

“Born tough”, yet vulnerable: Listening to postfeminist podcasts

Brigitte Biehl

Associate Editor

Johanna Kreft

FernUniversität in Hagen

“People ask me about being a woman. I never thought about being a woman. I just thought about me and being strong and pushing through. Maybe it’s being brought up at the race track, maybe it’s just being born tough, I don’t know. I’ve always just pushed through.”

Bethenny Frankel (2021), self-made mogul who rose to success after starring on the reality TV show “The Real Housewives of New York”.

For the past year again in the global pandemic, people have been cooped up in their homes, many were working remotely and most of us missed out on many social experiences. In the second cold season of the global pandemic, the consumption of content on streaming platforms has skyrocketed and the number of active podcast shows has almost quadrupled (Podcast Insights, 2021). The pandemic has deeply impacted the psyche and health of people, and simultaneously has given rise to various forms of cultural production that help to cope with the stress and prepare individuals to respond to the situation (Pawar, 2020). Cultural production consists of different visual, acoustic and performative media which, throughout history, accompany crises. Podcasts by female entrepreneurs and business women can be seen as one of these mass-media formats.

One thing that united people more than ever is the precariousness of our lives (Butler, 2004) as it becomes very clear that we all are vulnerable. Vulnerability is a very aesthetic, embodied phenomenon. While feminist perspectives today emphasize care across status groups, class and race, podcasts as contemporary media formats also support women, but remain ambivalent. We are going to reflect on [Just B with Bethenny Frankel](#) as a show that wants to provide female listeners with a “tool-kit” (Frankel), giving postfeminist advice, and offering an aesthetic experience.

These podcasts, like other media, create their own “aesthetic experience” (Biehl, 2020) which in this case is energetic, driven, and appealing. Host and guest talk very fast, are quick at turn-taking, and emphasize the need to “always hustle”. They make an effort with their looks – at least on social media – but admit that they record the show in pyjamas (Frankel). There is a fair share of emotionality, neuroticism and ranting. Overall, from an aesthetic perspective, there is strength and vulnerability – and possibly some hope for the feminist cause.

Research in management studies traditionally has assumed two opposing possibilities of popular culture. One is that popular culture carries ideological persuasions, ensuring that audiences accept the values that are suggested. Part of this is reproducing misogyny, racism, and discrimination. The other view puts an emphasis on the critical potential of popular culture, offering a valuable critiques of gender relations (Pullen & Rhodes, 2013). The phenomenon that we discuss unfolds an ambivalent potential, perpetuating postfeminist views without questioning social relations, but also offering glimpses of solidarity.

Podcasts by successful business women address a mostly female target group and audience, who statistically bear a larger burden in the pandemic with family and household chores being divided unequally and gender-based disparities being magnified (Ranji et al., 2020). One can assume that the consumption of entertainment media including podcasts for (female) listeners is not only an escape, but always a search for gratifications, i.e. the satisfaction of information needs, social or personal identity needs (Katz et al., 1973). When they listen to "successful" women's podcasts or other formats such as films and TV series, audiences can simultaneously fulfil information needs and personal identity needs by learning about entrepreneurship, management and leadership (Biehl, 2021a, b). These aesthetic experiences can be said to build up aesthetic knowing and an embodied understanding of life, work and identity (Taylor & Hansen, 2005: 1214).



Gender should not be an issue, at least this is what successful women on these podcasts preach. Evy Pompouras was a guest on Bethenny Frankel's show. source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CW8ckHMNypJ/>

A central message of these podcasts is that in today's times, gender is not important and not a barrier for success – at least not for the host and guests. Both Frankel and her guests on the one hand emphasize their femininity via their looks and behaviour, and on the other hand suggest that gender is of no relevance to a business career. Ironically, Frankel rose to fame with a reality TV series that thrives on female emotionality, often being very close to, or fully convergent with anti-feminist thinking, misogyny and female degradation. Media scholars such as Psarras (2020: 8) find that these celebrity entrepreneurs ("celebpreneurs") tend to perform and cultivate an amped-up, reactionary persona for capitalist media which love emotions and outbursts. These protagonists' attitude mirrors typical tenets of neoliberal feminism by suggesting that the gender revolution has already taken place and that those who

do not succeed are inhibited by internal barriers and a lack of motivation. The neoliberal subject disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing gendered inequality, and accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care (Rottenberg, 2018: 55).

