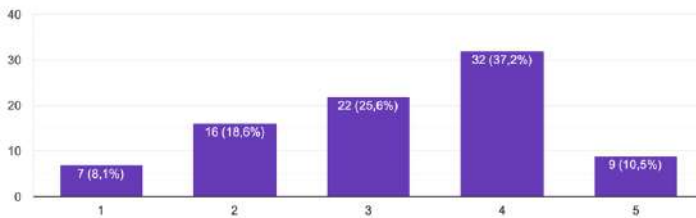
I recognize elements of continuity between the themes covered by traditional women's magazines (such as Vogue, Cosmopolitan, Elle, etc.) and cont...ebsites or social networks of these same brands).

86 antwoorden



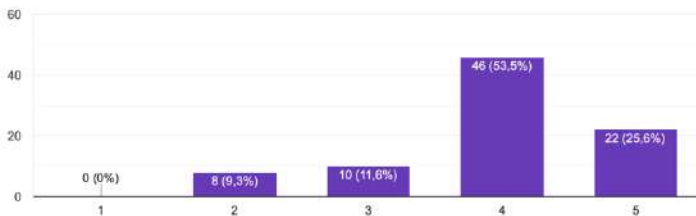
I feel that the contents of these magazines influenced, at some point, my perception of women's social roles.

86 antwoorden

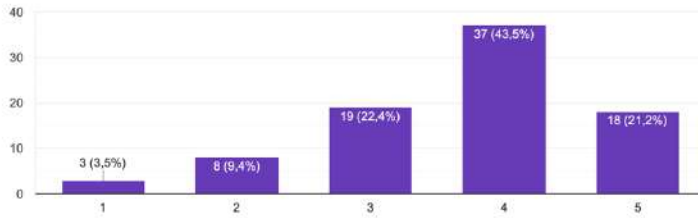


I believe that the visual design of the women's magazines I know (photography, typography, color palette, layout) contributes to forming the social image of women.

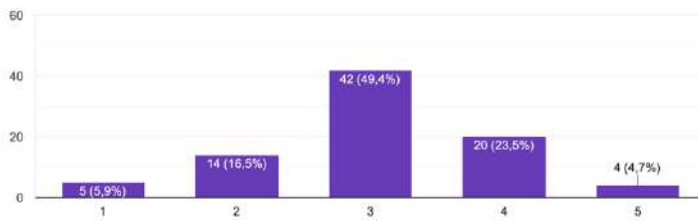
86 antwoorden



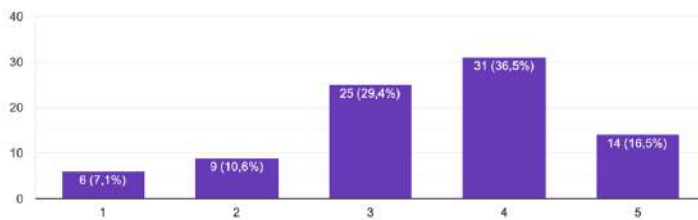
I notice significant differences between women's magazines of the past (even though I haven't read them) and the current digital content of these bran...especially when it comes to gender representation.  
85 antwoorden



The feminist discourse that I find on social media today has points in common with the discourse in women's magazines that I know or have read.  
85 antwoorden



I believe that the shift from print to digital magazines has impacted the way feminist ideas are communicated to the public.  
85 antwoorden



Even though I don't read women's magazines regularly, I recognize that these publications helped shape certain visual and behavioral patterns that still influence digital media today.  
85 antwoorden

