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Exploring Young Women's Attitudes towards the Feminist Movement and Popular Music Artists' Claims to Feminism

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Abstract The last decade has seen a marked increase in public visibility of feminism. Numerous factors have contributed to this; not least the growing number of celebrities aligning themselves with the feminist movement. This has led to a shift in the way feminism is perceived in the public eye, having gone from being a taboo subject that celebrities routinely avoid and distance themselves from, to becoming increasingly trendy and popular. This article focuses on a cohort of celebrities who have been particularly vocal about their views on feminism in recent years - female pop artists with a large fanbase of young women.

This study explores young women's attitudes towards the feminist movement and these popstars' endorsements of feminism. It examines what effect, if any, they have had on young women's views about feminism. This research was carried out among female and non-binary students of NUI Galway using an online survey. Considering the difficulties the feminist movement has experienced in its attempts to reach young women in the past, this study makes a contribution to existing research on young women's engagement with feminism and elucidates the role of celebrities and pop artists.

Key Words: Feminism, Young Women, Celebrity, Pop artists, Stigma

Introduction

In the late 2010's, feminism experienced a bout of popularity quite unlike any in recent history. It was voted 'Word of the Year' in 2017 by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as it generated 70 percent more searches on their website that year than the year before (Merriam-Webster, 2017). It is no coincidence that, at the same time, celebrities were increasingly making it known that they supported the feminist movement (Gill, 2016; Hoskin, Jenson & Blair, 2017). Not only have they played a central role in bringing greater public attention to the subject of feminism, but they have also shaped ongoing debates around how feminism is understood as we move into the 2020's (Gill, 2016; Lawson, 2018).

Celebrities who have been particularly vocal about their views on feminism include well-known pop artists like Beyoncé. As her target market consists mainly of young women, many of her fans may be quite new to feminism, with previous encounters limited to negative stereotypes found in the mainstream media (Beck, 1998; Zeisler, 2016). Young women, thought to be apathetic and indifferent towards feminism, were referred to as 'postfeminist' by the media at the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century (Beck, 1998; Griffin, 2001; Aronson, 2003). The recent growth of public visibility and celebrity advocacy of feminism has, however, led to changes in the way the movement is portrayed and how young women are positioned in relation to feminism in the mainstream media (Gill, 2016).

Popular feminism, as it has become known, differs from other strands of feminism in several ways: not least that it is widely accessible across the digital landscape, particularly on social media. Therefore, it is not confined to niche groups or academia (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Most notably, and in stark contrast to other forms of feminism, it is liked, accepted, and possibly even admired within popular discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2018). While multiple strands of feminism continue to exist, such as radical, queer, and post-modern feminism, 'popular' feminism receives, by far, the most attention within mainstream public spaces (Hoskin, Jenson & Blair, 2017).

This raises the question: What are young women's thoughts around the subject of feminism in 2020? Furthermore, what are their views regarding the recent emergence of popular feminism in the last decade? Has listening to pop artists publicly claiming feminist identity affected their attitudes towards feminism? These are some of the questions that will be explored in this article, highlighting the potential for celebrity feminism to impact young women's views on the feminist movement, along with its limitations.

Literature Review

Young Women and Feminism

The most widely agreed upon definition of feminism is that it is a movement for the political, social, and economic equality of men and women (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). Interest in and openness to the feminist movement has varied throughout the years in line with the

broader social and political context. Different generations of women adopted and applied feminism to their lived reality, creating various 'waves' of feminism. During the 80's, 90's and into the 00's, young women were largely thought to be uninterested in the feminist movement and were considered by the media to be 'postfeminist', or to be 'done-with' feminism (Aronson, 2003). This created tension between the older generation, or 'second wave' feminists, and young women, who, it was claimed, did not appreciate the gains of their elders which they benefited from and did not seek further change (Aronson, 2003). Despite this, the late 80's and 90's witnessed a large number of young women reclaiming feminism, subsequently rejecting the notion that they were 'postfeminist' and giving rise to the 'third wave' of feminism (Kinser, 2004).

