Time to Change the 'Change': Stigma and Support in Blogs about the Menopause

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Abstract: This article empirically explores how women who are members of UK-based women-only networks for women working in the media and communications industries blog about the menopause, specifically Bloom (www.bloomnetwork.uk), Women in Advertising and Communications Leadership (www.wacl.info), and Women in Public Relations (www.womeninpr. org). The over-arching research question in this paper is: How do women who are members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause? I seek to answer this question by exploring whether the selected blog posts' texts on the websites of women-only networks have a feminist and/or postfeminist sensibility. Specifically, do they engender an individualistic approach and/or promote solidarity? Furthermore, I examine the texts for indications regarding the 'sources and solutions for gender inequality in the workplace' (Gill, Orgad 2015: 340) and ask: What can this tell us about the networks' position vis-à-vis the menopause, feminism, and postfeminism? Discourse analysis reveals an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities in the narratives constructed in the blogs, which can be characterised by two main interpretative repertoires, Stigma and Support, the implications of which call for multilevel and multifaceted changes to support mid-life women in the contemporary media and communications workplace and beyond.

Keywords: women in communications; blogging the menopause; women-only networks

Drawing on scholarship that explores cultural representations of women, work, and ageing from a feminist perspective, as well as self-representation through digital technologies, this paper analyses blogposts about the menopause written by female members of women-only networks for women working in communications in the UK.

The most recent census conducted by the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA 2020) reveals that in the UK, the PR industry is predominantly female, at 68%. The census also reveals that a 'gender pay gap' exists and that this can be explained by a 'leadership gap', wherein men cluster in the more senior, high-er-paid roles (ibid.). Annual surveys by GWPR confirm a similar picture globally (Global Women in PR 2022a, 2023) and the Chartered Institute for Public Relations' recent PR Population report corroborates these findings (CIPR, Chalkstream 2024). Similarly, according to research by the Alliance for Inclusive and Multicultural Marketing (AIMM) and the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), women make up almost 70% of advertising professionals and yet they comprise just over 50% of senior-level execu-tives (ANA, AIMM 2022). It is in this context that women-only networks for women working in media and communications are fascinating subjects of research as they share a goal of improving the number and diversity of and the outcomes for women in related industries. In addition, last year GWPR found that only three in ten female PR agency workers see themselves working in agency roles in their fifties (2023), which is the average age at which women in the UK experience the menopause (British Menopause Society 2022). This requires further examination and I propose to start by exploring what women working in communications, who are members of women-only networks write about in their professional blogs about the menopause.

In her seminal book *The Change: Women, ageing and the menopause*, Greer states that 'there is evidence that women devise their own private ways of marking the ir-revocability of the change' (2019: 3). I am keen to examine the ways of marking the change devised by women working in communications who choose to blog about their experiences on the websites of the women-only networks to which they be-long. After all, these women are experts at managing relationships and reputations and creating narratives. And this is relevant now because as Orgad and Rottenberg conclude in their review of UK news coverage of the menopause from 2001 to 2021, menopause is 'enjoying a moment' (2023: 2).

I am responding to Orgad and Rottenberg's (2023) call for further study encom-passing media genres other than news media, with my proposal to study blogs. Blogs, short for web logs, are 'a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal jour-nal (or log) for an individual' (Coleman 2005: 274) and are considered 'sophisticated listening posts of modern democracy' (ibid.). The study of blogs is important, not least because they offer 'immense potential for decentralised networking and discussion' (Carstensen 2014: 490) and have the potential to shed light on the ways in which women working in communications talk about the menopause and its attendant workplace challenges and opportunities. According to Thumim, in her book *Self-rep-resentation and Digital Culture*, '[t]he concept and discourse of self-representation contains a valorisation of experience which has a therapeutic function and at the

same time invokes the possibility of material political outcomes' (2012: 9), making it a suitable framework for a feminist project, in which the private and public are closely intertwined. Moreover, the use of blogs by women as a form of self-representation is well established (Carstensen 2014; Carter 2014; Gajjala, Oh 2012; Keller 2012, 2016; Lacey, Perrons 2015; Mendes 2015; Wajcman 2000).

Here I conduct feminist discourse analysis (Gill 1995, 2009; Gill, Kelan, Scharff 2017; Lazar 2007, 2009), employing the method of interpretative repertoires (Wetherell, Potter 1988), 'to identify patterns across and between texts and to connect these to wider contexts and social formations' (Gill 2009: 351) and to shed light on the ways in which women working in communications, who are members of women-only networks, talk about the menopause during this period of rising visibility of 'the change' (Jermyn 2023; Orgad, Rottenberg 2023). Thus, I aim to make a contribution to the topic of workplace (in)equality, forms of resistance, and communication, facilitated by interactive technologies, namely blogs.

In this introduction, I define key terms and set out the aims of the article. Next, in the literature review, I examine central issues from the literature and provide an overview of the current situation of women working in the media and communications professions, namely advertising, marketing, and public relations. Then, in the methodology section, I explore the ways in which women who are members of UK-based women-only networks for women working in the media and communications industries blog about the menopause, specifically Bloom (www.bloomnetwork.uk), Women in Advertising and Communications Leadership (www.wacl.info), and Women in Public Relations (www.womeninpr.org). This is to investigate how the women in these networks who choose to blog about the menopause construct their narratives. The analysis takes a feminist perspective, seeking to identify the sensibility/ies with which the posts are written, whether feminist and/or postfeminist. Finally in the discussion and conclusion, I point to the ways in which the examined blogs about the menopause shed light on how the convergence between women working in media and communications, networking, and interactive technologies produces an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities characterised by anger at a lack of information and support from employers and government, combined with hope that through female solidarity change can be brought about in relation to the 'change' and perhaps beyond.

