

Feminism = Women's Movement? The Effects of Terminology and Gender on Endorsement of Feminism

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Building on past research, this study examined whether endorsement of feminism is still influenced by terminology used (i.e., feminism vs. women's movement) and participant gender. One hundred undergraduates (36 men and 64 women) were randomly assigned to receive scale items that identified feminist values but used the terms *feminism/feminist* or *women's movement/women* depending on the condition they were assigned. In addition, activism, acceptance of traditional gender roles, and feminist identification were measured. As expected, men endorsed feminism less than women overall, and participants in the women's movement (vs. feminism) condition endorsed feminism more. When controlling for feminist identification, there was no gender difference in activism or acceptance of gender roles for participants in the *feminism/feminist* condition; however, women reported more activism and less acceptance of gender roles than men in the *women's movement/women* condition. This study suggests that there is still a stigma surrounding feminism that influences its endorsement, especially among women.

Keywords: feminism, gender differences, feminist identification, political activism, attitudes toward women

Cette étude a examiné si l'approbation du féminisme est influencée par la terminologie et le genre. Cent étudiants du premier cycle assignés au hasard ont répondu à des items identifiant les valeurs féministes en utilisant les termes féminisme/féministe ou mouvement des femmes/femmes selon la condition. L'activisme, l'acceptation des rôles traditionnels de genre et l'identification féministe ont été mesurés. Comme prédit, les hommes approuvent moins le féminisme que les femmes et les participants dans la condition « mouvement des femmes » l'approuvent davantage. Lorsque l'identification féministe est contrôlée, il n'y a aucune différence de genre dans l'activisme ou l'acceptation des rôles de genre dans la condition « féminisme ». Les femmes ont signalé plus d'activisme et moins d'acceptation des rôles de genre que les hommes dans la condition « mouvement des femmes ». Cette étude suggère qu'il existe une stigmatisation entourant le féminisme influençant son approbation, particulièrement chez les femmes.

Mots-clés : féminisme, différences de genre, identification féministe, activisme politique, attitudes envers les femmes

Have you ever heard someone say, "I am not a feminist, but...?" A feminist is defined as a person who believes in women's rights and equality between genders (Thompson, 2010), although not all who share these beliefs are willing to identify or label themselves as feminists. Predictors of feminist self-identification include disagreement with conservative beliefs (Liss et al., 2001), endorsement of progressive values on social justice issues (Zucker, 2004), support of feminist goals and positive evaluation of feminists (Williams & Wittig, 1997). According to prior research, even people who endorse feminist goals and values, such as gender equality, may not identify as

feminists (Buschman & Lenart, 1996; Fitz et al., 2012; Zucker, 2004). The current study intends to examine why people may not self-identify as feminists while holding feminist values by examining how endorsement of feminist beliefs/values may change, depending on the terminology that is used (i.e., *women's movement* vs. *feminism*).

Research into barriers to feminist self-identification is important because identifying as a feminist has an impact on one's life (e.g., greater self-efficacy; Anderson, 2012). Research has found that men and women who hold traditional gender role attitudes (i.e., men go to work and women stay home to take care of the family) have more distress and less awareness of sexism (McDermott & Schwartz, 2013) and that perceiving sexist events can also be distressing (Moradi & Subich, 2002). Greater identification with feminism has not only been linked to a less traditional

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belief system but also higher well-being, which is described as life satisfaction, (Yakushko, 2007) and more personal and professional activism, such as advocating for women's rights (O'Neil et al., 1993). Holding traditional gender roles can have a negative impact on well-being, but identifying as a feminist and engaging in activism can reduce the distress related to restrictive gender roles.

Despite the positive impact feminist self-identification has on well-being, feminists are stigmatized for being outside of traditional gender norms, which can impact self-identification and well-being negatively (Link & Phelan, 2001). In one study demonstrating the effect of stereotyping on feminist identification, women either read a story including positive stereotypes about feminists (e.g., active, confident), negative stereotypes about feminists (e.g., angry, anti-male), or a control that did not refer to feminists (Roy et al., 2007). Women who read the positive stereotypes about feminists were twice as likely to self-identify as feminists than women in the negative stereotype or control conditions. Further, participants reading negative stereotypes or control stories did not differ in feminist identification, which implies that negative stereotypes about feminists are the typical opinion if one does not have positive associations and/or personally identify as a feminist (Roy et al., 2007). As a result of this stigma and negative stereotyping of feminists, people may not identify as feminists.