Third wave feminism differed significantly from the second wave, not least because it ensued from the immense social change achieved by the second wave (Kinser, 2004). While second wave feminism was characterised by activism, a collective struggle for equal rights and the rejection of commodity culture as a form of protest, third wave feminism was much more personal, focusing on individual expression and celebrating diversity (Mayhew, 2001). Intersectionality was central to its thinking and, as a result, many strands of feminism began emerging at that time (Winston *et al.*, 2012). Among them were 'Girllies', who reclaimed things considered stereotypically feminine that were shunned during the second wave such as knitting, nail polish and the colour pink (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). The concept of 'girl power' also arose at this time, celebrating female empowerment and independence, with British pop band 'The Spice Girls' the most widely recognisable embodiment of this (Munford, 2015). The legacy of these sub-factions continues to influence how feminism is understood today, particularly in mainstream media and popular culture.

Friction between different generations of feminists highlights the turbulent nature of young women's relationship to feminism. Such was the conflict that it was commonly referred to as the 'generations wars' in much of the literature (Budgeon, 2001). Despite young women leading the resurgence of feminism with the third wave, there remained a fear that most young women were indifferent to and disconnected from the women's movement (Griffin, 2001). Historically, research found that, rather than identify as feminists, young women tend to express feminist sentiments without labelling them as such (Renzetti, 1987; Aronson, 2003; Rudolfsdottir & Jolliffe, 2008). Recent studies uncovered a more complex picture, however, with young women reporting multi-faceted and often polarised attitudes towards feminism.

A poll conducted by the Fawcett Society in 2015 found 18-24-year olds the most likely group of women to identify as feminists, while simultaneously being the most likely to oppose it (Olchawski, 2016: 10; Fawcett Society, 2016: 14). In addition, women aged 18-24 were the most likely group to report not knowing what feminism stands for, with a quarter of women in this age group reporting that 'women and men are equal now' (Fawcett Society, 2016: 12; Olchawski, 2016: 8). This highlights why generalising and making claims about young women as one homogenous group is highly problematic (Griffin, 2001; Wilson, 2005). Another study done in 2019 by the Young Women's Trust proved more hopeful, with two-thirds of women aged 18-24 years reporting that they identify as feminists (Young Women's Trust, 2019). These studies show the wide ranging and often differing views young women hold towards feminism.

Media Representations of Feminism and Young Women

Media portrayals of the feminist movement are at the root of many of the challenges it continues to encounter, with the focus often centred on the supposed flaws of individual feminists, thereby stigmatising women who associate with it (Beck, 1998; Zeisler, 2016). Beck argues that the media's stereotyping of feminists as lesbians or 'dykes' has been highly effective at scaring young, heterosexual women away from feminism (1998: 143). The media's historically negative stereotyping of feminists has certainly impacted young women's willingness to associate with the women's movement.

Recent media representations of young women's relationship to feminism, however, could not be further from those of the late 20th and early 21st century. Gill (2016) describes this in her piece about the October 2015 edition of the free London Evening Standard magazine, released to coincide with students' return to university. 'New (gen) fem' was the headline, and, underneath, it read 'Neelam Gill Top Girl: In My Industry Women Earn More'¹ (Gill, 2016: 610). Articles included 'Today's Gender Warriors' and 'How To Date A Feminist' (Gill, 2016: 610). These articles reflect a shift within the mainstream media. Feminism has gone from being a repudiated and stigmatised identity, to becoming increasingly 'cool' (Gill 2016: 611; Hoskin, Jenson & Blair, 2017). This also signifies the continued existence of a postfeminist sensibility in which feminist values are both co-opted and depoliticised by the media, thus allowing them to be capitalised on. Gill (2007) notes common features of this sensibility including an emphasis on individualism, empowerment, and choice, along with consumerism. These are also significant features of 'popular' feminism.

