

Master Thesis Title:

Post-feminism in media culture:

a study of Beyoncé fans

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Preface

This year has been marked by an intense academic development as well as tough personal challenges. I came a long way and I am going to leave this Faculty (hopefully) stronger and more aware than ever before. With this thesis I would like to say goodbye to university life and continue the process of self-discovery outside the academic world. I was glad that I had the opportunity to write my thesis on a topic I care a lot about: feminism and women issues. Managing all this work was a great personal accomplishment.

I would like to thank my supervisor Leonieke Bolderman whose patience and guidance helped me throughout the thesis process. Your precious pieces of advice and constant availability have been incredibly useful. Next, I would like to say thank you to all the interviewees who took part in this project: your enthusiasm and interesting insights made this research exciting. I also want to say thank you to my chaotic and crazy family who, despite all, made all this possible. Finally, I am very grateful to Madelaine for providing me with great mental/emotional support and for having shared with me all the academic and personal struggles.

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ABSTRACT

The last few years have been characterized by a new resurgence of attention in feminism across the media. While some critics welcome enthusiastically this phenomenon, others like R. Gill and A. McRobbie see contemporary media culture as still animated by a post-feminist sensibility. In particular, celebrity culture depoliticizes feminist issues such as choice, freedom and autonomy by expressing neoliberal discourses of personal empowerment and success without considering the socio-political context one operates in. While little audience research has been done in order to evaluate how media consumers negotiate those representations of gender, fan studies produced a body of work focused on people's media practices. Thus my research aims at filling this gap in previous feminist and celebrity research by shifting the attention to the opinions of media consumers. In particular I will evaluate what role post-feminism plays in Beyoncé fandom, given the fact that she is one of the most famous celebrities worldwide who recently "came out" as a feminist. In my research I made use of 10 semi-structured interviews of men and women aged between 18 and 26 years old with diverse nationalities. Through discourse analysis of participants' answers I could evaluate how they confront wider forms of discourses related to gender. In particular, I explored how they perceive Beyoncé as a female celebrity, how they respond to the feminism brought forward by her and what are their opinions on feminism more generally. My analysis shows how the main notions of post-feminism as theorized by Gill and McRobbie inform the understanding of the interviewees with respect to women and women issues, although interviewees did not adhere fully to the post-feminist sensibility and in some case they were able to produce resistant readings. Post-feminist discourses of individual empowerment, choice and freedom were much present in interviewees' answers: women are seen as autonomous agents who can achieve what they want if they work hard on themselves. Socio-political issues related to women were under-discussed. They generally endorse the concept of female sexual freedom which is not considered critically in relation to the sexualized way celebrities present themselves. Moreover, the way they perceive Beyoncé- as someone in control of her persona- points to discourses of self-discipline and surveillance. However, many of the interviewees were able to articulate socio-political concerns in relation to race discrimination. Ultimately, interviewees walk a thin line between expressing a post-feminist viewpoint (feminism as no longer much useful) and positions related to the more politically engaged third wave of feminism which takes into account discrimination related to race and sexuality along with gender. My research contributed also to the field of audience research since it showed how fans can act in accordance with dominant ideologies of post-feminism and neoliberalism, but they can also produce alternative readings.

KEYWORDS: Post-feminism, celebrity culture, media culture, feminism, fandom

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1. Introduction

During her performance at the MTV Video Music Awards in August 2014, Beyoncé appeared on stage with the word “feminist” illuminated in big lettering behind her. An excerpt from the speech *We should all be feminists* by Nigerian Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie accompanied her performance. This iconic moment marked a year which had been characterized by the public endorsement of feminism on behalf of many female celebrities such as Emma Watson, Lena Dunham and Jennifer Lawrence (Hamad & Taylor, 2015). While some scholars welcome enthusiastically this new phenomenon (Keller & Ryan, 2014), others like Rose Gill (2016) raised questions about the nature of this kind of feminism seemingly celebrated across the media which is deemed to be “an accessible yet superficially empowering version of feminism”(Chatman, 2015, p.931), because it lacks content and political meaning. In particular, Gill (2016) and McRobbie (2009) see contemporary media culture as animated by what has been called a post-feminist sensibility. According to them media culture depoliticizes feminist issues such as sexual agency, freedom of choice and empowerment. The pervasive sexualization of women across the media is no longer considered problematic, since women have now gained the power to consciously choose for themselves. Neoliberal discourses of individual empowerment and choice go hand in hand with post-feminism: women are presented as autonomous subjects who can achieve anything they want if they make the right choices with respect to their lives. In this way, the stress is put on the individual without critically considering the socio-political context he/she lives in (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2007; Showden, 2009).

While previous research in media and celebrity studies was mainly focused on textual analysis, little audience research has been done in order to evaluate how media consumers negotiate those representations of gender in the media. On the other hand, fan studies have always been interested in studying people’s consumption of media outlets and celebrities by pointing to how people’s relation to media is always a matter of both compliance with dominant ideologies, but also production of alternative readings (Duffett, 2013).

In this research I decided to focus on Beyoncé fans since, although she recently “came out” as feminist, she has been described as a post-feminist character who invites women to be independent, self-governing and have economic and sexual agency (Chatman, 2015). My research question therefore is: what is the role of post-feminism in Beyoncé’s fandom? In my project I aim to find out how Beyoncé fans respond to the feminism portrayed by her and to what extent their opinions reflect

a post-feminist sensibility as theorized by Gill (2007). How do they perceive her role as a successful female celebrity? Do they appreciate the feminism portrayed by Beyoncé? If so, what meaning do they attach to it? What role does feminism play in their everyday life (if at all)? The research took place between February and May 2017 and it is based on 10 semi-structured interviews which were conducted via Skype with Beyoncé's fans (3 males and 7 females) from different countries in Europe and outside. With my research I would like to give a contribution to this ongoing academic debate about post-feminism by shifting the attention towards ordinary media consumers and their viewpoints. This project will be of academic relevance since it aims at filling a gap in previous feminist and celebrity research, by exploring how fans conceptualize media images and how they confront wider forms of discourses related to gender. The premise is that gender discourses are nowadays mainly shaped by media representations (Gill, 2007; Hamad & Taylor, 2015). Therefore in order to understand what the status of feminism and post-feminism is today, it is necessary to explore the language used by media consumers in relation to such issues. By focusing on their discourses, it is possible to analyze the structures of meaning behind their words and to understand how interviewees negotiate dominant ideologies. In so doing, the research will shed new light on the complexities and nuances of the much discussed concept of post-feminism, and it will try to evaluate to what extent it can still be considered a relevant concept for media research.

In Chapter 2 I will first discuss the theoretical framework by starting with an exploration of feminist arguments since the second wave until the emergence of post-feminism. I will describe the complicated relationship between feminism and post-feminism and what are the specific characteristics of this latter. I will then discuss how post-feminism is articulated in today's celebrity culture as well as how it relates to another quite recent manifestation of feminism, the third wave. Next, I will focus on audience research and how the practices of media consumers have been explored by fan studies. In Chapter 3 I will justify my choices with respect to research methods used as well as explaining how I collected my data and how the analysis was conducted. In Chapter 4 I present the analysis of my research which is divided in three sub-sections: individualism, choice and personal freedom; sexuality, body and family; race and gender. Finally, Chapter 5 includes the conclusion in which I articulate the answer to my research question and I make some final remarks about how the investigation went as well as making suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction and structure

In this chapter I will discuss the theoretical framework chosen to investigate the topic of post-feminism in relation to my research question. In order to understand the origins of this phenomenon, I will first begin by tracing a brief outline of the historical and conceptual development of feminist movement which eventually led to the emergence of post-feminism in 1990s. This was linked to the idea that feminism became no longer useful because it had already reached its goals. In particular, I will explain how the rise of neoliberal ideology with its focus on individualism and personal choice and the dismantling of feminism both in academia and in popular discourse brought forward the belief that in our western world we have moved beyond feminism into a new era of gender equality, free of politics. Then, I will go into more depth in describing the characteristics of what has been called the “post-feminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007), typical of the current cultural moment in western societies which is especially visible across the media. Post-feminist sensibility has been theorized as an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas as well as marked by a series of specific themes such as stress on individual empowerment, practices of self-surveillance and discipline and celebration of female sexuality. Next, I will point to how characteristics of post-feminism are embodied by celebrity culture to the extent that celebrities today are able to articulate struggles over the meaning of feminism and influence the popular perception around gender issues. Along with celebrity feminism, I will also analyze how feminism is articulated within the third wave and how this movement is related to post-feminism. I will then highlight the importance of fan studies with respect to my research question, since they aim at exploring people's responses to media representations while, on the other hand, media studies focused mainly on textual analysis of media outlets. Finally, I will briefly consider previous research which has been done around the topic of post-feminism in media culture. I will first look at different textual analyses made on Beyoncé which either depict her as embodying post-feminism or as challenging the mainstream of white feminism. Similarly, I will consider how the audience research done on celebrity feminism shows how media consumers produce understandings of media in line with dominant ideologies, but they are also able to produce alternative readings and points of critiques.

2.2 Feminist roots: the second-wave

In order to understand the concept of post-feminism, I first will trace a brief development of

the feminist movement because -as we will better see later- post-feminism first emerged as a reaction to feminism and engaged with some of the second-wave arguments by revising them or criticizing them. Feminist theory is essentially associated with women's inequality and oppression. (Trier-Bieniek, 2016) Historically, its main aim has been to raise consciousness about the power imbalances in gender relations and to fight for social, political and economic equality between the sexes. Therefore feminist theory and feminist activism often go hand in hand since they both want to challenge those socio-political oppressive structures which cause gender inequality. Feminism is defined as developing in "waves"- a metaphor which depicts women's movement as an ongoing process. While the first wave of feminism was important since it led women to gain the right to vote in 1920, it is especially the second wave of feminism which is relevant to the discussion on post-feminism. The second wave of feminism began with the consciousness-raising groups of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Betty Friedan's famous book *Feminist Mystique* published (1963) started a conversation about "the problem that has no name": the increasing frustration of many middle-class American housewives whose identity was defined primarily as wife and mother in the private realm of family. This new wave focused its attention on women pursuing careers in the public sphere (both in the work force and in the political field), as well as denouncing violence against women. In this respect, they produced critique of prostitution and pornography, but they also revealed the oppressive nature of women representations in the entertainment media since they were often portrayed as mere sexual objects. As explained by Genz & Brabon (2016), second wavers were characterized by an anti-media attitude since they believed that media offered false images of femininity which ultimately work to subjugate women in a passive state where traditional sex roles are reinforced and accepted. They usually criticized the normative idea of femininity which is deemed to be a tool of the patriarchy power and which reduce women to pleasurable objects for the male gaze (Bartky, 1990). They thus call for more realistic portrayals of women across the media so to raise consciousness among ordinary women about their state of passivity and make them empowered. Female revolution in consciousness was considered to be the first step to a wider social revolution to be carried out as a collectivity and through political activism. As we will see next those second wave arguments -critique of femininity and call for collective political action- are heavily challenged by post-feminist positions.

2.3 The emergence of post-feminism: neoliberalism and dismantling of feminism

The label “post-feminist” gained popularity during the 1990s and it came to represent the idea that women at that time had already gained equal rights –access to employment, equal education and so on- therefore the feminist movement became no longer useful. Post-feminists claimed that “women who persisted in calling attention to sexism were needlessly fighting old battles” (Showden, 2009, p.168). In particular, the emergence of post-feminism is linked to two main phenomena as described by McRobbie (2004): the neoliberal ideology and the dismantling of feminism both in academic and popular discourse during the 1990s. Neoliberalism is the term which defines the current cultural and economic moment in our Western societies and it is an ideology which promotes values of freedom, equality, individualism and self-help. The attention is driven away from socio-political struggles since the stress is put on individuals who can gain success in life if they make the right personal choices with respect to their lives and careers. People are encouraged to work hard on themselves in order to achieve self-improvement and practical results. In short, “neoliberalism produces self-governing subjects who regulate themselves without the need for state control or repression” (Gill & Arthurs, 2006, p.445). Therefore, “the solution to injustice is to work on the self rather than to work with others for social and political transformation.” (Gill, 2016, p.617). The neoliberal ideology with its stress on individualism also informs post-feminism which is detached from social and political activism as I will further explain next.

The other phenomenon linked to the rise of post-feminism is the dismantling of feminism in the academy during the 1990s. According to McRobbie (2004) this period was the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory: representational and universal claims of feminism have been challenged by post-colonialist and black feminists (Spivak, 1988; Trinh, 1989) who criticized the elitist Eurocentric approach of much feminist inquiry. Indeed, they claim that the category of “woman” which was the foundation of second wave feminist research actually reflects only the experiences of middle-class white women and failed to take into account factors such as race and class. More radically, postmodern critics came to challenge the very idea of a universal and unified subject, so that feminist critique which was based on an essentialist and stable definition of woman was put into question (Genz & Brabon, 2009). As highlighted by Gill (2007), in feminist academia there was a shift away from a stress on equality to a focus on differences which are produced by different social, economic and geographic backgrounds. Therefore, by focusing on diversity and not commonality, it

became more difficult for feminism to be still effective as a political movement and to carry out battles which were valid for all women (Genz & Brabon, 2009).

Moreover, over the 1990s, feminism also came to become unpopular across the media. First, as Andrea Stuart (1990) pointed out, feminist values achieved greater visibility especially in magazines and TV: feminist issues such as domestic violence, equal pay, sexual harassment were addressed to a vast audience like never before. However, since feminist values were supported by a range of institutions including education, law, employment and the media, there was the overall feeling that feminism has come to reach its goals. McRobbie (2004) claims that this was the time when feminism has been taken into account in order to be superseded and presented as no longer useful. She highlights the sites of popular culture where this work of the “undoing of feminism” can be seen by mentioning some TV and billboard advertisements. Women are depicted as sexually pleasurable objects: sexism can be re-enacted since there is no longer exploitation or oppression here, but women present themselves as sexually provocative out of their own choice and for their own enjoyment. Therefore, “for the girls what is proposed is a movement beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves”. (McRobbie, 2004, p.259) The result is the development of a culture of commercial sexuality, where sexual representations of women across media have become widespread. Media culture contributed to create a new gender regime free of politics based on equality, sexual freedom and pleasure.

2.4 The post-feminist sensibility: individualism, sexualization and self-discipline

As argued by McRobbie (2009) and Gill (2007), post-feminism is not simply to be considered as a backlash against feminism although some feminist scholars like Faludi (1992) interpreted post-feminism essentially as an anti-feminist conservative movement. Instead, one of the characteristics of post-feminism is the entanglement of anti-feminist *and* feminist ideas insofar as feminist ideas are “simultaneously incorporated, revised and depoliticised” (Gill, 2007, p.268). Post-feminist heroines in the media, Gill (2007) contends, value feminist ideas such as autonomy, empowerment and bodily integrity although they use such characteristics to make problematic choices from a feminist point of view. For instance, they choose traditional (heterosexual) weddings and family instead of work, they take their husbands' surnames on marriage and they display a traditional kind of stereotyped femininity. (McRobbie, 2004).