Other research has demonstrated that stigmatizing phrases have negative effects on acceptance of stereotyped groups. For example, participants showed more tolerance toward mental illness when items referenced "a person with a mental illness" than the more stigmatizing phrase "the mentally ill" (Granello & Gibbs, 2016, p. 17). Simply changing a phrase referencing a stereotyped group can affect how those individuals are perceived. Historically, what is now called the feminist movement has been called in the past a women's movement, where people were fighting for equality of the genders (Yakushko, 2007). As the language to define this movement has changed, (i.e., labelling it as feminism/feminist), literature has examined whether the term feminist has a negative connotation (Buschman & Lenart, 1996). In order to determine whether there is a stigma or a negative connotation associated with the word "feminist," Buschman and Lenart (1996) had female participants read statements that endorsed women's equality, but manipulated the items on the scale so that they saw either "feminist" or "women's movement" (p. 66). The term "feminist" resulted in less endorsement of the equality movement than when the same item used the term "women's movement" (Buschman & Lenart, 1996, p. 72). This finding further demonstrates that the

negative stigma associated with feminism is specifically directed towards the word itself and not the values of the movement.

However, there is a gap in the research about feminist self-identification. Most studies have neglected to involve male participants, which potentially overlooks factors that contribute to men's feminist identification. One study that did assess feminism in men measured morality, feminist identity, and political ideology. The non-feminist men were more likely to think of sexism as harmless, which led them to not identify as feminists (Precopio & Ramsey, 2017). Another study examined the effects of priming stereotypical and counter-stereotypical gender roles in men and women. Men had more acceptance of traditional gender roles when they were primed with stereotypical roles whereas women did not (de Lemus et al., 2015). The current study hopes to fill the gap in the literature by including men in the research about feminist values.

Further, the current study expands upon the research on feminism by helping to identify if men hold a stigma about the word feminism and/or if they have less endorsement of the feminist movement because they are more likely to hold traditional values (de Lemus et al., 2015; Glick et al., 2015). Including men in the studies about feminism gives more insight into how to address stigma regarding feminism, particularly if there is a negative connotation about the word or an overall disdain for the movement. Prior research has concluded that those who hold more traditional gender role values are less likely to identify as feminists and that men are more likely to accept traditional gender roles (de Lemus et al., 2015; Yakushko, 2007), but including men in the current study would help to determine if there is a relationship between men holding traditional gender roles and their self-identification to feminism.

The current study provides further insight into whether there is still a stigma associated with feminism and whether there is a difference in the amount of stigma between men and women. Similar to Buschman and Lenart (1996), the current study compares the effect of manipulating the term *feminism/feminist* versus *women's movement/women* on the participants' endorsement on a scale with the same items about the movement of fighting for gender equality. In addition, it examines participants' gender as a quasi-independent variable. The dependent variables for this study are endorsement of feminism, acceptance of traditional gender roles, and personal activism.

Hypothesis 1 concerns gender differences; based on past research (de Lemus et al., 2015), it is expected

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that men would endorse feminism and activism less than women but have more acceptance of traditional gender roles than women. Hypothesis 2 concerned the effect of condition; consistent with past research (Buschman & Lenart, 1996), participants reading items referencing *women's movement/women* are expected to endorse feminism more than participants reading the same items referring to *feminism/feminist*. Hypothesis 3 is rooted in the research that men are more likely to hold traditional gender role beliefs (de Lemus et al., 2015) and for that reason, are less likely to identify as feminists or endorse values/beliefs in the movement for gender equality regardless of which term is being used (Liss et al., 2001). Thus, Hypothesis 3 concerns the interaction between participant gender and condition; specifically, the *women's movement/women* condition is expected to produce greater endorsement of feminist attitudes (including more activism and less acceptance of traditional gender roles; O'Neil et al., 1993; Yakushko, 2007) for women compared to men, whereas no gender difference is expected for the *feminism/feminist* condition.

Method

Participants

The participants were 100 undergraduate students in a General Psychology course at a small Midwestern college, recruited using an online participation system. Because analyses were planned to be conducted by gender, participant gender was tracked to achieve a minimum number of men in the sample; there were no further criteria for inclusion or exclusion. There were 64 women and 36 men, with an average age of 18.78 ($SD = 1.40$). A majority of the participants were White (80%); 14% were African American, 5% were Hispanic, and 1% identified themselves as another ethnicity. One participant was removed from the data because there was a mistake in the presentation of materials, but there were no further exclusions from the data.