Celebrity Feminism

In the last decade, increased interest around feminism arose that was quite unique to this generation. Factors that contributed to this included the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity cuts, Donald Trump becoming President of the United States in 2017, and the emergence of the '#MeToo' movement (Bibby, 2017; Rivers, 2017; Lawson, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018). These instances, among others, made it harder to ignore the persistence of sexism and the continued need for feminist activism as we progressed into the late 2010's. The growth of social media in the 2000's was also of major significance, as it enabled the instant dissemination of ideas and views among internet users, as exemplified by the #MeToo movement founded on Twitter (Lawson, 2018). Some have argued that widespread internet access and the subsequent rise of social media sets the feminist activism of the '10s apart from other eras of feminism, indicating a 'fourth wave' (Cochrane, 2013; Rivers, 2017).

¹ Neelam Gill is a fashion model, no relation to the author cited.

This shift in the public's attitudes towards feminism was also evident in celebrities' feelings on the topic. Hamad & Taylor (2015) describe the media's struggle to keep up with the number of high-profile celebrities who began openly identifying as feminists in the early to mid-2010's. Perhaps the best-known example relates to world-renowned music artist Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, who, in 2013, included a sample from author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's viral TED Talk 'Why we should all be feminists' in her song '***Flawless' (Zeisler, 2016). In addition, at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, she performed with the word 'FEMINIST' emblazoned in giant white letters behind her (Zeisler, 2016). Also around this time, Taylor Swift, another popular music artist, began publicly calling herself a feminist (Zeisler, 2016). Harry Potter actor Emma Watson became the ambassador for the UN's 'HeForShe' campaign in 2014, and her speech encouraging men to get involved in feminism went viral (Zeisler, 2016; Gay, 2014). Countless other celebrities declared their affinity with the feminist movement during this period, fuelling a media frenzy over feminism's newfound popularity.

This celebrity trend of publicly claiming a feminist identity has created new feminist visibilities across the media landscape, replacing negative stereotypes with the likes of Beyoncé and Emma Watson (Gill, 2016; Lawson, 2018: 10). The widespread recognition that comes with fame puts celebrities in a position of incredible public influence, particularly in relation to young women as they are perhaps more likely to keep up with the latest celebrity trends and are a target demographic of pop artists (Colley, 2008). Studies have shown that young people today are more civic-minded, hold more progressive political views, and possess a stronger desire to affect change than previous generations (Stone, 2009; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). In her study, Becker (2013) found that students were receptive towards celebrity advocacy, particularly when the celebrity is well-liked and their motives for undertaking this advocacy are considered credible. Celebrities' newfound readiness to affiliate themselves with the feminist movement is also understood to be a defining feature of what some writers call the fourth wave (Rivers, 2017).

The phenomenon of 'celebrity feminism' is not a new trend, however, and was first coined by Wicke (1994: 758), who observed that 'the energies of the celebrity imaginary are fuelling feminist discourse and political activity as never before' (in Hamad & Taylor, 2015: 124). Shortly after, Skeggs (1997: 140) remarked that 'a great deal of feminism is mediated through celebrities'. The term 'celebrity feminism' is used to refer to those whose fame is founded on their feminist identity, such as Gloria Steinem, along with those who adopted the feminist label after they became famous (Taylor, 2014). These 'celebrity feminists' greatly contribute to 'the kinds of feminism that come to publicly circulate' and, thereby, receive varying degrees of cultural legitimation, making them crucial to popular understandings of feminism (Hamad & Taylor, 2015: 126).

Real vs. Popular Feminism

The response to this recent wave of celebrity feminism from feminist writers has been, at best, mixed. Zeisler (2016: 128) suggests that celebrity feminists such as Emma Watson are celebrated by the media because they represent a marketable, media-friendly version of feminism. She

highlights the media's focus on celebrity engagements with feminism as a means of legitimising the movement and making it more palatable to the masses, rather than challenging systems that perpetuate inequality, such as the film and music industry, where most of these celebrities emanate from (Zeisler, 2016: 126). She argues that focusing on individual celebrities portrays feminism as an identity to be claimed rather than a collective movement based on activism, bypassing the need to raise awareness of systematic oppression and inequality (Zeisler, 2016). Rather than asking who stands for feminism, she contends that we should look at how they stand for it (2016: 137). Gay (2014) also points out that Beyoncé would likely be the only 'face' of feminism for many, which could lead to the belief that feminism 'begins and ends' with her. She is critical of those who remain uninterested in feminism until a young and attractive celebrity raises the issue (Gay, 2014). Like Zeisler (2016), she refuses to celebrate 'popular' feminism, which she believes lacks substance and distracts from the work of 'real' feminism (Gay, 2014).