I choose to focus on women who are members of women-only networks for women working in media and communications because I believe that these networks 'have the capacity to realise and advance women's freedom' (Darmon 2024: 243). At the same time as discussing women's freedom, it is necessary to acknowledge that we are living and working within a neoliberal context. Eagleton-Pierce defines neoliberalism as 'commonly associated with the expansion of commercial markets and the privileging

of corporations' (2016: xiv) and states that 'studying neoliberalism means uncovering the reoccurring struggles over capital accumulation but always with an eye on how such processes are shaped by a range of conditions' (2016: xv). One such condition is the 'growing interest in networks' (Eagleton-Pierce 2016: 126). He argues that networking is widely seen as 'the process of intentionally pursuing contacts for personal gain' (Eagleton-Pierce 2016: 127), and that this is something 'distinctly neoliberal' (Eagleton-Pierce 2016: 127). From this standpoint, he observes that 'the appeal to social networking is commonly considered an important, even essential, activity for building and sustaining a professional career' (2016: 127), and that the concept of the network, particularly since the advent of the internet and platforms like LinkedIn, has become even more popular. In a pertinent example for this article, Eagleton-Pierce reminds us that networks can and do also serve forces other than neoliberalism: 'Thinking of networks as forces of liberation is also very common within social movements and civil society groups, such as in some feminist activism' (2016: 126). Thus, here I explore the blog texts written by members of women-only networks for women working in media and communications about the menopause to examine how they construct their narratives and whether they use their platforms to call for feminist change.

Taking a feminist perspective, I adopt Gill's definition of feminism and use the term 'to signal a concern with enduring gender inequalities and injustices' (2007: 25). In response to Dow's (1995) call for feminist scholars to situate themselves explicitly within feminism, I follow Mendes' lead and 'classify my position and the project as having a "feminist cultural studies perspective"' (2015: 45). I wish to acknowledge that while the term 'gender' has in recent years become contested, much of the literature that explores women in media and communications as well as the literature about postfeminism, women and work uses the terms 'women' and 'gender' interchangeably when discussing the ways in which women are treated and discriminated against in society and in work. And thus, so will I, for clarity and consistency. Furthermore, while this paper's focus is the menopause, I wish to clarify that I do not – and nor do the blog authors – interpret the menopause as the only limit placed on professional women's career development. Indeed, discrimination against women in the workplace starts at the very beginning of their career (if not before, if one considers the various ways in which women and girls are discouraged from school-age onwards from considering certain subjects and career pathways), when the spectre of motherhood (Jeffery 2023) can be a hindrance – along with menstruation – to being hired and/or promoted; followed by the realities of motherhood – if entered into – along with additional caring responsibilities that disproportionately fall to women (e.g. Criado Perez 2019); and ultimately, for those who have managed to survive these obstacles – not to mention the misogyny and sexual harassment/assault that are frequently encountered in the professional work environment – the arrival of the menopause.

In this article I aim to begin to respond to Jermyn, who states that 'it is imperative that scholarly interests converge to critique and amplify attention to the manifold significant ramifications of the menopausal turn' (2023: 7) and to Orgad and Rottenberg (2023: 16), who call for studies 'across various media genres and cultural contexts … beyond news media', by studying discourse about the menopause in women's blogs. It is also a response to Steffan who posits that 'there exists a paucity in empirical studies that explore how menopause is actually experienced at work' (2021: 197). The research is also informed by Toth and Aldoory's (2021: 56) call for studies to further 'build our understanding of discourse analysis… to reveal how gender meanings are built and reinforced', which I endeavour to accomplish in the empirical work presented here. Thus the over-arching research question in this paper is:

- How do women who are members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause?

I seek to answer this question by exploring the following questions:

- Do the selected blog posts' texts on women-only networks' websites have a feminist and/or postfeminist sensibility?
- Specifically, do they engender an individualistic approach and/or promote solidarity?

Within the discourse analysis, I examine the texts for indications regarding the 'sources and solutions for gender inequality in the workplace' (Gill, Orgad 2015: 340) and ask:

- What can this tell us about the networks' position vis-à-vis the menopause, feminism, and postfeminism?

Literature review

In this section I will review the literature about blogging, self-representation, and network sociality, about women, work, and networking, and about the menopause to set in context the empirical work that follows, which aims to address the question of how women who work in communications blog about the menopause. And what can this tell us about the menopause, feminism, and postfeminism?

Blogging, self-representation and network sociality

Various forms of internet-enabled media – including blogs – have the potential to both infiltrate the mainstream news media and to communicate directly with publics (Castells 2009). Blogs – short for web logs – are online, publicly visible personal accounts, which can be viewed as windows into complex socio-political-cultural insights (Coleman 2005). This makes them an important object of study, with the capacity to help us to 'understand the relationship between public and private meanings, between texts and technologies' (Silverstone 1999: 18). This is particularly relevant

when studying the public self-representations of a personal and even private topic such as the menopause. I position blogs as self-representations, on the basis that they are 'consequent upon the self speaking on behalf of itself' (Thumim 2012: 4), rather than being spoken about by others, in contrast to mass media, for example. Thumim's approach is particularly relevant to the research presented in this article because she focuses on the political potential of self-representation and on the emotional dimension of its content; a combination of personal and political which is pertinent to the blogs about menopause, in which women write about their experience of 'the change' and call for a variety of changes to how menopause is discussed and managed within their work contexts and in which they acknowledge the personal and political benefits of blogging.

