

Feminism's greatest obstacle in the digital age is the commodification of women's bodies

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“SEND NOODZ.” Thirteen-year-old boys are real artists with their text messages. What brevity! What charm! This all-caps imperative sets the tone for Nancy Jo Sales’s alarming new book, *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*.

Sales spent two and a half years interviewing over 200 teenage girls across 10 states about their online experiences. While heralded by many reviewers as a “harrowing” window into the teenage mind, Sales’ book is actually an early look at thingification—one of feminism’s greatest obstacles in the digital age.

By thingification, I mean the making of ourselves into “things”—commodities for others’ consumption. By turning our lives into a series of images, and attempting to be desired or “liked” by everyone, we end up in a state of alienation—both from others and from ourselves.

This state of being is at odds with the goals of feminism, which is at its core defined by “self-respect, and respect for others,” as Sales observes in her conclusion. It’s only by engaging with people IRL—in real life and in the flesh—that we can truly treat them as human beings, rather than as objects. One issue is the dehumanizing effect of screens, which create distance between people and frequently foster cruelty. But the larger problem is our constant need to reduce people to inanimate objects in order to easily categorize and describe them. “People wan[t] other people to be things so that they c[an] be dealt with,” writes the late lesbian feminist critic Barbara Johnson in her collection of essays *Persons and Things*. “Treating people as things [is what] we normally do, and that reassures us.”

“Everything’s about the likes”

“I guarantee you,” a 17-year-old girl named Teresa tells Sales, “every girl wishes she could get three hundred likes on her pictures. Because that means you’re the girl everybody wants to fuck. And everybody wants to be the girl everybody wants to fuck.”

Social media is an economy of the self—hence the rise of the “selfie.” Sharing a selfie has become a type of transaction. It is the price girls pay for attention. And attention is incredibly important to the girls Sales interviews.

“I think we have to think about whether that’s a healthy endeavor,” Sales contends in a recent interview with [Teen Vogue](#), “to constantly be subjecting yourself to validation from others for ‘likes.’ Why give up your power to others to validate you? Why ask others, ‘Here I am, tell me how great I am, please? Like me, please?’ You’re giving others the power to say whether or not you are worthwhile, and very often it’s based on what you look like in a picture, because it’s all image-driven. It’s a false valuation of self-worth that I think girls are being drawn into.”

At the same time, Sales acknowledges that it is unfair to chastise young women for being “drawn into” this sexualized economy. Their agency, she notes in her critique of “[choice feminism](#),” is circumscribed by a patriarchal power structure that equates women’s value with sex appeal. Furthermore, as Elspeth Reeve asserts in a piece at [The New Republic](#), attention is a basic human desire. “Why is it bad that teenage girls want attention? *American Girls* does not say. I think it’s shorthand for a whole set of sexist assumptions ... Everyone wants attention—from the fleeting acknowledgment of mere existence to the aching desire to be known, loved, and remembered after you’re gone.”

In this context, it makes sense that women would actively participate in the economy of the selfie. As 19-year-old Maya explained to Sales, “It got old to be the victim. For girls, it’s not getting us anywhere. It’s not building our case. It’s not getting us any more respect. So it’s like,” she says, referring to young women who sexual objectify young men on social media, “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.”

In other words, if you can’t take the heat, go offline. Many young women *want* to play the game, however. They want to be power players in their society, just like their male counterparts. For this reason, they often see social media as empowering. Framed in the language of “choice,” this argument holds that young women can and should be able to project themselves across a variety of social media platforms in whatever way they please. Their body, their selfie.

Is empowerment power?

It’s unclear whether this kind of digital empowerment is truly effective. Take, for example, the recent debate over the nude selfies Kim Kardashian posted on [Instagram](#). The reality star penned a letter calling her photo an act of [empowerment](#). “I am empowered by my body,” she wrote. “I am empowered by my sexuality. I am empowered by feeling comfortable in my skin. I am empowered by showing the world my flaws and not being afraid of what

anyone is going to say about me. And I hope that through this platform I have been given, I can encourage the same empowerment for girls and women all over the world.”

Not everyone agrees. As feminist critic Jill Filipovic points out in an essay for Cosmopolitan, “feeling ‘empowered’ is not the same as real, actual power.” “‘Empowerment’ is an empty catchphrase, a term used primarily to salve over the near-total lack of power held by women and girls around the world, a kind of head-pat to keep us satisfied with subservience,” Filipovic explains. “‘Empowerment’ is apparently not about equitable allocation of resources, or influence in politics and policy, or really power at all. It’s shorthand for ‘I wanted to do this and it made me feel good.’”

Sales encounters a 19-year-old Hunter College student named Jenna who expresses similar skepticism about how we’re defining empowerment these days. “[My feminist class was] talking about how girls sending nudes of themselves through Tinder... most of the people in my class said that it’s totally cool to send nudes, because we have a choice to show our bodies to whomever we want—which is true, but everyone thought I was an asshole for objecting and saying, yeah, but it’s for a man’s benefit. Like, guys don’t see nudes and think, Wow, what an empowered woman, good for her for being comfortable with her body. They go like, Great, boobs; or like, She’s a slut for sending me pictures but, like, I’ll still sleep with her.”

These selfie skirmishes showcase the level of influence that the internet has over feminism in 2016. Democratic forums like Facebook and Twitter have given voice to the voiceless and visibility to the invisible. But while the internet is a productive conduit of communication, it is also an alienating one. Technology, from social media platforms to the smartphone and selfie stick, has become the tool we use to validate our existence to the world. If we’re not careful, our willingness to buy into thingification may result in the loss of a part of our humanity.

“Estrangement shows itself precisely in the elimination of distance between people,” wrote German philosopher Theodor Adorno in 1951. At the dawn of a new, war-free world, Adorno was ruminating about the rapid societal changes caused by the intersection of capitalism and technology. So many years later, these thoughts encapsulate the paradox of life today—specifically in the multi-universes of social media.

Innovation has collapsed the space between people. We connect with one another through a click or a swipe. And yet because we feel like strangers to each other, it’s easy for us to treat each other as things. In fact, the erasure of interpersonal distance is what produces this estrangement. As Sales’ book

shows, feminism's concern should not lie with the moral indictment of young women for their participation in social media. Rather, feminism's task in the digital age is to subvert the thingification of our lives.

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