This distinction between so-called 'real' feminism and 'popular' forms of feminism features in most criticisms of celebrity feminism, which has been accused of diluting feminism down to its most agreeable form, even misappropriating it at times (Hamad & Taylor, 2015). However, as Hamad & Taylor point out, these criticisms presume there is an 'authentic' feminism that exists beyond its celebrity manifestations (2015: 125). They argue that the media has become a central site for discursive struggles over what constitutes feminism, and this has ideological and cultural implications for feminism that must be considered (Hamad & Taylor, 2015: 126). They caution media and cultural analysts against assuming this relationship is inherently negative for the feminist movement and suggest that feminism and celebrity culture intersect in ways that can be simultaneously productive and unproductive, with constraints and possibilities (Hamad & Taylor, 2015: 125).

Hobson (2016) also challenges critics of popular feminism that liken it to 'feminism-lite'. She highlights the tendency within feminist scholarship to believe that traditional, academic feminism is the only 'true' feminism (Hobson, 2016). She maintains that celebrity feminism is more than a 'gateway' and has the potential to develop into a legitimate and informed international movement for the next generation of feminists (Hobson, 2016). The likeness between this debate and generational disputes between second and third wave feminists are striking, with some second wave feminists accusing the third wave of 'discarding the essence' of feminism (Buckley, 2006: 13). This was based on the misconception that there was once a stable feminism against which emerging forms of feminism are unfavourably measured (Henry, 2004 in Buckley, 2006).

The celebrity feminism this study is concerned with relates to that of popular music artists. Lhamon (2007: 1) describes pop music as a catch-all for 'sticky sounds, inauthentic identity, and commercial crazes' (in Cable, 2017: 7-8). Perhaps this association with 'inauthentic identity and commercial crazes' rouses the suspicions of feminist and cultural analysts when it comes to pop artists' claims to feminism. Griffin's (2001) reminder to tread carefully when speaking about young people and be mindful of dominant representations of youth as 'troubling', and young women as shallow and naïve (Anderson, 2018), is useful here. There is a tendency to dismiss or devalue popular culture and it is worth considering whether we do so on its own merits or simply because of its association with teenage girls (Anderson, 2018: 157).

Methodology

Research Method & Aims

To investigate the influence of commercial female pop artists on female students' attitudes towards feminism, I undertook exploratory quantitative research by means of an online questionnaire survey. This allowed me to access a large cohort of people in a short space of time and was convenient for participants (Bryman, 2012). Because questionnaires are useful for measuring a wide variety of unobservable data, such as people's preferences, attitudes, and beliefs, it suited the research objectives (Bhattacharjee, 2012: 72). The aim of the study was to inquire into the attitudes of female students aged 18-35 years towards feminism and whether their beliefs were influenced by their music preferences, particularly if they listened to contemporary popular music.

Survey Design

The survey consisted of thirteen structured questions, three of which were demographic in nature. An open comments box at the end allowed participants to share their thoughts on the subject matter. These proved a valuable source of qualitative data, contextualising and providing insight into participants' responses. The survey aimed to explore students' attitudes towards feminism and their music choices. As the research was specifically interested in the influence of commercial female popstars who publicly claimed a feminist identity on participants' views towards feminism, a list of artists was specified and participants were asked to choose the ones they liked, if any. The artists all received differing levels of attention at some point in their career regarding their beliefs about feminism, with all of them publicly identifying as feminists.

Requirements for taking part - listed at the beginning - specified that respondents should be students in Ireland between 18 and 35 years old who identified as either female, trans-women, or non-binary. Young men were not included in the study as I was particularly interested in young women's attitudes towards feminism. Including young men would likely significantly alter the research as previous studies found women and men's views often differ greatly on the topic, with women generally being more receptive to it (Leaper & Arias, 2011: 487). Also, one of the central concerns of the research is the influence of commercial female pop artists on attitudes towards feminism. These artists typically appeal to young women rather than young men, so it was my belief that a separate study concerning the attitudes of young men towards feminism would be better suited to explore the topic.