While self-representation by women using digital technologies is not specifically discussed by Thumim (2012), it is explored by many other scholars (e.g. Carstensen 2014; Carter 2014; Gajjala, Oh 2012; Keller 2012, 2016; Lacey, Perrons 2015; Mendes 2015; Wajcman 2000). Blogs are also a key element in what Wittel (2001) calls 'network sociality', which he posits consists of 'fleeting and transient, yet iterative social relations' (2001: 51) and is characterised by a blurring of work and play, which I take here to also mean the personal, for as he continues to state: 'The assimilation of work and play corresponds with the blurring of boundaries between work and private life' (2001: 69). Willson goes on to state that internet platforms, such as blogs, enable 'collaborative, communal and interpersonal engagements' (2009: 493). Furthermore, Miller states that blogging 'is based on the notion that information is a commodity that is used to build and maintain relationships… an exchange of substantive information achieved through dialogue' (2008: 389). Thus the choice to analyse blogs is important in the context of women writing about the menopause because of the potential this format holds for combining the personal with the political, especially when the blogs are situated within a professional, women-only network environment. This is even more apposite given the professional belonging of these women and their audience. For as Wittel also states, network sociality is predominant in the 'cultural industry' (2001: 53), of which the fields of media and communications are a distinct part (Conor, Gill, Taylor 2015).

Women, work and networking
In their introduction to a special issue of *The Sociological Review* about gender and creative labour, Conor, Gill and Taylor assert that

Despite the myths of the CCI [cultural and creative industries] as diverse, open and egalitarian, inequalities remain a depressingly persistent feature of most fields. Whatever indices one considers – relative numbers in employment, pay,

contractual status or seniority – women as a group are consistently faring worse than men. (2015: 5)

This assertion remains frustratingly true almost a full decade after its publication. In this article I focus on women in advertising, marketing, and public relations, all of whom tell a similar story: a predominantly female workforce, with a significant gender leadership and pay gap. For example, the Public Relations and Communications Association's (PRCA) December 2020 census tells us that, in the UK, the public relations industry continues to be principally female, at 68%, but with only 43% of those ticking the 'female' box in leadership positions. It also highlights a gender pay gap of 21% and states that 'this can be explained by the fact that the respondents … are largely in senior roles which tend to be more male dominated' (PRCA 2020), thus demonstrating a leadership gap as well as a pay one. Similarly, the Alliance for Inclusive and Multicultural Marketing (AIMM) and the Association of National Advertisers' (ANA) 2022 report demonstrates that women make up 67.5% of the workforce but only 55.6% of senior level roles (ANA, AIMM 2022). These gaps are important to note because according to Sørensen:

> The gender gap in management positions has, from feminist perspectives, been interpreted in different ways. From a liberal feminist perspective, the gender gap is a symbol of underlying structures producing different opportunities for men and women. Within the framework of neoliberal culture, however, gendered patterns have also come to be interpreted as merely the result of individual choice. (2017: 299)

I agree that gender leadership and pay gaps are a feminist issue and will therefore set out here what I mean by 'feminism' for the purposes of this paper. Feminism is often discussed in terms of waves. While this concept can be contested, it is at the same time generally agreed that the first major organisation of feminism in the West dates to the mid-19th century and the cause of women's suffrage (Bryson 2003). It is also widely agreed that feminist activism did not cease upon the granting of the right of women to vote and that calls for the further advancement of women's rights and freedoms in the 1970s constitute a 'second wave' of feminism (ibid.). The period from the second wave onwards, namely since the 1980s, remains contested both in terms of time and character. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the school of thought which posits that this period is characterised by a simultaneous acknowledgement and repudiation of feminism (Gill 2016; McRobbie 2009), also known as postfeminism. Central to the notion of a postfeminist culture is Gill's assertion that 'postfeminism should be conceived of as a *sensibility*' (2007:

254; italics in the original). In articulating the elements of this sensibility, Gill states that it is organised 'around notions of choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and sexual difference, and articulated in an ironic and knowing register in which feminism is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated' (2007: 271). She goes on to assert that postfeminism is characterised by 'an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas' (2007: 255), wherein, according to McRobbie, feminism must remain 'unavowed' (2009: 118) and even be 'disparaged' (McRobbie 2009: 116). These aspects are further explored in the empirical section of the paper and it is pertinent to state that I adopt the approach posited by Gill, Kelan and Scharff (2017: 227), namely that I am 'interested in critically interrogating postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility or gender regime, not in "signing up" to postfeminism', and that I aim to analyse postfeminist culture rather than be a postfeminist-analyst. Furthermore, it is important to note the connections made by Gill, Kelan and Scharff between postfeminism and neoliberalism:

> First, both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves in wider society. Secondly, it is clear that the enterprising, autonomous, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism. Thirdly, it would seem that women, to a much greater extent than men, are called on to work on and transform their selves – and particularly to remodel their interiority, their subjectivity, for example to make themselves into more confident or 'resilient' subjects in the workplace. (2017: 231)