Procedure

The study received IRB approval before beginning data collection, and participants were treated consistently with IRB and APA standards. The first author was responsible for data collection. The participants signed up for the study, came to the lab, and completed the measures with a pencil and paper with as much time as they needed, although they did not take more than fifteen minutes. After obtaining informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions (i.e., *women's movement/women* vs. *feminism/feminist*) through the wording of the feminism scale. Participants then completed measures of acceptance of traditional

gender roles, activism, and demographics, including an item that assessed feminist identification. Participants received course credit for their participation.

Measures

Endorsement of Feminism. *The Feminist and Women's Movement* (FWM; Fassinger, 1994) scale measures attitudes towards the women's movement. The scale served as the manipulation; the scale was modified to refer only to "women's movement/women" or "feminism/feminist." There were ten items, and participants were asked to respond with their attitudes about the statements. An example item is "*The women's movement/Feminism* has positively influenced relationships between men and women." The participants responded on a Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater endorsement. Both versions of the scale had high reliability (both $\alpha = .88$).

Acceptance of Traditional Gender Roles and Activism. Two subscales of the *Gender Role Journey Scale* (O'Neil et al., 1993) were used to assess participants' acceptance of traditional gender roles (10 items; e.g., *I am responsible for changing restrictive gender roles*) and their personal-professional activism against sexism (11 items; e.g., *Women should be the primary caretakers of children*). Participants responded on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate greater acceptance of traditional gender roles and more activism. Both acceptance of traditional gender roles ($\alpha = .82$) and activism ($\alpha = .90$) had high reliability.

Demographics. Along with indicating their gender and age, participants indicated their feminist identification using the item *I label myself as a feminist* on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), as in previous studies (e.g., Myaskovsky & Wittig 1997). The demographics questionnaire was collected after the preceding measures, as to not prime the participant with the word "feminist."

Results

Table 1 shows univariate statistics for the sample and correlations between variables. Participants (collapsing across conditions) generally were at the midpoint of the scale for endorsement of feminism, but acceptance of traditional gender roles was below the midpoint. There was low to moderate gender activism and feminist identification, although feminist identification was more variable. All correlations between these variables, examined separately for men

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for All Variables

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	Correlations by gender				
		1	2	3	4	5
1. Endorsement	42.55 (8.59)	-	-.50*	.52*	.51*	.52*
2. Acceptance of roles	2.27 (0.77)	-.69*	-	-.61*	-.38*	-.36*
3. Activism	3.43 (0.91)	.72*	-.58*	-	.50*	.27
4. Feminist identification	3.21 (1.62)	.73*	-.46*	.72*	-	.43*
5. Political affiliation	3.33 (1.34)	.51*	-.49*	.38*	.45*	-

Note. * $p < .05$. Correlations for men are above and women below the diagonal

and women, were significant except one (i.e., men’s activism was not correlated with feminist identification). Participants – both men and women – who endorsed feminism or women’s movement more also reported more activism, greater feminist identification, more liberal political affiliation, and less acceptance of traditional gender roles. Acceptance of traditional gender roles was negatively correlated with all other variables.

A 2 (Participant Gender: men vs. women) x 2 (Condition: women’s movement/women vs. feminism/feminist) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted to test hypothesis 3. The results showed a significant main effect of Participant’s Gender, $F(1, 96) = 11.18, p = .001, \eta^2 = .10$. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, men ($M = 38.89, SD = 9.09$) endorsed feminism significantly less than women ($M = 44.61, SD = 7.60$). There was also a significant main effect of Condition, $F(1, 96) = 4.03, p = .047, \eta^2 = .04$. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants in the women’s movement condition ($M = 44.50, SD = 8.22$) endorsed feminism more than participants in the feminism condition ($M = 40.60, SD = 8.56$). There was no interaction between Participant’s Gender and Condition, $F(1, 96) < 1$, contrary to Hypothesis 3. Although the interaction was not significant, the cell means shown in Table 2 show a trend with a larger

gender difference for the women’s movement (vs. feminist) condition, with women in that condition showing the highest endorsement of feminism.