In the same vein, Angela McRobbie (2004) points to the complicated relationship between

post-feminism and feminism: “Post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force.” (p.1) According to her post-feminism is to be understood as a “double entanglement” with feminism (McRobbie, 2009): on the one hand post-feminism celebrates the liberalization regarding choice and diversity in sentimental relationships (for instance the legalization of gay marriage and adoption of rights for civil partnerships), on the other hand it is linked to neo-conservative values in relation to sexuality and family life (traditional demands on women such as to take care of the household and present themselves as sexual desirable objects are still at work). Women now can enjoy the fruits of feminism such as equal access to education and employment and can therefore pursue their own personal aspirations. The figure of the ambitious and hard-working “working girl”, McRobbie (2009) contends, must however retain a kind of traditional femininity which makes her desirable to men. She refers to this performance of normative femininity as “post-feminist masquerade”, which includes old-fashioned styles (rules about bags, shoes, hairstyles) and ultimately works to re-establish traditional gender hierarchies. Indeed, “the masquerade functions to re-assure male structures of power by defusing the presence and the aggressive and competitive actions of women as they come to inhabit positions of authority”. (McRobbie, 2009, p.68). What is new about the normative femininity of this masquerade is that it is presented as a matter of free choice on behalf of women rather than obligation. Similarly, while on the one hand, women are encouraged to overturn the old double sexual standard by showing their sexuality freely, on the other hand traditional values of marriage are celebrated again. This is also to be considered as a response to the increasing tolerance towards different kind of sentimental lifestyles, such as non-Western forms of kinship and gay and lesbians couples.

I will now turn to describe more specifically the characteristics of the so-called “post-feminist sensibility” as outlined by Gill (2007) which is especially visible in the contemporary media culture. She proposed an alternative understanding of post-feminism which has been usually defined as a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1992), an epistemological shift within feminism influenced by post-structuralism, postmodernism and postcolonial theory (Brooks, 1997) or as an historical shift that marked the end of traditional feminism (Hollows, 2000; Moseley & Read, 2002). According to Gill (2016), post-feminism is to be better understood as “patterned yet contradictory sensibility” (p.621), a

new phenomenon which is closely related to the dominant ideologies of neoliberalism and individualism. Indeed, neoliberal discourses of free choice and individual empowerment fits well with the post-feminist idea that women are autonomous subjects no longer limited by gender injustice who can therefore achieve anything they want if they focus on their capacities and make the right choices. All kind of broader political and social issues come to be seen as simply personal obstacles which can be overcome by working hard on oneself. This is in stark contrast with the second wave feminism which is -as we have seen- politically engaged and was based on collective activism to reach its goals.

The stress on individualism also leads to renewed practices of self-surveillance and discipline which are considered to be requirements for a normative femininity. Again, this is contrast with the work of second wave feminists who wanted to show how femininity as self-discipline was an oppressive tool of the patriarchal system. Instead, according to the post-feminist sensibility, the self is presented as a project that has to be built, evaluated and disciplined not only from an aesthetic but also psychological point of view. Body, sexual practice, career, home, finances need a constant labour and monitoring in order to create a better version of oneself. People are thus advised to transform their habits and styles and strive for success and self-realization.

Thus, femininity is defined mainly as a bodily property, rather than a social or psychological one and an attractive body is considered to be the main source of power and identity for a woman. The focus on women's bodies leads in turn to an overall sexualization of media culture: discourses about sexuality and erotic presentations of women have become pervasive across the media (for instance "porno chic" has become a widespread practice in representation of women in advertising and magazines). However, this sexualization of women is not seen as problematic, since women are no longer depicted as passive sexualized objects of the male gaze as it used to be in the past, but are now active desiring subjects who consciously choose to present themselves in a sexy way, out of their own choice. Gill (2007) argues that this is a more insidious form of exploitation because the male gaze has somehow been internalized and comes to construct the very woman subjectivity.

Finally, Gill continues, another important characteristic of post-feminism is the stress on natural sexual difference. While in the 1970s and 1980s the idea of female and male equality came to be popularly accepted, in 1990s discourses of biological sexual difference informed by evolutionary psychology became increasingly visible across the media. Ultimately, this is another way to re-affirm

traditional gender norms insofar as those discourses can be used to justify gender inequalities and represent them as inevitable.

2.5 Post-feminism and celebrity feminism

The last few years have been characterized by a new resurgence of attention in feminism in the media which seems to contradict the idea that feminism is in retreat (Keller & Ryan, 2014; Whelehan, 2010). Feminism is increasingly celebrated within the mainstream media as “cool” (Valenti, 2014) and came to become a desirable and fashionable identity among young women (Scharff, 2013). Indeed, interest for feminist issues has become widespread across media and celebrity culture: stories about women have become increasingly popular in newspapers and other media and many worldwide famous musicians and actresses have recently made public statements to support feminist values. Beyoncé appeared on stage with the word “feminist” illuminated in lettering behind her during her performance at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards. An extract from the famous speech *We should all be feminists* by Nigerian Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie accompanied her performance. In the same year British actress Emma Watson launched the #HeForShe Twitter campaign in order to promote gender equality and male solidarity with feminism. American actress and writer Lena Dunham (best known as the creator of the TV series *Girls*) supported the initiative for the non-profit reproduction health organization Planned Parenthood as a part of its “Women are Watching” political campaign. In *Feminist theory and pop culture* (2015) it is acknowledged that we are in a point in history when the lyrics of pop songs are as connected to feminist theory as the writing of historical feminist theorists. New generations of women are finding their feminism in pop culture and the future of feminist theory might be reflected in celebrity.

While some critics (Keller & Ryan, 2014; Retallack, Ringrose & Lawrence, 2016) welcome optimistically this new visibility of feminism phenomenon, many media critics point to the fact that celebrity feminism actually reflects a problematic post- feminist attitude. As argued by Gill (2016), the feminism put forward by many celebrities seems to be only a matter of fashion insofar as it is only superficially empowering and does not have any meaningful content. Celebrities embody a post-feminist sensibility, since even when they endorse feminism, this is not understood within a political agenda and it is not critical of the existing social relations. Celebrity culture promotes stories of individual success and seems to reinforce the idea that everyone can make it if they only work hard on themselves and make the right choices with respect to their life and career. (Cashmore, 2010)

Moreover, as Evans & Riley (2013) claim, celebrities often present themselves in a highly sexualized manner and display a kind of traditional femininity which is linked to the post-feminist masquerade explained by McRobbie. Celebrities are expected to regulate their bodies through self-discipline and hard work and conform to the strict norms imposed by the fashion and beauty complex (namely being thin, fit and constantly sexy).

Thus, celebrity culture is a particularly fruitful area of research, since as pointed out by Hamad & Taylor (2015) and Gill (2007), nowadays the struggles over the meaning of feminism take place primarily in the media. Gender discourses are often brought forward by celebrities who are able to influence perception around those issues with their public statements and actions. Indeed, “these modes of feminist celebrity help to shape the kinds of feminism that come to publicly circulate and that, to varying degrees, come to receive cultural legitimation” (Hamad & Taylor, 2015, p.126).

2.6 Post-feminism and Third wave feminism

While post-feminism seems to be still much alive across the media culture especially in relation to celebrities, it is useful for my research to consider another important manifestation of feminism -third wave feminism- and reflect upon how it relates to post-feminism. The third wave feminism also developed in the 1990s although chronologically speaking post-feminism arose first. Works such as *Third Wave Agenda* (1997) by Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake and the later *Manifesta* (2000) by Amy Richards and Jennifer Baumgardner are considered to be some of the central texts. As pointed out by Genz & Brabon (2016), third wave has often been described by its advocates in opposition to post-feminism, since it is more politically engaged and it is more related to the feminist activism of the second-wave. In particular, third wavers embrace diversity, multiculturalism and difference and they engage with the critiques of essentialism and exclusion within second wave. Indeed, they reject the idea of a universal category of “woman” by instead pointing out to the experiences of women with different social and racial backgrounds. They support the idea of intersectionality (Showden, 2009), which is the consideration of how different forms of oppressions related to race, gender, class and sexuality intersect one with the other, so that a true awareness of oppression should produce an analysis which takes into account all those factors along with gender.

Important sites of struggles are sexual politics and cultural production (Genz & Brabon, 2009): third wavers believe in the freedom of sexual expression on behalf of women as well as in the critical engagement with popular culture. In this respect, they see political activism tied to cultural production

and want to “re-imagine the disparate spaces constructed as inside and outside the academy as mutually informing and intersecting spheres of theory and practice”. (Genz & Brabon, 2009, p.160). Many third wavers focused on media images of strong female characters and therefore saw consumer culture as a place of potential empowerment. We can see here some similarities between third wave and post-feminism insofar as they both challenge the second-wave anti-popular and anti-feminine attitude. They both do not discard the realm of popular culture as a site of production of gender inequality, nor do they refuse the performance of traditional femininity- what has been called the “girlie aesthetic” (Showden, 2009, p.178). Because of those similarities, post-feminism and third wave are often used as synonyms by publicists and grouped under the general label of “new feminisms”, although the main point of difference remains that third wavers usually show a political engagement that post-feminists do not have. As pointed out by Showden (2009), the newest elements of third-wave feminism offer new political possibilities insofar as they focus on “intersectional identities and multilayered discrimination” (p.167)

2.7 From textual analysis in media studies to audience research in fan studies

These ideas on post-feminism have been criticized, for one on account on their focus on textual analysis both within feminist media research and celebrities studies. As pointed out by Andrea Press (2011) there is an actual lack of research regarding women and their viewpoints by feminist media scholars. Indeed, one of the primary concerns –Press contends- should be to evaluate the impact that the cultural phenomena have on women and other oppressed groups. Consequently, feminist media research should not limit itself to analyze cultural developments across the media from a humanistic perspective, but should also be attentive to how ordinary consumers make sense of such phenomena by focusing on the language they actually use.

Similarly, Turner (2010) complains about the abundance of textual analysis in celebrity studies which focuses on the details of representation of celebrities through media. According to him, this body of work which mostly makes use of content analysis and semiotic analysis tends to be rather descriptive. He argues that celebrity can be studied more fruitfully as a “cultural formation that has a social function”(p.14) which means that celebrity is a cultural phenomenon linked to broader shifts in culture and it is able to influence the understandings and expectations of especially young people with respect to their lives and aspirations. Consequently, he argues, it is necessary to conduct research involving direct enquiries of audience in order to understand how media consumers negotiate what

they see in the media.

Unlike media studies, fan studies have always been interested in studying people's consumption of media outlets and celebrities and produced a body of work which is relevant to understand how people negotiate media representations. Early audience research in media relied upon the concept of "textual determinism", which refers to the idea that the meaning of the text resides in the text itself and therefore positioned the audience as a passive receiver of that already given message (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The book that sparked a new era in fan studies is *Textual Poachers* (1992) by Henry Jenkins, who instead presented fans as creative and active participants in media culture. According to him: "Fandom is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests, a way of transforming mass culture into popular culture"(Jenkins, 2006, p.40). He focused on the creative practices carried out by fans who engaged critically with media texts by manipulating them (for instance fan art). According to him, researchers needed to study how fans were appropriating media and what new meanings they produced. Jenkins encouraged a political conception of fandom: "Fandom here becomes a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community" (Jenkins, 1992, p.46). Fans were thus depicted as able to challenge and rework the dominant ideologies in mass culture and produce alternative readings of it.

Also relevant within the field of fan studies was the work of David Cavicchi about Bruce Springsteen's fandom *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fan* (1998). He saw fandom rather as an opportunity for introspection, a way of discussing shared values and the source of creation of new meanings that extend into daily life. According to him "it might be useful to think about the work rather than the worth of fandom, what it does, not what it is, for various people in particular historical and social moments". (Cavicchi, 1998, p.9) He highlights the strong emotional attachment that fans have towards their objects which is similar to a form of real devotion and the ways this can affect their personal lives. Cavicchi thus describes fandom mainly as having a highly personal inner dimension. Ultimately, to him fandom is the realization of personal identity beyond rational explanation.

2.8 Fandom: compliance, resistance and the role of discourse

Most recently Mark Duffett (2013) has further developed previous theories about fans by shedding more light on the complexities and nuances of fandom. He maintains that fandom is always

about consumption of already given material *and* production of new meanings; it is about both compliance with dominant ideologies *and* resistance. Fans can act in accordance with dominant ideologies, but they can also produce alternative readings and points of critique. Moreover, fandom has to be considered both as a personal and social practice, indeed it means “making social connections and exploring pleasures in the context of a shared media culture. Texts and performances provide a common territory, a way to recognize ourselves through the prism of our passions, but experiencing them is only part of a process that is immensely personal and yet wonderfully social at the same time” (p.288). As regarding fans’ reception of media texts, Duffett argues that the way the audience understands them is mainly linked to wider forms of discourses. “Discourses are widely shared and socially legitimated ways of talking about specific things” (Duffett, 2013, p.80). Thus discourses shape the way fans perceive and make sense of media texts. Consequently, researchers should pay attention to the way that discourses give media users the cognitive tools to organize their understanding of media content.

Similarly, Gill (2007) highlights the importance of discourse in the construction of gender across the media. Under the influence of post-structuralism, she believes that gender and sexuality are not stable categories, but they are discursive constructions which are constantly renegotiated and rewritten. Media do not simply represent gender but they are actively involved in constructing it and people make sense of it through discursive means. The fact that gender is discursively constructed also means that the notion of “meaning is never single, univocal or total, but rather is fluid, ambiguous and contradictory: a site of ongoing conflict and contestation” (p.13).

2.9 Previous research in media and feminist studies

As already said previous research in feminist media studies and celebrity studies has mainly focused on textual analysis. For instance, Gill (2016) makes a content analysis of the Evening Standard’s magazine issue on “NEW GEN FEM”, which is all about the new feminist generation. She concludes that there is no attempt to explore the deep meaning of feminism which is reduced to be a cool and superficial identity. The postfeminist attitude can be seen in the use of iconography taken from feminist activism which however it is not deployed to challenge gender power relations. Interesting analyses have also been made on the character of Beyoncé pointing out how her persona relates to post-feminism. Dayna Chatman (2015) understands Beyoncé in the context of a “post-feminist gender regime” (McRobbie, 2011), which presents women as self-governing subjects who

have the power of making the right choices with respect to family, marriage, career and their bodies. Beyoncé's music invites young women to be independent, have both economic and sexual agency and have the freedom of choice over their bodies. However, it is argued that Beyoncé represents a post-feminist sensibility since "it lacks any complex awareness of continuing systemic struggles, instead it provides an accessible, yet superficially 'empowering' version of feminism". (Chatman, 2015, p.931). Moreover, as a black woman, the narrative around Beyoncé needs further reflections. Indeed, "it positions professional black women as ideal citizens and mothers and also seeks to reconfigure and normalize representations of the black family. The body, specifically the black female body, plays an important role in attempting to transform and normalize these representations" (p. 937). The woman body in the post-feminist regime is considered to be both a source of personal power and as a site of constant monitoring and self-surveillance. The analysis of Ellis Cashmore (2010) sees Beyoncé as the embodiment of America's new racial order. She promotes the idea that broader concerns about racism can be nullified or ignored if one focuses only on the individual success. "Celebrity culture reinforces the ideological fallacy that –'anyone can make it'. It is a 'myth of success'" (Cashmore, 2010, p.143). Similarly, Jaap Kooijman (2013) argues that Beyoncé along with other famous African American celebrities such as Jay-Z, Oprah Winfrey but also Barack and Michelle Obama "are embodiments of the American Dream, 'proving' that social-economic success is within everybody's reach and that racial boundaries can be overcome" (Kooijman, 2013, p.159).

