"SHE GOT THE POWER": THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER, FEMINISM AND POP MUSIC

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Ruby Cain
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Abstract

Pop music has long contributed to feminist discourse and practice as performers use their global platforms to disseminate ideas that combat sexism, gender discrimination, gender-based violence, and promote gender equality. The music industry's engagement with feminism occurs at the same time, however, as many young women distance themselves from feminism. With this apparent tension in mind, this research is concerned with new expressions of feminism in pop music and, specifically, how these expressions are perceived by an audience of young women.

To explore this, a feminist research methodology was adopted that centred young women's views, amplified their experiential knowledge and sense-making practices, and fostered a space of reflexivity. Multiple integrated qualitative research methods (the production of a music portfolio, followed by two focus groups) were used to explore how six young women made meaning from pop music they identified as concerned with feminism or gender-related issues. A feminist methodology and employing multiple methods that placed music and young women's responses to music at the centre of inquiry was valuable for fostering a participant-centred, reflexive and generative research space.

Iterative thematic analysis showed that young women have ambivalent subject positions regarding feminism, regardless of whether they personally identify as feminist. On the one hand, they valued principles of gender equality, but distanced themselves from feminist rhetoric they associated with a "radicalised" feminism. On the other hand, they valued performers they considered to be radical in their subversion of gender norms. Relatedly, participants *felt* empowered by performances they deemed overtly feminist in their contestation of gender norms.

Somewhat paradoxically, analysis also revealed that participants returned to a gender binary as they sought to make sense of pop music performances. Participants constructed reductionist dichotomies of 'sensual/sexual' to describe embodied performances they deemed acceptable and unacceptable, respectively. Similarly, they constructed an affective dichotomy of 'vulnerable/aggressive' that was readily mapped onto categories of feminine and masculine, respectively. These dichotomies reflect heteronormative constructions of women and women's bodies.

An ambivalent subject position emerges for young women as they navigate progressive feminist discourses that advance women's bodily autonomy, and a return to regressive heteronormative constructions of femininity and masculinity

that rest on the gender binary. As such, the research raises questions about the future of contemporary feminism. While ambivalence might appear at first glance as uncertainty and therefore of little value or concern for a feminist agenda, I argue that such ambivalence can be read as productive and generative, and has the capacity to foster societal change.

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Thesis and chapter titles – A note

The thesis and chapter titles include a title or lyric from a song examined in this research. When used for a chapter, the lyrics or song title reflect the theme of the chapter ahead. A description of each title is reported below (Table 1).

Table 1: Thesis and chapter titles

Thesis or chapter title	Artist and song title	Format
"She got the power": The intersection of gender, feminism and pop music	Miley Cyrus - 'Mother's Daughter'	Song lyric
Chapter One: "Power" – An introduction	Little Mix - 'Power'	Song title
Chapter Two: "Come on little lady, give us a smile" – Mapping the terrain of feminism and popular culture	Halsey - 'Nightmare'	Song lyric
Chapter Three: "I keep a record of the wreckage in my life" – (Pop) Music and methodology	Halsey - 'Nightmare'	Song lyric
Chapter Four: "All the things you told me not to be" – Ambivalent constructions of feminism and empowerment	Ariana Grande - 'God is a Woman'	Song lyric
Chapter Five: "I could play nice, or I could be a bully" – A return to dichotomous constructions of gender	Halsey - 'Nightmare'	Song lyric
Chapter Six: "I wish you farewell" – Conclusion	Kesha - 'Praying'	Song lyric

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Chapter 1:

"Power" - An introduction

Introduction

In July 2019, I attended a feminist performance called 'POWER' with a friend. It was described as a tribute to pop group 'Little Mix' and featured four young women (just like 'Little Mix') dancing to Little Mix' songs and sharing their gendered experiences and "emotional feminist rants" with the audience (Basement, 2019, n.p.). After the performance, I wrote about my experience of being there. Below is an excerpt from my writing:

> I feel great after watching that performance! I'd never really been a big fan of Little Mix, but because of my interest in feminism and pop music, they were on my radar. The songs were awesome, the music was loud and uplifting, and the dances were great too. Little Mix's soundtrack was all about girl power, empowerment and lifting other women up and I felt really positive and confident afterwards, so clearly it worked! The group performed synchronised dance routines too. They weren't professional dances, more like well-choreographed home-made dance moves. They were just up there having a great time, dancing to music that made them feel happy and connected to being a woman. They reminded me of the dances I made up with my friends when I was a kid. Back then, we didn't care what we looked like, it was just fun. We didn't feel embarrassed that we weren't any good or wondered what those watching would think of us. But then patriarchy got in the way. We grew *up* and patriarchy kicked in and we grew up to reject our bodies, fear the threat of judgement from the outside world (especially from a man) and we grew *out* of the days when we'd dance like nobody's watching. The patriarchy does that to us and makes us think little and therefore become little.
>
> One of the songs was about stripping and a fifth woman came on stage and danced very provocatively with the four main performers, eventually stripping down to her undies. My main worry was 'holy shit, there was an old guy in the audience, what is he gonna say, is he gonna be creepy?' I found

myself almost not wanting to look, thinking I was being creepy for watching. I kept looking away or at the other dancers instead and I remember thinking, 'why are they dancing so provocatively? Why is that necessary? Are they being ironic?' As I reflect on my responses, first about a man watching this performance and then about myself watching the performance, I realise how much patriarchy is at play. My default assumption about a man watching a sexual performance of a woman is that he would be creepy and not able to control his sexual urges. As for myself, I felt ashamed and uncomfortable watching the performance and was confused about its purpose. But the women had every right to perform on that stage in whatever way they wanted. By the end, I was so into it, it was really empowering!

It's funny cause even though I felt so empowered watching them all in what felt like such a safe space for women, I kept reflecting on how I'd organised to talk to my boyfriend the next morning and how terrified I was of what he would say - would he leave me? Think I was too hard to deal with? So, even though this performance was empowering for me in this moment, it was fleeting. I was still very aware that although this was a safe space, I still had to go back out into the patriarchy when I left the room. I found myself wanting to stay in that moment, not wanting it to end …

I wanted to start my thesis with this self-reflective piece to locate myself in this project and to locate my experience in the broader social context of gendered dynamics, popular culture and patriarchy. Although this reflection is deeply personal, it raises significant issues about feminism in contemporary society. First, it highlights the power of popular culture, and pop music in particular, to draw attention to social and political issues. The performance, and my experience and reflections of it, also raises ideas – and questions – about what it means to be empowered. This echoes a debate in current feminist scholarship that critically examines what empowerment looks like, how meaningful it is, and what impact it might have (see hooks, 2010; Whippman, 2016). Is empowerment about an intense, yet fleeting moment, as it was for me during the performance, or can it be sustained over time, potentially generating individual and structural change? Chapter Four will explore this question in further depth.

My reflections also critique patriarchy, the male gaze and my own ambivalent subject position in that moment. The performance was constructed as a safe space for women, but for me it remained located within a patriarchal system. My writing speaks to the importance of women's spaces and the value of coming together in solidarity to share experientially based stories of being strong, smart and powerful without undue focus on men. Central to my reflection is the performance of women's

bodies and bodily autonomy: who has the power to decide how and under what circumstances women can perform? This question is underpinned by current debates among feminists about the politics of gendered sexual practices, in particular, between 'sex positive' feminists who attempt to challenge discriminatory slut shaming practices against women and reframe women's sexual choices as positive (Sollee, 2017) and anti-pornography feminists who argue the case for the abolition of the sex industry (Bindel, 2019). This debate, often described as the "contemporary feminist sex wars" (Showden, 2016, p. 1), is suggestive of a dichotomous construction of these issues with clear oppositional positions about the best way forward. At the performance, however, my ambivalence was laid bare as I embodied these competing normative ideas about feminism, women and their bodies. I explore these debates as they relate to participants further in Chapter Five.

These reflections, and the ambivalent subject position it produced for me, reflect the foundation of this thesis. It is here at the intersection of feminism, popular culture, and young women that this thesis is located. While some might argue that popular culture is somewhat frivolous in the context of so many serious issues faced by society today, the role of popular culture should not be underestimated. As discussed below, and further in Chapter Two, pop music has the capacity to shape people's lives. We become heavily invested in the artists and music we listen to and grow to love, and they have the capacity to shape how we think about the world (Lazar, 2007). This thesis is concerned with new expressions of feminism in pop music and, specifically, how these expressions are perceived by an audience of young women: how do young women make sense of self-identified feminist artists and the music videos produced by those artists? The research explores the following research questions:

- To what extent are young women shaped by pop artists' engagement with feminism and depictions of gendered concerns?[1]
- How do popular feminist artists contribute to young women's understandings of feminism and empowerment?
- How do popular feminist artists contribute to young women's subjectivities as women?

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[1] A distinction is made throughout the thesis between 'feminism' and 'gendered concerns' in recognition that not all artists identify as feminist nor are they necessarily viewed as such by participants. Indeed, the goal of this project is to bring nuance to young women's understanding of pop music as feminist or not.

Introducing the field: The politics of feminism and popular culture

This research brings together two fields: the politics of popular culture, and feminism. Many young cisgender heterosexual women do not align themselves with feminist ideals, shying away from using or identifying with the term feminism (Scharff, 2016; McRobbie, 2009). This is despite high levels of engagement with feminist issues and politics (Zucker, 2004). For example, a poll of more than 4000 women in the United Kingdom (U.K.) found that fewer than one-fifth identified as feminist, despite 80 percent of all participants agreeing that sexism is still an issue, and that women and men *should* achieve equality (Fawcett Society, 2016). Historically, young women often distanced themselves from feminism due to the "overwhelmingly negative" (Zucker, 2004, p. 425) portrayal of feminists in the media. Not only were feminists presented as "extreme", there was also a false conflation of feminism with lesbians, thus producing a "perceived threat to heterosexuality" (Zucker, 2004, p. 425). This reluctance is still prevalent today.

Research points to several reasons why people might not identify as feminist, in what some theorists term feminism's fourth wave (Curtis, 2018). First, many prominent forms of contemporary feminism have become aligned with white, straight, middle-class women and, as such, fail to speak to working class women and/or women of colour (Gen Forward, 2018). Arguably, the perceived exclusionary nature of some strands of feminism leads to reticence about identifying with the term and the movement. Negative stereotypes of feminists also lead young women to disassociate with the term. Curtis (2018) argues that feminists are commonly represented as rejecting 'feminine' qualities by not wearing make-up, not shaving their legs and underarms, and hating men. These sentiments echo findings by Scharff (2016) who interviewed 40 young women in Germany and Britain about feminism and found that feminists were understood to be "unfeminine, man-hating and lesbian women" (p. 69). Scharff's participants expressed fear that if they identified as feminist, they would also be viewed in this way. But, as Judith Butler (1992) argues, even in the very moment that feminism is being rejected, discourses of gender and sexuality are being negotiated, which can bring about societal change. The tension between engagement and disengagement in feminist politics is central to this thesis.

Despite these common criticisms of feminism from young women, the feminist movement has received a resurgence of interest since the #MeToo movement (Sayej, 2017). The hashtag went viral in 2017 when actor Alyssa Milano urged her Twitter followers to reply 'me too' if they had also been sexually assaulted. #MeToo quickly became a global hashtag movement drawing attention to violence against women, changing the narrative of victim-blaming and criminalising perpetrators of gender-based violence (Hebert, 2018; Zacharek et al., 2017). In the first 24 hours alone, the

hashtag was tweeted more than 500,000 times and posted on Facebook by more than 4.7 million people, including numerous celebrities (Hebert, 2018). The movement highlighted the particularly fraught sexist industries of film, television and music as high-profile and powerful men, including Harvey Weinstein, were criminalised for sexual harassment (BBC, 2020). Issues of gender-based violence, sexual assault and harassment, and sex-based discrimination could no longer be ignored. One of the reasons for the groundswell of attention #MeToo received was its use of social media, including Facebook and Twitter. New digital spaces (and hashtag feminism) have a long reach, making feminist issues more accessible to a broader audience of (young) women. It is in the context of feminism's engagement with digital and social media platforms, alongside the celebrity culture that lends weight to the movement, that this research takes place.

Understanding popular culture is important for understanding society, because "culture is the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience, and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved" (Fiske, 2006, p. 118). Pop artists and their music are an important subset of popular culture. An appreciation of a particular genre of music can distinguish us from others and provide a contextual category for consumers to "structure their tastes, preferences, and identities" (Askin & Mauskapf, 2018, p. 4: see also Bourdieu, 1993). But pop music can also serve a political agenda, offering a powerful commentary on the "connection between music, society and power" (Winters, 2016, p. 112). Numerous contemporary pop music artists, including Beyoncé, Halsey and Little Mix, for example, aim to advance a feminist cause through their music, placing feminism at the centre of their artist brand by identifying as feminist in live performances, music videos and on social media.

This embrace of feminism amongst pop musicians is part of a broader "popular feminist appropriation" (McRobbie, 2008, p. 533) in television, magazines and consumer culture. Some have argued that pop music celebrities have simply harnessed, or indeed leveraged, feminism in response to its increasing popularity. Hamad and Taylor (2015), for example, argue that pop artists do not advance a feminist cause, but instead simply offer a "glib celebrity appropriation of the term" (p. 124). Despite such criticisms, the intersection of feminism and popular culture has undoubtedly contributed to its broadening appeal, producing a more palatable form of feminism (see Benedictis et al., 2019). Indeed, this heightened accessibility has meant that people's voices can be shared, listened to and celebrated in new and widespread ways. This trend raises questions as to how young women make sense of feminism in the context of the pop music they are exposed to, especially given that the "audience plays an active role in accepting, negotiating, or opposing the

intended/dominant meanings of cultural products, such as artists, songs, and videos" (Lieb, 2018, p. 24).

The impact of feminism's heightened accessibility is important to explore in relation to young women. Although some artists might intend to portray a feminist message of empowerment, women's autonomy over their bodies, and positive messages of sexuality, it is less clear how these messages are received and embraced. As discussed above, young women often eschew the label 'feminist', the term giving rise to "negative, affect-laden" responses (Scharff, 2016, p.1). This presents a paradox: at the same time as feminist ideas have become more visible in young women's everyday worlds, there is reluctance to embrace the label 'feminist'. This research seeks to address the resulting tension and critically examine the complexity of the contemporary feminist movement as young women grapple with its meaning. To explore these questions, I carried out qualitative research with six Auckland-based women aged between 19 and 26, examining their negotiation of feminism, gender and pop music. Participants created reflexive music portfolios and took part in two focus groups to reflect on the subjective meanings they held about the music that they identified as feminist in orientation or to have engaged in gendered concerns. The research methodology is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Roadmap of the thesis

This introductory chapter has sought to outline the genesis of the project, including my positionality as a young woman carrying out research in this field. It has outlined the broad aims of the research and located these aims within feminism and popular culture, with a particular emphasis on pop music. The following chapter (Chapter Two) offers a review of the scholarship and examines these fields more closely. It begins with an historical review of feminism, before turning to the feminist literature, centring on three key themes: patriarchy and the oppression of women; objectification and sexualisation of women; and empowerment. The second part of the chapter critically examines the role of popular culture with a particular focus on pop music and its relationship with gender, feminism and young women.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology and methods employed in this research. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first discusses the feminist methodological approach adopted in the study, while the second describes how the research was carried out. Two distinct methods, a participant-created 'music portfolio', and a series of focus groups, are outlined, each designed to reveal how participants make meaning from the pop music they are exposed to and, more specifically, how they connect with feminism and concerns about gender and gender equality as they are performed in contemporary pop music. The chapter describes how various sources

of data were analysed before concluding with a discussion of the ethical challenges that were negotiated throughout the project.

Chapters Four and Five comprise the findings chapters. Chapter Four specifically explores participants' understandings of contemporary feminism vis à vis the music industry. The chapter argues that participants' perceptions of feminism are complex and often result in ambivalent subject positions. Their views of empowerment are especially nuanced. While empowerment is a primary way that feminism materialises for participants, it was largely experienced as an internal and affective, emotionally laden response to the music videos we watched rather than an external, politically oriented stance capable of creating social change.

Chapter Five argues that young women rely on dichotomous constructions of gender, especially when trying to make sense of the performance of women's bodies in pop music videos. Two dichotomies were constructed by participants. First, participants constructed a moral code underpinned by their perception of what they think of as (unacceptably) sexual and (acceptably) sensual performances, revealing their ambivalence about performers being overtly sexual. A second dichotomy reveals a tension between vulnerability and aggression, characteristics that have long been aligned with femininity and masculinity, respectively. While 'vulnerable' performances were deemed acceptable expressions of femininity and feminism, 'aggressive' performances were not. Again, these ideas were underpinned by a moral code that reflected normative and binary constructions of gender.

Chapter Six provides concluding comments to the research. The chapter begins by briefly summarising the project and highlighting its key contributions to feminist scholarship before homing in on the ambivalent subjectivities revealed in this research. I begin with my own ambivalent subject position as a young feminist researcher, before turning to participants' subjectivity as they make sense of feminism in a contemporary context. The chapter finishes by considering the ambivalent future of feminism as a result of this research.

Chapter 2:

"Come on little lady, give us a smile" - Mapping the terrain of feminism and popular culture

Introduction

Since the rise of the #MeToo movement in 2017, women are increasingly protesting gender-based injustices and speaking out about gendered inequalities; feminism is on the rise. Debate and analysis of feminist and gender issues appears to have more media coverage than ever before, and feminist texts such as Clementine Ford's (2016) 'Fight Like a Girl' and Roxanne Gay's (2014a) 'Bad Feminist' have found popular success. Texts such as these have helped to develop new language for discussing feminist issues, calling out sexism and gender-based discrimination, and have introduced feminism to a broader young audience. Celebrity culture has also played an important role in the rise of contemporary feminism with many pop artists embracing feminist discourse in their song lyrics, feminist representation in their music videos and identifying as feminist in public interviews. The intersection of feminism and popular culture is certainly not new (see, for example, Hollows & Moseley, 2005). Girl bands such as the Spice Girls, and individual artists such as Helen Reddy in the 1970s, and Cyndi Lauper and Madonna in the 1980s and 1990s, have all advanced a woman-centred, if not feminist, message through their music. But the current feminist social milieu creates new articulations of feminism through digital and social media, which has amplified the reach and celebrity of popular artists.

The purpose of this chapter is to bring together two fields: feminist scholarship and popular culture studies. The chapter begins with an historical account of feminism to better understand the relevance of feminism in a contemporary context, including the points of commonality with and departure from earlier articulations of feminism. Three key feminist issues are discussed: patriarchy and oppression; sexualisation and objectification of women; and notions of empowerment. The chapter then explores music as a form of popular culture with a particular focus on the intersection of music and feminism. Here, I offer critical commentary on common representations of women in the industry and raise questions about the capacity of pop music to

embrace and advance a feminist agenda. I also respond to a gap in the current scholarship by considering how feminist popular culture shapes young women's understandings of feminism.

Relevance of feminism in contemporary society

To aid understanding of the relevance of feminism in the contemporary context, it is useful to consider its historical development. It has been argued that there are four distinct waves of feminism (Wrye, 2009), which can be a helpful way to categorise discrete historical feminist moments as well as understand the "relationships and competing tensions between different feminist ideologies" (Evans, 2016, p. 412). It should be noted, however, that some scholars are less enamoured with the wave metaphor, arguing that it falsely suggests that each wave represents a discrete period of time (Rivers, 2017; Offen, 2000). These critics argue that the metaphor fails to capture overlapping feminist themes that have emerged across time and reinforces the idea that little feminist work took place between those waves (Offen, 2000). Recognising this critique, I add nuance to the broad picture I paint of the 'waves' of feminism by then offering a thematic account of these periods, moving beyond temporal distinctions to better capture the way these themes sometimes lay dormant and sometimes erupt at different moments (Offen, 2000). Undoubtedly, feminism is a contentious movement with a complex history.

"A king is always a king—and a woman always a woman: his authority and her sex, ever stand between them and rational converse" (Wollstonecraft, 1792). So wrote Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, drawing critical attention to the assumed natural authority and superiority of men over women. However, the first wave of feminism did not emerge until the 19th century, largely through the suffragette movement that campaigned for women's right to vote (Wrye, 2009). But Wollstonecraft's writing on the importance of women's right to be educated, able to support herself financially, and be viewed as fully human, was influential in shaping the rise of this first wave. Demands for women's economic autonomy was certainly a feature, arising from the dependence of middle-class women on their male partners (or other male family members). Another concern, although of less prominence, was access to higher education for women and a focus on familial issues, such as the "legal position of married women [and] marital violence" (Hannam, 2012, p. 19). These issues also played out in the local context with Kate Shephard and Meri Mangakāhia, among others, campaigning for women's suffrage in New Zealand (Coleman, 2020).

Betty Friedman's ground-breaking book, 'The Feminine Mystique' (1963) is widely credited with initiating second-wave feminism. Her work sheds light on suburban domestic life, and the false idea that women's role in society is to serve men as

(house)wives and mothers. The central catchcry of second wave feminism, 'the personal is political' (Millett, 1970), articulated the position that personal experiences, including what happens within the private sphere of the home, is always a reflection of larger social and political structures. There was increased emphasis on family life at this time (distribution of labour, domestic violence, marital rape and reproductive rights, for example) alongside questioning the limited value placed on women and women's role in society. Women were valued primarily for their reproductive and mothering roles, roles that made women reliant on the men they loved (Firestone, 1970) and rendered them "eunuchs", devoid of personal or political power (Greer, 1971, book title). As de Beauvoir wrote in her 1949 seminal text 'The Second Sex' (1974), a "woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature" (p. xvii). Second wave feminists' critique of the way society was organised led to a "major restructuring of institutions worldwide" (Nicholson, 1997, p. 1), including the workplace and the family, in order to challenge gender discrimination and oppression.