Participation was also limited to those between 18 and 35 years old. Under 18-year olds were excluded for ethical reasons and, because the study is concerned with young women's views on feminism, the maximum age for inclusion was 35 years old. The wide age range allowed for comparison between different age groups to highlight any variations in the responses of younger and older participants. Finally, participants had to be students in Ireland for ease of distribution and due to practical constraints, such as time restrictions. Before distributing the survey, it was piloted with three volunteers. Their feedback allowed me to identify and remove unnecessary questions and refine some of the answers. This resulted in a more inclusive, user-friendly survey.

Sampling, Data Collection & Analysis

The survey was distributed via the NUI Galway Students' Union weekly newsletter email, thereby utilising convenience sampling. Most responses were recorded on the first day, and by the second day, over one hundred students had taken part. The survey ended after two weeks, having received one hundred and fifty-two responses. After invalid responses from people aged over 35, males, and non-students were deleted, the sample size stood at one hundred and thirty-eight. The survey was carried out on 'SurveyPlanet' (www.surveyplanet.com). I chose it for ease-of-use and convenience as it did not limit the number of questions users could include. Responses to each question were displayed visually, making the data easy to understand.

Using Microsoft Excel, I completed a statistical analysis of the data, employing a technique called descriptive analysis. This involved describing and summarising the

results and presenting the data in a way that allowed patterns to emerge (Ali & Bhaskar, 2016; Laerd Statistics, 2018). Along with providing basic information about the variables in a dataset, descriptive statistics uncover the relationship between variables (Ali & Bhaskar, 2016). A content analysis was used to examine participants' comments. This is the 'careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material' to identify the patterns, themes, assumptions, and meanings it contains (Lune & Berg, 2017: 182). First, initial themes in the comments were identified, such as expressing feminist stereotypes and critical engagement with pop artists claiming feminist identities. This allowed for the identification of broader patterns present in the data, such as the ways in which participants distinguish between different forms of feminism (authentic, popular, moderate or extreme), in addition to identifying the limitations of celebrity feminism.

Results Analysis & Discussion

Demographic Breakdown

All participants in the survey were students of NUI Galway. All were female apart from five who identified as non-binary. The number of participants based on their age is presented in Table 1. It shows that most participants were under 25 years, and the mode age was 20 years old.

Age	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35
Participants	10	22	35	22	14	8	8	5	3	1	0	1	0	2	2	2	1	2

Table 1: Number of Participants based on Age (in years)

Young Women's Attitudes Towards Feminism

The survey results provided a good overview of the beliefs of a non-representative sample of female students of NUI Galway in relation to feminism. A strong understanding of feminism was evident, with the vast majority defining it according to its dictionary definition. Only two participants defined it as 'a group of women who don't like men and think women are better than men' and one thought it was 'a historical movement that fought for women's rights and is no longer around'. One participant reported not knowing what feminism is, with a further thirteen respondents describing it as a combination of all three options provided. Some participants found these options quite limiting and unrepresentative of the diversity within the women's movement, with one commenting '*...the feminist movement is too broad to be defined by the statements listed. The range of thinking and beliefs is hugely diverse...*'. This demonstrates that these students have a well-developed understanding of feminism.

Furthermore, 85 percent of those who took part in the survey agreed with the concept of feminism and 78 percent identify as feminists. This tells us that there is a high degree of support for feminist principles among this cohort, and many are happy to associate with the feminist movement. In addition, 14 percent of students said they believe in gender equality but do not agree with feminism while 17 percent agreed there is a need for greater gender equality but did not consider themselves feminists, with 4 percent choosing 'no answer' when asked if they were a feminist. This tells us that a small number of students who took part in the research resist feminist identification despite agreeing with feminist principles. The 'I'm not a feminist, but...' phenomenon, also known as the 'Feminist Paradox', has been widely documented in research on women's views on feminism, with a much greater proportion of participants typically falling into this category in previous research (Renzetti, 1987; Aronson, 2003; Rudolfsdottir & Jolliffe, 2008; Leaper & Arias, 2011; Hoskin, Jenson & Blair, 2017).