These messages may have considerable social impact. Female entrepreneurs in the media commonly serve as aspirational lifestyle templates, with viewers (or listeners) being invited to "insert" themselves into these templates (Hearn 2010: 68). Women function as idols who narrate their own success stories and ideology, inviting fans and followers to emulate their example. Generally, popular culture provides us with many archetypes and new role models of leaders, managers and business people (e.g. Biehl, 2020a: 101-104). Also, there is a huge public awareness and follower response to Reality TV and business life personas including the Kardashians, Bethenny Frankel, and fellow business women. An obvious feminist advancement however is that these women go beyond dominant discourses in entrepreneurship where successful players are mostly male, strong-willed, decisive, and confident (Berglund, 2006: 239), whereby women are often seen as lacking entrepreneurial skill and propensity. They do certainly not subscribe to a masculinised discourse but find their own voice in podcasts as personal forms of expression.

Part of these podcasts include emotional "rants". These may involve tirades about men who violate social distancing in restaurants despite Covid measures – clearly showing the unease, the feeling of being in danger, and one's own vulnerability in today's times (Frankel, Ep. 80). Many women feel the same way, and Frankel certainly is in touch with her audience. Other issues also capture what many female consumers have wondered about, for example the pointless replacement of plastic straws in plastic cups with paper straws that quickly feel like "limp dicks" in Frankel's mouth. This openness may even go on to misguided rants that are received as transphobic where genitals of a trans school classmate of Frankel's daughter are being brought up for no further reason (Delott, 2021).

The feminine role models we see here are out there and are part of the discourse where they assert themselves forcefully. A frequent statement is that they "worked so hard" (Paris Hilton on Bethenny Frankel's podcast, Ep. 3) or that they "always hustle" – this is said several times in every episode. There is no mention of having had luck, or benefitting from privilege, social and cultural capital. This emphasis on "performance" makes social injustice and privilege disappear. Also, there is no mention of gender as an obstacle. In another episode, Sheryl Sandberg (Ep. 37) as a guest opposed Frankel's "I don't see gender". Sandberg herself explained how gender stereotypes work as a barrier for women's careers, for example when women are rated "bossy" or "bitchy" and men not, albeit displaying the same assertive behavior at work. Sandberg (Ep. 37, 52:55) also had to explain intersectionality – with not too much response from the host:

Sheryl Sandberg: "Women of colour have aaaall that gender bias and
aaaall that race bias!"

Bethenny Frankel: "Wow. Yeah."

Frankel, like other popular female business icons, seems to be beyond the gender debate – or several years behind. Hillary Clinton as a guest (Ep. 6) also did more work on the gender topic and social and institutional issues. Sandberg was not the obvious person to explain structural inequalities, as her book *Lean In* (2013) had been interpreted as a neoliberal manifesto (Rottenberg, 2018) that perpetuated the mission of a postfeminist woman in popular culture and society. A neoliberal feminist subject converts continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair. In this attitude, central feminist concepts such as liberation, equal rights and social justice have been replaced by balance, happiness and working on oneself

(McRobbie, 2015). Another problem in this view is that it only includes the white, attractive, slim middle-class woman while the majority of women are “othered” – they work in “jobs” and not in careers, in care work and support work, and have different backgrounds in terms of race and class. The latter women are marginalized in the podcast, as if they do not deserve much attention or mention.

The neoliberal idea encourages the feminine subject to work on herself and to internalize the revolution. If these struggles take place inside an individual’s mind only and not together with others in society, it neutralizes any collective action (Rottenberg, 2018: 68). A feminist perspective originally emphasizes an alliance of women and all marginalized groups against precarity, including LGBTQIA+, racial minorities, poor people and people with bodies that do not fulfill a dominant social norm (Smolović Jones et al., 2021).