So far, I have been using the word gender unproblematically, but it was during this period in feminism's history that an important distinction was made between sex as biology and gender as a position of the mind (Money, 1955). In other words, it was assumed that sex was biologically determined while gender was self-ascribed and could therefore differ from sex at birth (Stoller, 1968; see also Fausto-Sterling, 2000). This work reflects a gender binary in which two discrete categories of sex - female and male - are assumed to exist. This was and is problematic in that first, it assumes that every individual "clearly, easily, and permanently" (Lips, 2019, p. 16) fits into one or other pole of the binary, and second, that the binary can readily be mapped onto discrete social constructions of femininity and masculinity thus failing to account for the "fluidity and multiplicity" of gender (Joel et al, 2014, p. 291).

One of the primary ways that we are socialised into gender and gender roles is through the performance of gender in everyday life – how we 'do' gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in ways the reflect "culturally mediated expectations and roles associated with masculinity and femininity" (Lips, 2019, p. 2). The sex/gender distinction has been critiqued further, with Judith Butler (1990), for example, arguing that *both* sex and gender are *performative* in so far as one gives rise to the other. Indeed, Butler (1988) argues that gender is "constituted through time … through a stylized repetition of acts": the "mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the *illusion* of an abiding gendered self" (p. 519, my emphasis). As Lips (2019) argues, sex and gender are never truly distinct but are "intertwined" (p. 2). These challenges result in new terms for conceptualising gender in ways that better account for a gender spectrum such as "genderfluid,

gender nonconforming, gender-queer, agender, bi-gender, and pangender" (Lips, 2019, p. 15).

These debates were important to third wave feminism, which took place in the 1980s and 1990s and fought for women to 'have it all'— a career, sexual freedom and motherhood (Wrye, 2009). It responded to an ever-changing "economic, political and cultural" (Budgeon, 2011, p. 279) landscape that impacted gendered subjectivities, roles and norms, including the rejection of "the category of women", debates initiated by feminists of colour that shattered the idea of a shared women's experience or identity (Snyder, 2008, p. 183; see also Butler, 1990). The body became a key theme of third wave feminism, with attention paid to women's sexuality and desire, including the call that women should use "our tits and hips and lips [as] power tools" (Karp & Stoller, 1999, p. 7; see also Mann & Huffman, 2005; Coleman, 2009), and a site for identity expression. While some rallied around women's sexuality, feminist punk bands emerged with the 'Riot Grrrl' movement (Monem, 2007), which saw women performing in ways that challenged traditional gender stereotypes (Wrye, 2009; Wald & Gottlieb, 1994; see also Nguyen, 2012 for a postcolonial analysis of the movement). It was during the third wave of feminism that "theories of postcoloniality, queer sexuality, transgenderism and transsexuality, and disability activism" became part of feminist discourse (Wrye, 2009, p. 185), as well as increased awareness of the ways marginalised categories of difference intersect to amplify oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). The movement, however, remained largely white and faced considerable critique for its exclusion of women of colour (hooks, 1984).

Indeed, first, second and third waves of feminism were all critiqued for being exclusionary. First and second waves of feminism, in particular, were charged with essentialising women's experiences (hooks, 1984; Davies, 2018) and privileging the lived realities and interests of "white, middle class, heterosexual women" (Gamble, 2001, pp. 32-33; see also Linder, 2011; Thompson, 2001; Hannam, 2012). At the end of the nineteenth century, some women advocated *against* women of colour having access to the ballot box in order for white women to receive the right to vote (Allen & Allen, 1974; Newman, 1999), whilst others used racially based arguments of eugenics to minimise the number of women of colour who could reproduce (Roberts, 1998; Silliman et al., 2004). And in the 1970s, black feminist Audre Lorde (1979) was one of many who called out the privileging of white women's experiences at the time (see also hooks, 1984; Breines, 2002), charging radical feminist Mary Daly with essentialising women's experience and positioning women of colour as 'Other' in her influential book 'Gyn/Ecology' (Daly, 1978). This is not to say that women of colour didn't mobilise to politically advance their gender, class and race-based rights. However, the successes of women of colour during this time have often been disregarded or minimised in the telling of feminist history, denying racism in the

feminist movement and therefore laying a "foundation for continued exclusion in mainstream feminism" (Linder, 2011, p. 5), including the exclusion of sexual minorities (Kulick, 2008). Although third wave feminism intended to create a "positively difference-inclusive project" (Davies, 2018, p. 46), it also demonstrated numerous exclusionary practices. Women of colour were expected to speak to only *one* identity, their gender, and thus separate their racial identity from their gendered identity. This expectation failed to account for the ways in which race, class and gender intersect to compound experiences of discrimination and oppression (see Crenshaw, 1991 for a discussion of intersectionality; see also Hurtado, 1989) and placed the burden of responsibility on women of colour to ensure appropriate representation that was often deemed tokenistic. Women of colour were expected to be the voice of the collective, ignoring the multiplicity of human experience and homogenising marginalised experience, leading to further marginalisation of women of colour (McDonald, 2003; Kim, 2001; Linder, 2011). At the centre of this critique is a failure of the feminist movement to appropriately interrogate power and privilege, both within society and the movement itself, leading to a long history of "exclusion and isolation" (Linder, 2011, p. 6).

Contemporary feminism, sometimes described as fourth wave feminism, emerged in the 21st century (Wyre, 2009). There is considerable disagreement on whether the current climate does in fact represent a different feminist epoch (Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019), given shared features with earlier waves such as autonomy/choice and agency (Rivers, 2017). The current feminist period is set apart, however, for several reasons. First, female empowerment and the assertion that women should be able to make their own choices "outside the constraints of an overtly patriarchal society" (Rivers, 2017, p. 25) has emerged as a central tenet of feminism, materialising as a woman's choice to determine how she should look, who she can love, including who she can sleep with, and how she makes her money. Second, fourth wave feminism leverages new digital spaces to extend its reach to new audiences, normalising, disseminating, and making feminist discourse more accessible (Hebert, 2018; Baer, 2016; Looft, 2017). "Social media-based feminist activism" (Rivers, 2017, p, 4), for example, gave rise to hashtag feminism and the global #MeToo movement, centring issues of gender-based (sexual) violence and demanding a seismic shift in the treatment of women and negotiations of consent (see Friedman & Valenti, 2008).

The sex positivity movement has also provided new articulations of women's desire and sexuality (Ford, 2016) as well as new negotiations of consent (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). This movement seeks to address and correct damaging and shaming practices towards women and girls that position them as 'less-than'. As pointed out by Adichie (2019):

We make [girls] feel as though by being born female they're already guilty of something. And so, girls grow up to be women who cannot see they have desire. They grow up to be women who silence themselves. They grow up to be women who cannot say what they truly think, and they grow up -- and this is the worst thing we did to girls -- they grow up to be women who have turned pretence into an art form. (n.p.)

Inclusive spaces that better account for queer and trans communities, as well as celebrating body diversity (different body shapes, sizes, and abilities, for example) (Sollee, 2015) is the third feature of fourth wave feminism. This has given rise to the fat acceptance movement (Friedman et., 2019) and the 'body-positivity' movement, which advocates the acceptance of all bodies regardless of physical ability, size, gender, race, or appearance (Taylor, 2018).

Popular culture has manifested as a key platform for the contemporary feminist agenda (Farris & Rottenberg, 2017). Celebrities have carved out a space in feminist discourse as music 'megastars' such as Beyoncé, Little Mix and Miley Cyrus incorporate feminist issues into their music and use their public platforms to advance feminist issues. Popular television series tackle feminist issues directly such as 'The Handmaid's Tale', and the film 'Suffragette'. In the context of populist politics, the feminist agenda has also become a political tool with which many liberal politicians seek to align themselves; for example, former U.S. President, Barack Obama, declared himself feminist in a 2016 speech when he stated: "this is an extraordinary time to be a woman … And I say that not just as President but also as a feminist" (Obama, 2016, n.p.). Popular feminist text also has considerable weight in contemporary feminism. "Media literate" feminist, Roxanne Gay (2014a, p. 79) stresses the importance of popular culture for understanding gender and feminism. In reflecting on the connection between the depiction of female characters in television and women in real life, Gay (2014a) points out that women are always "call[ed] upon to perform their gender, whether through how they present themselves and their sexuality, how they behave, and how they conform (or don't) to society's expectations for women" (p. 81; see also Butler, 1990).

Exclusionary politics remain, however, in this contemporary feminist moment. Although the (relative) accessibility of online digital spaces makes the movement largely inclusive, as well as its popularisation through celebrity platform, it has faced considerable critique for its elite and individualist orientation (Rivers, 2017; hooks, 2010). By promoting the "achievements" and "lifestyles" of successful women, the movement perpetuates narrow and normative constructions of womanhood, promoting the idea that women must adhere to, or at least aspire to, an "individualized, neoliberal, and capitalist vision of 'success'" (Rivers, 2017, p. 25).

Feminism and neoliberal capitalism is an uneasy marriage, elevating "consumption as a strategy" to cure gendered social issues (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 2). This discourse feeds into a "personal responsibility" narrative of feminism (Rivers, 2017, p. 25) which dilutes the collective and activist nature of feminism and limits its transformative capacity, resulting in a "toothless" deradicalised feminism (Crispin, 2017b, n.p.). Indeed, pop artists as feminist icons can be viewed as problematic and hindering advances towards gender equality because the male-dominated music industry thrives on and leverages a "youthful and highly sexualized image of femininity" (Rivers, 2017, p. 25). Contemporary expressions of feminism raise questions, including whether feminism is even necessary in the contemporary context.

*Post*feminism advances the idea that feminism is no longer necessary (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; McRobbie, 2007) because the larger structural goals of equality have (arguably) already been achieved. This proposition leads to a logical, but I would argue, specious conclusion that if inequalities do exist still, they are not due to unequal gendered relations, but "natural differences and/or women's own choices" (Banet-Weiser et el., 2019, p. 5); women must simply overcome what once held them back – "passivity, silence, physical weakness, sexual objectification [and] poor body image" (James, 2017, p. 29; see also Whitefield-Madrano, 2016). Postfeminism is less concerned with overcoming the structures that produce inequalities for women, and more concerned with an individualised, neoliberal agenda that places the work of equality in women's hands. But the term postfeminism is far from clear-cut.

Hall and Rodriguez (2003) identified four themes that they argue gave rise to the postfeminist period since its emergence in the 1980s and 1990s. First, there was decreased public support for feminism during these decades; second, "Antifeminist" discourse (p. 879) became increasingly common; third, feminism was thought to have lost its relevance as young women felt the goals of feminism had been achieved, at the same time as older feminists felt they had yet to see equality; and fourth, a "no, but" rhetoric emerged whereby young women in particular, disassociated from the feminist label whilst still supporting broadly feminist goals, such as gender inequality and reproductive rights.

There is some disagreement, however, about what postfeminism is (Gill, 2007a), whether we are in a postfeminist era (Gill, 2016), and whether it is an "historical period in feminist thought and action as well as an epistemological break or backlash against certain feminist ideas and politics" (Riley, et al, 2017, p. 2). Rosalind Gill (2007a) put forward a conceptualisation of postfeminism that has proved fruitful. She suggested that postfeminism is a *sensibility* that is:

made up of a number of interrelated themes. These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring in self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference. (p. 147; see also Gill, 2007b)

Riley et al. (2017) describe a postfeminist sensibility as a "noncoherent set of ideas about femininity, embodiment and empowerment" (Riley et al., 2017, p. 1), *necessarily* noncoherent to reflect the shift away from "a fixed ideology and towards a more fluid, less coherent, affective set of ideas about feminism" (p. 3). Rather than being critical of the complexity and contradiction that a postfeminist sensibility raises, Riley et al. (2017) argue that these features enable its applicability to a range of disciplines that is useful for analysing contradictory subjectivities. That said, the authors have further interrogated Gill's framework, considering digital transformations and new technologies that have generated new ways of thinking about feminism, as well as updating some of Gill's conceptualisations for the contemporary context. For example, Riley et al. (2017) reframe women's self-sexualisation as an agentic practice; consider the ways that bodily modification is "psychologised" (p. 6), paying attention to the role of the mind in shaping the way the body is worked on; reconsider the make-over paradigm as potentially celebratory, empowering and liberating; and consider the role of consumption practices in reinvigorating traditional femininities. A postfeminist sensibility produces feminine subject positions that encourages women to work on themselves, in order to be rewarded and "rendered intelligible" through their alignment with the norms of "ideal femininity" (Riley et al., 2017, p. 3). The authors also draw attention to new feminist activist practices, as well as highlighting the importance of intersectional and transnational understandings of postfeminism, points that they argue are under-developed in Gills' original treatise. Consideration of these subjectivities is important to ensure the ongoing relevance and capacity of postfeminism for illuminating contemporary feminism in a diversity of contexts.

Popular culture occupies an ambivalent space in postfeminism. While postfeminism posits that feminism is no longer necessary, women are constructed as "self-made, savvy, empowered consumers" (Riley et al., 2017, p. 3), using 'girl power' rhetoric to draw attention to the way that women have taken back control of their bodies and constructed new expressions of femininity. In their discussion of postfeminism, Riley et al. (2019a), for example, discuss the impact of 1990s girl pop band, the 'Spice Girls', who exemplified a "self-assured and self-determined femininity – one that was girly and assertive" (p. 2), simultaneously claiming a feminine sexuality at the same time as asserting what they 'really really want'. Such portrayals were markedly different

from earlier iterations of feminist discourse: "the globe seemed transformed with women unprecedentedly sexually agentic, confident and publicly active" (Riley, 2019a, p. 2). But these shifts in feminist discourse are underpinned by capitalism with notions of 'girlhood', girl power and empowerment being used to sell goods to young girls and women (McRobbie, 2008). Businesses peddle the belief that "freedom [for women] has now been won [so the] politics of feminist struggles are no longer needed" as gender equality has been attained (McRobbie, 2008, p. 533).

Key themes in contemporary feminism

This section examines three key themes that emerge within and across these various waves of feminism: patriarchy and oppression; sexualisation and objectification of women; and empowerment.

'Grab 'em by the patriarchy': Patriarchy and the oppression of women

Challenging the patriarchal system that oppresses women has been and still is a key feminist goal. The patriarchy perpetuates the oppression of women, feeding into a system of male supremacy and domination (Thompson, 2001). bell hooks (2010), an influential black feminist, defines patriarchy as a:

> political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (p. 1)

Ultimately, patriarchy speaks to the overriding masculine structure that oppresses women and gender minorities. Feminist theorist Adrienne Rich pays particular focus on women's bodies as a site of patriarchy's control; "The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (Rich, 1976, p. 55). Although feminism has not always explicitly focused on combatting patriarchy and the structures that perpetuate the oppression of women, earlier waves attempted to validate women's place in society by highlighting their reproductive roles as well as their (non-paid) domestic labour (de Beauvoir, 1974), thus stressing their productive contribution to society. Radical feminists of the 1960s and 1970s saw male supremacy as a key symptom of patriarchy and a "primary form of social domination" over women (Thompson, 2001, p. 4). However, patriarchy has sometimes been seen as a war cry of out-dated, bitter and angry feminists who want to take men down (see Benn, 2013), associated with "an iron-spined feminist of the old school, or the kind of ossified leftist who complained bitterly about the evils of capitalism" (Higgins, 2018, n.p.). While some,

such as Higgins (2018) still critique the term as "oversimplifications of a more complex reality" (n.p.), the rise of the #MeToo movement has helped the catch cry of patriarchy re-emerge in contemporary feminism.

The language of patriarchy has made a resurgence in contemporary feminism; it has been re-harnessed, re-politicised and re-popularised. Patriarchy provides a language for articulating the individual, social and structural connections between seemingly disparate issues including the gendered division of labour and the gendered wage gap, domestic violence and a rape culture that is perpetuated by the objectification and sexualisation of women. It reveals an:

> invisible mechanism that connects a host of seemingly isolated and disparate events, intertwining the experience of women of vastly different backgrounds, race and culture, and ranging in force from the trivial and personal to the serious and geopolitical. (Higgins, 2018. n.p.)

Patriarchy is everywhere. The machinations of patriarchy are embedded within and function through the law and the state (Brown, 1992), through the family (Macé, 2018) and through the paid and unpaid labour market (Davies et al., 2017). But it also operates in not so obvious ways. Patriarchy is perpetuated and normalised through numerous cultural pillars of society, such as the education system (Marshall et al., 2017), religion (Giorgi & Palmisano, 2020), literature (Fawole, 2018) and popular culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Wood, 2019). Patriarchy also possesses shapeshifter qualities, constantly recreating its meaning and the ways in which it manifests, so the social forces behind it shift across time and in different cultural contexts. Patriarchy is normalised and naturalised, such that it is at once hyper-visible and yet erased from view. It is a social structure that is almost impossible to reject; it is too easy to become complicit and perpetuate its authority. Only the lucky few thrive in a patriarchal society. Indeed, as hooks (2010) asserted, patriarchy is good for no-one. But while a patriarchal system might not be good for men or women, it is women as a group who remain oppressed, marginalised, excluded and discriminated against. One of the primary vehicles of women's oppression is the sexualisation and objectification of women.

Sexualisation and objectification: Violence, harassment and body autonomy

The sexualisation and objectification of women is a key feature of patriarchy and an important feminist issue (Gill, 2008). The sexual objectification of women refers to "women's bodies [being] treated as objects for the sexual pleasure of men" (Smolak & Murnen, 2011, p. 53) and can be seen in film, television and music, as well as clothing for young women (Smolak & Murnen, 2011; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008). The

ubiquity of material depicting the sexualisation of women makes it difficult to ignore, especially as images become more and more overt in their objectification, such as depictions of rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence (Moraes et al., 2020). Objectification, more specifically, refers to:

> the practice of perceiving a person as an object that solely exists to appeal to the viewer's sexual desires. This is dehumanizing because a person is looked at as an object instead of a complex human being. Sexual objectification creates a relationship based upon power. The viewer is fully human. The person who is objectified is seen by the viewer as a some*thing*, not a someone, whose only purpose is pleasing the viewer. The position of the one objectified has no power. Usually, a man is thought to be the objectifier, and a woman is seen as the object. (Butts, 2019, n.p., my emphasis)

The sexualisation and objectification of women go hand in hand (Smolak & Murnen, 2011) and are so entrenched they have become social norms (Smolak & Murnen, 2011). They work to perpetuate the idea that women's value is solely based on physical and sexual appearance (Liss et al., 2011; Barnett et al., 2018; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008) and they normalise hierarchical gendered relations in which men have social control over women and their sexuality (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Drawing attention to how sexualisation and objectification works as the result of patriarchal oppression and male dominance (Gill, 2008; Mercurio & Landry, 2008) is an important feature of contemporary feminism, especially in light of the #MeToo movement (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

Sexualising and objectifying practices can lead to women conforming to sexualised expectations, with women (wittingly or unwittingly) participating in their own self-sexualisation and self-objectification (Ramsey & Horan, 2018; Smolak & Murnen, 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification occurs when people "see themselves from a third person perspective, value their bodies primarily for how they look, and present themselves in a sexualised manner as objects to be used" (Ramsey & Horan, 2018, p. 85). It facilitates the idea that women's engagement in their own sexualisation has promises and benefits: first, that they will appeal more to men, which can lead to "financial stability and personal safety" (Smolak & Murnen, 2011, p. 54); and second, that it will lead to more success in all areas of life. Therefore, there are rewards for sexualisation, and relatedly, fewer rewards for women who are not complicit in their own sexualisation.

Self-sexualisation is complicated. Contemporary feminist discourse embraces ideas of female autonomy and sexuality (Wrye, 2009). In support of this view, many 'self-sexualisers' report that they value or enjoy being sexualised because it affirms their

self-worth (Choi & DeLong, 2019). But it is important to note, of course, that this occurs "only if their appearance conforms to narrowly defined standards" (Choi & DeLong, 2019, p. 1356), suggesting that it is possible that this positive self-view could arise from a "sense of false empowerment" (Choi & DeLong, 2019, p. 1356; see also Liss et al., 2011). The sense of power attained still *feels* real, however; while some women might participate in their own sexualisation, they understand it as a source of power that flips the script on men who assume the upper hand. Haug (1987) argues that girls and young women engage in "body projects" in order to present themselves in sexualised ways, including shaving, getting one's hair done, or clothing practices. These practices reveal that "women are not only objects of male desire: they themselves play a part in their creation as such" (Haug, 1987, p. 131). However, I suggest that Haug misses the (feminist) point. It might be true that young women engage in practices to appear more sexual, and possibly sexually available, but these practices are themselves part of a patriarchal system that socialises girls and young women *into* self-sexualisation. Importantly, what Haug fails to account for is the profound negative impact that objectification and sexualisation — including that which is self-directed — can have on people, resulting in "shame, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, sexual dysfunction, reduced sexual agency, and increased sexual victimisation" (Ramsey & Horan, 2018, p. 86; see also Moradi & Huang, 2008). Feminists, such as Benn (2013), argue that the complicity of women in their own sexualisation and potential exploitation contributes to the idea that girls' and women's primary role and goal is to be a sex object for the gratification of men, as well as perpetuating a patriarchal system.