On the contrary, other analyses point to the way Beyoncé is able to successfully articulate stereotypes of black women and challenge the mainstream of white feminism. Aisha Durham (2012) notes that "Beyoncé is a key figure for contemporary feminist media studies because she represents the production of celebrity, gender politics presently defined by hip hop, and the complex negotiations of self- image and sexuality for young women coming of age during post-feminism" (p.36). Since black sexuality has traditionally been considered as exaggerated and promiscuous, expressing sexual agency is actually a way to contest the culture of silence surrounding this issue. Indeed "Beyoncé calls attention to intersecting discourses of racialized sexuality and gender, and she highlights the particular constraints that exist for Black girls and women who also want to express their sexuality in a society where Black bodies are always already marked as deviant." (Durham, 2012, p.37) Similarly, Weidhase (2015) believes that the sexually charged performances of Beyoncé are a means to reclaim the black female body beyond respectability politics. It is a way to address the

historical victimization of black women because of their hypersexuality. According to her, “Beyoncé’s body does not contest her feminist status, but instead her body contests the whiteness of mainstream feminism” (p.130).

As regards the audience research exploring women’s responses to celebrity feminism, there are researches showing how audience reception is in line with dominant ideologies or, on the contrary, how media consumers can produce alternative readings and points of critique. Belonging to the former group, the work of Evans & Riley (2013) is based on focus groups and interviews of white women in UK. They found out that women make sense of celebrities through neoliberal discourses that stress the importance of choice and personal entrepreneurship. Celebrities are admired because they are able to use their bodies and attractiveness as a source of money. Their success requires a careful work on transformation and discipline over their bodies. The appreciation of celebrities’ success went together with the perceived inability of ordinary women to measure up with those high standards of beauty and bodily discipline. The study by Allen & Mendick (2013) aimed at exploring how celebrities operate in young people’s lives, found out that “celebrity operates as a classed and gendered discursive device within young people’s identity work” (p.77). Their construction of identity in relation to work and education reflects distinctions circulating in celebrity culture (such as talented/talentless, proper/improper/, etc.) and draw again upon neoliberal discourses of personal achievement. However, some participants offered alternative readings to this dominant ideology, for instance by challenging the opposition between mind and bodies that constrains female celebrities.

Finally, the study by Keller & Ringrose (2015) focuses on teenage girls’ responses to celebrity feminism and highlight how most of girls take on a critical attitude towards the new visibility of feminism in media. They question not only the authenticity of it, but also the content which is considered to be superficial. Their answers seem to suggest that “feminism should not be treated as a ‘fashion’ that will eventually fall out of trend, but instead as requiring longstanding commitment” (p. 133). They also challenge the idea that displays of female bodies are indicative of gender equality. Ultimately, the realm of pop culture and how it is understood seems to be contradictory insofar as it shows how “complicity and critique, subordination and creation” (Genz & Brabon, 2009, p.26) can co-exist together.

3. Methods and data

3.1 Research question and sub-questions

With my research I would like to give a contribution to this ongoing academic debate about post-feminism by shifting the attention towards ordinary media consumers and their opinions. In particular, I will be focusing on the fans of Beyoncé, since –as we have seen- she represents a controversial version of post-feminism in the media. As argued by Chatman (2015) it is worth considering that Beyoncé with her music and persona can articulate discussions of gender politics and she is considered to be a ‘representative character’: her choices and behaviors influence and give meaning to the lives of girls and young women (Mask, 2009). It is therefore necessary to focus on audience research in order to find out how ordinary people understand and conceptualize female representations across the media.

My research question is thus the following: what role does post-feminism play in Beyoncé’s fandom? In my project I aim to find out how Beyoncé’s fans respond to the feminism portrayed by Beyoncé and to what extent their opinions reflect a post-feminist sensibility as described by Rose Gill. First, the research is going to explore what is the particular relationship between Beyoncé and her fans and what qualities of her they mostly appreciate. For instance, how do they perceive their role as a successful female celebrity? Why and how do they feel attached to her? Do they see her as a source of personal inspiration in any way? Does Beyoncé influence their personal values and beliefs? Moreover, the research evaluates whether the kind of feminism portrayed by Beyoncé plays any role in their appreciation for this artist. Do they mention the word “feminism” spontaneously? If so, what meaning do they attach to this concept? And how does Beyoncé’s feminism influence their own idea of what feminism is? To what extent are fans socially and politically engaged with women’s issues? What role does feminism play in their everyday life (if at all)? Do they consider feminism still necessary in our society? Other relevant sub-questions related to the main research questions are: to what extent their responses stress post-feminist discourses of individual empowerment and choice (as theorized by Gill)? Or do they rather see feminism as embedded in a broader and social political context? If so, do they engage with feminist socio-political concerns such as gender pay, sexual violence, sexism? Moreover, I also paid attention to discourses revolving around sexuality, body and family. Do inter-

viewees mention appreciation for traditional family values or on the contrary they express more progressive views on female roles? What is the role of the body in Beyoncé's feminism? In what ways do they talk about Beyoncé's image and persona?

Finally, I explored how gender discourses are related to other factors such as race. In order to analyze the answers of participants I will draw on the ongoing academic debate about post-feminism across the media which I summarized above. In particular I will make use of the notion of post-feminism formulated by Angela McRobbie and Ros Gill in order to evaluate to what extent the opinions of Beyoncé's fans can be considered to be post-feminist. In particular, the analysis will revolve around the main characteristics of post-feminist sensibility: individual empowerment and choice, self-monitoring and discipline, sexual subjectification.

3.2 Research design and methods

Answers of participants were analyzed through discourse analysis, which aims at identifying structures of meaning and recurrent discursive patterns which make sense of individual viewpoints on a particular social or cultural phenomenon (Jorgensen & Philipps, 2002). One of basic tenets of discourse analysis as explained by Potter & Wetherell (1987) is that the ways in which we make sense of the world are discursively constructed and at the same time discourse can actively construct the social world. Words are both constructive of and constructed by social realities. As claimed by Bryman "Language is depicted in discourse analysis as constituting or producing the social world". (Bryman, 2012, p.528) Moreover, discourse analysis highlights the link between knowledge and social processes: knowledge is created through social interactions in which we construct common truths about the world. Different social understandings lead in turn to different social actions. In this sense, discourse is also action-oriented: it is a way of accomplishing facts. In other words, knowledge which is discursively constructed shapes the way in which we perceive our society and how we act within it.

Discourse analysis of interviews allows analyzing the structures of meanings behind participants' language. The exact words interviewees use are objects of analysis since they shed light on the way people make sense of concepts such as feminism and representation of women. Language reveals the knowledge participants have in respect to those issues and give insight into their perception and how they discursively construct views on social reality.

I decided to answer my research question by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Conducting interviews is the optimal method in relation to my research, because it allows

collecting extensive data on individual's personal histories, perspectives and experiences. In particular I drew on the notion of the "active interview" as explained by Holstein & Gubrium (1995): interviews are considered to be the result of interpretive practice where knowledge is produced through the interaction of interviewer and respondents. Respondents are thus seen as active subjects "with a substantial repertoire of interpretive methods and stock of experiential materials": they are equipped with experiences and resources which contribute to the construction of knowledge throughout the interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p.10) Since the primary concern of my research is to explore what is the role of post-feminism in Beyoncé fans, it is therefore necessary to analyze the exact language fans use to make sense of gender issues. In-depth interviews are suitable for this research because they can shed light on opinions and viewpoints of media consumers and bring forth all the nuances and contradictions of such a sensitive topic which could not be explored by using other kinds of methods. The use of open-ended questions gives the participants the opportunity to respond in their own words rather than forcing them to choose from fixed responses. Moreover, open-ended questions have the ability to evoke answers that are meaningful to the participant and rich and explanatory in nature. In particular semi-structured interviews allow to "openness to changes of sequence and question forms in order to follow up the answers given and stories told by the interviewees". (Kvale, 1996, p.17). The use of such a method allows for flexibility in the research process: data collection and sub research questions are adjusted on the basis of what is learned while conducting the research. This allows for a iterative process of adjustment, whereby additional issues brought up by the interviewees and taken into consideration and can be therefore taken up and presented to later interviewees.

3.3 Sampling and Data Collection

Participants were selected by using a purposive sample: a sampling strategy in which participants are selected according to preselected criteria relevant to the research question. The criterion I set is that participants had to consider themselves fans of Beyoncé. I did not set any prior socio-demographic criteria, because I wanted to analyze responses across the board. In that way, I could try to evaluate whether different opinions could be linked to differences in age, race, gender and nationality or whether the same kind of discourses were shared among interviewees regardless of those factors as claimed by Duffett (2013). I recruited participants by posting a call on the Facebook page of Beyoncé's fans called "Beyhive", which is to my knowledge the international fan page with the highest

numbers of fans. Therefore, it was not hard to find participants and my post was generally welcomed with enthusiasm by fans, whose nationality and background were very diverse. In my Facebook post I chose not to mention that the research would be about post-feminism in order not to influence interviewees' responses, since I also wanted to find out whether they would mention the word "feminism" spontaneously and whether female empowerment would play any role in their appreciation of Beyoncé.

I aimed for diversity while assembling the group of participants which was eventually constituted by 10 people: 3 males, 7 females, 4 black people, 6 white people. The age range of participants was from 18 to 26 years old, so it turned out to be a young group of people. All of them were either studying at university or working after having finished university, so they were generally highly educated. Interviews were conducted by using Skype video calls and lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes for a total amount of 10 hours of recordings. They took place over the months of March and April 2017. In conducting the interviews I made use of an interview guide with some prepared questions in order to cover a list of specific topics. After the introductory questions, I asked about practices related to interviewees' fandom (how do they engage with Beyoncé?); then I explored what qualities interviewees appreciate most in Beyoncé and how generally they perceive her image and role as a female celebrity. Finally, when interviewees did not mention spontaneously feminism, I engaged more explicitly in discussions regarding feminist issues by posing direct questions. As a way to introduce the discussion on feminism, I asked about the song *Flawless*, which contains the speech of the feminist activist Chimamanda "We should all be feminists", because that was a good strategy to see whether feminist statements would play any role in their appreciation towards that song and Beyoncé more generally.

3.4 Data analysis

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Coding and preliminary analysis were done right after the transcription of each interview in order to be able to recognize recurrent patterns and compare those with the following interviews (Bryman, 2012). To keep track of the development of concepts I was studying, I also wrote memos after each interview. Following the distinction made by Charmaz (2006) initially I used the process of open coding to provide a general impression of the data. After this first stage, I used focused coding to identify the most recurring codes and the

most relevant to my research. In that way I could generate “more selective and abstract ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon of interest” (Bryman, 2012, p.570). Eventually, the conceptual categories I identified were grouped under the three macro-categories. The first is “most appreciated qualities in Beyoncé” which contains codes such as “strong, independent and self-confident”, “hard-working”, “humble/relatable”, “supporting women empowerment”, “engagement with social activism”, “family-oriented”. The other broad category was “post-feminism” which includes codes related to the main notions of the post-feminist sensibility as theorized by Gill. Thus this category encompasses codes such as “individual empowerment”, “personal freedom”, “autonomous sexuality”, “discipline and surveillance”, “traditional family values”, “being confused/unsure about feminism”, “feminism no longer useful”. The third category “no post-feminism”, which included categories that testify a more direct engagement with feminist positions such as “expressing socio-political concerns”, “attention for discrimination/inequality”, “against gender stereotypes”, “active involvement in activities for women” and so on. I then linked the codes from the first category with the codes of either the second or the third category. For instance, if someone appreciated Beyoncé for being “family-oriented”, he/she stressed also the importance of family values more generally which relates to the category of post-feminism. Next, the codes from the second and third category were compared to each other by trying to create oppositional couples when possible. For instance the code “traditional family values” included in “post-feminism” was compared to its contrary “against gender stereotypes” in order to evaluate which one was the most relevant in interviewees’ answers. I also evaluate how different categories interact with each other or contradict each other. Finally, after having evaluated the most recurring themes, I decided to structure my analysis according to three broad themes which correspond to the three sections of the next chapter. The three themes are: individual empowerment, choice and personal freedom; sexuality, body and family; race and gender. The theme of race naturally emerged from interviewees’ answers. I will explain more about the structure of each section and the division into sub-sections in the next chapter.

3.5 Validity and reflexivity

This research can be considered to be valid insofar as it used a logical research process and all the steps and decisions taken are made visible and clearly explained to the reader. The records of the main phases of the research process and the tools used are made easily accessible. The goal of this

research is not generalization, but exploration (Bryman, 2012) as it aims to study in depth the complexities and highlight the contradictions of the phenomena described. I acknowledge that the results of the research depend on what has been called “reflexivity”: “knowledge from a reflexive position is always a reflection of a researcher’s location in time and space” (Bryman, 2012, p.393) and it is informed by personal values and decisions. As a woman conducting research on post-feminism, I have to say that my beliefs are in line with feminist positions since I believe that feminism is still necessary in our western society (as well as elsewhere) to address persisting problems of gender discrimination. Although my research used a similar methodology used by many feminist researchers, I would not consider myself a feminist researcher since I chose to also include male interviewees because I believe that would add interesting insights to this topic. However, I did not allow my personal values to sway the conduct of the research and I maintained a neutral stand in order to let interviewees’ opinions emerge without manipulating them. For instance, initially I thought about making interviewees listen to the song Flawless during the interviews, in particular the excerpt of Chimamanda’s speech and then see how they would react to it. However, interviewees simply agreed with what Chimamanda said and did not add anything new or interesting. I realized right away that this was not a good move since it was too much influencing the interviewees and did not allow their opinions to emerge. Therefore, I changed strategy and I simply asked what they think about the song Flawless in order to see if they would mention the speech themselves.

4. Analysis

4.1 Individual empowerment, choice, freedom

In this first section of my analysis I will highlight how neoliberal discourses of individual empowerment and personal choice shape the understanding of the interviewees in relation to their personal identity, women and feminism more generally. First, I will explore the concept of empowerment which is mainly understood by interviewees as personal empowerment. This plays a major role in how interviewees appreciate Beyoncé: they are so emotionally attached to her because she helped them to feel empowered during difficult moments throughout their lives. Next, there is the concept of women empowerment which is again understood as an individualized phenomenon disconnected from a politically engaged feminism. Then, I will highlight how understandings of feminism are also shaped by discourses of free choice and personal freedom. Finally, I will analyse more in depth the attitudes of interviewees towards feminism. While a few interviewees were able to address the socio-political issues related to feminism, the majority seems to struggle in finding definitions on feminism and show little involvement in women issues. Even when interviewees refer to gender discrimination, this was only limited to personal accounts. Ultimately, they seem generally unable to fit those individual experiences into broader socio-political discourses.

4.1.1 Personal empowerment and women empowerment

Discourses of individual empowerment and personal freedom in regards to women and feminism are stressed by the majority of interviewees regardless of their gender, race and nationality. The way most of the interviewees appreciate Beyoncé is informed by neoliberal discourses which focus on “the rational, enterprising and self-regulating individual who is responsible for their life choices and trajectories”. (Allen & Mendick, 2013, p.78). The neoliberal ideology focused on individualism and self-sufficiency which popular Western culture has associated with masculine traits (Friedman, 2005) has been widely accepted and internalized by interviewees, even from women and African interviewees not belonging to the Western World.