What we see in these podcasts is at least *some* concern for other women that are not privileged, and may for example struggle to get through a very expensive divorce in the US. Frankel (Ep. 80) opens up her draining legal and emotional divorce battle and thinks about setting up a charity to help other women cover the costs. Again, institutional or policy work is not mentioned – even though Frankel criticizes at length legal frameworks that do not offer women sufficient protection against a male abuser, for example. Charity work is good, but not enough, feminism must have an institutional component to make better conditions for everyone.

These podcasts give a voice to business women and entrepreneurs who are very different from dominant male business player stereotypes. They are successful, tough and also weak. From an organizational aesthetics and management studies perspective, these women create a personal, subjective, and emotional contribution to a management discourse that is masculine, well-ordered and in control. This could be seen as a variation of “feminine writing” that opposes the traditional and rationalist management discourse (Pullen, 2017). Podcasts as a media product can even be seen as an aesthetic take on this, as an ‘artistic creation’ (Biehl-Missal, 2015). Women like Frankel indulge in their vulnerabilities, shortcomings and negative emotions rather than solely perpetuating a narration of strength that we hear from many male business people. However, this remains ambivalent. It would be time to go beyond being “born tough” and mobilizing one’s emotionality and vulnerability not for the aesthetic effect only, rather using it to connect with others and towards a joint cause. There are already examples in other podcast formats (e.g. Women in CTRL with [Sam Warren](#)). This can also be something that all listeners can bring forward by themselves.

References

- Berglund, K. 2006. Discursive diversity in fashioning entrepreneurial identity. In D. Hjorth and C. Steyaert (eds.), *Entrepreneurship as social change – A third movements in entrepreneurship book*, 231-250. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Biehl, B. 2021a. ‘Dracarys’ for all: TV series and experiential learning. *Management Learning* <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076211053327>.
- Biehl, B. 2021b. *Leadership in Game of Thrones*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Biehl-Missal, B. 2015. ‘I write like a painter’: Feminine creation with arts-based methods in organizational research. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 22(2): 179-196.
- Butler, J. 2004. *Precarious Lives*. London: Verso.

- Delott, S. 2021. Bethenny Frankel Goes on Weird Transphobic Rant, Refuses to Apologize or Learn. The Hollywood Gossip.
<https://www.thehollywoodgossip.com/2021/09/bethenny-frankel-goes-on-weird-transphobic-rant-refuses-to-apollo/>
- Hearn, A. 2010. Reality Television, The Hills and the limits of the immaterial labor thesis. *triple*, 8(1): 60-76.
- Katz, E., Haas, H., & Gurevitch, M. 1973. On the Use of the Mass Media for Important Things. *American Sociological Review*, 38(2): 164-181.
- Pawar, M. 2020. The global impact of and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 2(2): 111-120.
- Podcast Insights. 2021. *Podcast-Statistiken & Fakten*.
<https://www.podcastinsights.com/de/podcast-statistics/>
- Pullen A. 2017. Writing as Labiaplasty. *Organization*, 25(1): 123-130.
- Pullen, A., & Rhodes, C. 2013. Parody, subversion and the politics of gender at work: The case of Futurama's Raging Bender. *Organization*, 20(4): 512-533.
- Psarras, E. 2020. "It's a mix of authenticity and complete fabrication". Emotional camping: The cross-platform labor of the Real Housewives. *new media & society*, doi:1461444820975025.
- Rahman, K. & Arif, M. 2021. Impacts of Binge-Watching on Netflix during the COVID-19 pandemic, *South Asian Journal of Marketing*, 2(1): 97-112.
- Ranji, U., Frederiksen, B., Salganicoff, A., & Long, M. 2021. *Women, Work, and Family During COVID-19: Findings from the KFF Women's Health Survey*. Kaiser Family Foundation, March, 22.
- Rottenberg, C. 2018. *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sandberg, S. 2013. *Lean in: Women, work, and the will to lead*. New York: Random House.
- Smolović Jones, S., Winchester, N., & Clarke, C. (2021). Feminist solidarity building as embodied agonism: An ethnographic account of a protest movement. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(3): 917-934.
- Taylor, S. & Hansen, H. 2005. Finding form: Looking at the field of organizational aesthetics, *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(6): 1211-1231.