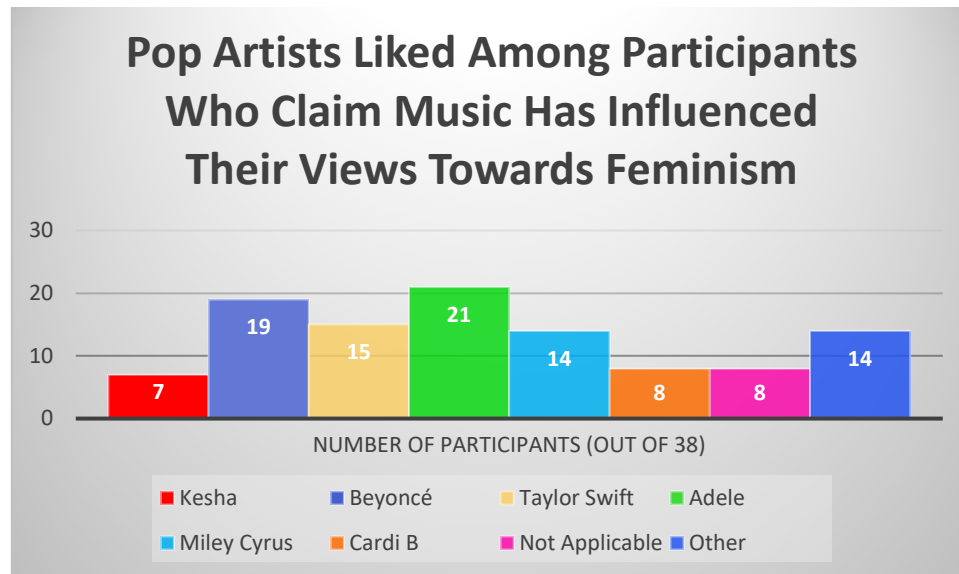
One study determined that women's identification with feminism could be placed along a continuum in which 'some women call themselves feminists, others reject the label 'feminist' but support its principles, while some reject feminism altogether' (Taylor, 1996 cited in Aronson,

2003: 906). This continuum is evident in this study, with a high number of respondents identifying with and supporting feminism and a very small proportion rejecting it outright. Some participants were highly critical of the feminist movement despite recognising the importance of gender equality. Anti-feminism or rejection of feminism was evident in some comments. For example, one participant claimed: *'...gender equality is important no doubt, but this feminist movement just puts hard-working women at risk of discrimination because of the expected uproar they could cause if they are feminists...'* Another student wrote: *'...to clarify, I am not an extreme feminist or "feminazi". As much as I believe in equal rights... I do not wish to be associated with what most people see as crazy men-hating women...'* This suggests that negative stereotypes and stigma towards feminism persist despite recent progress.

Also evident in the survey results was the widely held belief in the continued relevance of feminism to the present day, with only a small proportion concerned that it may be slightly outdated. This challenges past media constructions of feminism as being irrelevant to young women (Scharff, 2009). Most of the students surveyed believe feminism is still very relevant to today's world - even some of those who disagreed with the feminist movement considered it just as applicable to the current day as ever. Also, 30 percent of participants did not think feminism was stigmatised. This reflects wider social change in which feminism has become less taboo and occupies a more mainstream, visible space in society than in the past (Gill, 2016; Zeisler, 2016). Interestingly, those who actively stigmatised feminism by holding negative views about feminists or distinguishing between moderate and 'extreme' feminism all agreed that feminism was stigmatised and was not considered 'cool'. This supports Leaper and Arias' (2011) finding that endorsing feminist stereotypes negatively affects young women's willingness to associate with feminism.

