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Chintrakarn, Chalisa

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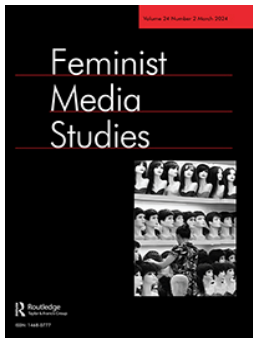
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Chalisa Chintrakarn

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Thai-fusion popular feminism: the beginning of #DontTellMeHowToDress on Instagram

Chalisa Chintrakarn 

Department of Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

The campaign #DontTellMeHowToDress opposed the assumption that dressing provocatively invokes sexual violence. Feminism has re-emerged in digital culture, yet, to date, this landscape has been found primarily in Anglo-American and European contexts. This article investigates how feminism enacted itself in the Thai context through the expressions of #DontTellMeHowToDress by female influencers and celebrities. I conducted a discourse analysis of over 100 Instagram posts shared by influencers and celebrities around the start of the campaign. The results foreground the importance of digital technologies for offering relatively young Thais, who generally hold more progressive views about society, a platform for voicing their concerns and leading to a societal change. However, the feminism presented by this campaign advocated clothing-related propriety, a Thai conservative component re-entrenching patriarchy. The posts also illustrated an array of exclusionary characteristics in Thailand, having reproduced Thai hegemonic beauty ideals that are associated with not only overall slender and sexy styles, but also Anglo-European and East Asian standards. Additionally, this campaign monetised feminism via both self- and brand/service promotions. In short, #DontTellMeHowToDress represented “Thai-fusion popular feminism” that constituted an amalgam of Thai and Anglo-American and European discourses.

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Introduction

Social media has been utilised as a springboard for political activism owing to its rapid diffusion and interactivity (Paulo Gerbaudo 2012); examples are the #MeToo and #MilkTeaAlliance¹ movements. One of them, #DontTellMeHowToDress, commenced on Instagram in late March 2018 in Thailand, a Global South² country. The movement was initiated by a Thailand-based celebrity/supermodel, Cindy Bishop (Sirinya Winsiri). The campaign was a response to the government’s warning that women should not wear sexy clothes to avoid sexual violence during the annual Thai New Year water-splashing festival, also known as Songkran. This government was led by Prayuth Chan-ocha, a junta who staged the 2014 coup d’état and was advocated by royalist civic groups, conservative

CONTACT Chalisa Chintrakarn  c.chintrakarn@pgr.bham.ac.uk  School of Social Policy, Muirhead Tower, 7th Floor, West Wing, Muirhead Tower, Ring Rd N, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TN, UK

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elites, and some Buddhist activists (Janjira Sombatpoonsiri 2018). To buttress their power, such a dictatorship attempted to suppress radical changes to the extant gender order (Duanghathai Buranajaroenkij 2023). A study by Thailand's Women and Men Progression Movement Foundation (Bangkok Post 2016) revealed that over half of Thai female respondents reported having been molested at the festival. Bishop herself was sexually assaulted during a previous running of the festival. Therefore, Bishop invited women to share their own experiences and feelings through the hashtags #DontTellMeHowToDress and #TellMenToRespect on social media, having encouraged individuals to fight for more respect from men (Cindy Bishop 2018c).

#DontTellMeHowToDress was more popular than #MeToo in Thailand (see for example the article by Laignee Barron (2018). Following the online success in initially launching #DontTellMeHowToDress, Bishop organised the first exhibition of the campaign. Having taken place around mid-2018 in Bangkok, the exhibition showcased a range of clothing worn at the time of the sexual violence, alongside personal testimonies from sexual abuse victims (Under the Ropes 2018). Ironically, the military government awarded Bishop "Activist of the Year" in 2018. Afterwards, she has been recognised by being appointed UN Women Regional Goodwill Ambassador for Asia and the Pacific in 2020. The international recognition of Bishop's activism demonstrates the power of #DontTellMeHowToDress, making it an ideal case study to explore the articulation of networked mobilisations against gender inequality in Southeast Asia³.

This campaign belongs to the accessibility of feminism in contemporary culture. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018, 1) associates this trend with the term "popular feminism," whereby "popular" is intended in several ways: 1) as accessible and available; 2) in terms of popularity, thus well-liked; 3) in Stuart Hall's (1998) grasp of the popular as a field of competition. As Banet-Weiser (2018) explicates the third point, various forms of popular feminism compete against one another for boosting their exposure, and the ones successful in this site of competition are predominantly middle-class, white, and heteronormative.