It is this calling upon women to 'adapt' in order to better succeed in the workplace that I am interested in here. Will the female members of women-only networks who blog about the menopause call upon women to adapt their ageing bodies to the workplace, as the findings of research carried out by Steffan (2021) – who interviewed women about their experiences of going through the menopause at work – suggest they might? I am interested in how women who are members of women-only networks and work in communications blog about the menopause especially because, having accrued years of valuable experience through which they have overcome some of the persistent obstacles that professional women face during their career – the 'gender gap' in both leadership and pay, the theoretical and actual motherhood penalty, the sexual harassment and assault – they are now faced with a new, female-only challenge. And indeed, the *PR Population Report* recently demonstrated that 'female practitioners [are] leaving practice mid-career or not getting support to

progress to senior roles' (Waddington 2024), which generally coincides with the age at which they are likely to be starting their menopause journey (British Menopause Society 2022). And it is these challenges, among others, that women-only networks state as their mission to support members to overcome (e.g. Global Women in PR 2022b; Women in PR 2022).

In writing about the creative and cultural industries more broadly, Conor, Gill and Taylor highlight the function of networking and state: 'In these settings reputation becomes a key commodity, and networking and maintaining contacts a key activity for nurturing it. This is achieved … in the affective labour of updating profiles, tweeting, blogging and engaging in diverse self-promotion' (2015: 7). However, while it is widely recognised that networking is 'commonly considered an important, even essential, activity for building and sustaining a professional career' (Eagleton-Pierce 2016: 127), its benefit to women remains contested. In their thematic review of the literature on women and networking, Topic et al. identify the general practice of networking as creating barriers for women, because it is 'a masculine practice that adversely affects women, primarily working mothers and those with caring responsibilities … but also other women, as many report sexism and sexual harassment' (2021: 6). They also find a contradiction in studies about women-only networking between those who claim that it 'can create a bottom-up approach and help women advance in their careers' (18) and those who suggest that it 'does not always impact promotions' (15). Furthermore, when it comes to the increasing popularity of women-only networking (Jacobs 2023), which Pini, Brown and Ryan state are often 'established because women have been marginalised in mainstream organisations' (2004: 290), they are seen by some as separatist (ibid.). Accusations of elitism and posturing have also been levelled at women-only networks (Jacobs 2023), along with the critique that they display a postfeminist sensibility and 'could do more by adopting feminist advocacy approaches' (Yeomans 2020: 45). On the other hand, in their analysis of women-only networks across four female-dominated industries – not including those studied here – Villesèche, Meliou and Jha claim that these networks can be reconceptualised 'as political arenas in which women's freedom can be realised and advanced' (2022: 1918), specifically in relation to the world of work. Considering these contradictory positions, I believe that women-only networks are important to study because they 'provide women with the opportunity to join a public group and share their views on work-related issues that matter to them' (Villesèche et al. 2022: 1904), not least in terms of 'naming gender harassment and discriminatory practices' (Pini et al. 2004: 289). And this is especially so in creative cultural industries such as advertising, marketing, and public relations, which are predominantly female and yet still plagued with bias and discrimination against women. I now turn to discussing the relevance of the menopause in this

context, bearing in mind the important point made by Jacobs that 'there is a fine line between creating awareness, which is positive, and exacerbating stigma, which is not' (2024).

The menopause

In their examination of two recent decades of news coverage of the menopause, Orgad and Rottenberg provide an overview of how feminist scholarship over the years has documented the ways in which 'ageing women in the West have been rendered culturally and socially invisible and/or disdained and demeaned' (2023: 3). That said, they find that 'menopause is, indeed, enjoying a moment' (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023: 2), the evolution of which can be characterised by 'an unprecedented period of pronounced public cultural conversation and promotion around a newly inflected era of menopause consciousness and comprehension' (Jermyn 2023: 2). Jermyn goes on to term this new era the 'menopausal turn' (ibid.). She, alongside Orgad and Rottenberg, identifies a recent proliferation of celebrity women going public about their own menopausal experiences as a key driver for the menopause's new cultural visibility, particularly in the US and the UK.

The menopause, or the Change (Greer 2019), commonly refers to the period women enter once menstruation has stopped for 12 months, which in the UK is experienced at around the age of 50 (Spector et al. 2024). The lead-up period, known as the peri-menopause, can last between five and ten years (ibid.) and can be accompanied by a variety of symptoms, the combination and expression of which can be different for each woman (British Menopause Society 2022) and might include: hot flushes and night sweats – experienced by 70–80% of women – as well as disturbed sleep and insomnia, low energy levels, low mood, anxiety, low libido, low sexual drive, impaired memory and concentration, a sensation of 'brain fog', joint aches, headaches, palpitations, vaginal dryness, and urinary symptoms. Menopausal symptoms last on average for more than seven years and it is estimated that more than a third of women experience long-term menopausal symptoms which may continue for several years beyond that (ibid.).

The menopause is an important topic to research because at this moment 'there are more older women than in any other historical period' (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023: 4) in the US and the UK and their presence in the workforce and as an economically active group is also on the rise (Jacobs 2024; Jermyn 2023; Orgad, Rottenberg 2023; Steffan 2021). In addition, the contemporary woman can expect to live more than half her life after the Change (Greer 2019). It is also relevant because women of menopausal age now are those who, compared to previous generations of women, entered the workforce in record numbers and into a diversity of industries in the 1990s, and who are being encouraged to stay in paid work beyond mid-life (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023).