The tension between these two positions of women's self-sexualisation as empowering or perpetuating the patriarchal system can lead to a 'calling out' of those who self-sexualise, especially online. Benn (2013) argues that online platforms and social media are not the best site for raising and responding to feminist issues because the kinds of response offered often fails to examine the patriarchal "structural inequality" (p. 225) that produces sexualisation and oppression in the first instance. Specifically, Benn warns that fourth wave feminism must not "sideline the intractable problem of structural inequality as a dreary or irrelevant struggle of the past or the concern only of the disappointed older woman" (p. 225). Instead, Benn argues that we should harness fourth wave feminism's ability to reignite these 'age-old' feminist issues and create new alliances that make feminism more accessible to others, including older, working-class and trans women. This, in turn, could lead to the movement's capacity to tackle a wider range of issues due to the greater diversity of voices and representation. These contemporary debates about women's bodily autonomy, and the representation of women's bodies, including how they are represented in popular culture, are central to this thesis, raising questions about heteronormative constructions of femininity and the performance of the female

body. While popular discourse suggests women are free to wear what they like, do what they like and use their bodies as they please, many women also experience extreme backlash when they do. An example of this is slut shaming, the "act of humiliating a woman based on presumed sexual behaviour and appearance, regardless of whether or not she is sexually active" (Papp et al., 2017, p. 240). While men can experience slut shaming, it is primarily an insult directed toward women and girls as a form of "social and sexual control" (p. 241); being called a 'slut' implies the "target lacks value and morality" (p. 240). Slut-shaming remains a key symptom of a patriarchal society of sexualisation and objectification.

'My body, my choice' has long been a catchcry of the feminist movement, and a women's right to body autonomy and choice is central to these debates (Walter, 2008). It is a woman's right to determine clothing she wants to wear, her sexual practices, her reproductive rights, including the right to legal and safe abortion (Wrye, 2009), and for her body not to be treated as a sex object. These debates are particularly relevant to the pop music industry and will be explored in Chapters Four and Five.

Empowerment

Empowerment is another theme that is important to consider in the context of this thesis, given it is often described as a feature of contemporary and celebrity feminism. There are two competing (but arguably interconnected) ideas, however, about the meaning of empowerment, which has shifted over time (Rowland, 1997): empowerment as a process of *individual* change, and empowerment as a process of *collective* radical social change (Segal et al., 1995). Empowerment as individual change refers to an internal transformation resulting from improved self-esteem or mental health, often as a consequence of individualised self-help work (Peterson et al., 2008). This way of thinking about empowerment is problematic, however, in that it places responsibility for self-improvement on the individual: "The message is clear: If you want to feel empowered, you need to be improved" (Whippman, 2016, n.p.). Furthermore, an individualised construction of empowerment, amplifies the idea that women must be enhanced, perpetuating an industry which constructs impossible beauty standards for women.

Grounding ideas of empowerment in therapeutic discourse has resulted in a 'wellness industry' that exploits individualised understandings of empowerment. 'Wellness influencers', such as Simone Anderson, for example promote health and lifestyle journeys (without the advice of healthcare professionals, dieticians, or nutritionists) through their social media-based platforms. Their sites are branded as pathways to empowerment and "couched in the language of self-celebration [...

which] can easily morph into a nasty strain of victim blaming" (Whippman, 2016, n.p.). Further, they promote a "continuous scrutiny and work on the self and body to meet cultural ideals and the needs of neoliberal economies, while understanding this work to be a personal choice" (Riley et al., 2019a, p. 138). Thus, they draw heavily on individualising discourses, constructing the individual as a problem to be fixed and failing to account for the structural issues that produce those practices in the first instance.

The alternative understanding on empowerment is collective action towards social change with a view to challenging organisational and social structures (Rowlands, 1997). By empowering a group of people towards a mutual goal, collective change can occur. The 2020 #BlackLivesMatter global movement fighting to challenge systematic and institutional racism against Black people is a case in point (Phoenix et al., 2020). Feminist scholars have also stressed the importance of working collaboratively to empower women as a group, develop resources and generate societal change that could not have been possible individually. 'Law empowerment' (Al-Sharmani, 2010) is a good example, shifting attention away from women's individual circumstances towards women's legal access to medical care, education and employment (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010).

To understand the collective position of empowerment, one must also consider power. Rowlands (1997; see also Schutz, 2019) argues that there are three types of power. The first is 'power to do' or 'power to' and includes individuals' agency to act in the advancement, and empowerment, of others. The second type of power is 'power with', which emphasises a collaborative stance, in which people work together as "relative equals" (Schutz, 2019, p. 23) to create change. The third type of power put forward is 'power over', also referred to as a zero-sum game. This posits a hierarchical notion of power in which groups and individuals "coerce or force" (Schutz, 2019, p. 23) others to follow their commands. This model of power assumes a "finite" supply of power (Rowlands, 1997, p. 11); if one person or group has more power, another person or group must have less because it "cannot be created" (Schutz, 2019, p. 28). This means that to change existing relations of power, those without it must take it from another individual or group (Rowlands, 1997). The notion that power is a finite resource in the hands of a few is important when thinking about the distribution of power between women and men and the possibility that women's empowerment might pose a threat to men. As Batliwala (1993) argues, "women's empowerment, if it is a real success, does mean loss of men's traditional power and control over women" (p. 9). Furthermore, Rowlands (1997) highlights that when empowerment is constructed as 'power over':

> if women gain power it will be at men's expense. … Women becoming empowered is seen as inherently threatening, … men will not only lose power but also face the possibility of having power wielded over them by women. Men's fear of losing control is an obstacle to women's empowerment. (p. 11)

Although there are distinct debates about empowerment as individual or collective feminist action, some scholars have also considered the extent to which these ways of thinking about empowerment are sometimes interconnected, involving both personal and collective forms. Rogers et al. (1997), for example, argued that empowerment is "the connection between a sense of personal competence, [and] a desire for and a willingness to take action in the public domain" (p. 1042) and a way of "gaining control over one's life and influencing the organizational and societal structure in which one lives" (p. 1042; see also Segal et al., 1995). Others have also suggested that "although women can empower themselves by obtaining some control over different aspects of their daily lives, empowerment also suggests the need to gain some control over power structures, or to change them" (Johnson, 1992, p. 148). What these definitions have in common is their shared understanding that empowerment is about having an internal sense of control and competence in order to achieve an overarching goal of creating wider social and structural change. Therefore, internal and collective constructions of empowerment work hand in hand; we need to change understandings of ourselves as being deserving of power in order for collective and structural change to occur (Kabeer, 2012; Rowlands, 1995).

A number of feminists argue that contemporary 'empowerment feminism' only serves a soft feminist and neoliberal agenda and, as such, has lost its radicalising potential (Crispin, 2017a; hooks, 2010). Walker (1995), for example, argues that empowerment feminism is a "cloak for conservatism, consumerism, and even sexism" (p. 18). In her polemic, 'Why I Am Not a Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto', Jessa Crispin (2017a) argues that feminism has been tamed and has become universal. In its attempt to seek equality with men, the movement has lost its radical and political way and has led to what one might call an apolitical movement that is "as banal, as non-threatening and ineffective as possible" (Crispin, 2017a, p. x). Instead, Crispin states that "the feminism I support is a full-on revolution. Where women are not simply allowed to participate in the world as it already exists … but are actively able to reshape it (Crispin, 2017a, p. xi).

Similarly, others have argued that empowerment feminism has turned contemporary feminism into a "feel-good anthem" whereby "empowerment has become the sparkly pink consolation prize for the gender that continues to be excluded from actual power" (Whippman, 2016, n.p.). The very ideas of empowerment have become caricatured, resulting in a soft version of power in which women can be

complicit with, rather than challenge, the patriarchal system. The wellness industry and the overt sexualisation and objectification of women (perhaps especially in the music industry) generates an uneasy marriage between capitalism and feminism. Indeed, capitalism is a bedfellow of patriarchy that commercialises overt femininity and sells it back to women through the wellness and beauty industries. Instead of generating structural change, empowerment feminism takes attention away from the need for structural change and leans toward a "social and celebratory" agenda, involving women's marches, fundraisers and matching feminist clothing, such as pussy hats (Cox, 2017, n.p.). These new expressions of feminism encourage women to think that everything they do is empowering, creating a "ubiquitous vacuousness" (Whippman, 2016, n.p.). Arguably, what was once a "dynamic, radical movement has dissipated into fragmented, identity-based subgroups" (Whippman, 2016, n.p.), offering a "shallow version of political action on personal issues" (Cox, 2017, n.p.) that ignores structural issues.

Popular culture: '*Porns* in the industry'

Patriarchy, the sexualisation of women, and empowerment are important in the context of this thesis because they each have a part to perform in the "corporate machine" (Levande, 2008, p. 314) of the music industry. The industry is embedded within a capitalist, patriarchal system in which men, both as performers and as producers, hold the greatest power. One of the ways the industry works is through (largely male) music executives who "prioritize packaging over talent" (Lieb, 2018, p. 9). In other words, they privilege the sexual attractiveness of female pop artists whose looks and bodies are considered to be their "core asset" (p. 9), over and above how they sing. Female performers have long been sexualised and objectified in the music industry. Indeed, Levande (2008) goes a step further to suggest that representations of women in popular culture have become hypersexualised and pornographic. This is important to consider when acknowledging the part played by the music industry in constructing normative expectations of women (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012).

Music videos have a long history of depicting misogynistic messages and images. Although recent years have seen a significant increase in the number and success of female artists, the sexualisation and objectification of women in music videos continues unabated (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; Conrad et al., 2009). In support of profit margins, the industry perpetually produces "cookie-cutter formulaic" moulds which female artists must fit in order to succeed (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012, p. 67; see also Strum, 2002). Empirical research shows that 40 to 75 percent of all genres of music videos contain sexual images (Arnett, 2002), and more specifically, these sexual images include "permissive sexual attitudes, exploitation, objectification, and

degradation" of women (Conrad et al, 2009 as cited in Frisby & Aubrey, 2012, p. 68). Women are shown playing submissive roles to male characters, as well as being presented as sexually submissive to men (Ashby & Rich, 2005; Baxter et al, 1985). Additionally, in male performers' music videos, women do not play an active role like their male counterparts, and instead are used as props, decoration (Arnett, 2002) and sex objects (Prichard & Tiggermann, 2012). A study of depictions of sexualisation in music videos from 1995 to 2016 showed that the sexual objectification continued unabated over the 21-year time-period and the severity of sexual depictions increased over time, with "ambiguous sexual expression, including sexual gestures, sexual poses, and sexual facial expressions" (Karsay et al., 2019, p. 346).

Exposure to sexualised and objectified women in music videos has a detrimental effect on young women. Research suggests that music videos showing thin and attractive women results in higher levels of body dissatisfaction among female audiences (Prichard & Tiggermann, 2012, p. 201) as well as women's own self-sexualisation and objectification (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012). Furthermore, Black women are the most targeted group for sexualisation and objectification in the music industry (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; Prichard & Tiggermann, 2012), which communicates broader beliefs about Black women's sexuality (Stephens, 2007). This is especially the case in hip-hop music videos in which Black women are almost twice as likely to be depicted wearing provocative clothing compared with any other ethnic group (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012). These depictions result in problematic assumptions about the heightened sexuality of Black women.

The overly sexualised and often misogynistic messages and images contained in pop music videos is the product of the male gaze (Levande, 2008). Laura Mulvey coined the term 'male gaze' in 1975, to capture the way women are perpetually represented in the visual arts from the viewpoint of men. The male gaze is defined as "heterosexual men's visual inspection of women's bodies or body parts" (Karsay et al., 2018, p. 28; see also Glapka, 2018) and more specifically, as "greater attention to the body or sexual body parts and less attention to the face" (Karsay et al., 2018, p. 28). It is almost impossible for women to avoid being subject to the objectifying male gaze given its "subtle nature and ubiquity" (Karsay et al., 2018, p. 28). It is certainly not difficult to find examples of this viewpoint in pop music videos. Robin Thicke's 2013 song 'Blurred Lines' (2013; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyDUC1LUXSU) featuring Pharrell Williams and T.I. presents a perfect example. The music video positions Thicke, Williams and T.I. as all-powerful over the female performers. This is achieved in a range of ways: the men are dressed in suits while the women are dressed in their underwear or sometimes appear to be naked; they are shown dancing provocatively around the men but their faces are vacant, expressing boredom and a passive role (see Frisby &

Aubrey, 2012); the symbolism of a dice held in the air suggests that women are submissive players in a sexual relational game in which men are in control; a performer is shown as a doll being groomed; another is led around by her hair as though a dog on a lead; and a final scene features the three men standing together in front of the camera while the three women are barely visible dancing in the background, quite literally erased from view (Figure 1). Together, these scenes exemplify Ashby and Rich's (2005) argument that women's role in music videos is sexually submissive, serving largely as props, decoration and sex objects (see also Arnett, 2002; Prichard & Tiggermann, 2012).

Figure 1: Stills from 'Blurred Lines' – Depictions of the male gaze

Another way the male gaze plays out in music videos is through the performance of 'girl-on-girl action' as a "manufactured lesbian sexuality" (Levande, 2008, p. 304). Although Smith (2014) argues that performers such as Nicki Minaj "bait[s] queer desire as a mode of empowerment, self-objectification, and fantasy" (p. 360), Levande (2008) offers a sound critique of such depictions, arguing that these scenes do not reflect genuine intimate relationships between two (or more) women. Instead, they are standard "pornographic fare" (p. 296) that manufactures lesbian relationships for the purposes of the male gaze. Furthermore, they become embedded within the common myth that the sexualisation of women in the music industry equals empowerment and the rights to one's own body. The encounter acts as currency to gain access and legitimacy in a male-dominated space (Levande, 2008).

This thesis is not about the depiction of women in pop music in general, but about the relationship between how young women make sense of performers and

performances that are presented as feminist in orientation. But this raises questions as to whether pop artists genuinely identify as feminist and want to advance feminist concerns or whether they are harnessing feminism as a brand to serve their own interests, as well as those of their management teams. There is no doubt that the music industry has historically used the language of feminism to capture audiences (Levande, 2008). For example, the term 'girl power' was coined by the girl band 'Spice Girls' in the 1990s (Levande, 2008). More recently, numerous female artists such as Miley Cyrus, Little Mix and Ariana Grande (discussed in Chapters Four and Five), navigate the feminist music-scape by using their platform in the music industry to promote concerns about gender equality. But, importantly, they must do so whilst simultaneously operating within an industry where their bodies remain sexualised and objectified.

Levande (2008) argues that girl groups and bands are a "petri dish" (p. 300) for feminism (see also McDonnell, 2004) and the way this occurs changes in response to the feminist agenda. Iddon and Marshall (2014), for example, argue that there has been a shift from the "collective action" of second-wave 'sisterhood' represented in Cindy Lauper's 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun', to a hypersexualised "provocative postmodernist individualism" performed by contemporary artists (p. 36). While some argue that this "strangely unsettled in-between space" (Iddon & Marshall, 2014, p. 36) can lead to sexual empowerment (McNair, 2002), others argue that the submerging of pop music into the 'pornosphere' whereby video performances "appropriate the conventions of pornography" (Iddon & Marshall, 2014, p. 36) can only be viewed as a return to a misogynistic industry where women are seen as nothing more than pawns in the industry.

Levande (2008) argues that the music industry has hijacked the feminist movement by harnessing feminism as a brand and using pop stars as products to "sell behaviours and attitudes about sexuality" through their music (p. 301). Levande illustrates her point with the 2004 Superbowl Pepsi advertisement. In the advertisement, Britney Spears, Beyoncé and Pink appear as "scantily clad Roman slaves" (p. 301) for 'emperor', Enrique Iglesias. Before long, however, the women unite, defeating and enslaving Iglesias by flipping him into a pit (with the help of a crate of Pepsi). The female pop stars/slaves are liberated while a lion secures his eventual fate, alluding to feminist themes of women's revolution. But in this case, revolution is concealed under the guise of sexual power through bondage, bare midriffs, and bronze bikinis. The depiction perpetuates the myth of the link between "stripping, prostitution, and pornographic imagery with power" (Levande, 2008, p. 301). Pepsi's slogan 'Dare for More' attempts to represent sexual freedom but the slogan reinforces the message that women become "more by wearing less" (Levande, 2008, p. 301); on the surface at least, it appears that power is acquired through revealing one's body. Levande

(2008) highlights its failure to account for the transactional negotiation of power represented. In this instance, power is ultimately returned to the male consumer in the stadium as "justified consumers of sex, all under the pretext of female empowerment" (p. 302). The advertisement is not only articulating the notion that sex sells, but also a "buy-into notion that demeaning women's bodies in exchange for profit is acceptable" (Levande, 2008, p. 302).

While this section has so far explored the intersection of feminism and popular culture, there is little work that seeks to understand how these depictions impact young women's understandings of feminism. Kanai (2019) draws connections between how young feminists are educated by, and participate in, feminism through popular culture. Her findings show a blurred relationship between the good feminist subject and "'idealized femininity'" (p. 26); participants used celebrity culture depicting feminism to classify *good* and *bad* feminism through the lens of intersectional feminism. The research also found that the feminist identity was closely intertwined with "practices of perfecting and disciplining the self" (Kanai, 2019, p. 25). As they sought an intersectional identity inclusive of minority groups, participants reinvoked "middle-class whiteness centred on self-monitoring, self-actualization and the disavowal of complicity" (p. 25). While Kanai's research provides a foundation for my research with its focus on how women make sense of their own feminist identity in the wake of digital and celebrity culture, its focus on how women mobilise their feminism is not considered.

A considerable body of work exists in postfeminist literature on young women, postfeminism and popular culture (Robinson, 2011; Evans & Riley, 2013). Robinson (2011), for example, uses postfeminism as a framework for understanding how young Australian women make sense of their lived experiences through exposure to popular culture, in this case, the feminist rhetoric depicted in television series 'Sex and the City' and 'Desperate Housewives'. She found that young women resonated with characters' lives and thought they embodied (post)feminist ideals, such as sexual autonomy, women enjoying sex without being slut-shamed, choosing not to have children, and not being economically or sexually dependent on a man – ways of life that contest heteronormative ideals of being a woman. Robinson (2011) identifies an emergent tension, however, between the normalised neoliberal construction of choice depicted in both shows, and the way it obscures the lack of choice in their own lives.

Sexual consumption was an important feature of the programmes watched and also features in work by Evans and Riley (2013) who examined how young people made sense of celebrities, including how those celebrities might influence their own subjectivity. They found that young women held paradoxical views: they appreciated

female celebrity sex symbols, but they also experienced pressure to conform to those same ideals by performing "constant work on the body" (p. 278). This paradox was due to young women's perception that they were "somehow failing" (p. 278) to conform to ever-more unrealistic standards of feminine beauty.

The commercialisation of such beauty ideals, as well as notions of "female freedom and gender equality" (McRobbie, 2008, p. 532) has a powerful influence on young women and girls. Popular culture forms "categories of youthful femininity" (p. 532) through the guise of allyship, a system that maliciously advances an individualised ideal category of girlhood, one that is far from attainable.

Although McRobbie (2008), Robinson (2011), and Evans and Riley (2013) did not specifically consider how depictions of *feminist* popular culture shape young women's understandings of gender and feminism, their research sheds light on the uncertainties faced by many young women as they navigate the intersection of gender and popular culture. My research takes such ideas as a starting point to consider how popular culture, and pop music in particular, shapes young women and their understandings of gender roles, the body, and sexual autonomy. My study seeks to extend their work, and others, by considering how young women make sense of feminism as performed by feminist artists, as well as how such music shapes young women's sense of self and identification with feminism.

Conclusion

New articulations of feminism through digital and other movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo and #TimesUp communicate that we are in a climate of cultural and social change. These movements rightfully state 'no more'. No more injustice. No more discrimination. No more silence. And the world is watching. This creates interesting tensions for feminism. At the very same time as there is outrage about the sexualisation and objectification of women and girls via hashtag feminism, we see the overt continued sexualisation of women in the music industry. While this is sometimes framed around personal freedom, choice, agency and autonomy, and empowerment, questions remain about the extent to which a masculinist, capitalist and patriarchal industry can advance a feminist cause.

Feminism and popular culture are at the centre of this thesis and this chapter has provided a review of the literature that is central to the research aims. As demonstrated, feminism is a contentious and fluid movement, subject to change in response to the current climate. Pop music, it seems, is perpetually at the centre of any given social milieu; music always provides the soundtrack to our lives. It raises the question: does pop music *reflect* the current social order or does it, in fact, *create*

the social order? Although causation is difficult to determine, many pop artists draw directly on feminist discourse in their artistry — their lyrics, their clothes, their performance and their social media presence. Without doubt, celebrity feminism has contributed to a feminist resurgence, but it does so while raising considerable questions about the industry's motivations and the potential outcome for young consumers. Constructions of femininity, female empowerment, sexual autonomy and power take shape in a contentious space which poses important questions in the context of this thesis: how might young women make sense of the ostensibly empowered feminist performances they watch and how might it shape their own subjectivity? The following chapter turns to the methodology employed to examine these key questions.

Chapter 3:

"I keep a record of the wreckage in my life" - (Pop) Music and methodology

Introduction

> There are different methodologies because different schools of thought have different rules for producing and justifying knowledge. (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 11)

It is important that methodological choices reflect the ontologies and epistemologies of a given research project. How one chooses the methodological approach translates into how the research takes place and the meaning, and subsequent knowledge, it produces. This research examines the ways that young women make sense of feminism through feminist performances by female music artists. I wanted the research to examine connections between the way women and feminism are represented in the music industry at the same time as speaking directly to young women about their perceptions of those performances. Ultimately, I wanted the research to be grounded in participants' experiential accounts of music and their intellectual, emotional and political sense-making practices. With this in mind, I sought a methodology that would allow young women to share their experiences of, and in-depth insights about, the feminism on display in pop music culture, representation and performance.

This chapter has two parts. The first outlines the methodological approach taken in this research, an approach that is social constructionist and grounded in feminist research practice. This methodology allowed me to explore how young women construct a multiplicity of ideas and depictions of gender, feminism and empowerment. The second part of this chapter describes the methods employed, namely individual music portfolios and focus groups. This section also outlines the recruitment process, describes the research participants, details the questions posed in focus groups, and outlines the analytic strategy employed, including the analysis I carried out of the videos themselves. This section also outlines ethical considerations arising from the research.