Beyoncé is appreciated mainly as the embodiment of the strong self-confident woman who worked hard on herself in order to obtain a brilliant career. She is depicted as independent, determined and very “work driven”. For example Djurdjica, a young girl from Serbia who works as special need teacher in a school, loves Beyoncé for being “workaholic”, for all the personal effort she

put in building her career to the extent that “no one ever worked so hard like she did”. She defined her as “the most powerful woman in the world right now” and links power with economic independency referring to her ability to pay her “own bills”. Nicole, a young Dutch student, appreciates the fact that Beyoncé is like “a boss, she does everything by herself and I think that’s inspirational to see a woman so powerful in all aspects of her career”. According to her the main quality a woman should have in order to be powerful is “confidence”, “being sure of oneself” and to sum up the personality of Beyoncé she uses the word “superwoman”. Beyoncé is also appreciated by some interviewees for her business skills since she is also the owner of some companies along with managing her career as a singer. Beyoncé is seen as an ambitious woman who managed to achieve success thank to her personal talent, the right choices she made and the will to always “strive for perfection”.

This concept of inner strength and self-confidence returns when interviewees talk about their emotional attachment to Beyoncé. 9 out of 10 interviewees are hardcore fans who have been following Beyoncé for many years since Destiny Child and the most important part in their attachment to Beyoncé seem to be that she helped them through their difficult moments in life by giving them determination and hope. Many of the interviewees talked about feeling “empowered” thanks to Beyoncé’s music. For example Alejandra, a young American worker understands empowerment as

That's not something that every artist today has and that's the empowerment, if you feel bad you listen to her music or interview or anything you will feel the courage to stand up and continue with life, because she always gives hope and always gives that bright side and even though it might seem impossible, but in the long term it's possible and she empowers you to keep going on and keep pushing for what you really believe and that's why she is powerful

Beyoncé helped her through her transition from college to work and give her hope for the future. Vivian talked about how Beyoncé’s music made her feel empowered with songs like “I’m a Survivor” in the period when her parents got divorced and she was sent to foster care. Others told how Beyoncé helped them overcoming break ups by making them feel not alone since they could feel they were going through something which she also went through. Generally her music made them feel stronger and gave them a “confidence boost”. Therefore, the strength they appreciate so much in Beyoncé is also a source of inspiration they can use for their personal life. This seems to confirm what Ang (1985) says in relation to popular pleasure which is mainly a “pleasure of recognition”: when the

audience members interact with a popular media text, “they need to be able to identify with it in some way or other, to integrate it into everyday life” (p.20).

Even when interviewees appreciated “women empowerment” in relation to how Beyoncé relates to women (some spontaneously, other when asked about the song “Flawless”), this was not directly connected to feminism and it was mainly understood as “an individualized phenomenon which, clearly connected to gender and age, is not related analytically to issues of power, inequality or oppression” (Gill, 2014, p.593). According to most interviewees, women empowerment is about making women feel stronger and self-confident, rather than a set of social or political goals that women as a group have to fight for. For example Aliya believes that:

I think she is empowering to women because she makes music that doesn't put us in a bad light, she makes music that ehm what am I trying to say like it builds us up and makes us feel good about ourselves and it doesn't downplay like what we could do in life ehm she doesn't make us seem like victims, a lot of women who make music is like always being heartbroken or how a man has done them wrong and like that's not what she talks about

In particular, this can be related to concept of “power feminism” introduced by the post-feminist writer Naomi Wolf in her book *Fire with Fire* (1994). She believed that women as a group hold a great social power and all they need to do is grab it in order to pursue their personal desires. She criticized second-wave feminism which is deemed to offer a kind of “victim feminism” which is hostile to personal achievement and “charges women to identify with powerlessness even at the expense of taking responsibility for the power they do possess” (p.136). However, as we will see next, notions of “pleasing oneself” and individual power seem to be problematic (Showden, 2016), because in this way all kind of broader political and social issues are somewhat ignored and downgraded to a personal level and can be solved through individual achievement.

4.1.2 The power of choice and personal freedom

While “women empowerment” was mentioned by the majority of interviewees (8), only 3 interviewees volunteered the term feminism when describing Beyoncé. Among those there was Diana, a young girl from Australia, who believes that Beyoncé is “the only female celebrity that I find inspiring as a woman that talks about feminism”. She stresses the importance of having the freedom to express oneself without having limiting expectations imposed from the outside. For her feminism is “a female having the right to set her own standards and not conform or use reference to the

traditional standards of being a female in society”, which means “there’s no limits to what you can be as a woman”. Robert, a young black student from Kenya, talked about how Beyoncé “embodies the new age of feminism” which is mainly based on entrepreneurship attitude and sexual freedom. He thinks women should be encouraged to start and manage their own business as Beyoncé successfully did with her clothing and perfume companies. So again, even the interviewees who mentioned spontaneously feminism put the stress is put on female personal freedom and self-realization to be achieved through work and economic independency.

When explicitly asked about feminism, most of the other interviewees also articulated discourses focused on personal strength, freedom and individual choice. For example, Sabrina a young student from Malta, said that the feminism portrayed by Beyoncé correlates with her own idea of feminism since she “believes in confidence and in doing whatever you like as long as you don’t hurt anyone”. Djurdjica said in relation to feminism: “I just want to be that girl that everybody can say oh my god, she’s by herself and she’s so much in control of everything... because she is so good at what she’s doing”. For her it is important to be in control of her own life and reach success in her career through personal achievement. Alejandra refers to Beyoncé’s feminism as “aggressive”, not because of the content, but because she is promoting it both in her professional life through songs and commercials and in her private life as well by teaching her daughter how to love herself for who she is. According to her the message that Beyoncé wants to get across with her feminism is that:

We are all equal, we are all capable of achieving our dreams no matter if you are black, white, woman, man, if you are poor, rich.. if you have the power, the energy to strive to your dreams you will definitely have the... it's gonna be tough road, but you'll definitely get there, I think that's the main message, just to make sure that everyone believes in themselves before believing in others, to be true to one another

Under the neoliberal ideology, as underlined by Gill (2007), women are seen as autonomous agents no longer limited by structural inequalities and because of that they can achieve anything they want if they work hard and believe in themselves, regardless of considerations of gender, race and class. Gill (2007) talks about a “reprivatization” of public issues, meaning that there is the idea that all our practices are freely chosen. Similarly, McRobbie (2009) explains how “female achievement is predicated not on feminism, but on ‘female individualism’”, the idea that success is within everyone’s reach since now women are free to compete in education and in work. In this respect, an interesting example is Djurdjica who is the only one recognizing that “women are still not privileged as men” in

her country. However, she is still very optimistic about the power that women have and the personal achievements they can obtain if they work hard. The issue of gender inequality is not mentioned when she gave a definition of feminism which is only related to individual empowerment. Though this is a situation that she feels “we can’t change”, women can still be successful if they make the right personal choices despite the structural inequality of the society they live in. There seem to be a sort of cognitive dissonance, whereby women are considered politically disadvantaged, but individually powerful. More generally, this sense of optimism in the power of free choice expressed by most of the interviewees fails to consider those political and social factors in society which still cause gender inequalities like gender pay gap, lack of women in positions of power within institutions and politics and sexism. In this way, feminist arguments such as freedom of choice and autonomy are depoliticized: what is predicated is simply a positive psychological mindset towards opportunities, so that the need of political action to create those opportunities is not felt necessary anymore.

4.1.3 Individualized feminism: failing to consider socio-political inequalities

When explicitly asked about feminism, many interviewees seemed to be indecisive and confused and struggled a bit in giving their opinions about feminism (“it’s hard to explain”, “I don’t know how to describe”, “it’s a tricky question”). This seems to show how interviewees for the most part were not much familiar with feminist positions since they found it difficult to articulate clearly their opinions on what feminism should be about. Others found it easier to talk about how their personal background shaped their idea of feminism. For example for Alejandra to grow up with three sisters and to see the relationship between her parents as equal means that she never considered women to be inferior to men. Similarly, Gyram grew up surrounded by sisters, girlfriends and a strong mother, so he considers Beyoncé’s feminism something he sees in his everyday life: “strong liberated girls, very smart, very powerful, in control of their minds and their lives”.

For the most part interviewees were not much involved in practical activities regarding women issues. Among the few involved there was Diana, who used to be a member of a university Leadership Society and organized a conference about the theme of Women and Leadership where they invited women working in different sectors for a Q&A panel with students. Similarly, Alejandra used to be part of a group called “Women and Business” at university, where they talked about “great women who were taking leadership” and where they have been taught to “have great ideas and have the intelligence to run a business and strive to be the best that we could”. Again, however, those activities

are oriented towards empowering women individually and encourage them to gain entrepreneurial skills in order to pursue brilliant careers. Others told how they sometimes engage with discussions about women issues with friends or family. For instance, Robert usually talks with friends about the story of his strong mother who brought up him and his brothers alone, while Vivian sometimes engages in discussions with his boyfriend who has a somewhat traditional mindset.

Although interviewees were not generally much actively involved, for the most part they were not unaware of the existence of gender inequality. Few interviewees were able to explicitly address the social and economic problems which are still present in today's society (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009) and expressed concerns which are more related to feminist engagement. Therefore, those few interviewees were able to articulate points of socio-political critiques and produce resistant viewpoints in contrast with the post-feminist stress on individualism. We will see in the last subsection how this critical engagement is especially visible with respect to issues of race. For example Vivian believes that feminism is about being emotionally independent and strong, but also about "having equal rights, to not get paid less, to have the same rights to have a job". As a young mother, she told about the struggles she had in finding a job and the fact that her boss is still unhappy with her having a child, so she brought up the issue of discriminated mothers at work. Also Nicole believes that while gender equality has been legally achieved, there are still some cultural issues that need to be fixed: "women still getting pressured into 'domesticated' life like cooking, taking care of the children, while men go out and work... sexual assaults, even catcalling or going to a club and men grabbing butts, being told your value is in the way you look, also the expectation of being emotional and crazy". Jaylen, a young black Canadian student living in Canada, who defines himself 100percent feminist, recognizes that Beyoncé's feminism is focused on individual empowerment, but her idea of feminism is broader. Indeed he believes that a part from making feel women confident with their bodies, feminism should also be about "getting rid of gender pay gap and rape culture".

Some degree of awareness of gender inequality was also present in other interviewees, although this was often limited to personal accounts: they did not seem able to fit these individual experiences into broader social or political discourses or to engage further in producing some criticism of structural inequalities. For example, Vivian produced this detailed account of the pressures women are subjected to in our society:

Women have a lot of different issues they have to deal with, I mean men...women have to be... as a

woman I mean you have to be a good mother, but you also have to have a career, but not too much career, because then you are a bad mother and if you don't have any career, then you are lazy, but you also have to do all that and also look beautiful and be not too fat, but have a lot of children, but not stress about it and do the house and everything and men don't have that, men are fathers

However, when asked what can be done about it, she just says that “respect for women should be higher”. She is able to criticize this unfair situation, but then she does not go any further in questioning the very nature of a system which requires women to be mothers, have a career and still look beautiful.

McRobbie (2009) defines the new female character who emerged recently in media representation as “the working girl”, that is the ambitious and career-oriented girl who has now the possibility to compete in education and in work. However, the compromise she has to follow is that “she must retain a visible fragility and the displaying of a kind of conventional feminine vulnerability will ensure she remains desirable to men” (McRobbie, p. 2009, 79). In this respect, Beyoncé is also seen as a super working girl who –as I explained before- is perceived to be very work driven and successful in her career. I will address in the next section the problematic issue of traditional femininity. In the field of employment the social compromise that women have to follow is exemplified by the working mothers, who have to manage their double responsibility in the workplace and in the household taking care of children. According to McRobbie, “instead of challenging the traditional expectations that women take primary responsibility in the home, there is a shift towards abandoning the critique of patriarchy and instead heroically attempting to do it all”. (McRobbie, 2009, p.80)

Finally, in some other cases, episodes of gender discrimination were not directly seen as something which feminism should fight against. An interesting case is Aliya, an African American mother who rejected the label “feminist” since in her understanding it simply means “man haters”; however she proved to be sensitive to episodes of gender discrimination. For instance she told about how she was treated poorly in a restaurant and it was only when her husband spoke for her that she received a better treatment. Press & Tripodi (2016) refers to this phenomenon as “feminism on the ground”: (p.544) women identify with a series of feminist positions, though not with the label feminist which is associated to a negative stigma.

All in all, we can say that although few interviewees were able to articulate some feminist

concerns, post-feminist discourses of individual empowerment and personal freedom are stressed by the majority of the interviewees regardless of their gender, race and nationality. This can be related to what Duffett argues in *Understanding Fandom* (2013) regarding fans' reception of media texts. The way fans perceive their objects seems not to be shaped by their social identity or the text itself, but by wider forms of discourses. In this case the dominant discourses of neo-liberal individualism give the interviewees the cognitive resources necessary to organize their understandings of what they see in the media.

4.2 Sexuality, body and family

In this second section I will engage with other central post-feminist arguments related to the female body and sexuality. I will first start by noting how, while the idea of gender equality in the public realm was generally endorsed by interviewees and somehow taken for granted, some interviewees expressed post-feminist ideas of natural sexual difference between men and women. More generally, interviewees supported the idea of female sexual freedom which is related to the neoliberal discourse of personal freedom and autonomy as discussed in the previous section. The sexualization of women is not seen as problematic or as a sign of objectification, since it is done consciously and out of their own free choice. Next, I will discuss how sexual freedom relates to traditional ideas of family, while on the other hand critiques of traditional gender roles are also brought forward by some interviewees. Finally, I will link the post-feminist concept of women as autonomous sexual subjects (Gill, 2007) to the new stress put on self-surveillance and discipline of the body which again is related to the neoliberal emphasis on individualism and "work on oneself".

4.2.1 Equality versus difference

Most of the (females) interviewees believe in the equality between men and women in the public realm. Alejandra states "we are all equal, we can all do the same tasks... just because we are women it doesn't mean that we are limited". Diana believes that feminism should be promoted nowadays as "an open dialogue between sexes towards improving equality in society". Djurdjca says that "I have the same rights as you have –the man- and I have the same opportunities, so we are the same". Equality is mainly understood as equality of opportunities and rights and it is more assumed than questioned. I will explain better in the next section how according to interviewees gender equality seems to have been already achieved in our Western world and therefore it is taken for granted. Here I would like to highlight how interviewees' understanding of equality seems to reflect what has

been called the “liberal sameness approach” (Showden, 2009), which is the idea that gender equality can be reached by making opportunities in the public realm equal and by simply removing those barriers which prevent women from entering the field of employment, politics and so on. Issues regarding women more specifically and which would require the intervention or protection of the state such as sexual and domestic violence, reproductive rights, sexism are generally under-discussed by the interviewees.