However, 'there exists a paucity in empirical studies that explore how menopause is actually experienced at work' (Steffan 2021: 197), which is a gap that this research aims to begin to address. I agree with Steffan that '[a]s older women, with their older bodies, become more prevalent in the labour force, it is time that the older female body at work has a greater spotlight on the organizational stage' (2021: 198). Discussion of a rise in the visibility of the menopause in the workforce and in the wider media culture is complicated by the current neoliberal moment, which is characterised by a postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007). As Jermyn states, it can be understood 'as an evolution and extension of neoliberalism and postfeminism … which share a pre-occupation with rising to the challenge of better managing the self' (2023: 3).

I argue that it is pertinent to study the self-representation of menopause by women working in advertising, marketing, and public relations, in particular, for as Conor, Gill and Taylor state: 'it is becoming increasingly clear that gender is mediated by age … with women concentrated in the youngest cohorts of the CCI [cultural and creative industries] workforce' (2015: 6). If we wish to address the drain of talented and experienced women from these industries as they transition into the menopause, a good place to start is to attend to what women of that cohort tell us.

Methodology

In this section, I present the methodological approach, research design, and methods I employed. Feminist methodology is a broad church and I adopt Reinhartz's (1992: 6) definition of feminist research methods as 'methods used in research projects by people who identify themselves as feminist or as part of the women's movement'. While there is no single way to conduct feminist methodology, it does imply a commitment to work 'for the transformation of the condition of the lives of women' (Brunskell 1998: 39), as well as 'a reflexivity which stresses the accountability of the analyst' (Gill 1995: 166), which must take place from the very beginning of the research process (Hesse-Biber 2012). That is the intention here.

To answer the research question 'how do women who are members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause?', I studied blogs about the menopause written by female members of the following UK-based, women-only networks for women working in advertising, marketing, and public relations: Women in PR, Bloom, and WACL. To conduct this study, blog posts on the sites of women-only networks for women working in communications in the UK were searched on 31/05/23 for blogs about the menopause (see Appendix 1). Eight relevant posts were identified on two sites: Bloom (bloomnetwork.uk) and WACL (wacl.info). The posts were written between 2021 and 2023. In addition, I have also included five blogs about the menopause, written by members of Women in PR, which appeared on PR Week's website between 2021 and 2023, as none ap-

peared on the womeninpr.org.uk website itself. The search for these additional posts was conducted on 20/02/2024. The texts analysed here are the only ones about the menopause written by professional women in the communications industries and posted on relevant platforms that I was able to find in my searches.

Orgad and Rottenberg (2023) document a significant increase in the visibility of the menopause in UK news coverage, with a particular rise since 2021, when the first celebrity documentary about the menopause aired on UK TV. Women blogging about the menopause on women-only networks' platforms for women working in communications has also been visible since 2021, with five on the topic appearing that year, four appearing in 2022, and four in 2023. This also tracks with Greer's observation that: 'Before 2000 we heard hardly one word in their [middle-aged women's] voices; now online blogs and chat rooms resound to a chorus of female protest and complaint' (2019: 11). This rise of women's voices highlights the importance of considering women's self-representation alongside their representation by others in the mass media.

Web-based texts are good examples of what Sørensen calls 'compressed narratives' (2017: 302), in which 'since space is limited, texts need to communicate effectively' (ibid.). Discourse analysis, 'a concern with discourse itself, a view of language as constructive and constructed, an emphasis upon discourse as a form of action, and a conviction in the rhetorical organization of discourse' (Gill 2007: 58), is used here to examine the selected texts. Discourse analysis was chosen to address the 'how' part of the research question. Discourse analysis was also chosen because it 'has an enormous amount to offer feminists', according to Gill (1995: 167), in particular in exploring 'a range of questions concerning the reproduction of gender power relations' (ibid.), in this case in relation to women, work, and the menopause.

When conducting discourse analysis, I follow the approach that is associated with sociology and social psychology (e.g. Gill 1995, 1996; Potter 1996; Potter, Wetherell 1994; Tonkiss 1998; Wetherell, Potter 1988). I employ the method of interpretative repertoires, which according to Wetherell and Potter 'can be seen as the building blocks speakers used for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena' (1988: 172). Gill further states that interpretative repertoires allow researchers 'to go beyond individual or discrete expressions to begin to identify patterns across and between texts, and to connect these to wider contexts and social formations' (2009: 351). I have found interpretative repertoires particularly useful in highlighting the ways in which feminist and postfeminist sensibilities are negotiated within the texts through the choice and use of language.

The starting point of the analysis is Darmon's (2017: 43) framework, which combines Gill's (2007) elements of postfeminist sensibility with proposed elements of feminist sensibility to operationalise the theory and apply it. Table 1 sets out the key

elements of Gill's postfeminist sensibility alongside Darmon's corresponding elements of feminist sensibility. These offer useful concepts to operationalise when analysing texts and exploring what they reveal about feminist and postfeminist sensibilities in contemporary media culture. All of the sensibility elements detailed in the table below were held in mind while conducting the analysis.

Table 1: A summary of sensibility elements

Postfeminist sensibility	Feminist sensibility
Choice	Equality
Individualism and empowerment	**Solidarity and politicisation**
Natural difference	Intersectionality
Irony and knowingness	**Anger and hope**
Feminism as passé or done wrong	Feminism as current and relevant

Source: Author.