Methodology: Feminist social constructionism

The aim of this research was to better understand how young women make sense of pop music they are exposed to in their everyday lives as feminist or advancing gendered concerns. As discussed in the previous chapter, ideas about feminism change over time, in given contexts and mean different things to different people—feminism is not absolute, it is socially constructed. I adopted a social constructionist epistemology for this research in recognition that there are multiple truths of social phenomena, including how people interpret or make sense of their lives (Breckenridge et al., 2012), and music, image or performance (see Patterson, 2014). Indeed, social constructivism posits the idea that "the world we live in and our place in it are not simply and evidently 'there' for participants. Rather, participants actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 3).

The 'discursive turn' in the social sciences is marked by recognition that society is constructed through language. Language shapes the way the world is understood through dominant discourses that produce meaning about the world. A discourse is a particular way of talking about a subject that is ideologically informed. They become dominant or prevailing because they are often created by those in power, and, because they are often repeated, they become an accepted way of looking at (or speaking about) a subject (Foucault, 1969). Language and discourses are gendered, with the power to produce gendered subjects located within systems of power and privilege (Stoddart, 2007; Bucholtz, 2014; Thompson et al., 2018). But language also has the power to rewrite the gender rulebook. It is therefore important to centre gendered discourses in this research to reveal gendered norms around how young women talk about pop music and feminism.

Pop music is a form of language with the power to create new discursive meanings of feminism and gender (Bennet & Waksman, 2015). Pop music and popular culture are important sites in which social reality, meaning and the social order, including gender and feminism, is constructed (Besigiroha, 2010). It offers people a powerful way to connect with others and informs our opinions and realities. As Perry (2003) states, "the space a musical artist occupies in popular culture is multi-textual. Lyrics, interviews, music and videos together create a collage, often finely planned, out of which we are supposed to form impressions" (p. 141). People don't simply watch or listen to music. Rather, songs and music videos have the power to create and recreate meaning in the lived context of a person's life (Lazar, 2007). A focus on language and the discourses young women use to make sense of the music they are exposed to was therefore important for this project. It allowed me to better

understand how gendered subjects are produced and how young women make meaning about their own lives and their own understandings of feminism.

A qualitative research design was developed because it was suitable for examining the multiplicity of meanings young women might hold in relation to their own gendered lives and the music they listen to. The "qualitative revolution" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. vii) is concerned with interpretivist and inductive research that is used to understand how people experience the world. It allows people to tell their own story on their own terms, so the researcher can make sense of their lives by "seeing through the eyes of the people being studied" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 404). This elicits rich and deep data that fosters participant reflexivity and allows room for participants to use their own words to share their experiences, in-depth feelings, and personal thoughts and emotions.

At the heart of this thesis is feminism. A feminist research approach provides "insights into gendered social existence that would otherwise not exist" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 147), or at least might not be fully articulated. Feminist research methodologies have

> the ability to explore experience, rather than impose externally defined structures on women's lives. Thus, feminists emphasized the importance of listening to, recording and understanding women's own descriptions and accounts. … feminist research must begin with an open-ended exploration of women's experiences, since only from that vantage point is it possible to see how their world is organised and the extent to which it differs to that of men. (Maynard, 2011, p. 12)

Amplifying experiential knowledge is an important feature of feminist methodologies that "demands awareness of, and appropriate responses to, relationships between researcher and researched" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 156). In line with feminist research praxis, I employed a relational approach to the research field (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002), building rapport between myself and participants and seeking to diminish the hierarchy or power relations that might be perceived between me as a researcher and participants as the researched. Given the "interrelation of politics, ethics and epistemology in feminist research" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 158), such an approach was important, and I sought to minimise these power inequalities whilst acknowledging that some semblance of power distribution remains. My own subject position as a young feminist and my desire for research that promotes a "collaborative interactional process, with reciprocal inputs from researcher and researched" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 159; see also Klostermann, 2020) was of key concern. I wanted the

research to be led by participants, so a reflexive stance was important as I thought critically about my relationship with participants (Jorgenson & Phillips, 2002), with whom I shared a great deal. Like them, I am a young woman who also listens to pop music and lives in the same city. Rather than being viewed as "a source of bias", however, my personal involvement was "an important element in establishing trust and thus obtaining good quality information" (Maynard, 2011, p. 16). These similarities between participants and myself enabled the breakdown of some of the power relations in research and fostered a relational feminist methodology.

Method

While the previous section outlined my overarching epistemological and methodological approach to carrying out this research, this section describes what I did. I begin by describing the recruitment process and the young women who took part. I then outline the three different stages of the research: completion of a music portfolio and two sequential focus groups. Importantly, and as discussed in more detail in the following, these methods reflect a qualitative, social constructionist research methodology that advances a feminist praxis. While the music portfolios were generative, shaping the direction of the research project, the focus groups were a woman's space in which discussion by women, about women, and for women, could take place. I describe the analytic strategy employed in the research — analysis of the research interviews as well as my analysis of the videos we watched — and complete the section by outlining the ethical considerations of the research.

Recruitment

I created a poster to advertise the research, which outlined the broad purpose of the research and what was involved (Appendix A). The advertisement included contact details and invited young women (aged 18 to 25) who were interested to contact me for further information. For logistical reasons, it was important that prospective participants reside in Auckland. My primary site for recruiting participants was through extended personal networks on Facebook, but I also chose to target specific Facebook sites, including local Neighbourly sites. Recruitment was challenging and after posting on public sites without success, I decided to post on my personal Facebook page.

Within two weeks, nine young women had contacted me to express their interest in taking part, six of whom decided to proceed. While I was Facebook friends with all six participants, I decided not to include close contact friends because I did not want them to feel pressured to take part and also because I had already talked at length with many friends about the project and I felt this would influence the way they

responded. The types of relationships I shared with the participants included: friends of friends; old co-workers from a previous part-time job; and one distant childhood friend. I emailed each prospective participant (Appendix B) thanking them for their interest, notifying them about what was involved by attaching the Information Sheet (Appendix C) and inviting them to join me for a coffee (one-on-one) to talk further about the research and answer any of their questions. In the first instance, communication by email proved challenging and I found prospective participants preferred Facebook Messenger. Following a feminist methodology of being flexible and centring participants' needs (Hesse-Biber, 2012), this became our preferred method of communication and I continued to communicate with participants through Facebook Messenger for the duration of the project.

The catch up over coffee was an important part of the recruitment process and I tried to keep each encounter fairly similar to ensure consistency in my methodological approach. We met at a café local to the participant and began informally, talking about how they had been, what they had been up to and what they did for work. This established rapport and a friendly, conversational connection which remains important for feminist research (Thwaites, 2017). After 15 to 20 minutes, I suggested we turn to the research project. I structured this part of our conversation around the Information Sheet and began by explaining what the project was about, and why I was interested in the topic, before outlining what would be involved should they choose to take part, including the proposed dates for focus groups. I spoke in detail about the portfolio I wanted them to keep, something that several participants expressed concern about getting right. After listening to these concerns, I developed clear written instructions for them to follow (Appendix D), which I later provided to alleviate concerns. We also discussed how their information would be managed and used, including my desire to audio-record the focus groups for analytic purposes, and ethical considerations of the research. Prospective participants were invited to choose a pseudonym to be used in any publications, and I explained that they would receive a $60 voucher in appreciation of their time. I finished by inviting questions and asking if they were still keen to take part. All six prospective participants were happy to proceed. At this stage, they signed the consent form (Appendix E).

Introducing the participants

All six participants were cis-gender, heterosexual[2] and Pākehā (New Zealand European). The youngest participant was aged 19 at the time of the focus groups and

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[2] As such, the identity of the participants was both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, their similarities regarding gender and sexuality enabled a close analysis of cis-het perspectives. On the other hand, I acknowledge this research cannot speak to the experiences of the queer community.

the oldest was 26. All participants reside in the greater Auckland area (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Contributing participants

Name	Age	Occupation
Holly	25	High school teacher at an Auckland school
Rory	26	Unknown
Dani	19	Receptionist and student studying law and sociology
Indiana	23	Visual merchandiser at a women's retail outlet
Rose	Early 20s	Receptionist at a gym and full-time student
Elizabeth	23	Works at a bank

Music portfolios

For the first research stage, I asked participants to complete a 'music portfolio' of material that resonated with them and invoked a "sense of empowerment or strength as a woman" (Appendix D) by consuming this content. More specifically, I encouraged participants to reflect on the music they listen to in their lives, the artists they follow on social media, particularly that which related to or reflected gendered and feminist concerns and consider how it made them feel and think. I asked them to do this over the course of the week rather than completing the task in a single sitting. This was an important method to ensure that participants' thoughts and ideas were central to the ensuing focus groups, a key principle when conducting feminist research. The type of content was up to participants, but I gave them a few suggestions, including "music lyrics, music videos, social media posts from artists, performances at concerts or awards nights, or even memes" (Appendix D). How participants collated their portfolio was also up to them. I suggested they could create a Word Document, use the notes application on their phone, or create a Google drive before sending these to me electronically. All six participants returned their portfolios, with some creating a Google Drive page, others writing notes on their phone and sending content to me in an email, while others created a Word document.

Each participant provided rich personal insights about their chosen music. I analysed the portfolios and used them to shape the content and focal point of the first focus group. This reflects my desire to adopt a feminist research praxis that generated space for participants to shape the way the research unfolded and, in doing so, "forgo some of the power that is embedded structurally in most research processes" (Ross, 2017, n.p.). I began by reading through them with the intention of choosing a range of content for the focus groups. I collated each participant's portfolio, recording the

music they shared and the types of media they used. This included particular artists as well as specific songs and music videos, lyrics, Instagram posts from artists and their fans, articles about artists, personal analysis/critique of songs and artists, and, in one case, a Spotify playlist (see examples in Figure 2).

Figure 2: Examples of music portfolios – Holly and Rory

I noted the frequency different artists were included in portfolios and participants' rationale for including artists, and I prioritised for analysis those that were mentioned by more than one participant. Given the contemporary focus of this research, I excluded some older music mentioned by participants because they grew up with them, including the Spice Girls, S Club 7 and Pink. Taylor Swift and Demi Lovato were also not included in the focus groups because neither depict feminism or gendered concerns explicitly through their music.[3] Table 3 below is a list of the artists and their songs specifically mentioned in the portfolios.

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[3] At the time the focus groups were carried out, I perceived Taylor Swift's music to engage less overtly with feminist messaging. I would note, however, that Swift has since released 'The Man' in 2019, which is considered to challenge the double standard of how women and men are treated

Table 3: Artists and songs included in music portfolios

Artists' name	Song titles
Halsey	'Nightmare'
Ariana Grande	'God is a Woman' and in general
Miley Cyrus	'Mother's Daughter'
Little Mix	'Woman like me' and in general
Taylor Swift	In general
Spice Girls	In general
S Club 7	In general
Pink	In general
Kesha	'Praying'
Nicki Minaj	In general
Cardi B	In general
Beyoncé	'Formation'
Demi Lovato	In general

Where artists were discussed in general, rather than identifying a specific song, I googled the artist together with key words, such as 'feminist' and 'women's rights' to identify potential songs to be included. I then analysed the lyrics of those songs (discussed in more detail below) and watched the music videos, recording what I noticed, including observations about the embodied performance of the artist and the dominant discourses in the lyrics. I sought a diversity of songs to avoid an homogenous collection that might impact the richness of data. I also chose some social media posts that participants had used in their portfolios that related to the chosen artists to further contextualise and enrich the discussion about those artists. The final list of songs and corresponding music videos for the first focus group is a combination of artists and songs that were suggested by participants, as well as music that reflected themes identified as important by me that emerged in the review of literature in Chapter Two (see Table 4 below for the final list of songs with justification for their inclusion).

Artist	Song title	Participants who mentioned this artist and/or song	Reasons for choosing this song
Miley Cyrus	'Mother's Daughter'	Rory – song Elizabeth – song Dani - song Holly - artist	The lyrics and music video contain what participants describe as feminist and/or gendered messages. A range of body abilities, sizes, ethnicities and gender identification are represented.
Beyoncé	'Formation'	Rose – song and artist Elizabeth – artist Dani – artist Indi - artist	Beyoncé was important to include because she had recently released a (feminist) documentary on Netflix and has long been publicly constructed as a feminist icon. She also offers a black intersectional feminist perspective.
Ariana Grande	'God is a Woman'	Rose – song Rory – song Indi- song	This was a popular song choice for participants for its empowering message. The lyrics and music video are quite sexual so is useful for discussing body autonomy.
Little Mix	'Woman Like Me'	Rory – song Dani – artist	This song was chosen because it is a girl group and overtly challenges gender roles and norms.
Halsey	'Nightmare'	Holly - song	This song was chosen because it enacts a feminist message using sexually provocative imagery and costumes, as well as the music itself having a harder edge. Halsey also publicly supports abortion rights.
Kesha	'Praying'	Holly - song	This song was chosen because it enacts a feminist message through an emotional experiential account and uses soft tones.

Focus group one

Many scholars have written about the advantages of focus groups as a research method (Heath et al., 2009; Carey & Asbury, 2012; Flick, 2018). It has been argued that they can provide a holistic understanding of a topic and provide insights into how group members give meaning to their experiences, including *why* participants

think or feel the way they do (Carey & Asbury 2012; see also Morgan, 2019). While participants might start as a fabricated social group, they engage in the topic and each other's experiences and opinions, becoming interested in each other's views as internal dynamics and social interactions develop (Heath et al., 2009; Morgan, 2019; Flick, 2018). Ensuring a flow of focused conversation provides the facilitator with insights about the "consensus and diversity" within the group (Morgan, 2019, p. 6; see also Heath et al., 2009). Perhaps most importantly, focus groups reduce the power imbalance between interviewer and participants, generating a more relaxed and non-threatening environment (Heath et al., 2009), a key feature of a feminist research praxis (Ross, 2017). This relaxed environment was central for the success of my focus groups.

Considerable scholarship also exists on the specific benefits of focus groups when carrying out research with young people (Heath et al., 2009; Allen, 2005). Focus groups with young people have been shown to be "empowering and emotionally supportive" (Heath et al., 2009, p. 11), largely due to a shared experience and process of meaning-making (Eder & Fingerson, 2003). It seems that focus groups create a social space that "grow[s] out of peer culture", simulates social life, and produces a more "natural" (Eder & Fingerson, 2003, p. 35) setting for conversation.

The first focus group was held in my home in July 2019, reflecting Krueger and Casey's (2000) argument that focus group settings should be a "friendly, warm, and comfortable environment" (p. 109). It centred on participants' connection to and understandings of artists who they had determined depicted feminism or gendered concerns. In addition to the song choices outlined above, Kesha's 'Rich, White Straight Man' (2019), was specifically requested for inclusion by Elizabeth toward the end of the focus group, a request that was enthusiastically supported by others in the group. We subsequently played and discussed the song before the focus group ended. Methodologically, the request is a clear indication that the intentions of the project resonated with participants, and it also reflects their agency in shaping the way the research unfolded (Peterson, 2020). Their agreement that it was a suitable song also suggests they had connected as a group while they listened, watched and talked about the music.

The first focus group took about three hours and began with food and (non-alcoholic) beverages to encourage participants to relax and get to know each other. After about 40 minutes of chatting, eating and drinking, I suggested we get started on the focus group. I invited everyone to take a seat in the lounge, in front of the television. Using a focus group guide (Appendix F), I began by thanking participants for their time and work on the portfolios, before establishing the group as a safe space in which we respected others' opinions and where participants were welcome to take time out if

needed. I explained the purpose of the focus group and plan for the session ahead. I asked participants if they had any questions and, with the consent of all participants, began audio-recording.

As outlined in the previous section, we watched a series of music videos drawn from participants' portfolios, starting with one of the most popular songs from the group's portfolios, Ariana Grande's 'God is a Woman' (2018). Before we began each video, I handed out the accompanying lyrics as well as content from the artist's social media page, if applicable. I encouraged participants to reflect on their thoughts and feelings as they listened to and watched the videos. In the conversations that followed, I asked more specific open-ended questions to elicit discussion. Questions included:

- What gendered messages did you identify while watching?
- What do you think the message means?
- What does the message mean to you and how does it make you feel?
- What do you think the artist was trying to depict and in what ways does this resonate with you?
- [As the focus group progressed] How do you think this video compares with other music videos we have watched?

The discussion was generative, watching and listening to the music together, which meant we could share and reflect as a group and build on each other's reflections. This enabled deeper and more critical thinking about the songs, music videos and dominant discourses they contained.

I then asked a final set of questions inviting participants to reflect on their perceptions of the music industry and their 'listening to music' practices. Questions included:

- To what extent do you think the music industry shapes ideas about women performers?
- Do you think the music industry is a useful platform to engage in gendered concerns? Why/why not?
- How do you think, if at all, the #MeToo movement has influenced artists using their platforms to voice gender-related concerns?
- What music do you listen to, how often do you listen to music, and for what purpose do you listen to music?

Although I asked open-ended questions, my specific questions were not often needed. The participants quickly became very comfortable with each other and were

able to carry the conversation themselves; they often asked each other to expand on their answers or asked each other questions, needing few prompts from me.

The focus group was audio recorded to support later analysis, discussed in more detail below. That said, following Carey and Asbury (2012), analysis of the focus groups began during each focus group as I "processed the comments, followed up to clarify or further explore them, and summarized main ideas for the group to review" (p. 79). In the days that followed the first focus group, I identified emergent themes which were then used to frame the second focus group, carried out one week later.

Focus group two

The second focus group was also held in my home with the same group of young women. Morgan et al., (2008) highlight how multiple rounds of focus groups can be beneficial for understanding how ideas and conversations about a given topic develop for participants over time. In addition, multiple focus groups with the same people can ensure participants become "accustomed to your presence [and] drop their guard" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 158), which can contribute to rich insights into the lived realities of participants. In the context of my research, there were only two rounds of focus groups, one week apart, but over this time, the group dynamic became very relaxed and comfortable and a bond formed within the group. More importantly, the multiple focus group method was designed to reflect a feminist perspective that promoted participants' contributions to the way the research unfolded.

The specific purpose of the second focus group was threefold (see focus group guide, Appendix G). First, I wanted to introduce additional music and types of media to encourage participants to reflect further on gendered and feminist performances and discourses in pop music. While the first focus group focused on music that participants said they connected to, I wanted to introduce additional music that participants explicitly said they did not connect to, as well as other music and videos that I considered useful for exploring participants' relationship with and understanding of feminism and female artists' performances. The final list of songs and videos I included, and the rationale for their inclusion are outlined in Table 5 below:

Artist	Song title/clip title	Rationale for choosing this song/clip
Nicki Minaj	'Anaconda'	Mentioned by one participant as an artist that she did *not* connect to. With regard to feminist discourses, the song is controversial, with public commentary debating the extent to which it is feminist (see Kyrola, 2017).
Janelle Monáe	'PYNK'	The song challenges body ideals and norms for women as well as challenging the male gaze. Provocative representation with Monáe and others wearing vulva pants.
Lady Gaga	Speech at the 2018 'Elle Annual Women in Hollywood' celebration	Challenges heteronormative clothing practices for women by wearing a pant suit rather than the customary gown. Gaga reflects on the gendered politics of this clothing choice in her speech. Gaga's speech was used to ask participants how they might use clothing practices to communicate their gendered identities.
Beyoncé	Live performance at the 2014 Video Music Awards	In this live performance, Beyoncé identifies her feminist identity through the word 'FEMINIST' lit on stage behind her as well as a definition read aloud to the global audience of what feminism means (to her). I used this clip to ask participants how they might communicate their feminism (if applicable) and/or their gendered ideas with those around them.

The second goal of the focus group was to share my reflections and observations from the first focus group to see if it aligned with their perceptions and to provide further opportunity to add additional commentary. I shared two key insights from my preliminary analysis. First, participants were quite critical of performances they determined to be overtly sexual. It seemed that more overtly sexualised performances obscured feminist messages and caused them to disconnect from the performer and the message. Second, I observed that participants connected more with performances that aligned with traditional depictions of femininity, such as

softness and vulnerability at the same time as disconnecting from performances that aligned with traditional depictions of masculinity, such as aggression. Raising these initial insights provided participants with an opportunity to expand on their thoughts, something I return to in Chapters Five and Six, as well as contributing further to a collaborative research space, a key feature of feminist methodologies (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002; Klostermann, 2020).

Third, I was interested in more explicitly exploring what feminism means to participants and how they perceived the music we watched together as feminist or not. While feminism was the underpinning focus of the earlier stages of the research process, we had not yet explored participants' relationship with feminism more specifically. I waited to have this conversation in the second focus group because I felt participants would be more comfortable sharing personal information with me and each other by this time. A range of exercises facilitated this goal. The first was a 'feminism writing exercise' where I asked participants to write for ten minutes on the following questions:

- What does feminism mean to you?
- Do you identify as a feminist? Why or why not?

We then talked together about their responses and feminism more broadly, leading to a generative discussion.

The second was a ranking exercise that asked participants to rank the eight songs we watched across the two focus groups according to two measures: which song was most empowering and which song had the strongest feminist message. At my invitation, participants chose to conduct the ranking exercise collectively instead of individually because they were now very comfortable with each other. The opportunity to work together also reflected a collaborative feminist research practice (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002) by sharing decision-making about how the research unfolded. The discussion was led largely by participants as they bounced off each other, but I also prompted quieter group members to ensure everyone contributed. Interestingly, participants didn't answer the two questions discretely. Instead, they combined their responses and answered both concomitantly as they talked. Transcription of the focus group enabled me to determine individual answers later. Although not all participants ranked all the songs, what became most important was the clustering of particular songs. The results of these exercises will be explored in Chapters Four and Five.