While women are seen as equal to men with respect to how they should be treated legally from the state, some of the interviewees expressed ideas of natural sexual differences between the sexes which is again another characteristic of the post-feminist sensibility. For example, Djurdjica believes that “we women have that power that men have not, because we are the sex symbols”. Robert clarifies how his understanding of feminism is based on equity and not on equality: men and women should be given the same opportunities legally, but they are fundamentally different from a natural point of view. For instance he praises Beyoncé for proudly embodying her sexuality: “Beyoncé – moving her hips and doing all these choreography- she is proud to be a woman and isn’t afraid to show she is a woman”. He shows antipathy towards radical feminists who “sort of want to dress up like a man”, “they don’t want to have long hair” and generally they “undermine their feminine sexuality which then is against the principle of sexuality”. Therefore he believes in the existence of a universal feminine sexuality which is presented somewhat as natural and very stereotypical. Alejandra believes that women are “naturally sensual”: this is a characteristic inherent to the female nature, while “that’s something that men cannot easily do”. Nicole claims that different male and female behaviors and roles are not only socially constructed, but are mostly “fueled in nature”, she thinks they depend on biological differences. However, she also stresses the fact that “more common and biological shouldn’t mean that someone has to do, be or act in some way, it’s the authoritarian part that’s the issue for me”. According to Gill (2007) the notion of sexual difference has become increasingly visible across the media over the last years. Indeed, these discourses of sexual difference are informed by evolutionary psychology and genetic science which aimed at finding a genetic basis for all human behaviors. Ultimately, Gill contends, these discourses of gender difference end up re-affirming traditional gender norms: they can be used to justify gender inequalities and represent them as inevitable.

4.2.2 Sexual freedom and traditional gender roles

While discourses of sexual difference were brought forward only by some, basically all interviewees supported the idea of female sexual freedom. Three interviewees spontaneously stressed the importance of sexual freedom when talking about Beyoncé and the kind of feminism she is portraying. For instance, Diana believes that if a woman expresses her sexuality, it does not mean that she is “sexually objectifying” herself because this is part of her freedom of expression. Sexual objectification is rather “a matter of opinion... a perspective that one places on another” and not something intrinsic to the way a woman chooses to express herself. When other interviewees were explicitly asked about this issue, they all shared the same opinions: they consider the criticism she received for being too sexually charged unjustified, because Beyoncé displays her body and sexuality out of her personal choice. She is aware of the way she presents herself, therefore that is not sign of any kind of exploitation. Only Nicole was able to articulate a point of critique towards the pervasive sexualization of female celebrities across the media. Although she appreciates how Beyoncé’s feminism defies the old-fashioned kind of mentality where woman sexuality was a taboo and only men were allowed to show their sexual freedom, she also acknowledged that:

She shows other young women the "perfect" body which doesn't help their self-esteem, and also that she is showing so much skin and sexualizes herself, so she could be seen as a sex object which goes back to: how many female singers are out there that haven't taken their clothes off? or feel the need to take their clothes off? Sometimes I am conflicted about that, but I definitely lean more towards it's her choice and she can do whatever she wants

This can be linked to what Gill (2007) says regarding the shift that has occurred in the representation of women across the media which is summarized as “from objectification to subjectification”. While once women in the media were represented as sexual and passive, powerless objects of the male gaze, now women are presented as autonomous sexual subjects who choose consciously to show their sexuality. This is line with the neoliberal discourse of choice which presents women as having the agency to take decisions on their own in a regime of personal freedom. However, Gill contends, this represents a deeper form of exploitation, since the male gaze has been internalized by women and comes to shape the very female subjectivity. Gill also explains how sexual freedom is related to the wider phenomenon of sexualisation of media culture where discourses around sex and erotic representations of women have become widespread. This is also referred to as “pornofication”,

which is “the notion of mainstream cultural products being imbued with aesthetics of porn” (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015 p.13). This aesthetics is especially visible in today’s advertisements where sexuality is commercialized and used as a strategy to sell products. Indeed, “feminist ideals such as the freedom and right to exercise choice have been taken up by advertisers and the media and are repackaged and sold back to women” (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015, p.163).

Similarly, McRobbie analyzed this new character of the sexually active woman and defined her “the phallic girl”. Women are encouraged to express their sexual desires freely and “in the name of sexual equity, to overturn the old double standards and emulate the assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men” (McRobbie, 2009, p.84). However, women are also asked not to abandon the traditional kind of feminine outlook which makes them attractive to men. According to McRobbie, this is ultimately another way to re-establish the traditional gender hierarchy, since the right to pursue sexual desires on behalf of women is “totally disconnected from any notion of a renewed feminism” (2007, p.85).

Although over the last decades girls have experienced an increase of sexual freedom, “earlier sexual attitudes still persist in our culture” (Press, 2011, p.110). While girls are attempting to negotiate their new sexual freedom, the presence of the “slut” stereotype is still well alive, as highlighted by Press (2011). Girls who live out their sexuality freely still seem to be subjected to hostility and old sexist insults. The issue of slut shaming was actually brought up by one of the interviewees, Gyram, who believes that while patriarchy is over at least in our Western world because women do not need to depend on men anymore, “slut shaming is the new sexism, the new misogyny” we have to face today. This is a problem which he is very concerned with since his sister was a victim of slut shaming at high school. He stresses the persistence of the sexual double standards between men and women and believes that there should be a more free attitude towards sex which does not have to be linked to moral judgments of any kind. Similarly, Vivian disagrees with people who argue that “when you are showing your body, you are being a slut, you’re being cheap” because this is just part of the freedom a woman should have in expressing herself.

The stress upon the autonomous sexual agency that women should have today was however accompanied in some cases by appreciation of traditional family values. Four among the female interviewees admire Beyoncé for being “family-oriented” and for the long-term relationship

with her husband Jay Z. For example Aliya, a mother herself, would like her own family to be like Beyoncé's because she thinks that, unlike other celebrities, Beyoncé always spends a lot of time with her daughter and husband. Similarly Sabrina points out that "despite her success and fame she's still grounded to her family". The endorsement of sexual freedom together with appreciation for more traditional values like family can be considered an example of what McRobbie calls "double entanglement" which is a main characteristic of post-feminism. She describes it as "the coexistence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life... with processes of liberalization with regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations". (McRobbie, 2004, p.256). She argues that in our western multi-cultural context where different modes of kinships are increasingly becoming more accepted (i.e. gay marriage), there is a coming back in celebrating the traditional marriage lifestyle as a way of re-affirming gender hierarchies.

However, while a couple of the interviewees appreciate how Beyoncé manages to be a mother and "still be sexy", those who stressed the importance of family did not explicitly express appreciation for Beyoncé's sensual performances. Similarly, those who most valued sexual freedom (the majority) did not mention at all Beyoncé's role as a mother and wife. For instance Alejandra, who considers family as a core value, when asked about Beyoncé's sexuality said:

she's extremely sensual and it's provocative, but she's not bowing down to anyone, she's not being provocative with strangers or other dancers for example in Partition she's with Jay Z, the whole video is with her and Jay Z and she's dancing to him and then she dances with her female dancers, but she's not showing her sensuality with multiple men let's say... the time she shows her body is usually right next to her husband and other female dancers, that's why I say she doesn't use it in a bad way

She somehow justifies Beyoncé's sensual performances because they are directed towards her husband only and for this reason she does not use her sexuality in "a bad way". In contrast Gyram, who supports strongly sexual freedom, disagreed with the argument that Beyoncé's sexuality is not vulgar only because it is directed towards her husband. Instead, she has the right to express her sexuality freely regardless. Therefore we can observe how interviewees tend to focus more on either the traditional value of marriage or sexual freedom as those are not always seen as totally compatible values. For those who are more family-oriented it seems that sexuality is still understood within a conservative framework: as a mother one has to follow a certain ethic of respectability in order not to appear inappropriate.

However, the picture here seems to be nuanced since interviewees seem to be divided on the issue of traditional family values. Indeed there were also some interviewees who expressed ideas that contrast traditional gender roles and are more directly engaged with feminist positions. For example they criticized existing gender stereotypes that still circulate in our society and that give a distorted image of what a woman should do or be. For example, Gyram believes that feminism should be about the end of gender stereotypes for both men and women: “women don’t have to stay at home or a man can also stay at home, men can have some fragilities, women don’t have to love make up or girlish stuff”. Similarly, Diana claims that women should not have “predisposed expectations” of what they could aspire to be: they should be free to realize themselves without being conditioned by “conventional or traditional standards” that are imposed on women from society. Jaylen believes that feminism should also be promoted by improving the way people talk about women. He believes in the use of politically correct terms, for example correcting people when they make “jokes about things like women should be in the house all the time”. Djurdjca complains about the traditional stereotypes that women are still subjected to in her country (“women should stay at home and cooking”) and tells how many of her friends got married and had to “renounce to themselves” since they got trapped in the family lifestyle.

4.2.3 Discipline and surveillance

Related to sexuality is also the new stress put on practices of self-surveillance and discipline of the body and the self as described by Gill (2007). This is another important feature of post-feminism and again it is connected to the emphasis on neoliberal individualism and the imperative of working on oneself. In the media culture especially in women magazines, television and talk shows the self is often presented as “a project to be evaluated, advised, disciplined and improved”(Gill, 2007, p.262) both from an aesthetic and psychological point of view. Women are thus encouraged to work on their body and on their interior life in order to become a successful version of themselves. According to Gill, what marks the present moment is the new intensity of these regulatory practices which are extended to private life and to interiority as well.

We can see how these discourses are reflected in the way interviewees generally talk about Beyoncé as being in tight control over her body and image. She is seen to be very aware of the way she presents herself to the media (“she knows what she is doing”) and every step she takes in her career is carefully calculated. Some made appreciation for the way she presents her physical persona

proudly. For example, Aliya mentioned “pretty” as the first thing when describing Beyoncé: she appreciates how she looks “classy, like a lady” and how her stage costumes look always perfect. Vivian appreciates how “Beyoncé has always shown women that you can have curves and still be sexy and be beautiful”. Similarly, Djiurdjca likes how Beyoncé shows that “she’s not ashamed of her body” and stresses the importance of being “aware of our skin and body”. Robert loves how “she is not afraid of showing her sexuality” and he spontaneously describes what he calls “the new age of feminism” which is perfectly represented by Beyoncé. According to him, this new feminism is about “being very very proud of the feminine sexuality... so definitely it involves embodying your body and not being afraid of using your body in whatever way to put out any message that you want”.

Those quotes seem to show an appreciation for the way Beyoncé uses her body which is considered to be as a source of power. This can be connected to what Gill says in relation to femininity as a bodily property: the message that media want to get across is that female identity is deeply linked to a sexy body which becomes the main source of power for a woman. At the same time women’s physical appearance is subjected to surveillance by the media and it has to conform to certain narrow standards of beauty (namely being skinny, fit and flawless). Although not all the interviewees talk explicitly about Beyoncé’s physical appearance and usually they appreciate more other qualities, one of the most appreciated qualities of Beyoncé which was mentioned by almost everyone is that she is very discreet with her private life. They admire Beyoncé for not revealing too much to the media (she doesn’t give interviews anymore now) and for not being involved in cheap gossips. Therefore Beyoncé is seen as being able to construct her public persona by deciding what/when/how to reveal certain aspects of herself to the media. She is careful in not exposing her private life excessively in the media in order to maintain her image and body under her own control.

In this respect, it is convenient to recall the notion of disciplinary power as theorized by Foucault: the power is seen as circulating through the body by regulating every aspect of its functioning. Power literally disciplines the body through a series of techniques, so that normative social and cultural norms come to be inscribed in our bodily experience. Foucault’s work was focused on how disciplinary practices functioned in institutions like the prison, factory, military, but some feminist writers such as Sandra Bartky (1990) have used his ideas in order to study the effect of discipline across a variety of social spaces like family, the workplace and the media. Drawing on Foucault’s

(1977) analysis on surveillance and the metaphor of the panopticon (a design for a prison where individuals are controlled by a guardian without however realizing when they are controlled), Bartky (1990) elaborates the idea of femininity as a discipline. Monitoring and surveillance are thought to be necessary for the performance of successful femininity: women are induced to put their own appearance into constant scrutiny in order to conform to certain standards of beauty. Images of normative femininity circulate especially in the media which are seen to be key sites of this form of power. The power takes the shape of the patriarchal system which requires women to present themselves as desirable objects. Indeed, "it is also the reflection in woman's consciousness of the fact that she is under surveillance in ways that he is not, that whatever else she may become, she is importantly a body designed to please and excite" (Bartky, 1990 p.80). Ultimately, this is how gender inequality is re-affirmed in the post-feminist era and also how feminist and anti-feminist ideas are entangled. Indeed, while on the one hand women are presented as free and autonomous agents, on the other hand they are still subjected to regulatory practices with respect to their bodies and subjectivities.

However, there were also few interviewees who produced alternative readings to this dominant discourse of beauty and self-discipline. For instance, Gyram believes that "even though Beyoncé wasn't that beautiful, I think I would still be a huge fan, because she's more than that". Jaylen thinks that a person is attractive "beyond physical traits", it is more a matter of "personality and how you present yourself, not physically, but emotionally and mentally". Djiurdjca explains how Beyoncé has been accused of being too fat, while she recognizes that being a black woman it is normal for her to have a different bodily constitution than white people. She seems to echo what Weidhase (2015) says about how Beyoncé's performances are a way of reclaiming the black female body against the mainstream of white feminism in a society where black bodies are marked as deviant. I will explain in the next section how broader considerations of race play an important role in the way interviewees perceive Beyoncé.

4.3 Race and Gender

In this last section I will engage with considerations related to race and I will explore how they intersect with gender discourses. While interviewees did not express many socio-political concerns regarding the status of women, they were generally more sensitive to issues regarding black people and minorities. They appreciate Beyoncé for her social activism and activities of philanthropy in favor

of disadvantaged people. This is also related to another quality of Beyoncé greatly appreciated by interviewees: her humility. Finally, I will explore how race is important to better understand the positions of interviewees with respect to gender. Ultimately, they seem to walk a thin line between post-feminism (insofar as feminism is felt as not that necessary anymore) and the more politically engaged third wave feminism which is more attentive to factors such as race and sexuality and wants to fight against oppressions across the board.