Because feminist identification had high correlations with dependent variables (i.e., endorsement of feminism, activism, and acceptance of traditional gender roles), feminist identification was added to all further analyses as a covariate, which provides a stricter test of the hypothesis.¹ Therefore, we analyzed endorsement of feminism again using a 2 (Participant Gender: men vs. women) x 2 (Condition: women’s movement/women vs. feminism/feminist) between-subjects factorial ANCOVA controlling for feminist identification. As expected, the covariate was significant, $F(1,95) = 67.87, p < .001, \eta^2 = .42$, and there was a significant effect of Condition on endorsement of feminism when controlling for feminist identification, $F(1, 94) = 6.16, p = .015, \eta^2 = .06$. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants in the women’s movement condition ($M = 44.50, SD = 8.22$) endorsed feminism significantly more than participants in the feminism condition ($M = 40.60, SD = 8.56$) when controlling for feminist identification.² Contrary to Hypothesis 1 and 3, there were no significant effects of Participant Gender or the interaction between Participant’s Gender and Condition, $ps > .32$.

Table 2

Univariate Statistics for Feminist Endorsement by Condition and Gender

Condition	Men	Women
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Feminist	37.84 (10.51)	42.49 (6.77)
Women’s movement	40.05 (7.33)	46.79 (7.79)

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Activism was examined using 2 (Participant's Gender: men vs. women) x 2 (Condition: women's movement/women vs. feminism/feminist) between-subjects factorial ANCOVA controlling for feminist identification. Again, the covariate was significant, $F(1, 95) = 67.15, p < .01, \eta^2 = .42$. There was a significant interaction of Participant's Gender and Condition on activism when controlling for feminist identification, $F(1, 94) = 3.98, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$. Planned comparisons ($p < .05$, as in Fisher's LSD test) indicated that there was no difference between men's ($M = 3.20, SD = 0.94$) and women's ($M = 3.39, SD = 0.87$) activism in the feminist condition, $p = .48$; however, women reported more activism ($M = 3.86, SD = 0.88$) than men ($M = 2.91, SD = 0.61$) in the women's movement condition, $p < .01$. There were no significant main effects of Participant's Gender or Condition, $ps > .39$.

Acceptance of traditional gender roles was examined using 2 (Participant Gender: men vs. women) x 2 (Condition: women's movement/women vs. feminism/feminist) between-subjects factorial ANCOVA controlling for feminist identification. Again, the covariate was significant, $F(1, 95) = 20.13, p < .01, \eta^2 = .18$. There was a significant main effect of Participant's Gender on acceptance of traditional gender roles when controlling for feminist identification, $F(1, 95) = 6.30, p = .014$. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, men ($M = 2.65, SD = 0.79$) endorsed traditional gender roles more than women ($M = 2.05, SD = 0.68$) when controlling for feminist identification. There was a significant interaction of Participant's Gender and Condition on acceptance of traditional gender roles when controlling for feminist identification, $F(1, 95) = 5.16, p = .025, \eta^2 = .05$. Planned comparisons indicated that there was no difference between men's ($M = 2.45, SD = 0.94$) and women's ($M = 2.21, SD = 0.87$) acceptance of traditional gender roles in the feminist condition, $p = .25$; however, women reported less acceptance of traditional gender roles ($M = 1.99, SD = 0.88$) than men ($M = 2.86, SD = 0.61$) in the women's movement condition, $p < .01$. There were no other significant effects ($p > .68$).

Discussion

This study examined whether endorsement of feminism would depend on the label referenced in scale (i.e., feminism vs. women's movement) and participant gender to determine if there is a stigma associated with the word feminist. The study also wanted to identify factors linked to feminist identification. The current study had the following hypothesis, Hypothesis 1 expected that men would endorse feminism and activism less than women but have more acceptance of traditional gender roles than

women. Hypothesis 2 was that participants reading items referencing *women's movement/women* were expected to endorse feminism more than participants reading the same items referring to *feminism/feminist*. Hypothesis 3 concerned the interaction between participant's gender and condition; specifically, the *women's movement/women* condition was expected to produce greater endorsement of feminist attitudes (including more activism and less acceptance of traditional gender roles) for women compared to men, whereas no gender difference was expected for the *feminism/feminist* condition.

Prior research showed stigma related to feminism, with women reporting that they have feminist values but not self-identifying as feminists (Fitz et al., 2012). Other research demonstrated stigma associated with the term feminism by manipulating scale items; participants who received the *women's movement* version of the scale reported higher levels of support for feminism than participants who received the scale that referenced "feminism" (Buschman & Lenart, 1996). However, prior studies examined these effects only among women. Our research found differences in men's and women's endorsement of and reactions to the term *feminism* vs. *women's movement*. It also demonstrates the continued stigma associated with feminism.