Popular feminism differs from postfeminism, in that the latter is grounded in a refusal of feminism as a political movement and as an identity (Rosalind Gill 2007; Angela McRobbie 2009). Despite this dissonance, Banet-Weiser (2018) remarks on the strong connections between popular feminism and postfeminism, arguing "postfeminism [...] is not displaced by popular feminism but rather bolstered by it" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 20). Popular feminism re-entrenches and reframes some of the discourses that circulate within postfeminist culture, such as the centrality of the body (Gill 2007) and the celebration of empowerment and individual choice (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). In essence, postfeminism champions women's individualisation regarding their professional and educational achievements and body image, by virtue of the triumph of second-wave feminism in illuminating a range of women's issues (McRobbie 2009).

Scholarship about gender issues in Thailand has developed mostly within the fields of cultural and communication studies, anthropology, and history. These works include Peter Anthony Jackson (2004), Tamara Loos (2005), Megan Sinnott (2012), Rebecca Townsend (2016), Rachel V Harrison (2017), Vimviriya Limkangvanmongkol and Crystal Abidin (2018), Thomas Baudinette (2019), and Ying-kit Chan (2021). Meanwhile, to date, popular feminism and postfeminism have been mainly explored to grasp Anglo-American and European contexts, albeit with some exceptions (see for example Michelle Lazar 2006;

Simidele Dosekun 2015). There is an ongoing need for further feminist scrutiny, to facilitate conversations about feminisms across national boundaries, by identifying overlaps, differences, and contradictions. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2013, 976) warns against the “universalising and colonising tendencies of feminist theorising.” Hence, while taking inspiration from cultural terrains that have been primarily about Anglo-American and European locales, this article allows for the specific social and historical situatedness of the object of study.

This paper explores the representations of #DontTellMeHowToDress by female celebrities/influencers on Instagram. The article identifies how this campaign reproduced discourses about gender and sexuality that circulate in Anglo-American and European countries, and the ways it differed. Via a Foucauldian discourse analysis of both verbal and visual components of 123 Instagram posts by 73 celebrities/influencers, I argue that #DontTellMeHowToDress bore both resemblances and dissimilarities to feminism in Anglo-American and European contexts. Such overlaps centre around overall sexy and slender styles, the commodification of feminism, and the impact of Anglo-European beauty. However, this paper uncovers discourses regarding 1) decency and propriety; 2) the close association of fair complexions with East Asians, both of which are more aligned with Thai society. These two discourses came into play in the materialisations of popular feminism within this particular #DontTellMeHowToDress phenomenon. This brings me to introduce the term “Thai-fusion popular feminism.”

The article begins by highlighting the relationships between popular feminism and postfeminism, while positioning this paper among an emerging field about the Global South. I then describe the methodology used, whereby a Foucauldian discourse analysis was performed to identify the dominant discourses about gender and society articulated through the Instagram posts. This is followed by the analysis section, structured according to the major discourses located, which are: the celebrities/influencers’ depiction of sexual violence in Thailand; fame and the commodification of feminism; the demonstration of women’s power and attractive looks; “white” bodies; and the inclusion of Thai conservatism. My aim is not to criticise these influencers/celebrities. Rather, I set out to interrogate the discourses produced about female emancipation in contemporary Thai culture.

Popular feminism and postfeminism

The digital campaign #DontTellMeHowToDress illustrates how over the last few years gender issues have found increasing visibility in culture at large (Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg 2020). Banet-Weiser (2018) explores the recent investment in feminism through the term “popular feminism,” claiming that one of its main characteristics is its dependence on an economy of visibility intensified through the logic of the digital. As digital technologies, often in the form of social media, take immense space in our daily communications, feminism itself has to compete for visibility in a fast-paced environment. The result is:

In a capitalist, corporate economy of visibility, those feminisms that are most easily commodified and branded are those that become most visible. This means, most of the time, that the

popular feminism that is most visible is that which is white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual. (Banet-Weiser 2018, 13)

In this regard, popular feminism reinforces the postfeminist trope of empowerment, often through the market and consumer culture (Banet-Weiser 2018). Through this focus on individual responses to structural issues, both popular feminism and postfeminism fail to fully address the underlying systems of inequality, reproducing hegemonic relations of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

One of the critiques against postfeminism has been its overwhelming focus on white femininity in the US, Europe, and the UK. However, multiple authors have engaged with articulations of race in postfeminism (e.g., Jess Butler 2013; Sumaya Farooq Samie and Kim Toffoletti 2018) and with articulations of postfeminism in Asian contexts (e.g., Lazar 2006; Sue Thornham and Feng Pengpeng 2010; Porranee Singpliam 2022; Fan Yang 2023; Hojin Song 2023). Pertinent to an African context, Dosekun (2015) argues that class-privileged young women in Lagos, Nigeria appear to embrace postfeminist subjectivities and champion their empowerment by thriving in the realms of professions, education, and consumer culture. As Dosekun (2015, 965) proposes, postfeminist culture “is readily transnationalised via the media, commodity, and consumer connectivities that today crisscross more borders more densely and more rapidly than ever before.”