4.3.1 Socio-political engagement and humility

The way interviewees articulated discourses of race is also relevant to understand their positions towards gender as a category of social and political analysis. While –as we have seen– generally interviewees perceived feminism as an individualized phenomenon disconnected from broader socio-political issues, most of them were sensitive to issues regarding race. They were more concerned with the social and political discrimination that black people still face today. Seven interviewees (all the four Black interviewees and three White) appreciate Beyoncé for being an example of a “successful black women” and they generally admire how she portrays black culture in her songs, especially in the last album *Lemonade*, and how she engages with the black community. For example Aliya, who is a black African American woman herself, described Beyoncé as “activist” (the other adjectives being “singer”, “mother” and “business woman”):

lately she's been using her music to you know get across a certain message, here in America we have like a major issue with race relation and I like how at the Superball all her dancers were just like black painters and I like that she did a song with Kendrick Lamar, who's also a very political artist and it was called Freedom and it's just like she's not afraid of use her voice to represent people who are often abused and misrepresented in the media and she got a lot of backlash for it, but she still does it anyway. Also she's like sent girls to college, she's built home for people, she does a lot of like charity work, so that's why I call her an activist, she's just like very active in the black community and she tries to help people a lot

Beyoncé is considered to be a politically engaged artist when it comes to black issues and she is appreciated for addressing the problem of race discrimination, which is still well alive especially in America as pointed out by all the three American interviewees. For instance, Aliya described how she often faced race discrimination in her everyday life. Similarly, the other black interviewees appreciated how she is empowering to the black community by employing black dancers in her videos and

performances as well as directly addressing the problem of black oppression in her songs such as “Freedom”. Their opinions seem to echo what the black feminist Patricia Collins says about the fact that “despite important strides to desegregate US society since 1970, racial segregation remains deeply entrenched in housing, schooling and employment”(Collins, 2009, p.26). Socio-political concerns about race seem to be related to the nationality and ethnicity of the fans since all the black interviewees and those from America talked about racism. This seems to be in contrast with what Duffett (2013) claims about how wider forms of discourse shape the understanding of fans regardless of their individual characteristics or the broader context. While –as we have seen- discourses of female individualism were internalized by basically all the interviewees, in the case of discussions about race factors such as the socio-political context and ethnicity seem to be relevant. In this respect, Krijnen & Van Bauwel (2015) argue that “situatedness”, which is the social-historical context of an individual, should be taken in consideration while considering the way people relate to media. Indeed, “we depart from a deterministic view of an individual’s characteristics as determining the pleasure she or he can experience, but simultaneously take them seriously as the context that informs media practices” (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015, p.143). Although individual characteristics cannot predict exactly how one relates to media content, they still have to be taken in consideration.

However, also some of the white non-American interviewees appreciated how she has helped the community with her philanthropic activities whether by giving money to homeless people, by giving scholarships to women of color or by donating money to Black Lives Matter. This is also related to another aspect of Beyoncé’s personality which is one of most valued among all interviewees: her humility and the fact of being “relatable”. For example, Alejandra believes that she is humble because she is still very attached to her African roots and “she’s not focusing on what’s trendy, she never loses her interiority, herself”. Robert provided as example of her humility an episode in which she met a fan of her who suffered from cancer few days before his death. Nicole believes that Beyoncé is relatable because in her songs talks about issues normal people can relate to: “it’s not just music about like I’m so rich and cool, most people don’t know how does that feel like, they know the emotional level”. She likes how in the interviewees seems to be shy, because that shows that “she is a human with other emotions than just the stage presence”. Therefore, while on the one hand interviewees appreciate Beyoncé for being a successful and powerful star –as we have seen in the first section-, on the other hand they equally value the fact that she is still “down to earth” and “she cares about

people” despite her success. Beyoncé manages to play multiple roles at the same time – as a brilliant artist, caring mother, business woman, engaged activist- and she is therefore able to appeal to a wide and variegated audience, who can identify with either of the different facets she portrays. This seems also to contradict the interpretation that “female celebrity’s appeal now appears to rest in her cool and calculated quasi-godlike posthuman persona”. (Evans & Riley, 2013, p.269). The fact that interviewees feel they can relate to Beyoncé thanks to her humility and attention to the community seems to confirm the “notion of befriending or identifying with the celebrity figure in para-social relationships where celebrities do their best to appear personal and intimate with their audience”. (Ibidem)

4.3.2 *Between post-feminism and third Wave feminism*

It is important to reflect further on the way interviewees talk about race issues and see how it intersects with gender. Interviewees seem to walk a thin line between post-feminism (feminism is felt as not that necessary anymore) and the more politically engaged third wave feminism which takes in consideration factors such as race and sexuality and wants to fight against all kind of oppressions. As we have seen, although interviewees were sometimes able to recognize gender discrimination by sharing their personal experiences, women are generally not seen as a much discriminated group anymore. The stress is often put on the gains which women have made over the years, so that now gender equality seems to be a goal which has been already achieved. For the most part they seem to endorse a so-called “gender mainstreaming” politics as described by Walby (2002): feminist activism has now become integrated into mainstream politics on a national and global level. Women’s experiences and interests have had a great impact in the field of human rights to the extent that gender issues are now fully taken into account within institutions. For example Nicole believes that “we kind of moved away from the whole men being equal to women thing”, because she thinks that at least in our western world equality has been legally reached. While she was able to point out the cultural issues still related to women discrimination, she also believes that men are not necessarily the privileged ones and also have issues to deal with (such as “custody battles always won by the mother, sexual assault taken less seriously, expectations to always be strong and not show emotions”) Similarly, Gyram believes that patriarchy is a thing of the past, since in the western society “women don’t have to depend on a man to fulfill their goals”. Vivian says:

the picture of feminism is different here, cause here in Europe or in America of course women are paid less than men, it's the same in Germany than in America, but we have rights to vote, we have rights I

mean years ago women did not have rights, but there are a lot of countries in the world where women do not have any right and for that matter I would be a feminist or I am a feminist and I think everybody not even women, I think gays and trans people and whatever they are, I don't care, I think every human should be treated the same

Even when the issue of gender pay gap is mentioned by the interviewees, this is somehow deemed not that relevant if one compares it to all the other rights that women have already gained and compared to situations in countries where women are denied basic rights. According to Vivian, feminism is more necessary elsewhere, because in our western society “we don’t have a big problem with feminism”. All these quotations seem to confirm what both Gill and McRobbie claim about post-feminism: “feminist ideas have become a kind of common sense”(Gill, 2007, p.1), they have been incorporated into the political and social debate to the extent that feminism is deemed to be no longer much necessary in our western culture since gender equality has been achieved already.

On the other hand, feminism is mainly seen as part of a broader social justice activism which calls for equality for all discriminated groups. In this respect, Diana says: “I believe I am a feminist because, to be honest, I get offended when I do see inequality between sexes because irrational or outdated claims that do not allow society to progress to its best. But to be even more honest, more than a feminist I would consider myself more of a humanist and feminism is part of such identity”. By a humanist she means that “every individual should be treated with respect regardless of their sex, gender, race, political view, religion”. Similarly others appreciate Beyoncé for being empowering for everyone, not only women, but also black and gay people. As regards the call for more inclusiveness Nicole said:

there are a lot of people that think that ehm feminism is like equality for everyone and feminism is that, also race issues and all type of things, but I don't see how that fits in all the time with feminism because I do think that there's a movement for anti-racism, there's a movement for gay people, there's a movement for disabled people and stuff like that, which I think it's great, I don't think that.. I have the feeling sometimes that feminism takes credit for everything (laughter), which I don't think it's necessarily helpful really for anyone, so I would like just to see people working together more instead of just all under one label of feminism

The importance of fighting injustice beyond gender as expressed by many interviewees seems to reflect the position of third-wave feminism, which has often been described in opposition to post-

feminism since it is a more politically engaged movement (Genz & Brabon, 2009). Third-wave feminism endorses a politics of ambiguity that is in favor of multicultural diversity and difference. It is informed by postmodern and poststructuralist theories of identity: the idea of a universal and unified subject is challenged. Rather they focus on “paradox, conflict, multiplicity and messiness”. (Showden, 2009, p.181). This means that third wavers “work with the fragmentation of existing identities and institutions, creating a new theoretical/political space that complicates female identity rather than defining it” (Genz & Brabon, 2009, p.159). In particular, in its emphasis on pluralism they take on the critiques of essentialism and exclusion within second-wave feminism made by women of color and lesbian feminists: there is no such a stable category as “woman”, but different female identities and experiences influenced by factors such as race, class and sexuality. Therefore third wave feminism embraces the concept of intersectionality, “seeing how race, sex, gender and class intersect (rather than work additively and as discrete categories) to produce both identities and political needs” (Snowden, 2009, p. 182). In this way this movement seeks liberation for all those who are oppressed. As claimed by Julie Shah, co-director of the Third Wave Foundation “the third wave is self-defining for each individual. It’s a group of women and men who are concerned about social justice for women, and social justice in general” (Showden, 2009, p.188). The term intersectionality was actually mentioned by Gyram when describing the kind of feminism portrayed by Beyoncé: “she takes into account that if you are a black female for example you have sexism to deal with, but you have also racism. If you are a transgender you will have sexism, but also transphobia, if you are lesbian you will have sexism and also homophobia and it's not the same struggles”. Oppression should then be considered along discourses of not only gender, but also race and sexuality. Gyram appreciates Beyoncé for embracing diversity and caring for other people’s all different kinds of discrimination. Ultimately, for interviewees gender seems not to be the primary mode of social and cultural analysis of discrimination but, other factors such as race or sexuality are deemed to be as relevant, if not more.

5. Conclusion

The present research explored the role of post-feminism in Beyoncé's fandom drawing on the assumption that nowadays struggles over the meaning of feminism take place primarily in the media. Since celebrities with their public persona and statements are able to shape the general perception around gender issues, I chose to investigate the fandom of one of the most popular artists who recently "came out" as a feminist. All in all, my research has highlighted how the main notions of post-feminism as theorized by Gill and McRobbie inform the understanding of the interviewees with respect to women and women issues, although interviewees did not adhere fully to the post-feminist sensibility and in some case they were able to produce resistant readings.

Discourses of individual empowerment, choice and freedom are much present in interviewees' answers in relation to gender issues. Such discourses seem to have been internalized by the majority of interviewees regardless of their gender, race and nationality. In accordance with the neoliberal ideology, interviewees see women as autonomous agents who are free to achieve what they want if they work hard of themselves. This rhetoric of free choice and self-empowerment thus focuses more on the individual only and does not engage much with political and social issues. Only a few interviewees were able to articulate concerns related to women status such as gender pay gap and rape culture. However, for the most part they were able to recognize gender discrimination based on their individual experiences only and they did not consider the broader socio-political context of inequality.

Related to the discourse of personal freedom is also the concept of female sexual freedom which was endorsed by the majority of the interviewees. Women who present themselves in a sensual manner are not seen as victims of objectification like they used to be seen in the past, but they are now seen as autonomous agents who choose to express their sexuality out of their own choice. Almost no one questioned the pervading sexualization of female celebrities in contemporary culture as this is seen as part of the personal freedom a woman should have in portraying herself. Sometimes the idea of female sexual autonomy was accompanied by appreciation for traditional family values although it seems that those values are not seen totally compatible by the interviewees. Those who stressed the importance of family did not talk explicitly about sexual freedom. However, in line with feminist positions, some interviewees articulate some points of critique against traditional gender roles and call for a less stereotyped image of women.

Next, I showed how the way the interviewees perceive Beyoncé –as someone in control of her own image and persona- pointed out to discourses of self-discipline and surveillance: the self is understood as a project to be evaluated and improved both physically and psychologically. In order to do so, the self is subjected to a constant monitoring which is arguably the main requirement for the performance of femininity. While on the one hand women are seen as having free agency and autonomy of choice, on the other hand they are still subjected to regulatory practices which ultimately reaffirm traditional gender hierarchies.

Interviewees articulate mainly discourses of individualism in relation to gender, but they were generally more sensitive to the issue of race discrimination. This is felt as an urgent socio-political problem to be addressed and compared to feminism seems no longer to be relevant since gender equality has been already achieved in the western world. Here interviewees walk a thin line between expressing a post-feminist viewpoint (feminism has been already incorporated in the mainstream and it has lost most of its relevance) and positions related to the more politically engaged third wave of feminism. Indeed their claim for equality for everyone regardless of race, sexuality and gender can be linked to the goals of third wave feminism which is focused of diversity and pluralism. One of its aims is to explore the intersection of different oppressions and how those produce different identities and political needs.

My analysis seems also to confirm what Duffett argues about fandom which is always about “consumption and production, resistance and collusion”. In this sense, my research contributed also to the field of audience research since it showed how fans can act both in accordance with dominant ideologies, but they can also produce alternative readings. Indeed, I have pointed out how on the one hand interviewees articulate readings which were in line with the dominant discourses of neoliberalism and post-feminism (although with some exceptions) with respect to women issues, while on the other hand they produce some resistant readings by engaging in discussions about race discrimination.

Moreover, my research showed how the concept of post-feminism is still valid as a critical concept to explore gender issues. In particular, it is useful since it can shed light on the contradictions of today celebrity feminism and highlight how feminism is entangled with anti-feminist ideas in complex ways. It is important to critically question the different meanings attached to feminism even when it is claimed as an identity by celebrities or it is celebrated across the media. Indeed, “critical uses of the

notion neither fall into a celebratory trap of seeing all instances of mediated feminism as indications that the media have somehow 'become feminist,' but nor do they fail to see how entangled feminist ideas can be with pre-feminist, anti-feminist, and backlash ones" (Gill, 2016, p.622). However, it is also true that interviewees articulate socio-political concerns which are in contrast with the post-feminist emphasis on individualism. This seems to show how the so-called post-feminist sensibility is not inescapable and media consumers are also able to produce resistant interpretations to dominant ideologies and to engage with positions more related to third wave feminism. While on the one hand it might be encouraging for feminism to see that people are generally concerned about social justice, on the other hand it is also worrying since gender is not considered to be a primary mode of political analysis anymore. Issues regarding specifically women might be underestimated or not taken in consideration if one focuses on social justice in general. Indeed, I would like to recall what Showden says in relation to third wavers: if they "reject the older feminist principle of sex, gender and patriarchy as central categories of social and political analyses... it is not clear why, if gender drops out, this new movement should be called the third wave of feminism or new feminism rather than simply 'social justice activism' (2009, p.189). Therefore, from a feminist viewpoint, to develop coalitions with other discriminated groups and to work with intersectional identities might be fruitful, although it is also important to continue producing socio-political critique from a gendered perspective.

In this respect, the theory used about post-feminism proved to be suitable for this type of research. Interviewee's responses reveal how the main concepts of post-feminism- namely self-discipline and surveillance, sexual freedom and individual empowerment- structure their opinions. However, -as we have seen- interviewees produced also resistant readings to dominant ideologies especially when talking about race discrimination. Therefore theory on post-feminism has to be integrated with theory regarding more specifically third wave feminism.

The method used, discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews, was appropriate since in this way I was able to analyze in depth interviewees' opinions and had the freedom to explore for each interviewee the issues he or she cares the most about. Limitations regard the fact that obviously since the number of interviewees is limited the results are inevitably not generalizable to all of Beyoncé's fandom. Because of that, it is also not easily possible to draw direct links between opinions expressed by interviewees and their race, gender and nationality.

Since media studies have focused mostly on textual analysis, further audience research is needed in order to evaluate the perception of everyday media consumers regarding gender issues. While textual analysis often pointed out to the post-feminist messages present in media representations, it is useful to explore how the audience negotiate and rearticulate dominant ideologies associated with such messages and to what extent they are able to produce resistant readings. Moreover, it would be useful for future research to explore the relationship between gender and race by taking on an intersectional approach in order to evaluate how those two factors come to be intertwined in fruitful and unexpected ways. Further audience research might also use mixed methods including content and discourse analysis of social media pages in order to gain a clearer picture of the phenomenon studied.