Although prior research has studied men's and women's feminism independently of each other, the current study included both men and women. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, male participants endorsed feminism significantly less than female participants. Although there was no gender difference found for activism, men reported more acceptance of traditional gender roles than women when controlling for feminist identification. Thus, men endorsed feminism less and accepted gender roles more than women in our sample. Research has shown that men are more likely to endorse traditional gender roles and that those who accept traditional gender roles are less likely to identify as feminists (de Lemus et al., 2015; Yakushko, 2007). The current study's findings show that there is a direct relationship, wherein men are more likely to hold traditional gender roles and thus, are less likely to endorse feminism, and as a result, will not identify as feminists.

Hypothesis 2 concerned the overall effect of the term "feminism" on attitudes. Participants in the *women's movement* condition endorsed feminism more than participants in the *feminism* condition, in support of Hypothesis 2 and replication of past research (Buschman & Lenart, 1996). Further, this effect continued to be significant even when controlling for feminist identification, which suggests a large and robust effect of terminology. Our study

suggests continued stigma around the term “feminism” in society nowadays, specifically because of the word and not because of what the movement intends to do. This conclusion can be drawn because participants in the women’s movement condition were more likely to endorse the actions and goals of working towards equality for women than participants in the feminist condition. Because of the continued negative associations with feminism in society, people may be less likely to endorse the movement and self-identify with the ideology, though they support its goals. Less identification with feminism and support for the movement is detrimental to the individuals who miss the benefits on well-being (Yakushko, 2007) and to society still working to address gender issues (e.g., #MeToo movement to bring awareness to gender issues and specifically sexual violence against women).

Hypothesis 3 extended previous research by examining whether negative responses to feminism (vs. women’s movement) depended on participant gender. There was limited evidence of this interaction for endorsement of feminism, but other attitudes relevant to feminism demonstrated the interaction. In partial support for Hypothesis 3, women reported more activism and less acceptance of traditional gender roles in the *women’s movement* condition than men, when controlling for feminist identification; however, there was no gender difference in the feminism condition. The terms *feminism* and *women’s movement* had differing effects on men and women. Women may be more motivated to distance themselves from feminism, given the negative associations, by reducing their endorsement of feminist attitudes as it was seen in previous research (Buschman & Lenart, 1996), and the support of Hypothesis 2 for the current study. Exposure to feminism in men, however, may prime more socially conscious attitudes that shift their attitudes toward women more generally.

More research is needed to examine why men continue to endorse feminism less than women. Although a significant effect for gender was found, our sample of male participants was smaller than the female sample, which may have limited our ability to detect a significant interaction between condition and gender for feminist endorsement. Future research should continue to examine men’s endorsement of feminism and self-identification with feminism. Although this study found continued stigma about the word and a discrepancy in self-identification and holding feminist values, future qualitative research could identify why men and/or women do not identify as feminists. Also, future experimental research could examine the stigma associated with feminism by providing a definition, which could indicate whether a

short definition – or which definition – could reduce stigma. Although this study chose to focus on men and women, future research also could examine different cultural considerations and ideologies about the term feminist and the endorsement of feminist values.

By including at least, a small sample of men in this study, men were directly compared with women, which provides a baseline for future research to expand on men’s attitudes towards feminism. Participant’s gender is a quasi-independent variable, which limits internal validity; a relationship between gender and attitudes about feminism is demonstrated but quasi-independent variables do not allow researchers to identify causality. However, the internal validity of this study is high for the terminology manipulation, given the survey items were the same with the exception of their reference to *feminism* vs. *women’s movement*, which was randomly assigned. As such, this small manipulation produced reliable changes across several measures related to feminist attitudes.

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrated that men endorsed feminism less than women, and that exposure to “feminism” vs. “women’s movement” reduced endorsement of feminist attitudes, especially among women. Specifically, men and women responded differently to this manipulation, with women reporting more activism and less acceptance of traditional gender roles than men in the “women’s movement” condition. This study adds to the literature by examining endorsement of feminism across gender, but more research is needed on why this discrepancy occurs. Women may distance themselves from the stigma of feminism by not only failing to identify as feminist but by shifting their attitude to be less feminist. The implication of the study is that feminism is still stigmatized and negatively stereotyped for women, although reminders of feminism may bring men’s attitudes more in line with women’s attitudes.

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Footnote

¹ We argue that including feminist identity is a stronger test because previous research and our analyses indicate that men are less likely to identify as feminist. Therefore, controlling for feminist identification is also partially controlling for gender differences.

² This effect was also significant when controlling for political affiliation rather than feminist identification. The patterns were similar when substituting political affiliation for feminist identification.