

# How can we resist to feminism? The Feminist Movement in a media-centric society<sup>1</sup>.

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## Abstract

One social movement that nowadays exemplifies the role of the media in shaping social issues is the feminist movement: the generation known as “the millennials” has become more interested and curious about feminism because of the number of powerful media figures who, in the last three-five years, have been expressing their opinion declaring that they are feminist. The Women’s March in Washington (January 2017) saw the presence and the active participation of many popular artists who voiced their support to the march and to the feminist perspective. This scenario leads to some questions that in the paper are addressed: what does the presence of these celebrities, declaring in public rally their support to the cause, means to the feminist movement? How the *commodification* of feminism through these celebrities leads them to have an influence in the socio-political-cultural-economic system? For a better understanding on how the feminism filtered by testimonials and continuously re-shaped by the media is a political process in itself and is now part of the idea that we have of feminism as a fundamental political and social movement, the paper will discuss some theories and terms.  
keywords: feminism, celebrities, media, language, commodification.

## 1. Feminism and the media

Living in a media-centric society, it is not surprising that our perceptions, understanding and interpretation of societal issues are influenced by what we encounter in the media sphere. In the last three-five years, the youngest generations have been expressing their curiosity in feminism mostly because of the number of powerful figures who, in different public occasions, declared they were feminist advocating for gender equality.

In the same direction can be seen the active participation of actors and actresses, music artists, performers, writers and journalists to the Women March in Washington in January 2017: they were very vocal about being feminist and they granted support and a wide echo to the March in their social media sites (Chen 2017).

This situation leads to questioning – first- what does the presence of these celebrities in public rallies means to the feminist movement? And – second- how their “marketing strategy” leads them to have an influence in our perception of feminism?

Feminism has always had its celebrities (Taylor 2017), stating from the literary works of fiction and non-fiction that, in the first and second wave of the movement, paved way for its authors to be famous and transcend to other artists on a more popular genre.

A clear example would be how, in the sixties, Aretha Franklin influenced the movement through one of her most famous songs, “Respect according to some experts, this song became a transformative moment

not only for Franklin’s career, but also for the women rights and civil rights struggle in general” (NPR Music 2017). Nevertheless, the use of celebrities to advance the feminist issues was generally seen by the critique as anti-feminist. As Taylor indicates, those celebrities who speak about the feminist movement in their works or personal advocacies, are the ones who are ‘selling out’ the movement, privileging their own personal success instead of fostering the collective dimension, which is the main feature of feminism throughout history (Taylor 2017).

From a different perspective, the new media that are at the basis of the widespread popularity of most of the artists involved in the word-hold on feminism can be seen as a “liberated” platform leading to a more reflective type of feminism, critical of the individualism in society (Shwartz 2015). In this perspective, Hobson expressed that celebrity feminism invites us to view public women beyond arguments on victimization, agency and, most importantly, beyond the symbols and icons that the feminists themselves have used for their own purpose (Hobson 2016). According to Hobson, celebrity feminism permits us to ask questions not just around gendered subjectivity, but about what it might mean to be identified as a politicized woman and especially as a feminist (Taylor 2017).

Although it is crucial in this media-centric society to have personal manifestos in order to symbolically interact with others on social issues, there is no concrete definition of what it means to be a feminist or having a feminist perspective, except for the fact that every person seems to be united in the idea that being a feminist means “achieving the goal to promote equality among sexes in all spheres of the society”. Which is certainly a great achievement, but does not exude the meanings of the question.

2. We (the consumers), the pop stars (the sellers) and feminism (the goods)

To highlight the idea that this paper seeks to answer, the influence of famous pop stars on the modern concepts of “feminism” and “gender advocacy”, will be used to put into evidence how pop culture has become integrated into them.

In examining the influence of a celebrity like – for example- Beyoncé, the research is guided by the following questions: how did she become a “representative” of the feminist movement? Is she indeed an *influencer* of the movement, or is she representing just a *mean* to discuss issues that the feminist movement is advocating for in society?