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APPENDIX A

Overview of respondents

1. Djiurdjca. Gender: Female; Age: 25; Nationality: Serbian; Residence: Belgrad; Education: graduated at University of Public Relations; Occupation: Teacher for children with special needs
2. Diana. Gender: Female; Age: 21; Nationality: Australian but born in Peru; Residence: Sydney; Education: graduated at University of Audio Engineering; Occupation: working in a marketing business industry for Migration Governmental Office
3. Robert. Gender: Male; Age: 23; Nationality: Kenyan (black); Residence: Nairobi; Education: currently attending University of Law; Occupation: working at Uber (technology company) as a partner specialist
4. Sabrina. Gender: Female; Age: 20; Nationality: Maltese; Residence: Malta; Education: currently attending the University of Environmental Science
5. Alejandra. Gender: Female; Age: 23; Nationality: American but born in Peru; Residence: New Jersey; Education: graduated; Occupation: warranty processing for Samsung
6. Gyram. Gender: Male; Age: 18; Nationality: Ivorian (black); Residence: Ivory Coast; Education: currently attending University of Law
7. Vivian. Gender: Female; Age: 27; Nationality: German but she is half American; Residence: Leonberg, Germany; Education: attended a three year school to qualify for the job she has now; Occupation: processing in an office
8. Aliya. Gender: Female; Age: 25; Nationality: African American (black); Residence: Philadelphia; Education: currently studying to become a teacher; Occupation: working in the health care profession
9. Jaylen. Gender: Male; Age: 20; Nationality: Canadian, but he is half Trini and half Jamaican (black); Residence: Ontario; Education: currently attending the Faculty of Business; Occupation: working for his municipality and as a pool supervisor
10. Nicole. Gender: Female; Age: 23; Nationality: Dutch; Residence: The Hague; Education: currently studying Communication at University; Occupation: working part-time at an insurance company

APPENDIX B

Semi-structured Interview Guide

1. How come did you become a fan of Beyoncé?
2. How many years have you been a fan of her?
3. Why do you like Beyoncé so much?
4. How would you describe her?
5. Why did you subscribe on the fan group Facebook page?
6. In what ways do you engage with Beyoncé? (Have you ever been to a concert of her? Do you buy her CDs? Do you follow her on social media?)
7. What qualities of her do you appreciate most?
8. Why do you think Beyoncé has become such an influential artist?
9. What do you think of her performances/music videos? What impact do they have on you?
10. What element is the most important in her performances?
11. Which video do you remember best and why?
12. What's your favorite song? Favorite album? Why?
13. Do you think she is attractive? Why?
14. What do you think of her last album "Lemonade"?
15. Do you think it is different in any way compared to her previous albums? Why?
16. In what way did Lemonade affect you? What do you think it stands for?
17. How would you describe the development of Beyoncé's career over the years?
18. What do you think of the song Flawless?
19. What do you think of the "feminist" performance at the MTV awards in 2014?
20. How would you describe Beyoncé's feminism?
21. What role does the body play?
22. How does Beyoncé's feminism relate to your own idea of feminism?
23. How does Beyoncé's feminism influence your idea of what it is?

24. How does it influence your everyday life?
25. Do you talk about it with others like family, friends, colleagues?
26. Do you engage in some kind of activities? Are you involved in some kind of ways?
27. How would you compare Beyoncé's feminism with that of other celebrities (like Emma Watson)?
28. Do you have anything to add?

APPENDIX C

Interview Transcript

00:05 S: For my thesis, I'm going to study the role of study Beyonce' as a cultural icon. I'm interested in the ways fans relate to her and explore their opinions about her work and presence in the media. All the names of participants will remain anonymous unless you want your name to be visible in the research. So you want to stay anonymous or not?

00:41 G: I think anonymous would be better

00:45 Alright. All the recordings of interviews will be stored safely in my computer for a period of about 4/5 months and will be used for my master thesis which will be accessible through the Erasmus University Thesis Repository online. This is not a normal conversation, so you can take your time to think about the answers and I might also need some time to think about the next question I want to ask since questions are not fixed, so we can take our time. So what's your age and nationality?

01:30 G: I'm 23 and I'm Dutch

01:34 S: What do you do in life?

01:53 G: I'm also in college, I'm also working on my thesis, I'm studying Communication and I also work part-time at an insurance company

02:01 S: Ok. So why did you become a fan of Beyoncé?

02:09 G: Uh, well I've been a fan of Beyoncé since Destiny Child I think, so it's been a really long time, I first of all really liked her music which is an obvious part (laughter). I also really like how she makes me feel like empowered or something when I listen to her music

02:44 S: What do you mean by empowered?

02:46 G: Ehm confidence and ehm like you can do anything, she's like the feminist icon or something

03:03 S: Oh ok, so is this the main reason why you appreciate her, because she is a feminist icon?

03:12 G: Ehm yeah well I think that's the second reason, the first reason is just the music I think

03:22 S: So how would you describe her feminism?

03:39 G: Mh I think a lot of it is ehm sexual freedom and also see like the black woman part, so it's like also the racism part in it which I mean I'm not black (laughter), but I do really appreciate that ehm and she's kind of like a boss you know, she does everything by herself and I think that's inspirational to see a woman so powerful in all aspects of her career

04:17 S: So why do you think sexual freedom is something important?

04:32 G: Why is it important like in general?

04:37 S: I think a lot of it comes from old-fashioned type of thing where woman is not allowed to do sex with other people than her husband or not showing that she is sexual and that men do have that freedom and I think that.. it's getting better overall and I think we're progressing in that sense, but I just think it's good that she shows that she can be a mother and still be sexy and just saying whatever she wants and what's on her mind, so people in general just sometimes think about sex and I think that she shows that that's normal when she sings about it and stuff

05:41 S: And also why do you appreciate the fact she is a black woman, like the racial part?

05:52 G: I think principal is the diversity part where you just don't see that many black women like being very successful and also how she talks about racism and especially in her last album where she just takes that and also talks about police brutality in America, so it's like activism against racism

06:27 S: Also, what do you mean by powerful, why is she powerful in your opinion?

06:40 G: Ehm because she's been relevant, I mean I think even the biggest artist in the last 20 years, so she managed to stay relevant for so long and she's also.. since she manages herself as her own companies and I think it's just a great example for people

07:14 S: And what a woman should have in order to be powerful in general?

07:26 G: I think it's ehm confidence first of all it's important ehm I think that she shows that all the time in her music and especially in her performances too, she is sure of herself. Also I think the messages that she put out especially in the last couple of years with her social activism is also... it's using her power in a way that would help people, so I think that's powerful too

08:07 S: And how do you think she helped people, like what do you mean by social activism?

08:14 G: Ehm I mean I think it's started with the feminism thing where she declared, I mean if you take for example ehm Flawless where she put in the speech of the feminist activist ehm I think when you have such a proper song that gives away that message that would help other people to also think about stuff like that, also she has the "be good" thing where people can donate when they come to the shows and especially in Lemonade I think that she shows a lot of racial aspects that I think many people wouldn't think about or maybe some people would be exposed to that information for the first time

09:12 S: What kind of references are you talking about, which songs do you have in mind?

09:21 G: Ehm well Flawless like I said, also Freedom and I think that especially the visual parts of Lemonade are showing a lot of black women, also showing I think it was during Don't hurt yourself whether she used the Malcolm X thing which it was also an anti-racism activist person, ehm yeah stuff like that, I think those are the things that I... she's probably done more (laughter)

10:07 S: Okay, so do you think the body plays an important role in her way of presenting her feminism?

10:27 G: Yeah I do yeah

10:31 S: And what do you think of you know she's been criticized by some feminists because they say her performances are too sexually charged, so what would you say on that?

11:12 G: I mean I think that's also just a personal freedom thing, but if she wants to do that, then I think it's great, then she should and I don't think it's harmful that she tells other people what to do, because if you don't want to do it, then you don't have to obviously ehm I think it's good that she ehm to me it looks like she is making all decisions and expressing herself the way she wants. So in some ways I do understand the criticism, but I don't think it's anyone's place to tell her or anyone what to do, so I would say I kinda get it, but at the same time it's her choice and I think that's the message she wants to portray instead. I mean she's a woman, so she can do whatever she wants basically

12:18 S: So how does Beyoncé's feminism relate to your own idea of feminism?

12:31 G: Ehm that's yeah, I have been into feminism and stuff for longer than she first came out as a feminist let's say, I do consider myself a feminist, but I'm not like really a hardcore activist or something (laughter). I do think it's really important to.. I think the stuff is doing is very important and good and I support it, I just don't mmh how am I gonna say this, I think it's important to think about all things, so also men issues, also class issues mostly, money and stuff which is basically the factor of all things (laughter). So I don't know, I think I support everything she does, I'm not like the hardcore protesting kind of person, but I do have the same opinions I think towards I know that she does and I think it's good, I would like to see a little bit more of inclusiveness as a whole on feminism, that it's not only about women issues, but also just you know gender equality, transgender things and men things and stuff like that, but yeah I mean I support what she does basically up to now, I haven't seen anything I disagree with ehm but yeah if I did then I would say it, but yeah

14:29 S: So what feminism should be about in your opinion?

14:30 G: I think it's basic just gender equality, I think we kind of moved away from the whole men being equal to women thing, ehm because I mean at least in western countries they have the same rights and stuff, so legally they are the same ehm culturally there are some things that are not really that great (laughter), but I think it's also important to talk about men issues, because I know that a lot of men struggle with stuff too and I think that they've kind of been left behind, so I would support a man rights thing too ehm yeah I think that is basically it

15:27 S: So do you think it should be more inclusive like including men, transgender and all kind of discriminated groups

15:35 G: Yeah yeah I also do think that, I think it's difficult because there are a lot of people that think that ehm feminism is like equality for everyone and feminism is that, also race issues and all type of things, I don't see how that fits in all the time with feminism because I do think that there's a movement for anti-racism, there's a movement for gay people, there's a movement for disabled people and stuff like that, which I think it's great, I don't think that.. I have the feeling sometimes that feminism takes credit for everything (laughter), which I don't think it's necessarily helpful really for anyone, so I would like just to see people working together more instead of just all under one label of feminism if you know what I mean

16:36 S: So you think it should also give credits to the work of other like activist groups which are not exactly feminist

16:52 G: Yeah yeah

16:53 S: And when did you start becoming interested in feminism? You said you knew feminism way before Beyoncé came out with all the feminism

17:14 G: I watched a lot of Youtube, I followed a lot of people that put out like opinion pieces and stuff and I think it was like 5 or 6 years ago that I first learned about it and then I started noticing things in daily life and then I became more outspoken about it, so it was basically the internet (laughter)

17:45 S: What did you start noticing in your daily life? like you became more aware of some kind of...?

18:03 G: Yeah I mean not like discrimination, but a lot of comments that you would get, that everything is basically about the way you look ehm (got disconnected)

18:25 S: Oh sorry, I lost you for a minute. Sorry sorry I cannot hear you anymore, it's not working anymore. Let me try again..

19:47 S: Maybe now it's better, I hope so

19:57 G: I think it should work now

20:07 S: I missed what you were saying actually, can you repeat please?

20:13 G: Well, what did you hear?

20:21 S: Like you started noticing people look at girls just how they are dressed or paying attention only to the physical appearance

20:32 G: Yeah I mean I also had an experience where I was out dancing and stuff and like a guy like grabbed my ass and stuff and I was told to dress differently which really pissed me off. Also I have a brother and my parents were like "oh you should start your own company and go with the science" and stuff like that and to me it was like "oh who are you dating?" (laughter) I mean it was like an active thing where they would focus more on career with him and not at all with me. Also I came out as a lesbian like also around that time like 6 years ago or something and people have also weird ideas about that too which is also like homophobia and stuff.. but it's weird, it's different for men than for women also if they are gay, so it was the last stop?. Then I also realized than men also don't really have everything great all the time ehm so yeah, that's why I'm a little more moderate now than I was I think (laughter)

22:18 S: So before you were more hardcore

22:20 G: Yeah (laughter) I think I was kind of an angry feminist type of person, then I just slowed down and then I was ok, I'm not the only one

22:35 S: Because you realized that there were also other people facing problems?

22:41 G: Yeah I read a lot of feminist stuff about male privilege, like they always have the better deal or something, which I don't think it's true right now, so yeah, I'm more focused on the individual right now rather than just if you are a woman or a man I mean everything can change and it's different for everyone I think

23:16 S: So you were saying from a legal point of view we arrived to equality right? But from a cultural point of view it's different, you were saying right? So how do you think we should work more from a more cultural point of view?

24:01 G: Yeah I think that there are maybe too many people that are still in the mindset of say 30 years ago or something when things really have changed so ehm if you look at how many women are educated now and how many men are educated now, it's pretty even you know and I think that there are a lot of cultural things that we do need to talk about on both sides men and women basically and that's important, but I don't really see ehm like the word feminist is just like women's equality basically which obviously I support, but for now I think it's more like basic gender equality that we need to focus on, that includes all people, not just women anymore (what do you mean by gender equality?)(what cultural things? examples?)

25:16 S: And what do you think it should be done to achieve equality for everyone?

25:27 G: That's a good question

25:30 S: (laughter) Tough one

25:30 G: If I knew.. (laughter) I don't know, I think a lot of it has to do with talking about and having open dialogue, I feel like a lot of people don't really wanna talk about anything and that doesn't help anyone I think ehm and then also in the political sense where ehm I think that politics should be more involved and stuff like that too, but yeah I mean the solution I don't have (laughter) I think talking about it with everyone and starting dialogue and conversations is always very helpful

26:19 S: And do you think that also education might play a role in all this?

26:44 G: Ehm I think so ehm but I'm more in the sense that I think that teachers should just give more classes about that for example in like biology like societal course and stuff like that yes, but not in the sense that I think necessarily to say that both genders should be represented equally in every career path or education, I don't think that it's gonna help anything, so I'm not really a fan of like affirmative action or stuff like that, but talking about it yes, I think that's good to do a high school and just open discussion about stuff like that yes

27:44 S: And so how does feminism influence or has influenced your everyday life?

28:09 G: I listen to her music everyday, so that's pretty influence (laughter), but I think that for a lot of like emotional stuff like when you go through break ups or something like that then I feel way better when I listen to Beyoncé. That goes back to the whole like powerful thing and independent and confidence thing where I feel that a lot of my friends have this too when they, we put Beyoncé on and sing along, then we just feel good like feel better and empowered basically

29:04 S: Do you ever talk about these issues like woman issues with other people like is it a discussion you have with family, friends or at university?

29:20 G: Yeah mostly with friends and family ehm I do know some family members and stuff and also friends don't really like talking about it, because they think it's just too complicated and too difficult and stuff, but I do talk about it with people yeah, it gets into some hard discussions sometimes, but it's fun (laughter)

29:46 S: Because you talk with people that don't share the same ideas as yours?

29:50 G: Oh yeah yeah a lot of the times

30:04 S: And what do you disagree upon?

30:04 G: Ehm well a lot of different things actually, I know a friend of mine who's very into feminism and social justice things and gender studies and stuff like that and we clash like on, she for example thinks that women should be represented like half and half with men in like all jobs and politics and everything and I just disagree because I think everybody should just do whatever they want and if they're interested in it then they can do it and if there're not then they don't. There's also a lot of discussion about biology, that's a lot of things that it comes down to a lot of the times where I just say well men and women are different so yeah I mean they're gonna do different things and think differently and that's fine where a lot of people seem to think that everything is like social and socially constructed and stuff and I think it's also a lot of things are social, but I'm more a biology type of person (laughter). So it's something a lot of people clash with me with, they just say it's not true but yeah

31:33 S: So do you think there are natural differences between men and women like from a biological point of view?

31:42 G: Yeah

31:44 S: Ok, like what?