Singpliam (2022) and Yang (2023) adopt Dosekun’s (2015) transnational approach to study a Thai celebrity show and Chinese chick flicks respectively. Yang (2023) has discovered the postfeminist version of China which clearly diverges from its Western counterpart on account of local values. These values refer to not only strong traditional femininities around romantic relationships, but also the state-led consumerism that economically privileges middle/upper-class women and simultaneously suppresses their democratic rights (Yang 2023). As with these previous works, my exploration of #DontTellMeHowToDress tackles 1) how Anglo-American and European discourses about gender and sexuality become transnational; 2) the ways they shift to fit with their new locale. The article illustrates that Dosekun’s (2015) above argument on transnationalisation can be extended to popular feminism in the Global South.

Methodology

I manually gathered the public Instagram posts shared in the first circa 7 weeks of the movement (late March–early May 2018). I chose this period, because I intended to capture the relatively raw responses to the launch of the campaign before any content about the next phase of #DontTellMeHowToDress, namely its initial offline exhibition. Some of these responses were reposted by the official #DontTellMeHowToDress Facebook and Instagram pages (DontTellMeHowToDress [nda](#); [ndb](#).) during the lead-up to this exhibition. My data collection entailed 123 Instagram posts by 73 (cisgender heterosexual and LGBTQ+) female influencers/celebrities, Bishop included, who are Thai and/or have associations with Thailand.

It is worth noting that Thai meanings of gender and sex detach from Anglo-American ones:

The persistence of *phet* [a Thai word] as the frame within which both gender and sexuality are understood in Thailand is reflected in the fact that even in Thai academic discourses only one

expression exists to translate both ‘sexual identity’ and ‘gender identity.’ (Peter Anthony Jackson 2000, 416, original emphasis)

In other words, it is not uncommon for Thais, including academics, to muddle gender and sexual identities (Jackson 2000). This possible conflation can provoke the perpetuation of heteronormativity in Thai society (Jackson 2000). Nonetheless, in the twenty-first century, Western definitions of sexual and gender identities have become increasingly widespread amongst Thais. As Arjun Appadurai (1996) argues, two distinct yet intersecting discourses can stay together while maintaining their original features. Accordingly, both Western and Thai discourses of gender and sexuality were considered throughout my analysis. Given the performativity of gender in the Anglo-American sphere, I included the posts of feminine-presenting transgender individuals regardless of sex, to mitigate the conflation of sex and gender in the Thai *phet* context.

The posts analysed were written in Thai and/or English⁴. In accordance with their celebrity/influencer status, a number of them are proficient in English. To gain a comprehensive insight into the expressions of this campaign, both verbal and visual elements of these posts were dissected. The subjects of the majority of the images/videos are their own faces or bodies, with most other photos featuring 1) both themselves and other(s); 2) text only; or 3) their children only. These Instagram posts were investigated through a Foucauldian discourse analysis, as it enlightens the regimes of truth that produce and are reproduced through discursive practices. Discourse is one of the fundamental concepts in Michel Foucault’s (1980) theory of power, since discourse is the foundation onto which power relations are built in society. Therefore, discourse takes a prominent role in how power is exercised in society and with the production and effects of truth (Foucault 1980).

Foucault did not explicitly give a methodology for discourse analysis (Jane Ussher and Janette Perz 2014), yet other scholars offer Foucauldian discourse analysis guidelines (see for example Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell 1987; Ian Parker 1992; Carla Willig 2008). This project followed Willig’s (2008) technique to achieve a comprehensive analysis: I familiarised myself with the posts to identify their patterns; I then located discursive objects by finding keywords/major visual features in each post; after that, I placed these objects into broader cultural discourses. These discourses, reflected in the sub-sections of the analysis section, include: the portrayal of sexual violence in Thailand; fame and the commodification of feminism; the depiction of women’s power and overall provocative and slim styles; “white” bodies; and the persistence of Thai conservatism. Proceeding with Willig’s (2008) guideline, I identified the consequences of such discursive constructions and used them to indicate the subject positions made available through the posts and the psychological dispositions attached to these positions. The outcome of this analysis is thoroughly articulated in the following overarching section. It demonstrates the ways #DontTellMeHowToDress reproduced discourses that circulate in Anglo-American and European phenomena, as well as investigating some of the ways it differed.