An inductive approach is taken, in which first the detailed analysis is carried out and then emerging patterns are related to the theoretical framework. In order to conduct the inductive, empirical work, I read and re-read the texts in detail multiple times, taking notes and paying attention to linguistic content, meanings and topics, form, grammar and cohesion, and trying to reveal the constructive processes, argumentative organisation, taken-for-grantedness, the variation and consistency within and between texts, as well as silences and gaps (Gill 1996; Potter, Wetherell 1994; Tonkiss 1998). As a result of this close reading, I identified two main interpretative repertoires – Stigma and Support – which contain within them a variety of discourses about women, the menopause, and work, which reflect an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities. These discourses contain within them sensibility elements which are particularly relevant to the ways in which the discourse of the two interpretative repertoires is constructed: individualism & empowerment, solidarity & politicisation, and anger & hope (bolded in the table above).

Analysis

Stigma
Within the repertoire of 'Stigma', there are discourses about the fear and shame experienced by menopausal women – including in relation to their job performance – about the mass exodus of mid-life women from the workforce as a result of the menopause and about the negative impact this has both on women and on the industry. Following their review of the social sciences literature on stigma, since Goff-

man's 1963 text on the topic, Link and Phelan (2001: 382) conclude that 'stigma exists when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separating, status loss and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold'. The discourses in the Stigma repertoire reveal to varying degrees a concern with all of the attributes identified by Link and Phelan.

In the blogs, we are reminded that, as Steffan says, '[t]here is not always a desire to disclose menopause at work' (2024: 1). For example: 'It was embarrassing and distressing. I started to hide and for a short time literally went to ground'; 'we just don't talk about it'; 'I felt it had to be kept a secret because no one else was talking about it either'; 'this deeply personal experience can be difficult and embarrassing to disclose in the workplace, where mid-life women can already feel invisible, isolated, and marginalised'. This is a recognition that with all the progress that the new-found visibility of the menopause is supposed to have engendered, there is still the fear that 'the price we are expected to pay for this is in giving a free pass to some very old-fashioned sexism' (Smith 2024: 4). Women are worried that if they talk openly about their menopause at work, it could be just another stick with which to beat them. For example: 'Fessing up to a hot flush opens you up to the double whammy of both sexism and ageism, so it's better to say nothing'. Indeed, Steffan's research findings point to 'the potential of menopause to disrupt, reduce, or interrupt women's confidence' (2021: 210). This is particularly evident in the discourse about women's fear of not performing on the job. For example: 'I was afraid of the changes that were happening and felt somehow ashamed that my normal capable self couldn't cope'; 'I wasn't sleeping well and had become increasingly anxious, which was both out of character and far from helpful in a demanding role'; 'I occasionally forgot the end of my sentences (mid pitch)'; 'I was embarrassed about my overwhelming heat surges, during presentations, meetings and social events'; 'how can you be responsible for running an agency when you struggle to remember basic words and names'; 'My memory was patchy, I'd be mid-presentation and I'd forget my words and my mental health was suffering as I experienced bouts of anxiety from one day to the next'. These are examples of what Steffan calls 'menopause talk', in which 'for some women, that strong sense of self can be interrupted and weakened to the point where individuals find themselves in precarious work outcomes' (2021: 211). Indeed, in the Stigma repertoire there is discourse about mid-life women fearing their menopause will have negative repercussions on their employment. For example: 'We keep quiet because we fear for our jobs'; 'fear of recrimination'; 'There is an understandable fear that sharing these experiences may negatively affect careers'. This evidence tallies with Link and Phelan's conceptualisation of stigma, which suggests that it is 'likely to be a key determinant of many of the life chances that sociologists study, from psychological well-being to employment, housing, and life itself' (2001: 382), in this

case, a fear of being exposed as suddenly incapable of doing the job and thus at risk of losing employment or being denied new professional opportunities.

The discourse in the Stigma repertoire has a distinct postfeminist sensibility, in that it carries within it an acknowledgment of the requirement to perform 'a neoliberal identity of menopause endurance – coping with the menopause in various ways: coping in silence, coping with unknown bodily changes, and coping by hiding the ageing body' (Steffan 2021: 205), Thus, for example: 'Talented and experienced women find themselves clouded by memory issues, dogged by joint and muscular pain, second-guessing their abilities and experiencing a huge dent to their confidence. Often it can feel as if the simplest thing is just to quit work – which only further impacts their confidence and sense of self'. This example demonstrates the ways in which women's internal surprise at hitherto unfamiliar 'inadequacy', brought about by menopause symptoms, leads to fears of external consequences in the form of work-related penalties, which are further complicated by attendant dents to their confidence. Thus, the discourse in the Stigma repertoire has a distinct postfeminist sensibility, in that it carries within it an acknowledgment of the requirement to be confident and display confidence. At the same time, there is also resistance to this trend in the discourse, which displays a feminist sensibility characterised by anger and politicisation, thus presenting an entanglement between postfeminist and feminist sensibilities. For example, 'the near-furious urge to challenge the stigma surrounding the menopause and the lack of workplace support for its many symptoms' displays fury, while 'what a shame it will be to win the working parent battle only to then lose these amazing colleagues at aged 50 because of the menopause' and 'it's time to start preventing such a mass exodus and retain a more substantial layer of experienced and talented women in our industry' display a recognition of the personal being political. There are also acknowledgements of solidarity: 'the lack of understanding and support for them [menopausal women] at this time means so many are leaving the industry … leaving younger staff without experienced female role models'. Thus we see that on the one hand women are acutely aware of the requirement to conform to 'popular neoliberal feminist dispositions' (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023: 12), remaining capable, confident, and coping, and aware of the risks of sexism in the workplace that disclosure brings. On the other hand, there is push-back against the repercussions of this stigma that leads women to leave the jobs they love and leaving younger women without the role models they need, which carries within it a distinct discourse of solidarity and thus feminist sensibility.