This section will explore how Beyoncé’s self-representation helped her, a woman of colour, gain access to power within the patriarchal system of the music industry. In analysing this aspect of the issue, Schwartz

<sup>1</sup> Dedicated to the memory of Prof. Monia Andreani

cited the argument of bell hooks, according to whom Beyoncé's self-representation is not for herself, but for the people watching/listening to her (Schwartz 2015). This can be seen as a sort of tactic, in order to infiltrate the system and achieve the goal of using it for another agenda. Actually, as Schwartz's points out, Beyoncé has been able to effectively use the framework of patriarchy in order to subvert it with some of her music by building on audiences.

This can be observed in the evolution of her production, starting from the commercialization of the concept of *independent woman*.

According to Schwartz, media, its content, the celebrities and their platforms serve to gather part of people's lives ("if she can do it I can do it too"). (Schwartz 2015). Furthermore, media has become a space where publics can express, critique, engage in a constructive way and create rooms for the voices that have often been erased, and this beyond their social and economic differences. But media are, most of all, a big "market" where you can "sell&buy" things and/or share ideas, and everybody should be conscious that small things such as the daily choices they make - within and through the media- the things we "like" (and the "like" we share), all these actions have an impact in the society. This is the reason why scholars and authorities from different fields are increasingly taking into account these everyday choices and interactions people make, in order to understand where the society is going, what the needs of the people are, and how to implement better policies. Alternatively, from another point of view, in order to foresee their needs and then offer and sell them what they are supposed to "want" (Harris 2018).

So the fact that Beyoncé is fighting patriarchy saying she is a "feminist" and using the language of the pop culture is something to think about and take into account - especially because people "like" it. Of course, this does not mean that Beyoncé is really a feminist, but it means that people want to express on this topic; they are interested in calling themselves "feminist" and tackle this issue.

So how did a celebrity like Beyoncé emerge? It is not the music moguls who gave her the power to become a reference point; rather, are the consumers - the people- those who gave celebrities that power, through a commodification of the brand they present.

### 3. Celebrities' feminism as a "space to talk"

*Commodification* is a term derived from the Marxist theory of commodity (Dragstedt 1976) defined as an object that *satisfies human needs* of whatever kind. In the sphere of the consumer culture (Miles 2015) and

in the media-centric society, the consumption of the *capital* that these objects contains may influence our acceptance of what may be different, as well as the perception on social, political and cultural issues that affect the scheme of our society. In this study, the kind of capital being referred to, is closely related to the term *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986), whose meaning pertains to accumulated knowledge, behaviours and skills, which define the social status or standing of an individual in the society.

The kind of *cultural capital* that is exemplified in this paper is strongly linked to the concept of *consumption* of goods, in the sense of satisfaction of our social needs, part of which is how we commodify celebrities.

Since celebrities have more access to be given a platform (a public) and mark an influence to their avid consumers (the fans), we can understand what basically is happening in the development of what we have called *celebrity feminism*: performers and actresses' fame is the product of their public feminist enunciative practices, they are famous because of their identification with feminism and with the feminist movement.

According to Dockterman, Beyoncé has become the embodiment of modern feminism for a generation reluctant to even claim the word. Thanks to celebrities, there are now people who talk about women and gender related topics, because celebrities are able to use their cultural capital to open a discussion about it, and the new media are the platform for sharing these statements. (Dockterman 2013). This situation is more inclined towards the perception that other authors suggested (Lilburn, Magarey, Sheridan 2000): as a public persona, celebrities have the capacity to create a space for public debate; they use their cultural capital to create a space for discussion on issues that the feminist movement seeks to produce. Although celebrities and testimonials are viewed as depicting false feminism and a hindrance to the success of the most authentic issues of the feminist movement, it cannot be denied that they have been served to the purpose of bringing, faster and wider than ever, awareness to the cause (Hobson 2016; Ray 2013; Schwartz 2015; Taylor 2017).