Analysis: #DontTellMeHowToDress and Thai-fusion popular feminism

Social media has been a mixed bag. It has given voice to groups traditionally marginalised by mainstream politics and widened democracy (Paulo Gerbaudo 2018). For example,

hashtags are useful for engaging with particular discussions, allowing various individuals to express their own experiences and viewpoints for some forms of wider changes (Rosemary Clark 2016; Sarah J Jackson, Moya Bailey and Brooke Foucault Welles 2020). On the contrary, it has strengthened social polarisation based upon the number of likes/followers and algorithms that privileges hegemonic views over more marginal ones (Gerbaudo 2018). Both sides of social media are evidenced in my analysis.

#MeToo has been the most well-documented social media movement against sexual misconduct in the past few years. The name “MeToo” has been critiqued on grounds of its prioritisation of the individual (“me”) over the collective (Alison Phipps 2020). Nevertheless, Catherine Rottenberg (2019, 46, original emphasis) suggests that “the campaign goes beyond the ‘Me’ of MeToo in important ways—there is, after all, the ‘Too,’ too, which can serve to produce solidarities and mobilisations.” #DontTellMeHowToDress took inspiration from similar movements in the US and Europe, particularly #MeToo, to denounce sexual violence against women in Thailand (Cassie Nichole DeFillipo 2019).

Indeed, social media movements like #DontTellMeHowToDress do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are dependent not only on the logic of social media, but also on the rules of the society in which they operate. Bishop herself argues:

Our culture is not one that is so confrontational, and it’s going to be a while until a woman comes out and names names or points a finger in the media [...]. But over the last few months, I’ve seen women in Thailand begin to collectively speak out, sharing their stories and pushing back on this victim-blaming which previously has gone completely unchecked here. (Hannah Ellis-Petersen 2019, para.7, in English)

In this vein, while Cindy Bishop deems #MeToo as inspiring other movements around the globe (Associated Press 2019), she recognises the urgency of having one’s own campaign in accordance with particular societies and regions. Panita Hummel Roth (2018), one of the posts in my analysis, mentioned something along these lines:

Anyone that knows me knows that I feel very strongly about this topic, not only it’s encouraging to see that after the #MeToo & #TimesUp movement, a lot of women in Hollywood are speaking out about sexual harassment and I am so glad that P’Cindy has started this conversation in Thailand also. (Roth 2018, para.1, in English)

Depiction of sexual violence in Thailand

By comparison to Europe, the UK, and the US, the sensitive essence of sexuality remains in Thailand, notwithstanding an increase of relatively liberal views on sexual relationships among young people (Wilailak Ounjit 2015). Meanwhile, sexual harassment and assault are pervasive in Thai society. A multitude of Thai women of all ages have experienced sexual violence in both public and domestic domains (Sucheela Tanchainan 1986; Santhanee Ditsayabut 2019). Relatedly, within the context of this paper, over half of the posts consisted of visual presentations with overall black, white, and/or grey tones (see for example Aerin Yuktadatta Bencharongkul 2018b; Nathalie Ducheine 2018), which, in Thai culture, implies mourning (Yong Sathiankoset 2008). This symbolises the negative effects of sexual misconduct and the psychological violence they were subjected to.

According to ASEAN UP (2019), almost 75% of the total Thai population actively utilise social media. Thailand is an Asian country known for its high social media usage, perhaps due to the importance of social status (Digital Business Lab 2021). Moreover, Instagram is integral to Thai female celebrity and influencer culture (Limkangvanmongkol and Abidin 2018). According to one of the posts analysed (Bishop 2018c), Bishop deployed social media to provide visibility to the issue of sexual harassment and assault, and to demand for action at the regulatory level, such as strict punishments and the implementation of safety measures. As another post (Cindy Bishop 2018g) demonstrates, the campaign brought about more stringent macro-level measures concerning sexual violence during Songkran. Clearly, social media offered a space through which women could defy Thai conservatism that—on top of oppressive power relations in the field of sexuality—dictates that women be respectful and demure.