Support

Within the repertoire of 'Support' there are two main discourses. The first is a critique of the lack of existing information, support, and understanding of the menopause and menopausal women, as well as a recognition that better information and

support from government and in the workplace are needed. This discourse is also about seeking information and help independently to counter the paucity. The second discourse is about the important and positive impact that support from other women can provide: a solidarity between menopausal, younger, and older women.

The lack of sufficient information and appropriate support for menopausal women at work is reflected in Steffan's call: 'Employers should shift their focus on menopause management from reactive to proactive' (Steffan 2021: 211). And it is overwhelmingly reflected in the discourse of the Support repertoire, as seen in the following statements: 'support at work is lagging sadly behind this progress. Not having a supportive policy for older working women is both discriminatory and short sighted'; 'We keep it quiet because there are no HR policies that relate to us'; 'the menopause seemed the missing link within workplace training, policy and culture'; 'There was no menopause policy at my workplace, it simply wasn't visible as necessary or needed'; 'support and understanding at work is still the exception not the norm' . These texts reflect a feminist sensibility not only in the recognition that the personal is political – as discussed at the end of the Stigma section – but also in that they place the responsibility for solving the problem of the lack of support squarely with management rather than with the individual. For example: 'The only way to remove the stigma and ignorance is to make menopause education mandatory and introduce policy changes'. Furthermore, they identify that this is a structural issue that leads to discrimination and requires structural change to be resolved: 'what are we doing to offer reassurance to women facing into mid-life that they can still have a rewarding career in comms, post 50?'; 'companies need to be fighting to retain the women that work for them'. This discourse reflects a pushback against the economic drive to keep women over fifty in the workplace without attending to their particular needs. Furthermore, the economic benefit of supporting menopausal women is also highlighted. For example: 'the onus should be on every business leader to give women a fighting chance as they manage the balance of personal and professional challenges. And in doing so, their retention levels of all these brilliant, highly experienced and capable women will soar – win-win'; 'It's clear that helping women better manage their menopause benefits everyone'. These messages are often aimed directly at industry leaders: 'Supporting perimenopausal and menopausal women is an intersectional issue that will ricochet positive impacts on gender and age-related biases within your business'; 'Identifying what you can do to mitigate the impact of menopause is not only the right thing to do, it's a business case for future survival'; 'It's not "the right thing to do", it makes commercial sense, and your businesses will be all the richer for it (in both senses)'. The case for supporting women is thus also asserted as the case for supporting business.

In addition to identifying a problem outside of individual women, which reflects a feminist sensibility, the discourse in the Support repertoire also focuses on a range

of solutions. For example: 'to drag the menopause and all that leads up to it, out of its anachronistic closet'; 'to educate, elevate and empower this stage and ultimately to lead policy change in the industry' ; 'menopause is a conversation we need to be having, and fast – first, by giving it a voice, and second, by developing kick-ass HR practices and policies that help mid-lifers flourish in their PR careers'; so as to create 'lasting change for women in the workplace'. The desired outcomes of these proposed solutions have a feminist sensibility, in terms of both acknowledging and addressing perceived sexist discrimination: 'there have been a plethora of workplace menopause policies appearing that point, hopefully, to a long overdue change to the terrible midlife discrimination of women in our industry'. And they also seek to create a better future in solidarity with younger women: 'Expanding education and awareness seems key, so women will benefit from better support and understanding in the future'; 'a policy … for women down the line to benefit'. The discourse also carries a marker of hope: 'we remain hopeful that workplace attitudes and policies will continue to emerge and evolve'; and 'there is a sense of a new lease of life where you can do things differently'. This discourse is also reflected in Steffan's assessment of the justification for conducting research into the menopause so that the 'generations who follow will be better prepared for the transition of menopause and its potential impact on all aspects of life, including the workplace' (2021: 1). That said, there is also discourse with a postfeminist sensibility of individualism and doing things for yourself and by yourself, 'with a ton of research and a lot of being kind to me, I've developed a fairly robust toolkit for the rest of my ride'; 'I started to investigate the evidence and do my own research … with that knowledge I invested in my future health'. However, this discourse of supporting oneself is intertwined with a discourse with a feminist sensibility that acknowledges that solidarity and structural change are required: 'finding safe, reliable help and support should not be down to luck, it should be a given'; and 'The wholesale change in attitude we need will inevitably be slower than we would like, but the onus should be on every business leader to give women a fighting chance as they manage the balance of personal and professional challenges'. This again demonstrates the entanglement of both postfeminist and feminist sensibilities.