Analysing the data

I used intersecting analytical strategies to analyse multiple kinds of data. Thematic analysis was the initial analytical strategy which "involves the searching across a data set, be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts to find repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86) that can be grouped categorically. Research portfolios and both focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis. Music portfolios were printed and reviewed for analytic themes that could support the agenda for the first focus group. To do this, I collated all of the portfolios, read any articles or other reading materials included in those portfolios including social media screenshots and reviewed song lyrics. Initial themes and song and video choices emerged that helped to shape the first focus group, including themes of empowerment, the body, and female sexuality.

The focus groups were transcribed verbatim and presented in table form with the participant's name on the left, text in the middle and a blank column on the right for my analytical comments. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), transcriptions were carefully reviewed, identifying dominant themes while working iteratively to identify underpinning discursive drivers, especially in relation to gender and feminism. I understood participants' comments as both representative of and reflective of a gendered symbolic order, which allowed me to understand how participants engaged with the visual and textual material and how they (re)produced gendered/feminist knowledge in the process. The analysis was flexible, allowing for new insights into how participants supported or challenged understandings of feminism and feminist performances. I read each transcript, identifying any overarching emergent themes. I then completed a second, closer analysis to further develop thematic codes (see Krueger & Casey, 2015). Themes identified in the review of feminist scholarship also shaped the analytic process. I also carried out free writing exercises to critically engage with emergent themes and develop those themes further. The initial review of the transcripts led to a series of high-level codes, including feminism, gender, bodies, activism, and emotions (such as anger, sadness and vulnerability).

To account for the gendered focus of this research project and my feminist research approach, I also carried out feminist discourse analysis. This feminist analysis moved beyond dominant themes to:

> advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchal) gendered social arrangements [as well as] critique discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order – relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social

group, and disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group. (Lazar, 2007, p. 141; 145)

This level of analysis homed in on the language used by searching for "patterns in language use, building on and referring back to the assumptions [participants are] making about the nature of language, interaction, and society and the interrelationships between them" (Taylor, 2001, p. 39). I moved beyond the words spoken by participants to uncover the dominant discourses that resided beneath them. This process allowed me to systematically identify connections in the data and it allowed me to work iteratively between participants' talk and theoretical concepts and ideas. The second level of analysis added further nuance to the initial thematic categories and led to additional themes such as the politics of bodily representation, gendered performance of emotion and complex and contradictory constructions of empowerment. The coding of the data into emergent themes were then read with the scholarship in mind to further develop analytic insights.

Following a feminist praxis, reflexivity was also an important feature of my analysis. Indeed:

> making explicit the play of power relations in your research process, and in identifying your relationship to the researched, is particularly important given the interrelation of politics, ethics and epistemology in feminist research … Taking reflexivity personally means reflecting critically on the consequences of your presence in the research process. (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 158)

I acknowledged my own role as an insider researcher (Greene, 2014; Collins, 1986) in that I too am a young woman who listens and dances to pop music and who also resides in urban Auckland. I am also a feminist who thinks about what music means to me and how it might shape (my) human and gendered experience. One of the key concerns of insider research is that the researcher will unduly influence the position of participants (Greene, 2014). But rather than attempting to remove this part of myself from the research, I invited my own insights into the research, adopting a reflexive stance. There were certainly experiences, thoughts and opinions I shared with participants, as well as different insights and reflections. These aspects of commonality enabled greater rapport, trust and connection between me and the group, which also fostered a space of safety to share personal insights.

An additional important analytic stage was my close analysis of the music videos we watched. This was carried out after the focus groups were completed and analysed, during the writing phase of the research. I watched the videos, read the lyrics, and

identified dominant gendered themes. This thematic analysis was considered iteratively, alongside my analysis of the focus groups and the scholarship in the field. Together, these three points of analysis—focus groups, scholarship and music videos—were used to enhance my thinking about the relationship between gender and pop music (see Pink, 2012 for discussions of visual research, reflection and analysis).

Ethical considerations

> At all stages in the research you have to decide on ethics and accountability, to consider whom your work is for, and its political and practical implications. (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 157)

Social science research always raises ethical considerations that need to be managed. To work through potential ethical considerations, I held a group 'peer review' session attended by an independent Sociologist from Massey University, a Master of Arts student from the Sociology programme, and my two supervisors. The process was designed to critically examine the research project together and raise potential ethical implications of carrying out the research as well as consider how these might be mitigated in the research field. The collaborative process reflects a feminist practice and methodology. The contributors to the peer review session all deemed the research to be of low-risk to participants, meaning it would unlikely cause undue emotional harm or distress. I then completed the formal Massey University Human Ethics procedure and the research was judged to be low-risk.

That said, some potential ethical issues were raised in the peer review session, particularly regarding the gendered nature of the study. This included potential emotional harm to participants if triggered by the content of the focus groups or sharing personal traumatic experiences, which could also be triggering for other participants. This was mitigated by talking about this openly with participants prior to them consenting to participate. A culture of safety and respect for one another was fostered at the start of each focus group, and participants were reminded they could take some time out if they needed.

Additional ethical considerations included the negotiation of confidentiality and privacy of participants. Participants each chose a pseudonym to be used in all written and published work from this research. Participants were also asked not to use each other's names when talking about the project outside of the research. There were also potential safety considerations regarding hosting the focus groups in my own home, but I was not concerned given all participants were distant friends or

acquaintances. Participants were informed that the focus group would be audio recorded and that once transcribed, I would destroy copies of the recordings.

The feminist research methodology employed sought to mitigate some of the ethical considerations. Dismantling the exercise of power in research is central for feminist research practice: "your relationships with [research participants], and what they understand you to be doing, are ethical issues, and raise questions about the exercise of power in the production of data" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 156). In their work on feminist methodologies, Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) highlight that one way to minimise potential harm to participants is through conducting insider research, or research in your "own social location" (p. 158). As outlined in the previous section, I conducted this research as an insider researcher. The particular benefit of investigating one's own social group is that "your identities are already known and accepted, and the value of your project is clear to the participants" (p. 158). Therefore, my insider status worked to minimise the boundaries between researcher and researched and mitigate potential ethical issues.

Finally, carrying out multiple rounds of focus groups can lead to participants dropping their guard, which exposes a particular kind of vulnerability for participants who might end up "reveal[ing] more than they might wish" (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 158). This raises an additional ethical challenge of the research, which also extends to how the research is written up. While I want to accurately represent participants, I am also mindful that a critical feminist stance is often concerned with examining what might lie behind participants' views, leaving them potentially perplexed by the analytic insights. I sought to mitigate this by, first, checking in with participants following my initial analysis to ensure that my insights resonated, and second, by ensuring that when I do share a synopsis of the research findings with participants, I do so in a way that is communicated kindly, and also give participants the opportunity to seek further explanation from me as the researcher.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined my methodological approach to this research as well as the specific methods employed. A feminist methodology was appropriate for the present study given the project's focus on the role of pop music in shaping young women's understanding of feminism. I sought to advance a feminist methodology by bringing gendered representations of music and constructions of the feminine and feminism in popular culture specifically into the research. The music industry has a long history of objectifying and sexualising women and has garnered considerable attention by feminist scholars (Lieb, 2018; Levande, 2008). The present study builds on this long tradition of feminist scholarship but extends this methodologically by centering

music in the research method. Doing so enabled participants to make sense of and articulate their ideas in collaboration with one another in direct response to specific pop music, making it a key strength of the methodology. The act of listening to pop music in each focus group acted as a vehicle through which participants could connect with each other as well as explore and communicate their own thoughts and opinions.

Another key strength of the research methodology was the use of music portfolios to shape the direction of the research. This allowed participants to take ownership of the project and ground their views in it. Participants' agency in shaping the project continued in the focus groups, which again provided participants with the authority to shape the direction of the research. Such an approach reflects feminist research practice that supports the sharing of authority in the research relationship. The use of multiple focus groups was an additional strength of the methodology. Although each focus group had a specific agenda, their goals were connected. Carrying out two focus groups with the same women resulted in a cohesive and connected group that enjoyed spending time together (most of the group stayed behind after the second focus group to hang out as a group). This method also allowed participants to continue reflecting on the topic and their 'listening to music' practices during the week between the focus groups, which resulted in greater critical reflection overall. Multiple focus groups also ensured that participants were central in the generation of data as the second focus group allowed an opportunity for me to raise initial analytical insights from the first and ask for participants' opinions on these insights. The multi-layered methodological choices adopted in this project and its grounding in feminist principles work together to produce a research project that centers participants to produce rich and authentic data.

Chapter 4:

"All the things you told me not to be" – Ambivalent constructions of feminism and empowerment

Introduction

In Chapter Two, I explored the complexities of contemporary feminism as empowerment emerges as a key feature. I considered the extent to which 'soft' feminism and an 'empowered' subject offers a valid, legitimate, and useful movement for advancing feminism. This chapter revisits these ideas from the viewpoint of participants. The first section explores participants' views of feminism, drawing attention to their ambivalent relationship with feminism and a feminist identity. I then use Miley Cyrus' 'Mother's Daughter' (2019) (chosen because it was identified by participants as an exemplar of feminism in popular culture) to examine participants' (re)constructions of a positive, "radical" feminism. While the language of radical is loaded in feminist debate, participants draw on the term in different ways. They shift between *distancing* themselves from what they describe as "radical" anti-male feminists who they perceive elevate the needs of women to the detriment of men and dictate how women ought to live, to *valuing* what they describe as "radical" celebrity feminists who promote inclusion, diversity and gender equality. I argue that the language of radicality emerges as an ambivalent stance towards feminism.

The second section centres on empowerment as a significant feature of how participants articulated their understanding of feminism. There is considerable debate about empowerment feminism and the extent to which it holds the capacity to generate societal change regarding gender equality. I show that participants construct complex understandings of empowerment. They hold a personal, internal and affective relationship with empowerment, but they also felt empowered by pop music and understood empowerment as a key feature of contemporary feminism. While some feminist scholars would argue that participants' internal affective state

is unlikely to effect change, I argue that the affective state, especially where it is sustained over time, has transformative potential.

Constructions of feminism: It's complicated

Participants had complex and ambivalent relationships with feminism. While all participants thought gender equality was important and discussed various fields in which society should strive for it, their personal understanding of feminism and the extent to which they identified as feminist was ambivalent. The following section examines first, how they articulated their own feminism, and second, how they understood gender and feminism through pop music, in particular, Miley Cyrus.

Personal constructions of feminism

During the second focus group, we watched a video of Beyoncé (2014) (see https://vimeo.com/127017886) performing a medley of her songs at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards. Towards the end of the performance, when it is just Beyoncé on stage, the word 'FEMINIST' is lit up behind her in silhouette as she stands powerfully and resolutely on stage with legs apart, head held high (Figure 3). While the voice of feminist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, reads from her 2013 Ted Talk 'We Should All Be Feminist', the words are emblazoned across the screen:

> We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, 'You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful, otherwise you would threaten the man.' Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. (Adichie, 2013, Ted Talk)

Figure 3: Beyoncé at the VMA awards

I showed this clip in the focus group because it is often described as an iconic feminist moment: the "holy grail" of feminist endorsements (Bennett, 2014); and "fearless, feminist [and] flawless" (Alexis, 2014, n.p.). As such, I thought the video of Queen B,

as she is often referred, might serve as a springboard to better understand how participants communicate their feminist identity (if, indeed, they identify as feminist) or support for gender equality. Participants were enamoured with her; not only can she sing and dance, she's fiercely and publicly feminist, and she declares her feminism on a global stage.

Celebrities play an important role in normalising and popularising feminist politics in contemporary feminism. Participants were less certain, however, about publicly declaring their own feminist stance. In response to watching the video, Elizabeth shared a story from when she was on student exchange in New York. At the time, there were protests on the street in response to the election of Donald Trump as President of the U.S. While there, Elizabeth purchased a hat with the word 'feminist' printed on it. Her friend took a photograph of her wearing the hat with Trump towers to her left and security guards carrying AK47 rifles to her right and posted the photograph on her Instagram. For Elizabeth, the act of posting the photograph was a public assertion of her feminist identity. But now she is back in New Zealand, she doesn't feel comfortable wearing the hat:

> I don't wear it all the time, so I feel almost way more comfortable wearing it when on exchange walking around a Uni with people that didn't know me, rather than wearing it in my everyday back in New Zealand. Like, I still would wear it when I need to, like to the beach or tramping, like for actually protect[ing] my face haha, [group laughs], but I don't often use it as like as a fashion choice, statement. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 2)

It is a performative act to identify publicly as feminist and for Elizabeth, one that requires a degree of bravery. She values the anonymity that comes with being overseas where she feels more comfortable declaring (and wearing) her feminism. When asked what made her feel different in New Zealand, she replied:

> Good question haha. It's probably like recognising the fact that there are a lot of issues around [identifying as a feminist] ... like I know that, and I still identify as that, but maybe I don't want to put it out there constantly 24/7. I dunno. I get looked at when I wear it. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 2)

Place is clearly an important feature of Elizabeth's feminist politics (see Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019). She grapples with a feminist identity that comes, at times, with emotional weight. For her, feminism is a risky stance, the performance of which depends on where she is and who she is with. Dani shared a similar experience from when she was planning to attend her high school ball. At the time, Dani was at "kind of a weird stage where I was just like 'yeah', I'm gonna be super feminist in everything

I do'" (Focus Group 2). Her desire to fully embody her feminist ideals led to her deciding to wear a suit to the ball instead of a traditional ball gown. Dressing in ostensibly masculine clothes symbolised a feminist act for her that challenged patriarchal norms and gendered dress codes (Paoletti, 2015). But as the ball drew near, she "got too scared to wear [a suit] and then just opted for a ball dress" (Focus Group 2). When faced with the potential judgment of others for breaking heteronormative dress codes, like Elizabeth, Dani's public feminist stance faltered. In both examples, Elizabeth and Dani were fearful of how others might perceive their public display of feminism, which led them to hide their feminist identities (see Scharff, 2016).

A public feminist identity can come at personal cost. Elizabeth now describes herself as a "strong" feminist who displays her feminism through her Instagram page as well as in her workplace:

> I'm quite outspoken about [my feminist identity] and … I'll call people out if they've said something that's not okay or doing something and I do it in the workplace, like at banking, there's *a lot* of men, [it's] male-dominated. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 2, Elizabeth's emphasis)

Listening to Elizabeth, it sounds as though there is a lot to call out. Her male colleagues know that she is feminist and that she will not tolerate sexism in the workplace: "I'm outspoken enough that people know it's a strong part of who I am". However, she also talks about the ways her male colleagues will sometimes ridicule or belittle her:

> [They] kinda joke about it but respect me at the same time. Like one of my boss' boss will purposely trigger me and in some ways it's like messed up on so many levels, but he also acknowledges that it is important and then he'll be like 'oh I'm not gonna make this comment because Elizabeth's listening' … so, they kind of, I guess … respect me at the same time. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 2)

Tomlinson (2010) argues that the "trope of the angry feminist" (p. 1) works because it undermines the feminist argument by attacking the individual. This works to shut down feminist debate, and make individual feminists question their own identification and the validity of their arguments. This same phenomenon is revealed in Elizabeth's example, albeit packaged in 'humour'. She thinks that calling her colleagues out has reduced sexism in her workplace, a task that required "emotional and mental labour [that is] sometimes taxing" (Elizabeth, Focus Group 2). She also recognises that her colleagues are using her feminist identity as the butt of their

jokes. It calls into question whether they really do respect her, feminism and women in general, given they use her feminist identity as a punchline (see Tomlinson, 2010).

At the beginning of the second focus group, we carried out a ten-minute writing exercise in which I asked participants to write their personal responses to the following questions:

- What does feminism mean to you?
- Do you identify as a feminist?

For those who identified as feminist (3 participants), feminism meant centring gender equality, as the following excerpts from their writing illustrate: "ultimately equality of gender and bringing women up to men" (Elizabeth); "equality in all aspects of life and equal access to opportunities" (Holly); and "equality of both sexes (a thoughtful and even discussion of gender roles)" (Rory). Elizabeth, Holly and Rory also introduced the idea that some people believe feminism means elevating women over men, but they distanced themselves from this rhetoric (as suggested in the quotes above).

Three participants did not identify as feminist, and two of these participants, Indiana and Rose, offered the following explanation:

Indiana:	[I feel that I] haven't had enough, like, life experience or knowledge on it to say I am. It's not something I actively research, yeah
Rose:	I feel like I'm the same as well
Indiana:	Yeah, I just don't know enough I feel
Rose:	Yeah, I don't know enough and I'm not like a super active feminist in the way that I do protests or anything or like research, but I like believe in-
Indiana:	Yeah same

This exchange suggests they construct feminism as an active practice that is performed and linked to ideas of the collective (as in Rose's reference to protests). In addition to active participation, a feminist identity also requires knowledge: either knowledge about the topic or "doing research" on the topic, perhaps in reference to me carrying out this research. For Indiana and Rose, a feminist identity carries pressure to know, research and do feminist work; it is an active identity as well as a belief system.

As discussed in Chapter Two, it is not uncommon for young women to distance themselves from the feminist movement at the same time as agreeing with the principle of equal rights and gender equality (Scharff, 2016; Hall & Rodriguez, 2003). This idea reflects the stance of all three non-feminist participants:

> I wouldn't call myself a feminist, but I definitely believe in like, equality between men and women. (Dani, Focus Group 2)

> I respect the idea [of feminism] and definitely support women's rights and female empowerment. (Indiana, writing exercise)
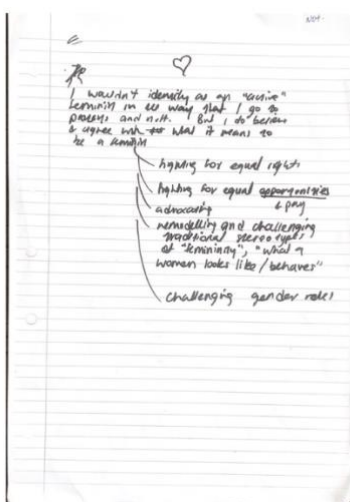
> I wouldn't identify as an "active" feminist … but I do agree with what it means to be a feminist:
> - Fighting for equal rights
> - Fighting for equal opportunities and pay
> - Advocating
> - Remodelling and challenging traditional stereotypes of "femininity", "what a woman looks like/behaves"
> - Challenging gender roles
>
> (Rose, writing exercise, see Figure 4)

Figure 4: Rose's writing exercise on feminism

However, most of my participants (including those who identified as feminists), believed that feminism had been "taken too far" (Dani). They were all keenly aware of how feminism can be portrayed negatively (Zucker, 2004; Curtis, 2018) so they worked hard to distance themselves from a certain *brand* of feminism. Dani, for example, assumes that the drive toward equality has led to a newly emerging hierarchy that privileges women over men and ignores the "beginning of the whole movement", which she argues was about gender *equality*, not elevating one group over another:

> I think the feminist movement today has been taken a bit far. I dunno, there's like a list of things, but … I think it's gotten to a point where women are perceived to be like elevated above men … it's almost been taken too far or out of context in some sense. (Dani, Focus Group 2)

The ensuing discussion sheds light on this understanding. Participants talked about "radical" feminists who have "highjack[ed]" feminism, while also recognising that radical voices are needed to "progress and gain attention" (Elizabeth). Rory mirrored Elizabeth's sentiments, pointing out that because "the role of women has been so secondary, I understand why the scales have needed to be tipped so dramatically". Holly identifies as feminist but shares similar thoughts, claiming that a "minority of dick heads" have taken it too far. When pressed on what she means, she likens feminism to a religious group in that there is always an "extremist group" within any belief system that goes too far. Elizabeth also identifies as a feminist but similarly comments on how sometimes the "loudest voices are often the most radical". She thinks that feminism has been:

> hijacked quite a lot [in the last couple of years] in quite a lot of readings, like radicals have done that, but I hate that means that people can't identify as a feminist, cause ultimately the history behind it still holds the same meaning. But it is about empowering women to be [at] the same level as men, like equality, it's not about bringing men down *at all*. Most people do know that, but it *sucks* that it has been slightly hijacked. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 2, Elizabeth's emphasis)

Rory also expressed frustration at what she perceived to be the exclusionary nature of contemporary feminism. Although she is a feminist, she identifies specifically with "first and second wave feminism", explaining that for the past two years, she no longer identifies as a "third wave feminist". When prompted to expand, she explained:

> Um, I just kind of started hearing and watching some media that was more about both sexes and I just saw a little disparity between it's okay to bring up women's issues, but not okay to bring up men's issues. (Rory, Focus Group 2)

Rory's retreat from what she describes as "third wave feminism" arises from her perception that men and men's issues are excluded from the movement. She constructs this perception as an anti-male stance and is nostalgic for earlier waves of feminism which represent to her a more inclusive feminism — an interesting viewpoint given the critique of first and second wave feminism as exclusionary (Davies, 2018; Gamble, 2001; Allen & Allen, 1974).

Participants, feminist or not, are heavily influenced by public discourses of feminism and are conscious of the implications of being personally aligned with negative "radical" feminism, synonymous with "loud" and "extreme" feminism that they feel detract from the feminist agenda. Dani's desire to distance herself from this brand of

feminism reflects her shifting position over time. As previously discussed, Dani was a committed feminist in high school but is no longer, primarily because she feels that some feminist Instagram pages are autocratic, dictating how women *ought* to be in the world:

> [Some Instagram pages] are pretty extreme, like they make you feel pretty shit about yourself, like if you're not following the way that they're saying women should live and it's like, hold on a second, what if we just, you know, I'm choosing to live a certain way, you can choose to live a certain way, there's nothing wrong with that. The whole point of this movement is to be equal with men, not try and tell a woman how to live her life. I dunno, there's just another perspective on it that sort of pushed me away from that movement, but not from the whole fundamental idea of it, which is equality for men and women. (Dani, Focus Group 2)

While gender equality remains the primary goal of feminism, Dani thinks the contemporary public articulation of feminism has shifted. As such, identifying as feminist would associate her with dictatorial views. It seems identifying as feminist is fraught for many young women and, while all participants discussed gender equality, their feminism was not overly concerned with challenging the patriarchal order that produces inequality in the first place. As explored in Chapter Two, an individualised feminism has been widely critiqued for being too soft (Crispin, 2017a) and lacking the teeth required to create social change. But their feminisms *do* engage in micro politics: Rory places an inclusive movement at the centre of her feminism and Elizabeth calls out sexist behaviour. There are suggestions too of a feminist community, of demanding accurate representation, and of challenging sexism. Although they want structural change, their focus is on the micro politics that arise in the context of their own everyday lives, and they are not overtly public in their feminist practice. While participants have their own fairly private and inward-looking understanding of feminism, they have quite different expectations of feminism when enacted by pop artists who identify as feminist. It is to the participants' construction of gender and feminism through pop music that I now turn.