31:45 G: Ehm I mean a lot of things for example men tend to be -not all men obviously- but from a biological sense men and even male animals and stuff are usually the hunters and the workers ehm while the women carry the child and nurture the child, I don't think that it means every woman should do that or every man should do that, I just think that if both people feel like that's the thing that they are best at, then they should do that right? So a lot of people think, I mean people that I talk to think that that's old-fashioned and that it's basically all social conditioning which I think some part of it is, but I do think that there is a biological element to that which some people don't like and I always go back to humans are animals too ehm and I don't know, people disagree with me and that's fine, I don't know (laughter). A lot of times it comes down to biological stuff and that I don't think there's much of a difference, or there's almost no difference basically

33:16 S: So do you also think that there are some kind of things or jobs that a men can do better and some other things that a woman can do better because of these biological differences?

33:28 G: No they usually tell me that women role is for example in social sciences or teaching or nurturing or something like that because that's the condition you are told to do by society and men go for high pay jobs and IT things and science most of the times, because they are conditioned to do that too and I don't think that's true, I think a part of it could be that, but I also think that there's a huge part about just biology which plays a role and I also don't like it when people think that there has to be like a quote or something that has to be filled like we only reach equality once 50percent of our political leaders are women and I'm like no, to me it's about

ehm equality of opportunity instead of equality of outcomes, because I just don't like it when people are forced into anything or that they hire a woman just because she is a woman and I'm just like that's not equality to me

34:54 S: Have you ever engaged in some kind of activities regarding these issues like anything?

35:19 G: Well, ehm I mean I went to the Women's March if that counts. I used to be a volunteer for this pro-LGBT rights thing, but I don't think it counts as feminism, but I did that too, that's pretty much it yeah. I usually just talk about it on Twitter, but that's about it as far as it goes

35:55 S: Ok, so how would you compare Beyoncé's feminism with other celebrities because there have been many actresses and singers in America that kind of endorsed feminism recently

36:27 G: I think she does a good job in showing that she has to do with the women things, but also with the black things so as a way of putting those together ehm for example like the Taylor Swift type of people, they are feminists but don't realize that a black woman might have other problems than she does because she's white and stuff like that, I don't know, I just see a lot of like, I think a lot of celebrities try their best, but I think they miss a lot of things, I don't know how many celebrities let their fans donate and stuff which she does which I think it's really cool and also that it shows it through her work, for example Taylor Swift, she talks about feminism in talk shows and stuff, but when you listen to her music it's like nothing (laughter) and I think that Beyoncé also shows her stands on things in her music and especially in the visual album, so I think that's good

37:54 S: Ok, let's go back to Beyoncé now. So how would you describe Beyoncé?

38:30 G: Mh you mean in one word, sentence or?

38:34 S: Ehm well maybe more than once sentence (laughter)

38:38 G: Ok well I think Beyoncé is probably one of the most long term successful artists worldwide, one of the few celebrities which creates all bodies of work which I really like, also her voice is really incredible, she's also super sexy, she can dance, she can act, she's basically a super woman, if i have to sum it up in one work it would be super woman probably yeah

39:30 S: It's quite fitting. So why do you subscribe to the facebook page?

39:52 G: My friends always make fun of me for loving Beyoncé too much, so maybe I can find something where I can talk about it without bothering my friends on facebook, so basically that's why, that's a community of people that shares their love for her, so I think it's fun to be surrounded by stuff like that. Also I just wanna be updated on the new things, so when new comes up that the whole group would post, which otherwise I might miss, so that's also a reason

40:42 S: And are you also in touch with other fans?

40:42 G: Oh you mean through Facebook?

40:48 S: Yeah

40:53 G: Yeah there have been like 5 people who have messaged me privately and sent me friend requests and stuff which I think is cool, so you actually talk a lot, it's fun but I haven't made like real friends or something, I

just have fun conversations with them, that's it

41:22 S: And are you active on the facebook group?

41:28 G: Well, I read a lot of it, I don't make my own posts, I think I made that twice ehm not that much and sometimes I do respond in the comments, but I prefer to read things most of the times

41:48 S: And do they post like interesting things? Do you find it interesting?

41:58 G: I mean some things are interesting, some things are not really interesting (laughter) ehm I think it's fun when they ask for other people's opinions about stuff like what songs do you really like or show pictures from the concert, that's fun, but there's also kind of what outfit did you like the most and I don't really care about that, so ehm I think a lot of it it's fun and sometimes occasionally there's some interesting discussions, not that much honestly, but I think the majority of it it's just fun to see

42:45 S: And in what ways do you engage with Beyoncé like have you ever been to a concert or?

42:58 G: Yeah I went to all the concerts in this country like in 2008 or something, I think I've been to 6 or 7 concerts of her, I own the CDs and stuff, not all them, but at least from the last 3 albums. I always go to her concerts, that's one thing I always do

43:30 S: Do you also follow her on Youtube, official website?

43:36 G: I follow her on Instagram, the Facebook page too, Youtube yes. I think I follow her on Twitter too, but she never twits anything, but yeah I think I follow her on everything yeah

44:01 S: And so you've already talked about it a little bit, but what qualities of her do you appreciate most?

44:10 G: Yeah the confidence especially when she is performing and stuff, I also just like that she is kind of shy in interviews and stuff, you can tell that she's quiet and stuff, that's cool to see that she's a human with other emotions than just the stage presence ehm another quality is her singing ability, I really appreciate that, also just the power thing that I mentioned, it's just like when she walks on the stage everyone is like shocked like what?!

45:19 S: Sorry can you excuse me one moment? Ok next question would be: why do you think Beyoncé has become such a famous and influential artist?

46:26 G: I think for the most part her fans from long ago, from Destiny Childs and stuff they kind of grew up with her, because she's been in the industry for so long, so many people they knew her for 20 years ehm so it's easy to relate to her I think, and then it's arguably the best female vocalist of this century I think and I think that one thing that I noticed is that a lot of people want to see her shows because she is so good performing, but I know a lot of people don't really listen to her music, but do like the show, so they go to the shows, but actually don't listen to the music which I think it's interesting ehm a lot of people when they say Beyoncé they just think of Single Ladies or something ehm and they don't really listen to the music, I don't know many people that they actually do, but they appreciate her performances very much, so I think that in general most of people, I mean what I've seen anyways, like her performances more than they like her music and I think that the reason why she is still so relevant is, a huge part has to do with the way that she does her shows and tours and

VMA performances and stuff like that

48:13 S: But you do appreciate more her music

48:21 G: Yeah I mean I also really love her shows, but I do listen to her music all the time, so I don't think I would fall in that category, but yeah I think for most people that is true

48:31 S: With "music" do you also mean lyrics?

48:31 G: The lyrics? Yeah yeah

48:40 S: And so what do you think of her performances actually and music videos?

48:49 G: The performances are just, I don't even understand how a person can do that, so everytime I go to her shows I think "this is the best thing I've ever seen" and then I go to another show 2 years later of her and it's like better and I don't know how it happens, she's like always working on improving herself, the shows that she puts up, I mean not even the dancing and the singing, but also the production it's crazy, I mean it's again so powerful that even when she sells out an entire stadium, then I think that people all the way in the back they feel the energy and everybody is on the same theme that night you know, so yeah, I'm just really impressed by her voice all the time, so yeah and did you say the music videos?

50:03 S: Music videos yeah

50:09 G: I think that all the times it's a new concept for most of her videos, it's just something that you've never seen before ehm for example the Formation thing everyone was just like what is this? you know. Also the fact that she made two visual albums and she also made for Bday like 10 years ago she also made a video for every song, it's just an entire experience and I don't even know of every artist that does that other than her, so I think it makes her unique

50:54 S: So what impact do they have on you?

51:01 G: Well, it just makes it more personal or something, especially in the last 2 albums when she also gets more personal, at least it seems like that, it's like you connect with her or something or you know a part of her life which I know it's not true, but it just seems that way and I also think that a lot of her music is a lot relatable like the whole Lemonade thing with the break ups and cheating and all that stuff. Also the Beyoncé self-titled thing where all the different things like the sexy things and Pretty hurts which everyone knows about, it's just relevant to a lot of people, so it's not just music about like "I'm so rich and I'm so cool", most people don't know how does that feels like, they know the emotional level, so I think it has a lot to do it with it too

52:14 S: And which video do you remember best and why?

52:27 G: Mh which video, that's a good question... I think the Crazy in Love thing was just the video that made her ehm even the fact that everybody still does that dance like 15 years later... crazy! I wouldn't say that there is necessarily like a unique video or unique song ehm it's just especially the intro part where she is like (singing) and then the walking thing and all the dances of course, she makes anthems right, things that you can listen 20-30 years from now which are just iconic and I think her most popular videos are also the Single Ladies thing and Formation too, it's just memorable yeah

53:39 S: And what's your favorite album?

53:39 G: Oh my god, that's hard... I think it's 4 for me

53:59 S: And why?

54:00 G: I like the RnB ballades thing, it's more RnB than anything she's ever done before ehm maybe that's not true actually, but I mean you can tell that it was a new kind of sound to her too ehm I think that it also has to do with the fact that there was a time where she fired her dad, so it was like just kinda doing her own thing and making new things, so and I just really like the slow ballades yeah

54:45 S: And do you think of the last album Lemonade?

54:48 G: I love it, Love love it. I actually bought it, I think I've been listening to it for a solid year for pretty much every single day, so I love it yeah. I just really like the whole raw thing, so the Don't hurt yourself and Sorry and the cursing and everything that feels so real to me, so I really like it

55:30 S: Do you think is it different in any ways compared to other albums?

55:31 G: Yeah it's a full story, you just kinda especially when you watch it with the visuals too, you kinda go through the stages of her emotions in it, so I mean Beyoncé's self-titled was also visual, but I don't see it as a story and I think Lemonade was a story, so it's kinda like a movie with lots of songs yeah. It was also different because I feel like it was more open and honest that she's ever seen I think

56:23 S: So what do you think this album stand for?

56:30 G: I think it represents a lot of relationship problems first of all, also racism things and also kind of feminist things in it too to make such angry songs you know just really like raw emotions and showing that everybody feels that too sometimes ehm it's really layered, so people can look at it and think "I think this is what it means, I think that it's the stages of relationship that someone cheated on you" and other people say "oh no it's a metaphor for how black women have it hard in America" or something like that, so I think it's art, so you can interpret it in the way you want

57:41 S: And how would you describe her relationship with Jay Z?

57:54 G: I think -this is an unpopular opinion- but I think that they haven't actually had any problems to that extent, I think most of it it's just marketing thing and I think that they are happy, but I also think that it's kind of a business relationship sometimes? Ehm I don't know I mean I don't know, nobody can be sure, but I mean my speculation is that they are a couple and they are happy, I don't think he ever cheated on her to be honest, but I think that it's also like business model too (laughter). It's a terrible thing to say, but I do feel it yeah (why do you think it's a business model?)

58:54 S: The other Beyhive would kill you probably (laughter)

58:59 G: I would not post it on the Facebook page (laughter)

59:03 S: Yeah don't do that. Ehm and why do you think she is attractive?

59:28 G: I just think her face is super symmetrical and it's kinda weird, she's also you know, she also has a good body, I think most people would agree that she still has a good body and I think it's interesting because she is black, but she is half black, so she is also appealing to people that normally wouldn't like black people and she's also appealing to people that would usually like black people, so I think a lot of people would think she is really attractive, also because of that, because she is light skin brown and she has good curves and a super pretty face so yeah

1:00:26 S: I think we're done, it's been one hour... Do you have anything else you want to add?

1:01:11 G: No I don't think so

1:01:16 S: Ok cool, thank you

Note: After having transcribed the interview I contacted the interviewee on Facebook to have further clarification about some of her answers. We had a Facebook chat on 9th May 2017.

S: So you said "I think it's also important to talk about men issues, because I know that a lot of men struggle with stuff too and I think that they've kind of been left behind, so I would support a man rights thing too", which kind of things men struggle with? can you come up with some examples?

G: yes, male suicide rates are really high, custody battles are almost always won by the mother, rapes/sexual assault taken less seriously, little to no help when a man is a victim of domestic abuse, expectations to always be strong and not show emotions (esp. sadness or fear)

S: alright, got it. and you also said while talking about feminism: "I think it's basic just gender equality, I think we kind of moved away from the whole men being equal to women thing, ehm because I mean at least in western countries they have the same rights and stuff, so legally they are the same ehm culturally there are some things that are not really that great" what cultural things are you referring to? again, any examples?

G: women still getting pressured into 'domesticated' life, like, cooking, taking care of the children, while men go out and work. especially in religious communities I feel this still happens a lot. Also, sexual assaults, even catcalling or going to a club and men grapping butts. being told your value is in the way you look. also the expectation of being emotional and "crazy" (for some reason I don't understand haha)

S: alright. and well about the things you were saying about biological differences between men and women, this is an argument which was often used by antifeminist to somehow justify the woman role as mother and wife and stuff, so don't you think that this opinion might give rise to some sexist stereotypes which you are actually against? how would you see that?

G: yes, good point, that's actually my most important point: it is fueled in nature for the most part. and that's why it's more common in men and women to act a certain way. but there's a problem when it's expected or someone is pressured into those roles because not everybody fits these molds and it's also a problem when hardcore feminists try to say there is no biological difference and "force" women to do things that they wouldn't actually want for themselves so, more common & biological shouldn't mean that someone HAS TO do/be/act in some way, it's the authoritarian part that's the issue for me

S: alright, clear enough, yeah this is actually a an interesting point like the debate nature VS cultural/social conditioning

G: yes I think so too!

S: also, you appreciate the part of social activism in Beyoncé (also referring to black issues), so why do you personally care about diversity and discriminated groups?

G: I would say I'm an ally, I want to help people that are discriminated against because I don't want that injustice

S: ok. and when talking about criticism Beyoncé received for her sensual performances you said: So in some ways I do understand the criticism, but I don't think it's anyone's place to tell her or anyone what to do, so I would say I kinda get it, but at the same time it's her choice and I think that's the message she wants to portray instead. I mean she's a woman, so she can do whatever she wants basically". What do you mean "in a way I kind of get that criticism"?

G: I get it in the sense that it shows other young women the "perfect" body which doesn't help their self-esteem, and also that she is showing so much skin and sexualizes herself, so she could be seen as a sexobject which goes back to: how many female singers are out there that haven't taken their clothes off? or feel the need to take their clothes off? Sometimes I am conflicted about that. but I definitely lean more towards it's her choice and she can do whatever she wants

S: I see, yeah that's also kind of controversial in a way... and last question: why do you think things like affirmative action policies are not useful? what would be useful in your opinion?

N: I don't think it's useful because it doesn't get to the root of solving the problem. If employers have to hire one gay person and one black person and three women and one turkish person and they will be 'represented' but not by the willingness of the employer and they are also not judged on their qualities, the employer will probably not change because it's forced upon them, and the biggest thing: we want to get away from judging people by their skin colour or gender or anything else. that would be the end goal, right? so in my opinion, we're not getting to that point if we keep judging people by their skin colour, even is it's meant to help them

S: right, clear enough

G: I think it all starts with education. so talking about these issues from a young age in middle school. also it's more useful to check more often if there is discrimination happening. even though that's hard because it's often behind the scenes