Additional discourse with a feminist sensibility can be found in the Support repertoire in the form of solidarity with other women: 'Hearing other women's stories and how they coped is, above all, what helped me when I was really losing the plot'; 'I find myself something of an agony aunt to other menopausal women'; 'It's hard to describe how validating it is to hear that what you're feeling is normal. That you're not actually losing your mind. That it's natural and things will be ok'; 'I listened to other women going through the same changes but in different ways and realised I wasn't alone'; and 'Allyship is key'. And there is a call for those who have benefited from

this support to: 'help other women that feel the same way'; 'listen to other women'; and acknowledge that 'we are in this menopause moment together', 'you don't need to experience this alone', and 'this is a call to action, to all women who want to ask questions about the menopause and be listened to in the hope that our collective experiences will inform change for the future'. The discourse recognises the personal, public, and even political ways in which support from other women is meaningful.

Finally, in relation to the much-cited, mediated celebrity interventions (e.g. Jermyn 2023; Orgad, Rottenberg 2023) as well as those by women in the communications industries who have been vocal about their menopause, the discourse in this repertoire is itself supportive. For example: 'It's down to the courage of certain women who stood up, spoke out, shared their stories and agitated for long overdue action'; 'these women stand together determined to draw a line under the unnecessary waste of experienced resources'. These expressions of solidarity with and gratitude for women in the public eye who have helped to drag the menopause into the open reflects a feminist sensibility that goes some way to responding to concerns expressed by some scholars that the current menopause 'turn' or 'moment' might be delimited or otherwise negatively impacted by its association with the culture of celebrity.

Discussion, limitations and further research

Women who are working in media and communications and reaching the menopause during its current, new visibility are women who have responded to the call to participate fully in the world of work. These women are well educated and have worked hard to succeed in work and life. Having faced a myriad of obstacles in which their biology, in the form of menstruation and the spectre of motherhood (Jeffery 2023) alongside the reality of sexual harassment and assault, has played a key part throughout their careers, the bloggers are now confronted with the new and often-ignored realities of being female: the menopause.

In this paper I have sought to examine how members of women-only networks in media and communications industries blog about the menopause. The purpose is twofold: first, because 'networking as social practice is considerably under-researched' (Wittel 2001: 71) in general and the feminist potential of women-only networks in particular requires further research (Darmon 2024); and second, because it is imperative to explore 'the extent to which the "coming out of the closet" of menopause benefits ageing women' (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023: 15). Therefore, the over-arching research question posed here is: How do women who are members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause? And the sub-questions are: Do the selected blog posts' texts the websites of women-only networks have a feminist and/or postfeminist sensibility? And do they engender

an individualistic approach and/or promote solidarity? Furthermore, within the discourse analysis, I examine the texts for indications regarding the 'sources and solutions for gender inequality in the workplace' (Gill, Orgad 2015: 340) and ask: What can this tell us about the networks' position vis-à-vis the menopause, feminism, and postfeminism?

The findings of the discourse analysis conducted on the examined blogs align with the following assertion: 'While the menopausal turn frequently calls on individual women to step up and arm themselves with information and assistance … it is also a movement in which many of its strident voices callout what they perceive to be the shortcomings of an insufficiently responsive and informed government and medical establishment' (Jermyn 2023: 6). Thus, I suggest that the menopause 'turn' or 'moment' is characterised by an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities that demonstrates the feminist potential of solidarity and collective action and the constraints of individualism; it is, after all, well documented that 'women internalise external discourses that shape how choices are produced, constructed and limited in the neoliberal world of work' (Villesèche et al. 2022: 1906). Therefore, I am not surprised to find discourses with a postfeminist sensibility in both the identified repertoires – 'Stigma' and 'Support' – and I am at the same time encouraged by the simultaneous cleavage to discourses with a feminist sensibility in both. That said, feminism itself is rarely mentioned and is perhaps even 'unavowed' (McRobbie 2009: 118).

The analysis demonstrates the complex ways in which members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause. They demonstrate a sensibility that is characterised by an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities, which I argue is characteristic of this moment. Women currently in mid-life have been led to believe by popular culture that the goals of feminism have been achieved and that it is now passé (Gill 2007). And yet they are suddenly confronted with the reality in which it is needed, wherein women once again find themselves being urged to fit female bodies and needs into a world designed by and for men (Criado Perez 2019). So, they try to cope individually with the menopause at work and beyond, only to discover that solidarity and structural change are still needed. They use the tools afforded by the network sociality (Wittel 2001), namely blogging, to call on their sisters, not to change themselves but to support each other and demand that their employers implement the structural changes required to support menopausal women, now and in the future.

It is also important to note that changing stigma will not be achieved only by introducing the 'kick-ass HR policies' suggested by some bloggers. For as Link and Phelan argue, to really change stigma 'any approach must be multifaceted and multilevel … [and] must ultimately address the fundamental cause of stigma' (2001: 381), which in the case of menopause is its negative cultural capital stemming from the pervasive-

ness of gendered ageism (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023). I believe, however, that blogging about the menopause and calling for structural change by members of women-only networks in communications is a positive step in the right direction, which hopefully can spread out beyond the communications industry to benefit all women as they experience the menopause at work.

I propose that further study be conducted into the function, purpose, and role of blogging and of women-only networks for women working in communications – in relation to the menopause and beyond – in order to further explore their potential for feminist transformation (Villesèche et al. 2022) within the networks and their sector as well as elsewhere. For example, interviews with members of the networks studied here (Bloom, WACL and Women in PR) could provide important insight into members' thoughts and aspirations and could enhance our growing understanding of the impact of technologies and menopause on contemporary working women.

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