In Thailand, seniority is often associated with more experience and authority, such that younger individuals have been struggling with expressing their ideas in Thai workplaces or institutions (Chamnan Chanruang 2015). While Anglo-American conservatism supports equal liberty with freedom of speech, Thai conservatism impedes people from discussing certain topics, including sexuality (Surapot Taweesuk 2019). Compared to older Thai generations, younger Thais generally demand more freedom of speech and liberal democratic rights in the country, covering ones pertaining to LGBTQ+ (Buranajaroenkij 2023). In my analysis of #DontTellMeHowToDress, to my knowledge the majority of these celebrities/influencers were no more than 40 years old when partaking in the campaign. Their relatively young ages may be connected with their support for freedom of expression. Hence, social media has created a space through which younger Thais have been able to speak up, despite—or in opposition to—Thai conservatism. Accordingly, a number of the women in my analysis recounted their personal thoughts/experiences of gender-based violence (see for example Sarah Severs 2018 and the below quote).

Being molested by men during the Songkran festival, TubTim [her nickname] used to face this situation myself almost every year that [I] joined Songkran. These days, [I] am scared of partaking in Songkran, and avoid joining the water-splashing event. (despite wanting to enjoy the tradition) (Mallika Jongwattana 2018, para.1)

Fame and the commodification of feminism

Just as Banet-Weiser (2018) has remarked in relation to Anglo-American and European popular feminism, feminism in #DontTellMeHowToDress was also interwoven with an economy of visibility. Bishop encouraged both public figures and the general population to discuss victim blaming. During the lead-up to the first #DontTellMeHowToDress exhibition, the official #DontTellMeHowToDress's Facebook and Instagram accounts (DontTellMeHowToDress n.d.-a; n.d.-b) shared some statistics and/or general information on gender-based violence. Interestingly though, these accounts reposted only certain Instagram posts shared in the first circa 7 weeks of the movement: those of some celebrities/influencers (including Bishop) instead of general people. It is likely that this choice of only resharing posts shared by public figures was deliberate, based on the assumption that celebrities/influencers bring more visibility compared to the general

population. Given that these famous figures were class-privileged, this particular reposting neglected the voices of non-celebrity Thais who belonged to other social standings.

Celebrities mainly exist in the media, and their participation in social media helps them sustain their fanbases (Alice Marwick 2015). Through lifestyle choices and product endorsement—they work to legitimate consumerist values that are fundamental for the commercial interests of the media and capitalist economies at large (Graeme Turner 2004; Sean Redmond 2014). Likewise, as Alison Hearn and Stephanie Schoenhoff (2016, 194, original emphasis) write, an influencer typically “works to generate a form of ‘celebrity’ capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic ‘personal brand’ via social networks, which can subsequently be used by companies and advertisers for consumer outreach.”

This is made explicit in #DontTellMeHowToDress through the way the celebrities/influencers’ posts were intertwined with the fashion and aesthetic industry. Approximately one-third of Bishop’s posts and ones by a number of other celebrities/influencers (such as Alizabeth Sadler Leenanuchai 2018; Cara Grogan McIlroy 2018; Chanokwanan Rakcheep 2018a, 2018b; Chonticha Asavanich 2018; Davika Hoorne 2018; Nalin Hohler 2018; Sawitri Rochanapruk 2018; Thitapha Kultanon 2018) referred to Instagram accounts of fashion/beauty/health/wellness brands or services through tags/hashtags/mentions. This means, while partaking in #DontTellMeHowToDress to denounce gender inequality, these celebrities/influencers also commodified the campaign as part of their celebrity profile development. The following are several examples of such posts:

“I’m feelin’ lots of “classy” with a little bit of “sassy” 🙄😏 What’s your personal style? In @insomniabyvara for Bentley Thailand launch. #mccindybishop #mceventbycindy #bentleythailand #donttellyouhowtodress #tellyoutorespect”. (Cindy Bishop 2018f, para.1, original emphasis, in English)

“What I do is not up to you! I’m wearing @poemcouture By @sean_poem for @eveandboy #donttellyouhowtodress #tellyoutorespect join p @cindysirinya ‘S campaign if you would like to help promote our right”. (Rochanapruk 2018, para.1, in English)

Such evidence of the #DontTellMeHowToDress campaign in selling products and services, whether intentionally or not, illustrates the way popular feminism is enmeshed with capitalistic structures which rely on the commodification of virtually anything, including feminism. Celebrity feminism and the competition for visibility through social media amplify easily commodified feminist expressions, whilst inducing a positive change in safety measures (Bishop 2018g) as noted earlier.