Pop Artists' Impact on Young Women's Attitudes Towards Feminism

While most participants felt that their choice of music had no influence on their attitudes towards feminism, over a quarter, or 38 respondents, reported that it did. Most students liked mainstream pop music and were fans of several artists on the list provided, as well as specifying a wide variety of artists they liked in the 'other' category. Among participants who reported music had influenced their beliefs about feminism, Adele was the most popular artist, with over half of them listening to her music. Half of them listened to Beyoncé, and both Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus were liked by over one-third of participants whose choice of music had an influence on their attitudes towards feminism. Just over 20 percent liked Cardi B and Kesha was the least favourite artist among this cohort of students.



All except four of the participants who said music had an influence on their beliefs about feminism agreed with the concept of feminism and considered themselves feminists. Only two participants who reported music had an influence on their attitudes towards the feminist movement questioned the relevance of feminism, with the remaining thirty-six agreeing that it was just as relevant today as ever. Also, almost a quarter of these participants felt there was little or no stigma around feminism anymore. This is consistent with the broader results which show that 30 percent of all participants felt feminism was not stigmatised, which may indicate a shift in the level of stigma towards feminism (Hoskin, Jenson & Blair, 2017). This perceived lack of stigma could be one of the reasons behind participants' willingness to associate with the feminist movement, with previous studies often putting the high number of participants who fall into the 'Feminist Paradox' down to the persistence of stigma around feminism (Rudolfsdottir & Jolliffe, 2008; Leaper & Arias, 2011).

While the recent surge of pop artists claiming a feminist identity has likely contributed to this shift, this study does not provide sufficient evidence to attribute reduced stigma around feminism to these pop artists. Over three-quarters of participants who reported that their music preferences impacted their views on feminism believed feminism was stigmatised, and many students who like pop artists that have publicly voiced their support for feminism also reported the persistence of stigma around feminism. There are also other factors that likely contributed to this shift in the level of stigma around feminism, such as the integration of feminism into mainstream public discourse and other high-profile figures, aside from pop artists, who have been vocal in their support of feminism (Gill, 2016; Rivers, 2017).

In addition, over half of all participants chose 'music/celebrities' as one of the sources from which they learned about feminism, indicating a proportion of respondents who said their music choices had no effect on their beliefs about feminism still learned about the feminist movement through music and celebrity culture, at least to some extent. This tells us that they

do not have to like the artists specified to pick up on the messages they send out to the public. Even participants whose music preferences had no influence on their attitudes towards feminism acknowledged the power of music to influence listeners and its potential to convey a feminist message. Although their music choices may not have influenced their attitudes towards feminism, they contributed to what they know about feminism. This illustrates the importance of the kinds of ideas, whether direct or indirect, that are conveyed through music.

Criticisms of Pop Artists' Endorsements of Feminism

Several students were discerning of popular music artists that claimed feminist identities. Some believed the feminism they promoted was artificial and discriminatory, as expressed in the following comments:

...the female music artists listed have helped to popularise... feminism among young girls but their branch is usually an elitist and exclusionary feminism that serves wealthy women.

...while the likes of Beyonce and Miley Cyrus... have helped to popularize feminism, it generally stays at a superficial and commercial level. What they promote is usually a neoliberal, consumeristic feminism that is focused on... 'girl power'... for financial gain...

...celebrities have to a degree turned feminism into a 'trend' and... mainstream feminism (...featured in pop songs) is often not very inclusive to all types of women (in terms of race, sexual orientation etc)... I don't enjoy... music... in which I feel feminism is being used as a trend or in an inauthentic manner to sell products...

This demonstrates young women's awareness of the contradictions inherent in many celebrity claims to feminism, their ability to critically engage with pop music, and to

question the conflicts of interest that underlie many pop artists' representations of feminism. It also challenges the notion that young women are mindless consumers of pop music, passively observing and absorbing sexist images without recognising them as such (Robinson, 2008). Ultimately, while there was some acknowledgement that the pop artists specified may have contributed to the formation of a more accessible version of feminism and helped to legitimise the feminist cause among the wider public, many respondents were suspicious of these artists' newfound feminist identities, leaving no indication that these specific artists had influenced participants' engagement with feminism.

