

## **Beyoncé: Be However the F\*\*\*\*\* You Want**

Beyoncé. Three syllables represent a world pop sensation. Other labels too: A-list celebrity, successful businesswoman, visionary artist. But one label is perhaps her most intriguing and polarizing yet (and also three syllables)—feminist. Known for her iconic sex appeal and provocative music, Beyoncé Knowles has become a bold feminist in mainstream media. She has claimed ownership of her sexuality and identity as a woman through her art; having evolved her personal definition of feminism, she dares others to create their own.

Beyoncé's emergence as a feminist parallels her emergence as a musician. In 2010, at age 28, the singer took a year-long hiatus after her world tour. During this break, she denounced her stage persona, Sasha Fierce, which she previously introduced with her 2008 album, *I am... Sasha Fierce*. She had created her alter ego to separate her shy personality from the stage, to feel sexy while performing. But a few years later she felt confident enough to finally merge the two together (Crosley).

During this time Beyoncé also began managing her own career, previously managed by her father since she was nine. As a young woman, Beyoncé wanted to set the example that it was possible for women to own their own businesses and record labels ("Beyoncé - Year of 4"). As she took control of her music, she diversified her portfolio with 70s-90s funk and soul influences in her 2011 album (*Four*), which included the famous single "Run the World (Girls)", an empowering anthem sung by young women across the world (Nicholson). These actions show a pivot in her career, where she began to mature as an artist and a feminist.

In 2013 Beyoncé took greater risks. She surprised critics and fans alike with her fifth album (*Beyoncé*), a collection of 14 songs and 17 videos dropped onto iTunes without fanfare or hype from traditional distribution and promotion channels (Kot). The album broke iTunes sales records—828,773 copies worldwide in just three days, later going platinum and gold around the world (Caulfield "iTunes").

Beyoncé was critically acclaimed for visual storytelling that embraced darker themes and experimental production. The album addressed sexuality, fidelity, and power from a woman's perspective. A notable single from the album, "Flawless", is accompanied by a black and white music video with over 38 million views on Youtube ("Beyoncé - \*\*\*Flawless ft. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie"). The video combines innovative choreography with punk rock elements, for example a rejection of earlier feminine fashion in preference for freer, looser clothing (Kornhaber).

The music also samples a speech from Nigerian feminist and author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in which she criticizes the upbringing of boys and girls alike in gendered society, where boys are raised with assumptions of rape culture and girls are raised to see each other as competition for male attention ("We should all be feminists").

Around this time, Beyoncé publically announced her stance on feminism. While performing "Flawless" at the 2014 Video Music Awards, she stood onstage, a striking silhouette in front of a screen that proclaimed "FEMINIST" in bold block letters (Bennett). She dazzled millions of viewers and brought modern feminism to mainstream media. It was no coincidence that Beyoncé made the cover of *TIME* magazine as 2014's most influential person of the year (Sandberg). At the time, she had sold over 100 million copies of her albums as a solo artist (all of which debuted

at number one on the Billboard 200) and won 17 Grammy Awards (Kot). With such an unconventional release of her fifth album, she pushed her boundaries as an artist and made a powerful public statement.

The media has framed Beyoncé's relationship to feminism predominantly in terms of her sexuality. While she is embraced by many people across the world, she has also received backlash for her stage image. Author and activist Dr. Bell Hooks was quoted in a panel discussion calling Beyoncé's image "anti-feminist" and "assaulting", stating that she does not have control over her body, which stands for society's unhealthy fixation on wealth and fame— she pointed out "if Beyoncé was a homeless woman... or a poor, down-and out woman who looked the same way, would people be enchanted by her?" (Sieczkowski).

As an answer to this rhetorical question, clearly she would not have the same effects. However Beyoncé's position is her strength; it gives her a platform to declare her identity, and while people may disagree as to her effects on feminism, no one can deny her ability to bring the conversation to the general public.

In terms of feminism, sexuality is divided into two competing schools of thought: an objectification of the self versus empowerment and acceptance of the self. Many people, including Dr. Hooks, are concerned with the effects of sexualization on young women, who are more easily influenced than older woman and are still developing mentally and physically.