Constructing gender and feminism through pop music

While the previous section examined participants' personal identification with feminism, this section focuses more closely on the intersection of feminism and pop music, using Miley Cyrus' 'Mother's Daughter' (2019) (see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T2RonyJ_Ts)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T2RonyJ_Ts). The video was released in 2019 and was identified by several participants as one that resonated strongly. It has been described as "one of [Cyrus'] most bluntly political music videos ever" due to the

inclusionary and celebratory way it addresses a range of gendered and feminist issues (Bailey, 2019, n.p.), including sexual autonomy and freedom; the right to freely protest; challenging the objectification and sexualisation of bodies (in particular women's bodies); and celebrating gender and body diversity (Figure 5). Collectively, these diverse representations challenge normative constructions of the body, speak to the fluidity of gender and sexuality (see Lips, 2019), and promote body and sex positivity movements (Ivanski & Kohut, 2017).
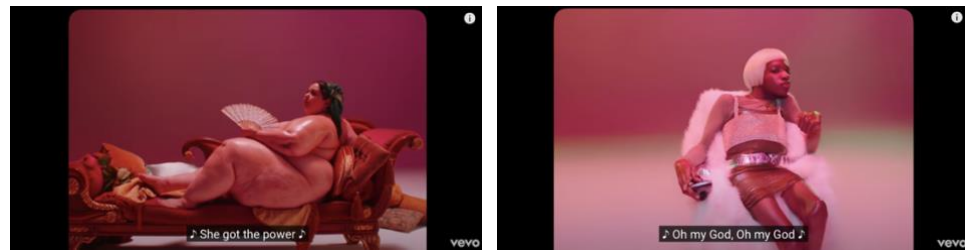
Figure 5: Stills from 'Mother's Daughter' – Fat woman on chaise longue; person in wheelchair

The video also depicts practices that are considered taboo, such as a mother breastfeeding her baby in public (Grant, 2016), a menstruating woman wearing a pad (Chrisler, 2013), and another with a C-section scar (Cripe, 2018) (Figure 6). Together, these depictions (and others) challenge the stigma that is too often associated with the biological function of some women's bodies.
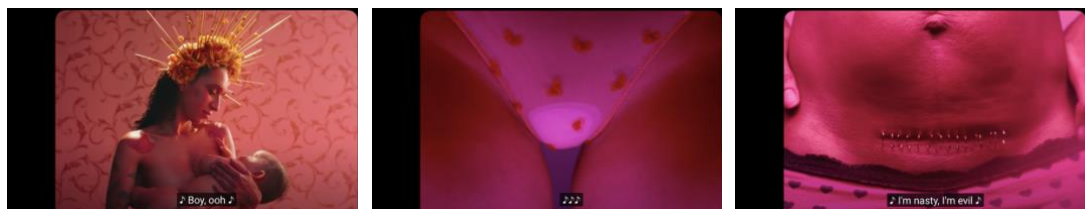
Figure 6: Stills from 'Mother's Daughter' – Breastfeeding menstruation, menstruation and scars

Cyrus herself is also featured wearing a vagina dentata as she performs (Figure 7). The use of vagina dentata, which is Latin for toothed vagina, is redolent of the feminist catch-phrase, 'this pussy fights back'. Through wearing the dentata, I argue that Cyrus asserts her sexual autonomy and challenges masculine sexual entitlement and the ongoing objectification and sexualisation of women in music for the viewing pleasure of men (Karsay et al., 2018).

Figure 7: Still from 'Mother's Daughter' – Vagina dentata

Cyrus' music and video disrupts heteropatriarchal norms of women with *literal* feminist messages that appear on the screen including: 'virginity is a social construct', 'every woman is a riot', 'not an object' (painted on a woman's breasts); 'feminist AF'; and two messages that are painted on the chest and back of an activist: 'I am free' and 'my body my rules', appearing as the protestor is shown being violently taken away from a woman's march by police authorities (Figure 8). The use of text as performance is a stylistic nod to the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist group emerging in the 1980s, who often used billboards and text to communicate their protest messages (Guerrilla Girls, 2020). In this context, the imagery depicts Cyrus' solidarity with women and their right to protest and points to the feminist work that still needs to be done.
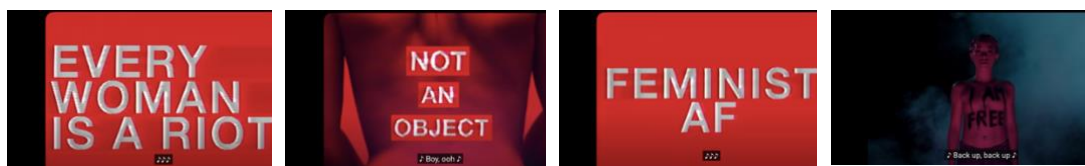
Figure 8: Stills from 'Mother's Daughter' – Text as protest

One of the most powerful ways that Cyrus makes her feminist stance known is through the lyrics of the song. Excerpts include:

> [Pre-Chorus]
> Oh my God, she got the power
> Oh, look at her, she got the power
> So, so, so
>
> [Chorus]
> Don't fuck with my freedom
> I came up to get me some
> I'm nasty, I'm evil
> Must be something in the water or that I'm my mother's daughter (Cyrus, 2019, song lyrics)

The repeated lyrics "Don't fuck with my freedom" is a clear contestation of patriarchy. "I came up to get me some" is underpinned by desire and sexual autonomy, communicating that women reserve the right to be sexual without judgement. "I'm nasty, I'm evil" communicates her right to be angry (a normative masculine construction discussed in more detail in Chapter Five), while recognising that by speaking up, she will be denounced for her non-feminine stance. Finally, the lyrics and song title, "I'm my mother's daughter" is a tribute to those feminists who came before, as well as a nod to her own mother for raising her to be feminist.

Participants viewed the song and video as a "radical" and "feminist" song. Radical has a particular meaning in feminism, reaching back to the radical feminists of the 1970s who fought to overturn patriarchy, male supremacy and "the worst excesses of the social system" (Thompson, 2001, p. 4; see also Willis, 1984). More recently, radical has appeared again, this time in the context of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) (Hines, 2017) who view gender from a "biology-based/sex essentialist understanding" (Camminga, 2020, p. 820), leading to the promotion of transphobic sentiments. But participants do not use "radical" in either of these ways and may in fact not even be aware of its previous and current use. As discussed in the previous section, they first used "radical" to describe and distance themselves from those feminists who they felt had hijacked the movement. In this context, however, they used "radical" in complimentary ways, arguing that Cyrus demonstrated her commitment to feminism through her radical stance. They provided three reasons for describing her performance as radical: its inclusion of a diversity of bodies, abilities, and gendered groups; its shock factor; and its 'do what you want' attitude, each of which are discussed below.

The video's inclusionary stance was a primary reason they considered the video "radical": "[she] covered a whole lot of groups" (Dani, Focus Group 1); and "[she tackled a multitude of issues within it. It was really empowering" (Elizabeth, Focus Group 1). The video celebrated inclusion, not least because it tackled *gendered* concerns, not just *women's* concerns:

> [The video] wasn't just about women, it was really arguably about the *true* meaning of feminism, which is equality for all. (Holly, Focus Group 2)

Participants valued the diversity of representation (gender identity, including trans and non-binary people, sexuality, body ability, shape and size, ethnicity and age), and as well as the depiction of people performing roles that are usually considered taboo or are scrutinised if performed in public. Holly, for example, found it:

refreshing to see, like the woman breast feeding [another participant: yeah!] like wearing the crown, um, but obviously that's something that's been in the media a lot like in New Zealand even and overseas. (Holly, Focus Group 1)

Breast feeding in public remains a contentious issue for women with many facing considerable scrutiny (Grant, 2016), social judgment and harassment (Harvey, 2019). In the video, however, public breast feeding is celebrated and normalised. Holly connects to the breast-feeding scene because she recognises it as a politicised message and values Cyrus using her celebrity platform to raise awareness about the issue. Public breast feeding was not the only thing participants valued:

I like in the video that she incorporates so much else into it. Like, you have body positivity with like big, like bigger, women in there, and then you've got like the fact that she's trying to show women aren't sexual objects like the caesarean scar thing, and the breast feeding. And you've got the guy with the 'they/them', oh sorry, person with the 'they/them' on their shirt. 'Virginity is a social construct' that sort of stuff, like she's … putting in all the values there and that stuff. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 1)

This quote reveals Elizabeth's appreciation of a feminism that challenges heteropatriarchal and heteronormative ideas of gender. She values the way Cyrus challenges gender roles, bodily performance, double standards of sexuality and virginity, beauty standards including body size, as well as the politics of place (for example, breast feeding in public). But the quote is also revealing in that it illustrates the challenge of maintaining a feminist subject position that contests dominant norms. First, Elizabeth explains that she liked that Cyrus includes a "bigger woman" in the video, but this raises the question of what she means by bigger. Her words unwittingly reinstate the idea of a small, toned and slim norm against which all women are or should be measured. Second, Elizabeth appreciates that Cyrus is "trying to show women aren't sexual objects". The word *trying* reveals, however, just how embedded the sexualisation of women is in modern society; it is presented as a fact that one must attempt (no matter how unlikely) to overcome. Third, Elizabeth mistakenly mis-genders the person with they/them on their shirt. She doesn't do this to be dismissive. She genuinely makes a mistake and quickly corrects herself, but the mistake demonstrates the challenge of recognising new categories of gender. Our first impressions of social categories and language undoubtedly fail us at times, even in genuine moments of positive expression.

The "shock factor" of the song was another reason they considered it "radical" feminism, especially when comparing the video with Cyrus' older music. Rather than shocking in a negative sense, in this case, the shock factor was viewed positively

because it was considered to raise awareness of a multitude of issues and help audiences connect with the feminist messages being communicated:

> [The song is] like being different and in a way being a bit shocking for people to be like 'oh my god, look at this', but I know that … she's getting so many different messages across. (Rose, Focus Group 1)

Even when Cyrus *did* perform in a sexualised manner, the video was thought to integrate a political feminist message. This resulted in it being judged differently from other performances, including her own earlier performances. Instead of being deemed overly sexual (discussed in more detail in the following chapter), Cyrus' performance was viewed as provocatively political and feminist:

> I think also with um, like somehow when she's doing like, those typically sexual moves they don't look as sexual [someone: yeah] in this video, um and I don't, I don't know what it is, I don't know if it's like the contrast cos it's a bit more like flashy like, kind of [someone: yeah] can't quite describe it, [Holly: yeah] the way the video camera works on it and then it like flashes to like, an image of something very unsexual but definitely didn't have that vibe to it [another participant: yeah] which was different and refreshing. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 1)

Elizabeth explains her understanding of the "shocking" nature of the video by comparing it with Cyrus' earlier music, in particular the video for the 2013 song 'Wrecking Ball' (2013; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=My2FRPA3Gf8). The video was strongly critiqued (and parodied) for its sexually provocative depiction of Cyrus swinging naked on a wrecking ball. Many thought she had gone too far, arguing that the sexually suggestive imagery could not be considered empowering for women (see Hann, 2013). Indeed, McKee et al. (2014) argue the performance represents the "pornographication" (p. 161) of popular culture. This was not the first time Cyrus has been accused of being overly sexual in her videos. Her popularisation of the dancing trend 'twerking' was also criticised for its sexual nature, a point raised by participants. In this instance, however, a distinction was made between earlier criticisms of Cyrus' 'shocking' performances and the shock factor depicted in 'Mother's Daughter'. Elizabeth explains:

> [In previous videos, Cyrus was] really *shocking* in the complete other way [sexual]. Everyone was like hating on her. [She] had all these videos that were so shocking on that side of it, and I think now, she's almost like using the fact that she can create, like knows, she can make something happen, like create shocking content, but do it in a different way with a different [political and

feminist] message. Yeah, I think it's cool that she's like used those experiences, I guess to like change it now … do it in a different way, take a different angle. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 1)

A distinction is made here between being shocking in a *sexual* way and being shocking in a *political* way. According to Elizabeth, Cyrus' older music was designed to shock viewers and listeners purely through explicit sexualised performances whereas her recent work shocks viewers by reconstructing her music and performance in ways designed to communicate a political and feminist agenda of sexual freedom and autonomy. Indeed, participants appreciated that Cyrus is able to embody multiple subject positions across a music repertoire that includes other songs:

it's just like two sides of a coin like she's got that durability of being like different types of, I dunno, on a spectrum of like sexual and then not and stuff, like she's not putting herself in a box kind of thing. But then this album's *clearly,* like she's got it framed around it by like putting the political elements in it, yeah. (Rory, Focus Group 1, Rory's emphasis)

Interestingly, participants thought a degree of shock value was necessary if listeners/viewers are to hear and internalise the political and feminist discourses: "[there's] too much out there. It's the only way to get like the word out" (Rose). Participants felt Cyrus used "shock" successfully to generate public discourse and raise awareness of gendered and feminist issues. Her success, however, does raise interesting issues and questions. Despite the diversity of performers in her music video, Cyrus herself falls within heteronormative constructions of feminine beauty. This raises questions about what her performance communicates about feminine beauty, identity, and value. While participants think her shock tactics are constructive for the feminist agenda, some might question the extent to which she is complicit with heteropatriarchal rules and regulations around the performance of women's bodies given she wears a full-body red leather bodysuit, which many would consider sexy, and dances provocatively. The important point of difference for participants, however, is that the song is heavily bookended with feminist discourse, such that Cyrus' performance can be read as an ironic subversion of those heteropatriarchal norms, and therefore viewed as politically positive.

According to participants, Cyrus embodies an 'I do what I want attitude' in her performance, which is the third reason they viewed her performance as "radical" feminism. The music industry is undoubtedly masculinist and hierarchical, with male producers often having control over female performers (Lieb, 2018; Wolfe, 2019; Coates, 1997; Frith & McRobbie, 1978). Although it is difficult for female artists to

challenge the masculinist norms of the industry (Lieb, 2018), participants felt she took back control from the industry, expressed her lack of care about the opinions of others, including how the public might criticise her ("I love that she, like doesn't care anymore … she just like says what she wants, which is really cool"; Rose, Focus group 1), and successfully distances herself from music industry norms as well as her earlier overtly sexualised performances.

Unsurprisingly, participants noticed the stark difference in how Cyrus performs now in 'Mother's Daughter' and how she performed when she was younger in Hannah Montana (a 'tween' television show that launched her career and provided her celebrity status). Participants constructed a timeline of her career and hypothesised the degree of control the music industry had over her at various times:

> [Cyrus] was kind of really controlled with what she, the content she was putting out … so I guess this video's kinda like, really breaking from everything she's been told to do in the past through her music, so it was really out there and pretty cool. (Dani, Focus Group 1)

> She feels like she has control over her music … and she sort of found contentness in her life and now she's finally able to actually give messages she wants to give. (Holly, Focus Group 1)

Pop artists, especially women, must constantly reinvent themselves to remain relevant (Lieb, 2018). Participants could see how Cyrus had changed her music and had a "totally different visual aesthetic" (Rory, Focus Group 1), shifting from tween icon to feminist icon and "giving herself to the [feminist] concept completely" (Rory, Focus Group 2).

Participants often returned to discourses of control when trying to make sense of Cyrus' earlier performances. Although they can't know for sure, they collectively decided that she had been under the control of the music industry and her male producer. In contrast, they constructed her current identity as autonomous, empowered and feminist, taking back control of her public identity through her most recent music and performance.

What participants might be witnessing, however, is Cyrus 'leaning in' to advance her own career with little regard for the structural change required to produce gender equality (see Sandberg, 2013).[4] Cyrus' 'brand' of feminism might in fact be the further

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[4] Sandberg's book, which seeks to address women's (lack of) success in the workplace, portrays an individualised empowerment feminism that states that women only have to *lean in* to achieve success.

commodification of the feminist movement whereby managers and producers, and now Cyrus herself, capitalise on the feminist agenda. (Re)branding is important to consider here. As discussed in Chapter Two, pop artists are branded in gendered ways with female pop artists constructed as "short term" (Lieb, 2018, p. 18) brands that are expected to fizzle out quickly. Unlike male artists who are able to maintain a single performative brand that lasts their entire career, female pop artists must constantly reinvent themselves (Lieb, 2018). This raises questions about whether the shift in Cyrus' performative identity can be explained as a feminist act that challenges gender and industry norms, an act that is complicit with gender and industry norms, or a complex combination of the two.

Empowerment as manifestation of feminism

While the previous section focused on constructions of feminism, and the intersection of feminism and pop music in its broadest sense, this section focuses specifically on empowerment as a significant feature of contemporary feminism (Rivers, 2017). Empowerment feminism has been described as a "celebratory" (Cox, 2017, n.p.) branch of feminism that creates a "shallow" feminism that constructs everything women do as empowering (Cox, 2017, n.p.; see also Whippman, 2016). In the current climate, empowerment feminism is often a feature of pop music (see Veerman, 2017), especially those artists who identify as feminists themselves or want their music to articulate their position on gendered issues. The extent to which those performances are shallow or have depth, however, is not clear. The following section explores this question from the perspective of participants.

Participants' internal constructions of empowerment

Discourses of empowerment featured heavily throughout the focus groups, at times initiated by me but also introduced spontaneously by participants. Reflecting the criticism that empowerment feminism is a celebratory movement (Cox, 2017) and a "feel-good anthem" (Whippman, 2016, n.p.), participants' ideas of empowerment were largely underpinned by individualising discourses. The way they talked about empowerment advanced a soft feminism that reflected an internally oriented and positive subject position, one that was not directed towards a collective politically oriented feminist agenda.

One of the ways that empowerment was articulated by participants was as an internal feeling of confidence. This was articulated first by Holly and later through a conversation between Holly and Elizabeth:

Again, these ideas place the responsibility on women to improve themselves in the world around them, ideas which have been widely critiqued (see Gibson, 2018; Benn, 2013; Brooks, 2014).

> [Not] necessarily outward confidence, but like there's something in you that like feels confidently even if you're, not like, 'I am standing on the stage in a bikini, like yes I am confident', it's like, just in yourself. (Holly, Focus Group 2)

Elizabeth: Like that you feel *good* inside. Just when you like feel like you got all this positive energy from it, like warm fuzzies

Holly: I was just about to say warm fuzzies, but like more that fuzzy, it's like definitely there haha [group laughs/agrees]

These conversations distinguish between an externally oriented confidence that prioritises the viewpoints of others and an internally oriented confidence that is located *within* oneself; a quieter private kind of confidence "just in yourself".

Participants' articulations of empowerment as internally oriented feelings raises the question of what they might mean for a feminist agenda. Langle de Paz (2016) would argue that the affective experience of feeling empowered is a "feminist emotion" (p. 187) to be harnessed rather than denied. Elizabeth captures this sentiment in the following:

> And I guess something can be *really* empowering, for almost like, if it stays with you, like past like, what you said [motioning to Indiana] with the Kesha one, you were thinking about it all week [Indiana: yeah], and maybe like changes your behaviour or you change slightly from it, or feel like you have, or it hits you really emotionally. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 2)

Critical feminists would argue this affective individual state is "banal [and] non-threatening" (Crispin, 2017a, p. x), unable to challenge the patriarchal order that produces gendered inequalities (Cox, 2017) and that being "hit really emotionally" (Elizabeth, Focus Group 2) is simply a "shallow" interpretation of feminism and female empowerment (Cox, 2017, n.p.). Further, they would note that empowerment feminism has been co-opted by capitalism to sell products and messages of self-improvement back to women through fitness and wellbeing industries (Riley, 2019). One could also argue that the music industry similarly exploits its audience.

The idea that their sense of empowerment is shallow would not resonate with participants, however, because their sense of empowerment is felt deeply. Scholars of affect and emotion offer, perhaps, an alternative way of thinking about the affective aspects of empowerment feminism. Hardt and Negri (2000) argue that "the production of ideas, knowledges, and affects … does not merely create means by

which society is formed and maintained; such immaterial labor also directly produces social relationships" (p. 66). In the context of women *feeling* empowered, scholars of affect would suggest that those emotional states are transpersonal, cannot be fully represented in words, and have the capacity to effect change. An affective state produces "intangible" responses, such as a "feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion" (Hardt, 1999, p. 96) that are fundamentally generative. Such intangibility cannot be fully captured by patriarchy; participants' intensity of emotion sits outside of patriarchy. This is an excellent counternarrative to critics of empowerment feminism who denounce internal emotive responses as politically redundant (see Crispin, 2017a; hooks, 2010). It is, in fact, here in this moment of affective response to depictions of feminism that possibility for change is generated. And this is especially the case when considering the temporal quality suggested by Elizabeth above – a "sustained" affective response, generating the potential for transformation.