Influence of Other Artists on Young Women's Views of Feminism

Finally, it is important to note the variety of popular artists students listened to, as listed in the 'other' category; some of whom may have impacted students' attitudes towards the feminist movement. Hozier and Lady Gaga were credited by participants as conveying positive messages about feminism and gender through their music. Respondents also listed various other artists they liked, demonstrating the wide range of contemporary pop artists students engage with. Many reported their music choices had impacted their beliefs around feminism, highlighting the different ways music can influence listeners' attitudes towards the women's movement. Artists do not have to publicly claim a feminist identity to affect how their fans view feminism – by questioning instances of gender inequality in their music they are raising awareness of feminist issues.

Also, the importance of mainstream pop stars who do not strictly conform to gender and other social norms was emphasised by one student who commented:

...messaging in pop song lyrics is really important. The target audience are... largely adolescent, who are trying to mould an identity for themselves. I think the artist's lyrics and popstar persona subconsciously shape their developing mindset and identity to a significant degree. This is why it's important to have mainstream stars like Lizzo, Charli XCX, Billie Eilish, etc., having different and not entirely 'conformist' lyrics, body-types, sexual orientation and styles in their music. It offers young people an array of messages and styles to consider whilst they develop their own perspectives and preferences.

In addition, eight participants who agreed that their music choices had affected their attitude towards feminism did not listen to pop music and liked other music genres. This accounts for over 20 percent of participants who claimed their music preferences had an influence on their views around feminism. Some attributed their feminist beliefs to artists who were better-known in previous decades and whose claims to feminism were perceived of as more authentic than today's pop artists'. These included Annie Lennox, Joni Mitchell, The Dixie Chicks, Patti Smith, and Lauryn Hill, among others. While these artists may not have been as vocal about their support for feminism as some of the commercial female pop artists specified in the survey, they sang about their own issues and struggles as women and thus were perceived of as more authentic, 'real' feminists who had shown this through their songs rather than by adopting a feminist identity.

Conclusion

In exploring the beliefs of young female students of NUI Galway regarding feminism in 2020, this study found an overwhelmingly positive attitude among the participants towards the women's movement. It also added to what is known about the potential for young women's music preferences to influence their views towards feminism. While a preference for the music of female pop stars who had publicly claimed a feminist identity could not be linked to support for the feminist movement among the respondents, over a quarter of students surveyed

reported that their music choices had some influence on their beliefs about the feminist movement. These students listened to a wide variety of music; some liked the female pop artists specified along with other pop artists, while others preferred alternative music.

Furthermore, the research revealed that the level of stigma attached to claiming a feminist identity has shifted to some extent, and that celebrity endorsements of feminism have contributed to changes in the broad cultural attitude towards feminism. While this seems like a positive development, some students raised concerns about the authenticity of certain celebrities' claims to feminism. They expressed reservations about pop artists' recent change of heart toward the feminist movement as they felt it represents a narrow, exclusionary form of feminism. It is clear from this that the participants of this study neither wholly dismissed pop artists' manifestations of feminism, nor consumed them uncritically (Rivers, 2017).

Further research on this topic would benefit from expanding the sample size to include female students from other universities in both Galway and other parts of Ireland. This would allow the researcher to explore possible variation in the views of female students in different parts of Ireland and in different universities. In addition, obtaining more detailed demographic information, such as what year students are in and what they are studying, would improve the research in numerous ways. Not only would it reveal how representative the research is of the wider female student population, it would also give a better sense of the significance of different factors related to their student status on their views of feminism, such as whether students who are further on in their education, for example 3rd or 4th years, are more supportive of feminism.

Another recommendation for future research in this area would be to include young women who are not in education and occupy a broad range of social positions in terms of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on. This would be much more representative of young women in Ireland and would contribute to a better understanding of the significance of young women's backgrounds on their attitudes towards feminism. Also, it may be of benefit to conduct interviews with participants to get a more nuanced insight into their views on the subject as the depth of information obtained in this study was limited due to its quantitative design. Finally, further research into the views of young men in relation to feminism and the factors that have influenced their beliefs, including the effect, if any, of male celebrities voicing their support for feminism would be a welcome addition in this field.

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