### 3. Feminism and the New Media

In the case addressed by this research, new media help to create an inclusive network in order to make the feminist movement more accessible and valuable to women of different age and with different backgrounds and experiences (Schwartz 2015). They build a platform that transcends all socio-political and cultural demographics, bringing people from across backgrounds and location creating a unique kind

of “public”, a sort of self-organized network among strangers who are united by a reflexive discourse on a particular content.

It is true that the fight for inequality experienced by women and other categories of people has always been publicly organized, but the difference from the past is the availability of a wide range of platforms for communication and a growing number of pop culture personalities coming out as feminist and supporting the cause (Schwartz 2015). Organizations such as the United Nations, ask for the help of celebrities to represent the cause of inequalities (Bahou 2017). Even the manner of our electoral and political system is influenced by celebrities, due to the social media, the new mean of communication that allows all the individuals to express their opinions about any type of social situations as well as to share information they found about the issues they are passionate about.

As Schwartz pointed out, celebrities and the organizations around them have, in one way or another used the “old” mass media (one-way communication) and the “new” social media (two-way communication) to generate new type of political organization and cultural critique.

Case at point would be the contribution of Oprah Winfrey on instating Barak Obama as the first Black American President. As Chambers stated in an article on the Daily Mail (2014), Obama had no stronger ally than Oprah throughout his first campaign for president, including the time he was competing against Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party nomination. Recently, Beyoncé showed support for Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign by joining it, in an attempt to appeal to young and minority voters, not necessarily motivated to vote for Clinton.

These two pop culture icons – Beyoncé and Oprah – show how consumption of their brand can lead to a great cultural capital, able to influence the social, political and cultural scheme of the society. The same situation is happening in advocating the feminist movement: the presence of celebrities who demonstrate activism using the new media as a platform of communication, creates a democratic space for consumers to praise, critique and engage in an interactive manner, making it easy and comfortable to exchange dialogue about the perspectives of women, men and other genders on the issues presented by different advocacies embodying the goal of the feminist movement.

The invitation for dialogue that the new media promotes helps us in learning about the different marginalization that people experience: throughout the waves of feminism, most of the issues addressed by the movement were those that were relevant to women with class privileges, leaving the “rest” of the female

population marginalized.

The incorporation of other gender issues with the movement shows that there is still a wider range of individuals experiencing discrimination who need space and words.

#### 4. Re- shaping the discourse

According to bell hooks, women’s liberation movement primarily called attention to issues relevant to women with class privileges and this is why equal pay, sexist representation of women and reproductive rights obtained attention, due to the class privilege the forerunners of the early waves of feminism have had (Hooks 1989). On the other hand, those who didn’t have access to facilities and information like women from rural areas, indigenous women and women from other socio-cultural backgrounds, as well as those being discriminated based on their gender, have been resolutely overlooked (Davis 1981).

Even today, there are societies –our society first- in which the issue of gender discrimination is not addressed enough and, although in presence of specific laws, there is still a huge number of women and people in general, who are still experiencing discrimination because of the stereotyped notions of the patriarchal system. This means that marginalization is still present within the circle of women and other genders, leading an individual to question the intention of the feminist movement (Crenshaw 1989).

It is not a matter of emphasizing the context on the subject of women of colour, since the second wave of feminism sought to address the voices and the experiences of these women as forefront of the feminist theories (Trier-Bieniek 2015). It is a matter of being aware that the marginalization of women and other genders based on race and class still persists, in clear contradiction with the notion of feminism, which is to have equality among sexes and to take a collective organized action to eliminate patriarchy (Schwartz 2015).