Rory also draws on an internal construction of empowerment but in a slightly different way:

> [Empowerment is] maybe a balance between being self-assured and open. Um, empowerment to me is just like, not being totally, um like standing ground with my views and like continuing this fluidity; I can agree, I can disagree, but it's always changing, so I think it's just being open and assured, yep. (Rory, Focus Group 2)

Having space for her ideas to grow and develop are central to Rory's understanding of empowerment. Like Elizabeth, there is a temporal dimension, but in this case, this is underpinned by a stance that is highly reflexive. Empowerment is articulated as fluidity, change and openness, characteristics that reflect curiosity and engagement with the world. For Rory, it is her sense of self that is projected to the world and it is important to her that this projection of self can shift. It is short sighted to describe such materialisations of empowerment feminism as simply an internalised stance that has no capacity to address gender inequality in society. Indeed, and somewhat paradoxically due the masculine origins of the word, it is somewhat paternalistic to describe empowerment feminism in this way.

The relationship between music and empowerment

Listening to and watching music videos amplified participants' sense of empowerment. They often *felt* empowered because of the feminist message they thought the artists wanted to convey. With reference to Miley Cyrus' 'Mother's Daughter', Dani explained that she could see that Cyrus was:

really trying to portray a political message from that, so that's one that would probably stand out … whereas the rest like some of the others were questionable whether they wanted to get a political message out … I think Miley Cyrus was one where she had a clear message and I got something from that. (Dani, Focus Group 2)

Dani connects with and feels empowered by Cyrus because of the explicit feminist and political message and she values that this is done without reducing women to their relationship with men, a theme she recognises in other music:

[Ariana Grande and Little Mix] were still trying to bring in like, women and power and all that, but they somehow always linked it back to like a boy or a guy, or some sexual situation with a guy. [Cyrus] hasn't done that this whole time [group: yeah] … so like, the whole song has got like, a very clear message to it, unlike the other ones, they were trying to like, go forward with power but also like, 'turn me on' sort of thing. (Dani, Focus Group 2)

Moreover, Dani felt least empowered by artists who *lacked* a clear feminist agenda, such as Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda' (2014):

I don't think she's trying to bring across a feminist message from it, like when she was producing or whether she did have any input in producing it or writing the song, I don't think she was like I need to appeal to the feminists in this world, like I don't think she was intending that with this song. (Dani, Focus Group 2)

The importance of artist intention for Dani (and others) reveals how powerful music and celebrity status is for shaping listeners' perspectives. The ranking of song, video and artist exercise further revealed why participants ranked one song 'more feminist' or 'more empowering' than another. Three participants ranked Miley Cyrus' 'Mother's Daughter' as the most empowering/strongest feminist message, largely because they felt it was inclusive, covered a wide range of gendered issues, and was obviously feminist, as discussed above. In contrast, Indiana's highest ranked song was Ariana Grande's 'God is a Woman' because she "just always think[s] of that scene when [Grande is] big, like a god and the men are really small" (Focus Group 2). For Indiana, it was about seeing women in positions of power *over* men. Indiana reflects what Rowlands (1997) and Schutz (2019) term a 'zero-sum game' construction of power as a finite resource. Indiana likes that Grande has *taken the power back* from men, leaving them physically small and devoid of power. Following this logic, when women become empowered, "men will not only lose power but also face the

possibility of having power wielded over them by women" (Rowlands, 1997, p. 11), a possibility Indiana relishes.

Others were less convinced that Grande held all the power. Elizabeth, for example, thought the song had empowering "imagery", but pointed out that it was "still about like, trying to please a man" (Focus Group 2), a point also made by Dani above. Both Elizabeth and Dani reject the idea that women can only be empowered (or powerful) if they can sexually please a man.

The body, and the performance of the body, was often implicated in their discussion of empowerment. In particular, they questioned whether performers had power if their performance was provocative, an idea explored in detail in Chapter Five. The body was also implicated in discussion of Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda', which was ranked least preferred by most participants, for varying but connected reasons. First, concerns were raised about the recurring lyric in the song: "fuck the skinny bitches". Elizabeth and Rory, in particular, felt the lyrics were dismissive of and judgemental towards thin women, and in Rory's words: "don't reduce us to that" (Focus Group 2). The fat acceptance movement has done important feminist work to legitimise fat women's bodies and challenge heteronormative beauty standards (Rinaldi et al., 2020), but Davies et al. (2020) have pointed out that thin women are also the victims of body shaming. This multi-layer of body shaming illustrates that women are in an impossible situation in which their bodies are always available to be judged, not only by men but also by other women, a standpoint rejected by participants. There was a tension, however, regarding Minaj. Despite ranking Minaj's song as least empowering and with the weakest feminist message, Dani talks about the power of the song to bring her and her girlfriends together in nightclubs:

> But I actually don't mind [it], like when the song comes on and you're like clubbing in town with your girlfriends, you sing along to it and it's a good time, and it always brings girls together in a weird way from what I found. But yeah, I dunno, I don't really have an issue with it. (Dani, Focus Group 2)

Dani reveals an ambivalent understanding not only of the song, but of empowerment. While she doesn't think the song itself is empowering, its capacity to unite her girlfriends on the dance floor *is*. A tension emerges. To be clear, Dani doesn't only listen to music to feel empowered, as she pointed out in both focus groups:

> a lot of the videos with females, like I don't watch it specifically to get empowered. Like sometimes I just like the music. I'm not like judging 'oh, I'm gonna listen to this cause I'm not feeling empowered'. (Dani, Focus Group 1)

Like I personally don't listen to music all the time to feel some sort of empowerment. (Dani, Focus Group 2)

For Dani, empowerment arises through her own agentic practices around that music: choosing to listen to it or not, her enjoyment of dancing to it with her friends at a club, and the female fun and comradery that arises when she does.

There is no doubt that participants are positively influenced and empowered by celebrities and celebrity culture. Elizabeth's portfolio speaks to this influence in detail as she explains why she *unfollows* artists on social media:

There are many female artists who I feel are empowering with a lot of the music they put out, owning who they are, posting strong feminist values, and always having other women's backs in the industry etc. such as Miley [Cyrus], Beyoncé, Ariana [Grande], and Taylor [Swift] – just to name a couple of the BIG stars. However, I feel drowned in how often celebrities post on social media in general so have unfollowed most famous people, not just music/pop stars … Mostly the only famous people I have are politicians, and Miley and Leonardo DiCaprio come to mind because of all the political work they do and how outspoken they are about their values.

I don't find it empowering to see 5 different photos from the same concert or photoshoot with no caption. They always look amazing and if they love the photo and want to post it then of course they should, that's what empowerment is about, but I guess for me personally I don't get anything out of the photo, and trying to sift through multiple artists 5 posts on my feed that I don't like just to see the 1 post I might like isn't worth my time. Perhaps the pop industry is still too dominated with how they look, despite the efforts and good content coming out of it, it still primarily uses sex to sell and maybe sexy photos are still what the majority of people want to see.. I don't want to see that in ubiquity, and don't feel empowered by that consuming my feed, so made the choice to unfollow them. (Elizabeth, Music Portfolio)

Elizabeth's comments lie at the heart of empowerment debates. She wants to be empowered by pop artists through their public platforms, but the ubiquity of the images used turns her away from a celebrity culture that continues to privilege narrow standards of beauty (Figure 9).
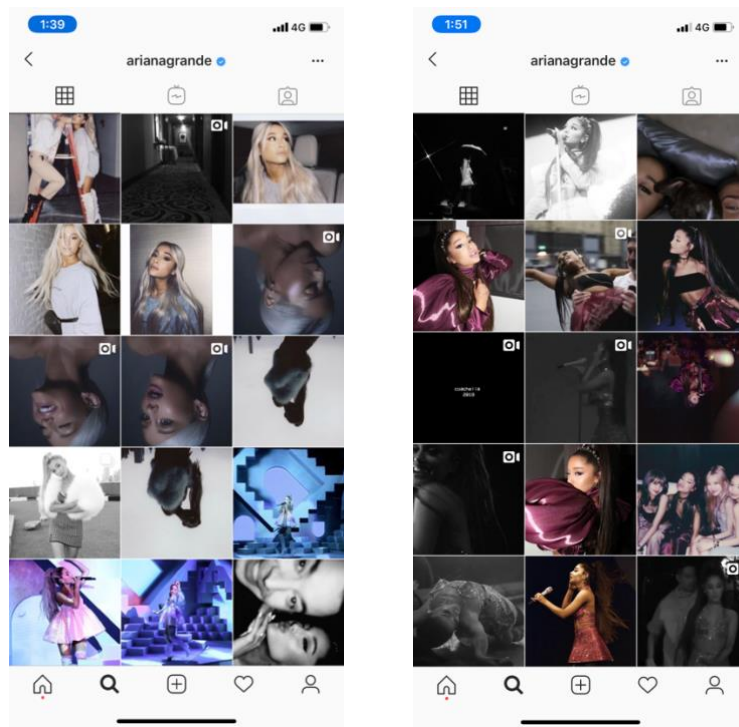
Figure 9: Images from Ariana Grande's Instagram page to illustrate Elizabeth's point

Elizabeth is keenly aware of the patriarchal structures embedded in the individualistic and capitalist industry of social media as well as the music industry that perpetuates a 'sex sells' rhetoric of women's bodies. Elizabeth works hard to distance herself from such embodiments, such as Ariana Grande's Instagram page, but she also takes this power back by unfollowing such artists, repositioning herself beyond these narrow confines. Elizabeth recognises that her Instagram feed becomes a vehicle for the promotion of others. She is agentic in her choice instead to follow celebrities who share their *political* beliefs and are outspoken about gender-related issues. This, she argues, is more empowering for her and has the potential to empower a female audience, while at the same time, the act of doing so serves as a defiance of patriarchal control in this digital exchange.

For the most part, participants' understandings of empowerment were about what the video or song depicted. Sometimes, however, concerns were raised about the song's production, the argument made that a song can't really be empowering if its production exploited the performer. When speaking about Grande's God is a Woman, for example, Holly said: "the song itself, like as a song, that's empowering" (Focus Group 2), but she didn't like that there was not a female director involved in the video's production. This position moves beyond the individualised understandings of feminism and empowerment discussed so far and instead advances concern about the structural organisation of the industry itself.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored young women's understanding of feminism and empowerment from a variety of angles, including their personal reflections and how they produce meaning through their engagement with pop music. Meaning was framed around the concept of 'the radical', which meant different things to them in different contexts. Their personal relationship with feminism was ambivalent and influenced by what they perceive to be radical, exclusionary and anti-male discourses of feminism that construct the female subject as problematic. As such, they worked hard to distance themselves from narrow and negative rhetoric associated with what they deemed a "radicalised" version of feminism. In contrast, they reconstructed what it means to be radical by embracing what they viewed as the "radical" performance of Miley Cyrus, highlighting her inclusionary stance, her shock tactics, and her personal power. Again, an ambivalent subject position emerged in which the idea of radical practice is negotiated in different ways and in different contexts.

Empowerment is often cited as a key feature of fourth wave feminism (Rivers, 2017) but there is considerable debate in feminist scholarship regarding whether it is a process of internal positive individual change or whether it has the capacity to serve collective processes of social change and challenge the structures that disempower women. Participants largely held highly individualised ideas of empowerment that centred on internal affective states. While some would argue that such an emotive state is of no concern to the advancement of feminism, I argue that such affective states should not be understated. Participants expressed deeply held feelings that in some cases were sustained over time. Although (experiences of) empowerment for participants was largely about the self, it materialised as affective change in the context of their everyday lives.

Chapter 5:

"I could play nice, or I could be a bully" – A return to dichotomous constructions of gender

Introduction

This chapter uses the music of Little Mix, Ariana Grande, Kesha, and Halsey to examine how young women make sense of performances they previously identified as advancing a feminist agenda. The first section draws attention to ambivalent constructions of "sexual" and "sensual" performances. Debate on women's bodily autonomy, including how they should be able to perform their bodies, is long-standing and continues unabated (Wrye, 2009). Some argue that women should be able to perform their bodies in whatever way they choose, including in overtly sexual ways (Haug, 1987), and to do so can be considered feminist. Others, however, argue that a woman's sexualised performance can never be viewed as feminist because it unavoidably serves a patriarchal system that reproduces narrow, normative constructions of the feminine in the first instance (Benn, 2013). This debate about bodily freedom and self-determination is central to the first half of this chapter.

The second section examines participants' responses to two songs that address male violence, Kesha's 'Praying' and Halsey's 'Nightmare'. This is an issue of particular concern to women given the perpetual threat of symbolic and physical violence that women face (Manne, 2017; Ahmed, 2017). Participants construct each performance as emotional, mapping each artists' performance onto the gender binary. Kesha's vulnerable performance in 'Praying' is viewed as 'acceptable' due to its 'feminine' response, while Halsey's 'aggressive' performance in 'Nightmare' is viewed as 'unacceptable' for its 'masculine' orientation. The mapping of emotion onto the gender binary is reflected in the literature; women are often aligned with sadness and fear (Shields et al., 2007) as well as shame and vulnerability, especially in the context of being victims of violence and harassment by men (Weiss, 2010), while men are aligned with anger and pride (Shields et al., 2007). These emotional categories are not constructed equally; they are embedded within relations of power. As noted by Shields et al. (2007), "men express power*ful* emotion[s]" implying dominance,

while "women express power*less* emotions [that] imply vulnerability" (p. 70, my emphasis). This section critically examines how these relations of power play out as participants make sense of these performances that they believe transgress affective gender norms.

Each of these two sections return to dichotomous constructions of gender representation. Feminists have drawn attention to the multiple ways in which characteristics often associated with women were constructed in opposition to those of men (Bock, 1991): 'weak and strong', 'soft and hard', and 'passive and active' are aligned with feminine and masculine categories, respectively (Bordo, 2004; de Beauvoir, 1974). I argue that participants draw on dichotomous constructions of gender, bodily performance and practice that result in ambivalent subject positions for women. When performers are perceived to have gone 'too far' (too sexualised, too masculine), it disrupts and disconnects participants from the feminist message being articulated and raises questions about the place of pop music in advancing the feminist cause.

Dichotomy of sexual and sensual

This section uses Little Mix's 'Woman Like Me' and Ariana Grande's 'God is a Woman' to examine how participants make sense of gender, including women's bodies, through their performance. The songs were chosen because they featured in several portfolios, and participants felt they productively communicated gender-based issues and reinforced positive constructions of women, albeit in different ways. Participants paid close attention to how the artists in each video used their bodies to convey their feminist message. They initially described both songs as "sexual" due to suggestive gestures and lyrics which centred on women's bodies and sex. With this shared characteristic of the central role of the body identified, participants then compared *how* each song was constructed as sexual. More nuanced responses emerged that contrasted Little Mix as "sexual" and Grande as "sensual", a dichotomy that was shaped by normative expectations of women, women's bodies, and women's performance.

Making sense of Little Mix: A "sexual" performance

Little Mix is a British girl group created in 2011 on the UK's 'X Factor'[5] and features four female singers, Jade Thirlwall, Perrie Edwards, Leigh-Anne Pinnock, and Jesy Nelson. 'Woman Like Me' (2018a; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSOpiZo1BAA) was released in 2018 and

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[5] The 'X Factor' is a televised singing competition in which performers audition before celebrity judges and a live audience.

features the performers celebrating women by challenging traditional gender roles and portrayals of femininity:

> [the song is] all about celebrating incredible women in every shape and form. We don't feel like there are enough places to celebrate women right now ... so we wanted to make one! (Little Mix, Instagram, 2018b)

The video begins with the group in the back of a prison-like van being shipped off to finishing school to learn how to behave like 'ladies'. Once there, they learn how to iron, arrange flowers, vacuum and make tea. At the start, they perform these traditional gendered roles in 'feminine' ways with soft, polite facial expressions. They politely 'eat' from empty plates, sip tea and learn good posture by balancing books on their head (Figure 10).
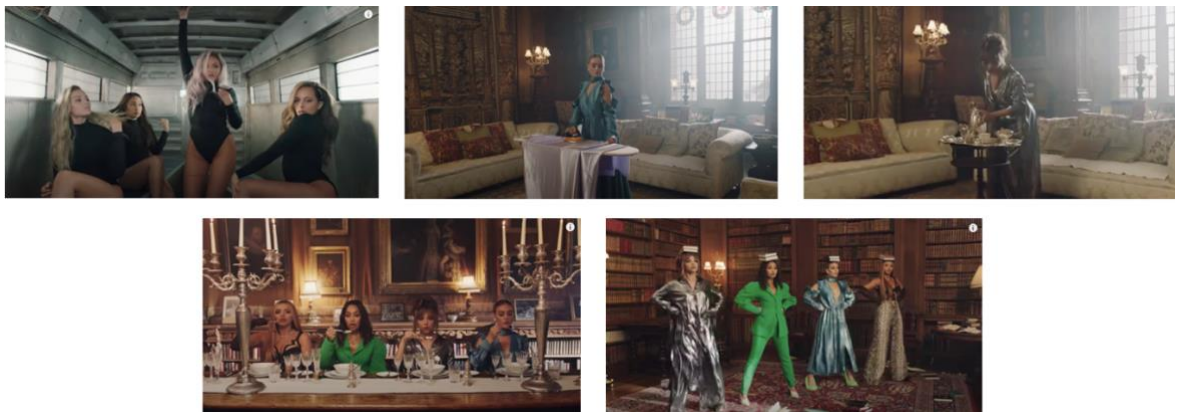
Figure 10*: Stills from 'Woman Like Me' – Compliance*

Towards the end of the video, however, they reject these gendered norms by scorching silk sheets, throwing domestic goods around, chopping up a flower arrangement, and stuffing their mouths with burgers while glaring defiantly at the camera (Figure 11).
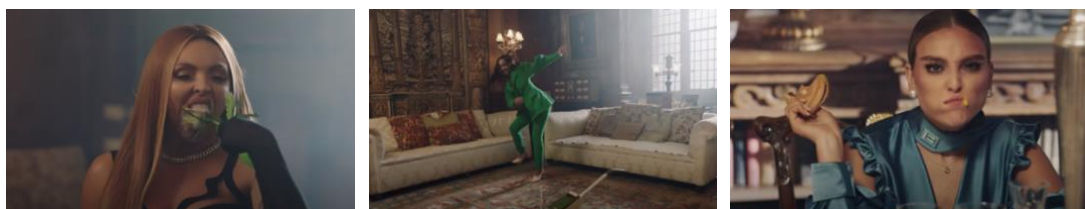
Figure 11: Stills from 'Woman Like Me' – Contestation

Little Mix's rejection of heteronormative constructions of womanhood is also illustrated in the revealing clothing they wear and what could be described as sexualised dance routines, including 'chairography' (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Still from 'Woman like Me' – 'Chairography' dancing

Symbolic imagery is also used to challenge heteronormative expectations of how women can, or should, perform their body. The music video includes two scenes featuring measuring scales: the group shown walking over a ruler printed on a path, and the group dancing in a balanced measuring scale (Figure 13). I suggest these images are intended to challenge prevailing ideas that conflate a women's worth with her size or weight (see Bordo, 2004).

Figure 13: Stills from 'Woman like Me' – Group being measured, walking along a scale; group dancing in the balanced scales

The lyrics also challenge heteronormative constructions of women as passive by promoting women speaking up and having a voice. And they do so in the knowledge that doing so might result in men rejecting them for being too outspoken:

> I always say what I'm feeling
> I was born without a zip on my mouth
>
> My mama always said, "Girl, you're trouble"
> And now I wonder, could you fall for a woman like me. (Little Mix, 2018a, song lyrics)

Participants appreciated Little Mix for the way they challenged gendered norms. They liked that the artists transformed from docile enactments of traditional femininity and female domestication to independent women rejecting these same

norms and values. According to Dani, "women have been told to … act a certain way" but the video contests those heteronormative constructions and offers an alternative model of society in which women are "not being controlled [according to] traditional stereotypes" (Rose). Despite their appreciation, however, the conversation quickly shifted to an explicit judgment of the performers as participants categorised the song as "sexual", and importantly, reflecting the (sexual) interests of men. Indeed, they drew on the concept of the male gaze to make sense of the performance:

> I could feel the male gaze a bit more in that one. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 1)

> I found this one less empowering [than Ariana Grande's song]. But then again, I think it is partly the male gaze aspect of it too. (Holly, Focus Group 1)

The 'male gaze' describes the way that "movies and other mass-media products are often made with the viewpoint of men in mind, so that women are objectified as sex objects rather than being represented as full human beings" (Lawson & Garrod, 2001, p. 144). It is interesting that participants were aware of the idea of the male gaze and were able to use it to describe how they felt about the performance of women's bodies in the music video. They noticed the revealing clothing as well as choreography they considered provocative. But their perception of the performance, dance and dress was that it emerged as the result of a male-dominated industry where the:

> industry is so full of men [and it's] just going to come through *naturally* when they're the ones maybe controlling, having more say in the creative side of it. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 1, my emphasis)

Elizabeth's comment is revealing. As discussed in Chapter Two, men are socialised into roles of dominance and control (Rich, 1976). While this is clearly contested by feminist scholars (Thompson, 2001), Elizabeth's understanding of dominant masculinity is that it is normal. Indeed, her reference to "natural" seems to suggest she has internalised this norm and therefore *expects* that men will be in positions of control over women. According to this logic, overtly sexual women artists are assumed to always be under the control of men and performing as objects for men's pleasure, rather than their own.

The theme of choice is interesting to explore here. Participants are conscious that the artists could have chosen to perform their bodies sexually, but ultimately question whether it was their decision:

Yeah, I feel like it was still like very sexual, still like, obviously like you said, choice, like I'm all about that as well and that sort of thing, but sometimes I feel like they don't always have that choice. Like it just made me think back to that, like we don't really know what happened, was it with Fifth Harmony and Camila Cabello, and she supposedly didn't like the way they were forced to be so sexual [in their performance]. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 1)

Elizabeth describes what she perceives as a lack of choice in Little Mix's video in terms of how the artists represent themselves (sexually or otherwise). Although participants didn't draw on the language of patriarchy, they recognise the masculinised industry in which these artists are embedded. Elizabeth references former girl group, Fifth Harmony, and member Camila Cabello's departure from that group as a way to amplify the lack of choice available to women in the music industry. Cabello reportedly left because producers expected her to perform in sexually provocative ways; ultimately, she did not have bodily autonomy while in the group but gained agency by leaving. Elizabeth's comparison makes clear that she believes that Little Mix also have little agency as control is assumed to be in the hands of a male producer and director.