Demonstration of women’s power and attractive bodies

Gill (2007) argues that a sexy body is one of the key characteristics of a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill 2007, 162), whereby women are understood as empowered and strong through “‘pleasing themselves’ and ‘using beauty’ to make themselves feel good” (Gill 2007, 153, original emphasis). Put simply, in the postfeminist terrain, the focus on the body translates into a strong affirmation of personal choice and body autonomy (Gill 2007). This is also the case in popular feminism, as Banet-Weiser (2018) points out that brandable bodies, along with can-do/empowered attitudes and self-confidence, are integral to economies of visibility.

These features of postfeminism and popular feminism accord well with the images and captions of the #DontTellMeHowToDress posts analysed. Firstly, suggestions of women's power and strength characterised both the verbal and visual expressions. Specifically, a number of the photos/videos in their posts comprised confident facial expressions and postures that signified significant power, such as fierce-looking eyes or work-out postures (see for example Namthip Jongrachatawiboon 2018; Pattiya Watchara-Amnoui 2018). Likewise, some of the influencers/celebrities' captions depicted their power and strength through the emojis emblematic of strength (e.g. 🦵 and 💪), text, and/or hashtags as follows:

"Do not underestimate the power of a woman" (Cindy Bishop 2018e, para.1, in English).

"We should never have to feel unsafe or belittled while chasing our dreams. We need to stand up for each other so in the future our children can be safe and respected. Girl power 🦵." (McIlroy 2018, para.1, in English)

"I AM STRONG, I AM BEAUTIFUL AND I AM A WOMAN." (Metinee Kingpayome Sharples 2018, para.1, original emphasis, in English)

"REMINDER – Women do not need to be polite to someone who is making them uncomfortable. 🦵🦵 I absolutely support the gorgeous and strong @cindysirinya campaign 🦵❤️🦵🦵 #donttellmehowtodress #tellmentorespect #feminism". (Nathacha Nilwan 2018, para.1, original emphasis, in English)

"A woman with a VOICE is by definition a STRONG woman . . ." (Sonia Couling 2018, para.1, original emphasis, in English)

Secondly, a multitude of the posts analysed here stressed their individual agency regarding dressing up. To be more specific, Bishop and many other female celebrities/influencers underscored women's rights to choose what to wear and not be harassed because of it. They proclaimed or implied that a woman's body is her own possession:

"How I decide to dress does not reflect on what I want to open myself up to be a petting zoo. I dress for me." (Severs 2018, para.1, in English)

"A woman's body belongs to her and HER ALONE. Not her parents, not her lover, not her husband." (Cindy Bishop 2018b, para.1, original emphasis, in English)

"Women have the right to be heard, the right to express themselves, and the right to dress however they please." (Pim Bubear 2018, para.1, in English)

"What I wear doesn't determine how you can treat me. Stay in your lane. #donttellmehowtodress #tellmentorespect #mybodyismine #womenwill #pressforprogress." (Aerin Yuktadatta Bencharongkul 2018a, para.1, in English)

However, 87 out of 123 posts in this study showcased images/videos demonstrating their provocative styles, i.e., sexy outfits/body postures (see for example Hohler 2018; Watchara-Amnoui 2018). In other words, most of the celebrities/influencers shared at least one post with sexy looks. It must also be emphasised that almost all of the influencers/celebrities in this project had slender body shapes. Altogether, there was little reflection about which bodies are entitled to the celebration of body autonomy, empowerment, and individual choice within

the economy of visibility. My analysis demonstrates that it is primarily sexy and slim bodies that are entitled to this, which reproduced hegemonic beauty ideals circulating in Thailand. Equally importantly, as illustrated in the following sub-section, white Anglo-European styles remain intact in these aesthetic standards in the country, although they are not the only dominant force.

Complexity of dominant “white” beauty

As mentioned, popular feminism has thus far been mostly associated with white femininity (Banet-Weiser 2018). In my project, white Anglo-European aesthetics affected the posts analysed to a certain degree: a number of these women wore predominantly Anglo-European-style make-up which is generally heavier than their East-Asian⁵-style counterpart. Moreover, quite a number of these celebrities/influencers, including Bishop, Couling (2018), and Ducheine (2018), are partially ethnically white (i.e., Eurasian). As Julie Matthews (2007) maintains, Eurasians complicate existing race and gender hierarchies. Yet, they are understood as having cosmopolitan hybridity that is preferred in this globalised world (Matthews 2007; Jeaney Yip, Susan Ainsworth, and Miles Tycho Hugh 2019). However, below I demonstrate a nuanced picture of aesthetic representations in this particular #DontTellMeHowToDress context, which corresponds to the wider Thai media full of famous figures who are either East-Asian-looking or Eurasian (Dredge Byung’chu Käng 2017).