From the Nineties on, the third wave of feminism has shown a different approach, trying to address the concern on marginalization by appealing to participants to be reflective of their experiences, showing a better convergence of multiple marginalization and creating an intersectional interpretation of these experiences. But the question that can still rise (and indeed it has been risen many times) is: how can we bring forth a solid front to subdue patriarchy if within the movement there are so many nuances and no clear understanding on achieving the goal? Here the new media might be helpful to the movement: they can translate/transmit what the movement wants to achieve on a public level, wherein people can easily comprehend

the complexity of achieving equality among sexes. The ability of new media to reach people from different backgrounds and experiences can be useful to create an inclusive space eradicating the discriminant part of the concepts of “class” and “gender” in a democratic form of interaction, which in a way consists of having a lens to see the flaws of the movement and address it.

Trier-Bieniek discussed in her book that the combination of pop culture and feminism in the third wave allowed new generations of feminist to be who they want to be adding to this a political – public, collective- consciousness (Trier-Bieniek 2015). Today, the possibilities given by the platform of the new media show how individuals – alone, behind the video of our computer- can massively contribute to the mechanism of the society simply by interacting in a multi-communication space.

As justified by Trier-Bieniek, the fact that what “we consume” can become more available to masses in different forms of brand; consuming is an “influential act” and this happens also when pop culture impacts the feminist discourse, showing the connection among identities, the need for socialization and the media (Trier-Bieniek 2015). The concept reflects the point that bell hooks contends, when she states that the current feminism aims to achieve a kind of feminism wherein individuals have their own stance that acknowledge the ways that women from multiple background experience marginalization and reflectivity of their identity (Dinez, Humez 1995).

Through the platform offered by the new media the movement is no longer, limiting the scope of feminism to women, but it can reach other genders, men included: according to hooks, the new media are able to create a space for dialogue and discussion that helps to bring feminist consciousness to males, which is essential to the movement.

Furthermore, dialogues within the new media space could foster a realistic standpoint on gender exploitation.

In this scenario figures like Beyoncé can emerge for their capacity of using their cultural capital to make people listen to the issues of marginalization that women and other genders face through their music or involvement in social cause, making pop culture that useful and effective “language” capable to bring in awareness on how inequality and gender are linked in our culture (Trier-Bieniek 2015). Moreover, the dialogues fostered through the new media and the influence of celebrities bring awareness on experience of marginalization, creating an intersectional approach in understanding these occurrences. Beyoncé’s ability to reach a large audience through her songs,

allows her to build a larger platform and direct more fans to intersectional criticism and scholarship. This shows how celebrities, although criticized and castigated as “terrorists” and “slave” (Hooks) or proclaimed icons of feminism (Harris-Perry) (Hobson 2015) can, nevertheless, facilitate a democratic platform to discuss issues the most individuals – young individuals- usually evade.

## 5. Beyoncé’s Feminist Discourse

Popular music provides opportunities for people to participate in aesthetic, political and cultural activities (Bigelow 2014). However, like any other brand in the market, not everyone buys the feminism Beyoncé has been selling so far. The display of agreement and contradiction of people towards Beyoncé’s association with feminism shows that individuals can create a dialogue on the kind of feminism that appeals to them, and not be restricted to the usual notion of what “a feminist” should be.

The manner of how Beyoncé is selling her product agrees with Holt’s view on branding, which forges extraordinary alliance between potentially antagonistic positions, reflecting on how our consumption of brands resonates or influence our socio-political standpoint in the issues that we have in our society and how we identify our own brand of feminism (Holt 2002). What makes Beyoncé’s way of exhibiting feminism different from other artists is how she is not just pushing her perspective to her audience; rather she uses her platform to “educate” her fan-based public about feminist issues, such as gender inequality (Schwartz 2015, p. 49). Unlike Madonna, who repeatedly claims that she is a feminist and she is subduing patriarchy, but the general feeling is that she pushes people to believe *her* marque of feminism (Sherwin 2016), Beyoncé’s use of her brand to promote awareness of gender inequality makes an *individual* think. People can process their own choice on her claims, conforming or criticizing the artist’s message.