Singer Annie Lennox was quoted criticizing female performers like Beyoncé for their hypersexualization. Stage performances such as twerking "is not feminism," she said. "It's not liberating, it's not empowering. It's a sexual thing that you're doing on a stage... this overt sexuality thrust, literally, at particular audiences... I find it disturbing and I think it's exploitative, and it's troubling" ("You Cannot Go Back": Annie Lennox On 'Nostalgia').

There is clear concern for the portrayal of female bodies and the effects on young women. Previous research has shown that self-objectification is detrimental to the mental health of young women, and correlates to higher risk for depression, body dissatisfaction, and self-harm (Muehlenkamp, Swanson, & Brausch). Being exposed to overtly sexualized media messages carries a high risk factor on impressionable youths.

But completely rejecting sexual expression for young women can be damaging too. In a society that treats sexuality based on gender, a young woman may feel shame and confusion with sexual desire, a natural bodily response. For example, on the related act of masturbation, research has shown that women struggle more to reconcile the contradiction of self pleasure and social taboo while men generally recognize the act as healthy sexual development (Kaestle & Allen).

Research also supports the feminist theory that women may feel sexually empowered by focusing on their own pleasure and learning (Bowman), and that positive early childhood communication correlates to young women's positive views of their sexual selves and subsequent sexual activity (Hogarth, & Ingham). Rejecting sexuality can hamper development in this critical period, as feelings can be difficult to navigate without open conversations with peers and adult figures.

These two divisive opinions (sexuality as liberation or objectification), boil down to questions of audience and choice. Young women should grow up in an informed environment with the ability to cultivate their own version of femininity and feminism (and whether or not that includes sexual expression), without constant media bombardment of how they should look and act.

Author, TV host, and transgender activist Janet Mock believes gender equality and sexuality are not mutually exclusive. "They can exist in the same body at the same time" ("Janet

Mock on Beyoncé's Feminism"). When discussing Beyoncé's sexuality, she stated young girls who may not understand sexuality yet, "who are still finding how to express their own bodies and their own movements... [may be] confused about the image of Beyoncé." But Mock also believes it's important to let Beyoncé own her sense of sexuality, and she feels liberated by the singer's ability "to slough off all identity and respectability politics by saying 'I am Beyoncé, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a wife, and I am a sexual being'" ("Janet Mock on Beyoncé's Feminism.").

Beyoncé herself has acknowledged concerns for her audience. In reference to her fifth album, she stated "I always felt like it was my responsibility to be aware of kids and their parents and all these generations and I felt like it stifled me." But now she feels she has done so many things in her life and her career she has "earned the right to be me and to express any and every side of myself" ("Beyoncé - Self-Titled, Part 5.").

While creating Beyoncé, she birthed her first child, Blue Ivy. Her video for "Partition" stars herself as the lead in a noir; she wanted to explore the lost identity many women feel after giving birth, and reclaim her own. "Just because you become a mother, it doesn't mean you lose who you are," Beyoncé said. "I was this woman, this mother trying to get my focus and my dreams and my self back. I was very aware of the fact that I was showing my body. I wanted to show my body. I wanted to show that... you can have your child and still have fun and still be sexy and still have dreams and still live for yourself" (19). Beyoncé admitted that she probably would not have been able to express herself earlier, that she would've been too afraid of what other people thought. But finally accepting herself she said "I don't at all have any shame about being sexual.... I don't feel like I have to protect that side of me because I do believe that sexuality is a power that we all have (19)."

Embracing her full identity as a woman has empowered Beyoncé to create groundbreaking music and art. Her sixth album, *Lemonade*, was released in 2016 with an hour-long film of the same name. Record breaking sales made her the only act to have six albums debut at number one on the Billboard 200 (Caulfield "Lemonade"). She has created an entirely new genre, a mix between movie and music video, a reiteration of her visual album experience hinted in her previous works. Beyoncé combines startling elements like spoken poetry, experimental choreography, and cinematography. She is a diverse artist who has collaborated across music genres and is unafraid to take a sociopolitical stance in her art, supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and modern feminism, among others (Bale).

At the heart of her art she continues to share her experiences with the world. "I don't have to prove anything to anyone," she said. "I only have to follow my heart and concentrate on what I want to say to the world" ("Beyoncé - Year of 4"). She proves herself as a trailblazing artist. With her identity as a black woman tied closely to the music she creates, Beyoncé is unapologetic about her evolution as a feminist and encourages others to live their own definition of feminism.

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