One of the beauty ideals dominating Thai society refers to light-skinnedness, which lies at the intersection of traditional differentiations between high-status and low-status Thais and the prominent East Asian influence. Aren Aizura (2009) argues that the preference for lighter complexions differentiates high-status Thais from agricultural labourers, whose skin is darker in tone because of their exposure to the sun whilst working in the fields. Put simply, fair-skinnedness is one of the primary components that signifies social class in the country (Penny Van Esterik 2000). Based upon the posts about #DontTellMeHowToDress, the vast majority of the celebrities/influencers in my analysis seemed to lighten their skin in the photos. Considering the high social status of celebrities/influencers in Thai society, making their bodies fairer can be interpreted as further raising their social status.

In Thai society, rather than white Anglo-Europeanness, nowadays fair complexions usually revolve around the impact of Asian cosmopolitanism related to East Asians which covers the economic burgeoning of Thais of Chinese lineage (Käng 2017). The East Asia region and East Asian descents are associated with such Asian cosmopolitanism. In fact, both American and East Asian (including Singaporean Chinese) cultural elements have complicatedly affected lifestyles of middle-class Thais (Takashi Shiraishi 2004, 2006). According to Käng (2017, 189), people with East Asian ethnicities “represent modernity and middle-class consumerism specifically tied to the Asian region and Asian bodies.” Individuals of East Asian heritage intrinsically have lighter complexions compared to their Southeast Asian counterparts, hence Käng (2017, 188) hails this ethnically East Asian group as “white Asian” people.

Overall, in line with hegemonic “white” beauty ideals that have pervaded in larger Thai society (Käng 2017), both white Anglo-European and East Asian standards dominated the economy of visibility within this specific #DontTellMeHowToDress context. This is partially distinct from aesthetic ideals in Anglo-American and European contexts. Nevertheless, although the way this campaign was represented in its first circa 7 weeks is far from *absolute* white Anglo-European hegemony, white Anglo-European aesthetics still had a considerable effect.

Negotiation of Thai conservatism

Notwithstanding the use of social media to challenge Thai conservatism that dictates women be demure and respectful, an important conservative discourse about decency and propriety was at play in this campaign. To illustrate:

“Women have the right to dress whatever styles, as long as it is neither indecent nor illegal” (Cindy Bishop 2018a, para.1 (words from the video)).

Thai women, from the past, have worn Thai sashes [*sabai* in Thai] [and] covered with sabai [that have been] adjusted to contemporary outfits, some tube tops, some spaghetti straps. However [we] dress, if appropriate for certain time and place, [it] should look good. (Suttikan Wangjaroentaweekul 2018, para.1)

!!Crime theory involves 3 factors: perpetrators, victims, and opportunities. Not supportive of dressing provocatively ... Everyone has the right to express freely ... but not all people in society are good ... [We] must be vigilant ... Express freely in safe spaces ... Avoid dressing provocatively in places risky to be raped ... despite having the right to dress however we please ... because it is not worth it ... (Chalida Tantiphiphop 2018, para.3, original emphasis)

Additionally, Cindy Bishop’s (2018d) textual image, reposted by Taya Rogers (2018), reiterated the lingering importance of considering clothing-related decency. The conservative discourse regarding decency contradicts previous claims about women’s freedom to wear what they choose, implying instead that Thai women ought to dress in keeping with Thai conservatism. Arguably, the conservative outlook that female revealing clothing determines gender-based violence was reproduced by Bishop herself even when she opposed it. This is bound up with a fundamental, deep-rooted element of Thai culture: taking actions in tandem with time and place (*kala thesa* in Thai) to be socially or publicly accepted (Van Esterik 2000; Jackson 2004). In Thailand, one’s public images are under far more scrutiny than their private counterparts (Jackson 2004). As Jackson (2004, 181) posits, the notion of images “has epistemological implications, determining what can and cannot be articulated as public knowledge in Thailand.”

This conservative outlook on propriety is marginal in popular feminist and postfeminist regimes in Anglo-American and European societies, where women overall have freer choices on clothing (albeit under some institutional pressures) (Kelly Oliver 2007). Therefore, attitudes towards respectability and decency in relation to women’s clothing were paramount in the expressions of #DontTellMeHowToDress concerning Thai conservatism, such that it can be described as “Thai-fusion popular feminism.”