According to Holt today’s consumers are aware of what a brand can symbolize for them (Holt 2002). Beyoncé is certainly aware of how the public will react to her declaration of being a feminist. This is why, as bell hooks pointed out, she is careful with how she represents herself: her self-representation is for the people who are watching her (Schwartz 2015), without losing a personal side of her person to her public persona.

Beyoncé is able to demonstrate that consumers are more aware of how they assert their identity through their brand choices and she uses new media to influence the way women actively or passively express

their resistance to patriarchy and other social issues. Furthermore, she also uses this platform to validate that not all burdens that women experience should be shouldered by everyone: she makes us believe that we have a choice, because we are rational beings, we have to own up to our decisions and we have to take pride in ourselves because that is how we, as women or just as individuals, can collectively and independently empower each other.

This kind of feminism emulates that, what oppress women and the other marginalized individuals, should not be feared, and people should be aware of the reality: it is reasonably impossible to eradicate the patriarchal system completely, there will be always new ways to marginalize, and discriminate people based on gender and/or socio-political-cultural-economic background. However, we have a choice on how we deal with these experiences, on how we can subdue patriarchy from participating within the system, how we choose our beliefs, express our opinions and take a stand on social issues. In addition, we have freedom to deliberate the type of feminism that works for us, because it all falls under the same goal to achieve equality among sexes and gender.

If this is the kind of feminism promoted by most of the celebrities, are they then considered as personalities embodying the movement or just a gateway for feminism to be recognized through creating spaces of dialogue using new media?

## 6. Feminism “in the right package”

What Hobson stated in his article on the question of the role of celebrities in the feminist movement (Hobson 2016) represents a critical-analytical answer to the commentary made by Gay, who wrote about the complication of incorporating celebrities in the “re-branding” of feminism. This author stated that today people easily accept feminism and feminist messages when presented in the right package, which means that brand ambassadors and celebrity endorsements are required in order to make the world a more equitable place (Gay 2014). Nothing new one can argue, since feminism has always had its celebrities and it has always been a part of our consumer culture to have brand ambassadors and celebrity endorsers—they help to attract attention to merchandise promoted for consumption. The same goes for the presence of celebrities in the feminist movement: if these personalities are able to catch our attention with their association to the movement, the strategy works and this is a basic marketing and advertising approach. Although it is important to stress on the fact that, as individuals, we have the right to choose, it should be clear that this means that, no matter how many ce-

lebrities associate themselves with the movement, it is within our digression if their feminism appeals to us. When we choose to be “feminist” or follow a certain ideology, we become part of the movement and not just a gateway for other people to notice and discuss about feminism. Individual empowerment leads to collective empowerment, connoting that one individual associating with feminism and offering a platform for discussion constitutes for eventual collective group organizing to execute activities for the feminist movement.

Let us assume that there are people who are ignorant about what feminism means and about what it aims to achieve, and let us pretend that people avoid conversations about the marginalization that women and other genders are experiencing, as Gay claims in his article (Gay 2014). Since information is easily available nowadays on the Internet and on old and new media platforms, it is not proper to assert that people are ignorant or avoid conversations on the issues attributed to feminism. We are all aware that there are still societies that do not openly discuss about these issues, however, when we look into the new media we can see more and more people discuss about feminism from across spectrums and social spheres. This is not happening because of the presence of celebrities, but it is due to people’s giving out opinion on the subject of feminism from what they read and heard and other sources that are not associated with the entertainment industry.

Another point raised by Gay was that people celebrate the feminism of the celebrities even when they avoid the actual work of feminism. Let us not generalize that all celebrities, who associates themselves with the movement, avoids the actual work of feminism, because the simple act of incorporating feminism in their work, art, music and other mediums is already a contribution to the movement. Beyoncé’s last songs creatively incorporate notions of the issues that women and other genders face. She has efficiently used her platform, aware that she is working under a patriarchal system, to promote the different experiences of women; this display of pride, as previous discussed, can be considered in itself a “feminist act” (Gay 2014).

Furthermore, as Hobson discussed in her article, some academic feminists—including hooks—demanded that Beyoncé express a more deeply engaged feminism beyond sexual expression, since she gave us her visually stunning black feminist masterpiece *Lemonade*, featuring another writer, the Somali-British poet Warsan Shire. Academics reframe this and turn it into an intellectual source, such as Candice Benbow’s popular *Lemonade Syllabus* (Benbow 2016),

clarifying that certain celebrities are articulating and theorizing critical issues pertaining to gender and its intersections with race and class for mass audience (Hobson 2016).

The platform that the celebrities create for the movement does not mean that their involvement ends there: they are a part of the movement, as any individuals who choose to participate -actively or passively- in any social group. Others may argue that celebrities are public persona and they should serve as a model of active participation. The fact that they choose to associate themselves with the feminist movement, given that they are operating under a patriarchal system, is the proof that they choose to represent and be a part of the movement and not just a gateway used as marketing strategy for a cause. They invite us to view public women beyond the arguments of victimization and agency and beyond the symbols and icons, we usually associate with the movement. Celebrity feminism offers us a different lens and their access to social media makes the complex issues that the feminist movement instigates easily understandable to every individual, regardless of the background. Furthermore, these artists and performers make the ideals of feminism part of our everyday life, promoting that feminism is for everybody, whether we choose to reflect on the situation of our personal life or on a socio-political collective issue.

Feminism itself is a political process, participating in an array of feminist movements, and this means that celebrity feminism shows that people do not have to be confined to a specific identity or to a way of life, being it about individual empowerment to advocate collectively for equality and freedom of choice.

## 6. Conclusion

We are in an era in which information and communication are widely accessible and we should take advantage of it, as celebrities do, marketing themselves and their work, creating a platform to promote a dialogue on the advocacies they choose to represent.

This is what celebrities have contributed to the movement: the creation of spaces for dialogue on the social issues we face in our society. However, we have to remember that it is we, the consumers, who give them the cultural capital to have a podium to speak for a social or political movement.

Our consumption's choices are part of our everyday life and so is the feminism that celebrities promote and we consume. Celebrities' feminism comes into play when their brand of feminism either mirrors or contradicts how we perceive it, and this allows us to have liberal-democratic stances on what feminism

means making it accessible to everyone.

On the other hand, the feminism promoted by the celebrities is strongly criticized for "selling out" the movement, promoting "false feminism" through seductive marketing campaign (Ray 2014). As Beyoncé put it: "I don't want calling myself feminist to make it feel that's my one priority over racism or sexism or anything else. If we believe in equal rights, the same way society allows a man to express his darkness, to express his pain, to express his sexuality, to express his opinion- I feel that women have the same rights" (Hobson 2016). Most celebrities did not impose to follow their perception on feminism, what they are inviting us to do is to sustain a dialogue with a multiplicity of voices. Thanks to the new media, they are - or can be- the door to access a huge platform of communication that permits us to exercise our choices, to sustain dialogues in order to deconstruct the system of oppression advocated by the social movements.

Another author (Schwartz 2015) stressed that the feminist movement has a long history of exclusion and marginalization of certain identities, which celebrity feminists address in a way that invites us to view women and other genders issues in an intersectional manner, beyond the symbols and icons most feminist fetishized (Hobson 2016).

Furthermore, we have to be conscious of our freedom to choose, sentient on our manner of consumption, because as part of the society, we have the responsibility to ensure that what we are doing in our everyday lives promotes a sustainable development and equal consensus. Scholars, authorities and other professionals should be conscious of the influence they give out and received; in this way we can find better solutions to the issues that societies face. Just as how some celebrities use their platform to consciously, advocate for the feminist movement.

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