Conclusion

#DontTellMeHowToDress, launched by Cindy Bishop on Instagram, has been a crucial feminist campaign in Thailand over the last few years. I investigated the Instagram posts shared by celebrities/influencers in the first circa 7 weeks of the campaign (late March–early May 2018), with the aim of exploring the discourses produced about female emancipation in contemporary Thai culture. I undertook this analysis through the lenses of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018) and postfeminism (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). Despite accusations of being dominated by Anglo-American and European contexts, these lenses provided me with the vocabulary to grasp how certain European and Anglo-American discourses become transnational (Dosekun 2015), while not being reproduced in the exact same way.

Predicated on the analysis of 123 posts, I enlightened the significance of digital media for aiding relatively young Thais in amplifying their concerns around sexual violence. Simultaneously, I displayed how competing in the economy of visibility via social media induced the production of a form of feminism that was easily agreed with and liked. The need to be widely accepted was pivotal to the implication of the campaign in commodity culture. That is, some of the celebrities/influencers participated in the commodification of themselves and feminism in this campaign while promoting products or services. This means, while the campaign brought about a societal change regarding measures to help minimise sexual misconduct, there were still some limitations to how critical these voices can be. They ultimately relied on the fashion and aesthetic industry for their economic and professional growth.

More broadly, I put forward the argument that #DontTellMeHowToDress bore both overlaps with and differences from feminism in Anglo-American and European contexts. These overlaps are concerned with overall sexy and slender styles, the commodification of feminism, and the effect of Anglo-European beauty. Indeed, the centrality of the female body in the campaign, specifically overall provocative, slim, and “white” bodies, reproduced hegemonic standards of femininity in Thailand. The “white” bodies, as dominant in this campaign, were influenced by both white Anglo-European and East Asian styles. Such “white” beauty is far from absolute white Anglo-European hegemony, yet white Anglo-European aesthetics was still impactful.

Nonetheless, there were two key ways in which #DontTellMeHowToDress departed from Anglo-American and European contexts. Firstly, in Thailand, light skin, which is typically equated with higher socioeconomic standing, is closely linked to East Asians rather than white Anglo-Europeans. Secondly, the campaign embraced the conservative viewpoint concerning female clothing, which is less common in European and Anglo-American countries. There was a contradiction between the assertion that women should dress however they please and the discourses of decency, such that the key message of the campaign was undermined by complying with patriarchal morality around women’s propriety and respectability.

I recognise that Dosekun’s (2015) claim about the transnational trajectory of post-feminism can be extended to popular feminism, as popular feminism travels beyond the US, the UK, and Europe to Thailand. Meanwhile, popular feminisms are reified in

ways that make them more palatable to the context they emerge. Consequently, this study makes a substantial contribution to global approaches to feminist issues, in that it is one of the first works that dissected how popular feminism is manifested within a Thai context “in its complexity.” Follow-up studies could centre around the impact of this campaign on the Southeast Asian region more widely, including Singapore and the Philippines, where in-person #DontTellMeHowToDress exhibitions occurred. This focus would bring further evidence to study how popular feminisms travel transnationally, and how gender inequality is articulated in different Southeast Asian countries.

Notes

1. #MilkTeaAlliance is an online activism that “united users from Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in a fight against Chinese techno-nationalists’ attempts to shame public figures into supporting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s framing of geopolitics” (Adam K Dedman and Autumn Lai 2021, 97).
2. The Global North-South binary is usually characterised by wealth: the former largely comprises countries in Western Europe and North America as well as Australia, Japan, and Singapore, whereas the latter refers to much of Africa, South America, and Asia (Gunnar Myrdal 1977; Martin Müller 2020). The article uses the Global North-South distinction when describing global economic disparities between countries.
3. Thailand is situated in the Southeast Asian region.
4. All translations from Thai are mine, unless otherwise stated. I tackled potential translation issues concerning cultural nuances by 1) my understanding of both Thai and English languages; 2) by pairing certain English words with their Thai counterparts whereby I can give new meanings to the English words.
5. The East Asian region comprises Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea, North Korea, and Mongolia.

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Notes on contributor

Chalisa Chintrakarn is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at the University of Birmingham. Her broad research interests are concerned with gender, media, body, Asia, intersectionality, and qualitative research methods.

ORCID

Chalisa Chintrakarn  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7751-1904>

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