The assumption made here is that Little Mix members who choose to stay in the group will have limited choice or autonomy over how they perform. Participants make a problematic and narrow link between sexual performance and male power; because these artists perform in overtly sexual ways, it is assumed they must do so at the hands of a male producer. Certainly, this might be the case. There is considerable evidence of the masculinisation of power in the music industry (Wolfe, 2019; Frith & McRobbie, 1978). And yet these assumptions fail to account for the possibility of women's positive sexual expression (Wrye, 2009). A moral discourse underpins participants' assumption: if Little Mix had a choice, they wouldn't and *shouldn't* perform in such a sexually provocative way. And by doing so, whether by choice or implicit force, the artists open themselves up to judgement.

There is clear ambivalence in participants' talk. While they embrace the idea that women should have bodily autonomy and agency, they also seem to suggest that performative expressions of that autonomy must fall within a fairly narrow construction of female sexuality. They unintentionally produce a narrow range of (acceptable autonomous) sexual expression for women, one that inadvertently undermines a feminist agenda of 'body autonomy' and 'rights to one's own body' (Wrye, 2009). For participants, the overt sexualisation disrupts and undermines the feminist message.

Ultimately, participants felt that Little Mix go 'too far'. They liked that the group challenged traditional gender roles and normative feminine practices but quickly reverted to judging and even slut-shaming the women's performance. When discussing what was meant by the song title, Elizabeth said: "if you were to summarise [the dancing] in one word, it's almost like 'slut'", to which Holly agreed. While three other participants disagreed with the term, it is noteworthy that they each went on to discuss in further detail the line that Little Mix had crossed. It seems that *overt* sexualised performances cannot be considered feminist.

Making sense of Ariana Grande: From a "sexual" to a "sensual" performance

The second song used in this section is American pop artist Ariana Grande's 'God is a Woman' (2018; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHLHSlExFis). Grande has become a feminist icon of sorts, often using her global platform to talk about gendered issues and politics; Grande does not only *self*-identify as feminist, she also *publicly* lives a feminist life through her public profile (Wray, 2018; Rueckert, 2017). Like the previous song, 'God is a Woman' has been described as a feminist anthem that champions "female empowerment" (Rhiannon, 2018, n.p.; see also Stiernberg, 2018). A recurring image in the music video features Grande sitting on top of the world causing hurricanes by fingering the clouds, conveying the authority of women at the same time as drawing on obviously sexual undertones.

Religious symbolism is also used to challenge Christian patriarchy's narrow and normative constructions of women. A woman-only recreation of Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam' centres Grande as God, an obvious gender reversal of Christianity and the creation of (wo)mankind (Figure 14). The inclusion of a Bible reading: Ezekiel 25:17 further subverts Christian patriarchy. The verse was made famous by the film, 'Pulp Fiction', but in this example, Grande changes 'brothers' to 'sisters' and the quote is read by pop music and feminist icon, Madonna:

> And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my sisters. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you. (Grande, 2018, song lyrics)
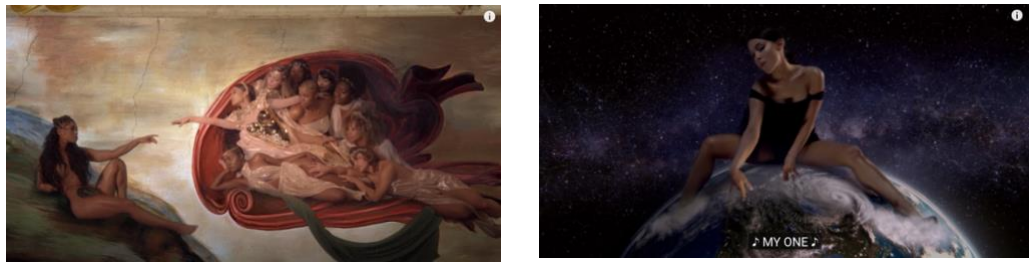
Figure 14: Stills from 'God is a Woman' – Women-only recreation of Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam'

Grande also uses symbolism in her videos to depict feminist practices. Whilst wearing black gloves printed with the word 'POWER' (symbolising black power), Grande swings a judge's gavel, literally shattering the glass ceiling[6], before the scene shifts to a giant pair of women's legs spread across the room (Figure 15).
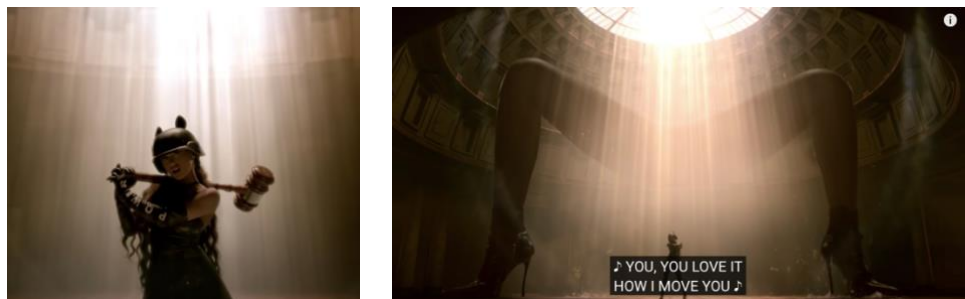
Figure 15: Stills from 'God is a Woman' – Breaking the glass ceiling and legs spread

The song challenges the sexual objectification of women by celebrating women's sexual autonomy and asserting their right to enjoy sex and talk about it without judgement. Notably, however, critics have argued the song reduces women's god-like characteristics to sex appeal, suggesting this is a step backwards for gender equality (Parker, 2018).

Participants enjoyed Grande's video, and particularly appreciated a scene where physically small men threw insults at a large-scale Grande (Figure 16). They understood the scene as Grande subverting the gendered norms of the music industry which position men as prominent while women are usually in the "background", presented "specifically [as] an object" (Holly): the scene "switch[ed] the … scales a bit to enhance women [representing] a shift in power" (Rory) between men and women in the music industry. Holly enthused that "[men were] not even in the background, they're so small and diminished that they're almost not present". As such, the scene was considered an "empowering" and "powerful image" (Elizabeth).

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[6] For a discussion of the glass ceiling faced by women and other minorities, see Morrison and van Glinow (1990).

Figure 16: Still from 'God is a Woman' – Grande having insults thrown at her by physically small men

Participants also found the imagery of God as a woman "powerful" and felt the all-women rendition of Michelangelo's painting "immortalis[ed]" Grande (Elizabeth). But they also described her performance as sexual and reacted negatively to some aspects:

Elizabeth:	Actually, just like reading the lyrics a bit more, and it's, it's not changing my opinion, but like, when you look at the chorus, it's all quite still related to sex
Holly:	Yea it's veeery sexual [drawn out]
Rose:	Even like all the symbols in there
Group:	Nods/says yeah
	Rose: Even that like that paint thing I was like, that is very suggestive [laughs] … just that whole thing, tits
Group:	Laughs
Elizabeth:	So, it's like empowering women but still through a sexual nature
Group:	Nods/says yeah
Elizabeth:	So, on the flip side, like is that completely empowering? [laughs] I dunno. Not sure.

Rose's reference to the "paint thing" refers to a scene in which Grande swims naked in pink and purple milky water with her breasts barely concealed, her body positioned "suggestive[ly]" (Figure 17). The resulting conversation shows participants starting to renegotiate their initial appreciation of the video as they identify contradictory messages.
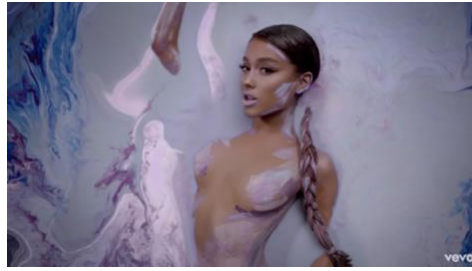
Figure 17: Still from 'God is a Woman' – Grande swimming in purple water

Similarly, they perceive the lyrics about Grande's ability to please a man sexually as highly problematic and, again, contradicting their initial views. The sexually suggestive nature of the chorus was identified as especially problematic:

> You, you love it how I move you
> You love it how I touch you
> My one, when all is said and done
> You'll believe God is a woman. (Grande, 2018, song lyrics)

These lyrics highlight Grande's sexual autonomy and omnipotent power *over* men through control of male sexual pleasure. They also highlight the role of sex in acquiring God-like power; but it is only when her male partner has climaxed that he will see her as God.

Over time, participants became ambivalent about the video. On the one hand, they appreciate Grande's power and value the way she exercises her right to have sex and talk about sex without discrimination (see Walter, 2008). On the other hand, they recognise that she remains embedded in a patriarchal system that conflates women's power with her sexuality and ultimately positions her as submissive to men's desire (see Benn, 2013). They also raise questions about whether this can serve a feminist agenda that insists women have bodily autonomy, or whether Grande is complicit in sexualising her own body for the benefit and service of men. This question is further problematised because Grande's performance reflects a narrow heteronormative depiction of female sexuality that further inflates an already established male-oriented viewpoint of sex, and this in turn raises questions for participants of whether a woman can or *should* gain dominance by using her body and her ability to (sexually) please a man.

That said, compared with Little Mix, participants still felt Grande's performance could be categorised as empowering for women. Indeed, as they talked, they performed a sleight of hand that reframed Grande's performance as "sensual" rather than "sexual". As they sought to make sense of her performance, they utilised common

discourses of femininity, describing her as "fluid", "flowing", "gentle", "subtle", "soft", and "sensual":

> Rory: It's not so much about like … how predominantly like male pop stars, it would be quite, um, I dunno, like thrusting and like, really like in your face inferior, like possessive [towards women], whereas this is quite like, fluid sexuality
>
> Group: Yeah
>
> Rory: You know like flowing, which is [Holly agreeing]
>
> Holly: Gentle movements
>
> Elizabeth: [Laughs]
>
> Rory: You know what I mean, like, and I think that is a point to make because it's, yeah, a more softer sensuality rather than like, an in your face explicit
>
> Holly: Yeah, sensual rather than like overly sexual, like subtle. Constantly underlying, but it's not as in your face

Fluidity and softness are starkly contrasted with depictions of masculinity as fixed and tough (Levant & Pryor, 2020). Participants liked what they considered the femininity of her performance and felt it enhanced rather than compromised its feminist message which advanced bodily autonomy and sexual freedom. It was also participants' understanding that Grande *chose* to perform this way:

> I guess cause maybe the video's used like predominantly women, it's showing that women have decided to put themselves in that way, to show themselves in that way. So, she's decided that yes, she's showing herself in a sexual way, but it's because she's chosen she's comfortable to do that because of how she's done the video, I guess and how it's controlled by women. It's not just like as [Holly was] saying, just women in the background of a guy's video. (Dani, Focus Group 1)

In contrast to Little Mix, Dani assumes that Grande has taken the lead role in determining how the music video was produced, including how her body would be presented. These assumptions about Grande's freedom of choice enabled participants to rearticulate what they initially viewed as problematic and overly sexual, as instead, a sensual performance that epitomised both femininity and sexual freedom.

The assumption that the song and video was produced by women, for women, also led to what some participants described as the "women's gaze":

> It's definitely using like the women's gaze lens rather than the male's gaze, like it's very, like, um, like sensual. (Rory, Focus Group 1)

Rory, and others, assume[7] that the video was created through the lens of a woman — by women, for women. And the video itself features primarily women; if men are present, they are physically small, denoting a shift in power from the masculine to the feminine. The principal feature of the female gaze in this instance is the subtle, sensual performance, rather than an overtly sexual performance. For participants, this depiction of feminine power advances a stronger and more palatable feminist message. This contrasts with their view of other music videos (Little Mix's 'Woman Like Me', for example) that they assumed were created through the lens of a man — by men, for men. There is a continuum constructed by participants from overtly sexualised and being controlled by men, through to sensual, whereby women performers themselves are in control.

A moral discourse underpins participants' constructions of these performances: to be a 'good woman' and a 'good feminist' is to adhere to normative constructions of femininity. While Grande is understood to be in control and empowering, Little Mix is understood to be under the control of male producers and disempowering. Participants construct a 'sensual/sexual' dichotomy that readily maps onto a 'women's lens/male gaze' dichotomy to shape their ideas. The dichotomous constructions and their moral underpinning construct ambivalent subject positions for the performers (and also for the participants, discussed in greater detail in the concluding chapter). Participants recognise the tension between legitimising Grande on the one hand and delegitimising Little Mix on the other, given that both songs are pro-women for different reasons. The performers are embedded within popular culture that is itself embedded within patriarchal reductionist ideas of women, so this tension is perhaps unsurprising. The hegemony of patriarchy's moralistic and heteronormative constructions of being feminine is difficult to avoid, leaving little room for women to have complete bodily autonomy.

Dichotomy of feminine and masculine

While the previous section explored the emergent tension between what were considered sexual and sensual performances, this section uses Kesha's 'Praying' (2017a) and Halsey's 'Nightmare' (2019) to explore how participants make sense of artists singing about gender-based violence by returning to dichotomous constructions of 'feminine' and 'masculine', respectively. Each artist sings about women's experiences of violence (physical, emotional, and symbolic) at the hands of

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[7] Wrongly, as it turns out as the video was created predominantly by men.

men, albeit in different ways. Although participants liked both songs and appreciated the way they addressed the perpetual threat of violence that women face (Manne, 2017; Ahmed, 2017), they framed Kesha's performance as "emotional" and "vulnerable" and aligned her performance with heteronormative constructions of femininity. Conversely, over time, they began to characterise Halsey's music video as an "aggressive" performance, which they aligned closely with heteronormative constructions of masculinity. The mapping of these emotional states onto a gender binary impacted how they internalised the overtly gendered and feminist messages contained within each song. While Kesha dealt with her experience in a "feminine" manner and was viewed positively, participants were critical of and uncomfortable with Halsey's "masculine" response.

Making sense of Kesha: A "feminine" performance

Kesha is an American pop artist who released the song 'Praying' (2017a; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-Dur3uXXCQ) in July 2017. The song depicts the artist's break from her male producer, Dr Luke, after being abused by him over their 10-year professional relationship. Dr Luke sexually assaulted and harassed Kesha, including on two occasions, drugging and raping her. In 2014, Kesha filed a civil suit against him (Vincent, 2018), which was unfortunately dismissed. The verdict outraged Kesha's supporters, resulting in protests outside the court where the trial took place and an online #FreeKesha social media movement. The song became an anthem for the #MeToo movement because its release coincided with accusations of sexual misconduct against some of Hollywood's most powerful men. Its anthem status was further cemented when Kesha (2018) performed the song at the 2018 Grammy's along with a large female choir (see https://www.billboard.com/video/kesha-praying-about-2018-grammys-billboard-on-billboarddz-sourceflv-8096772).

'Praying' was the first song Kesha released after a four-year hiatus, during which time the trials and court cases took place and she was trapped in a recording contract with Dr Luke. She hopes the song "reaches people who are amid struggles, to let them know that no matter how bad it seems now, you can get through it" (Kesha, 2017b, n.p.). She describes the song as:

> coming to feel empathy for someone else even if they hurt you or scare you. It's a song about learning to be proud of the person you are even during low moments when you feel alone. It's also about hoping everyone, even someone who hurt you, can heal. (Kesha, 2017b, n.p., Interview)

There are many religious symbols in the music video, including a church, angel wings and scenes featuring Kesha praying (Figure 18). These symbols, as well as the title of the song, communicate the importance of her faith in her healing process.
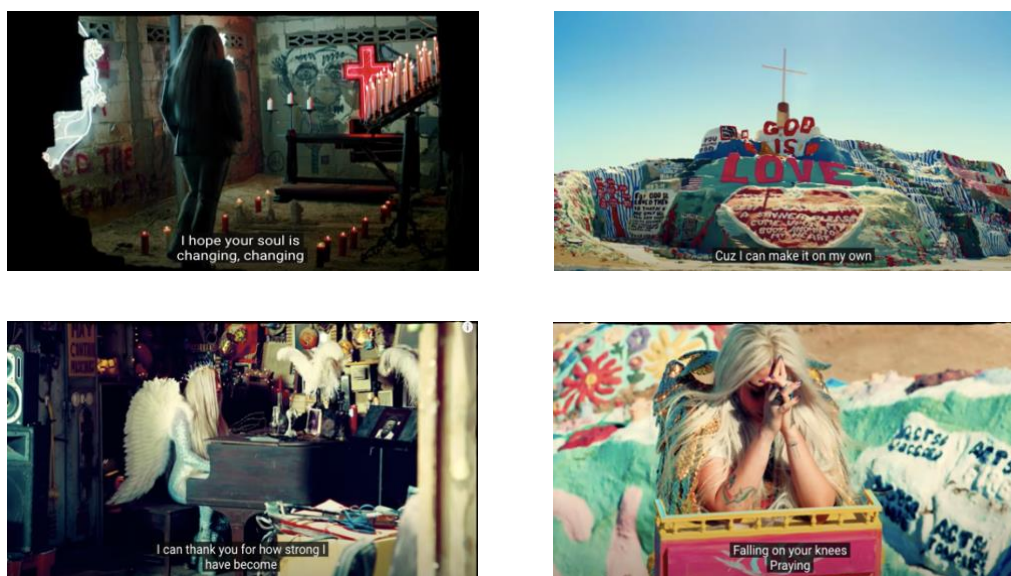
Figure 18: Stills from 'Praying' – Religion themes

Participants understood the song as representative of Kesha gaining autonomy and reasserting control over her music. They valued what they perceived as Kesha's strength in doing so:

> [The song is] to do with her breaking from a producer who, I don't wanna put this out there cause I'm not entirely sure, but I think sexually assaulted her [group: yeah] and he got off it. And she was so under his control for her music career. (Dani, Focus Group 1)

> Like, she had control [in 'Praying'], um, whereas all of the old stuff was kind of guided by that producer. (Holly, Focus Group 1)

According to participants, Kesha was able to use her regained control to share her experience through her music. She can now "release her *own* music" (Holly, my emphasis) in a way that reflects her own feelings and ways of being in the world and sing about issues that matter to her.

One of the important issues for participants was the way Kesha used her personal experience to connect with other gendered issues that her fans might be facing, exemplified in two scenes. The first features men with pig masks, described as "big headed" and "not cute pigs, it's very much like ugly" (Holly), chasing a frightened Kesha (see Figure 19). The pigs represent Dr Luke as well as the threat of sexual

assault that all women face (see Manne, 2017). The second is a scene with stacks of old televisions constructed as a wall, each with words painted on them that address what Holly called "all the societal things around, like capitalism and um, femininity and gender" (Figure 19). Kesha eventually smashes the televisions with a wooden bat and, symbolically at least, the social issues and constructs that produce structural inequalities. Holly and Dani admire Kesha for her compassion to extend her message beyond her own experience:

> [I admire Kesha for trying to] branch from just like her situation and tried to apply it to all other situations and issues happening. (Dani, Focus Group 1)

Figure 19: Stills from 'Praying' – "Ugly" pigs' heads chasing Kesha; Televisions with societal messages

Participants felt Kesha subverted the power relations between her and her producer and had, in some way, won her fight against him. Participants now see Kesha's music as a vehicle through which she can produce her own music. Participants see evidence of this through the clear distinction between her past and present performance style. Her past style is upbeat, heavily autotuned songs that focused on partying. In contrast, her present style uses her music to communicate issues and experiences that are important to her:

> if you notice in the song, there's no autotune and in all her other music she's, all her music that she's produced previously has all been heavily autotuned, so it was like, an opportunity for her to showcase her real talent … 'TiK ToK' was *completely* different [group agrees], like the autotune they used in that, she barely had a voice. (Dani, Focus Group 1)

According to participants, Kesha's former producer supressed her talent and kept her within a narrow performative brand, one that did not allow for a feminist subject position that explored the depths of her emotion and femininity. Kesha regaining control of her music is an important moment of recognition and connection for participants. Considerable literature suggests that the music industry is a heavily male-dominated industry (Leonard, 2007; Frith & McRobbie, 1978). Indeed, Wolfe (2019) asserts that the music industry "remains one of the most white, male-dominated industries in the world" (p. 27). Further, predominantly male producers

are "controller[s] of the spatial, the temporal and the overall music texture" (p. 5). Female pop artists are therefore heavily controlled by men within the industry. But what participants see in the video is Kesha resisting masculine control and narrow constructions of femininity. Although participants recognise Kesha taking back control of her music career as a progressive feminist act, what they most appreciate is that she has taken what they describe as a "vulnerable" and feminine approach.

Participants described Kesha's music video as "really powerful" (Elizabeth), "graceful" (Indiana) and "awesome" (Dani). They also framed her performance as "feminine" and therefore viewed it as an acceptable response to her experience of male violence. They performed this constructive work in a range of ways. First, they framed what they perceived as Kesha's honesty and openness as a signifier of femininity that allowed them to connect with her. They liked that she was transparent about her experience and didn't shy away from telling her audience what had happened and how it had made her feel. They felt she was brave in doing so and discussed how this allowed them to connect more deeply and emotionally with the song:

> the lyrical value in that is *so* insightful. I feel like you could listen to it and be like 'woah, someone really did her wrong, must have been something really heavy', like you can flesh it out. (Rory, Focus Group 2, Rory's emphasis)

> after I heard the back story of that, then I felt more emotionally connected, like just hearing her story. I watched it the second time and it was just completely different, but then like, that really influenced my viewing of the song, knowing what she'd been through and that's why she wrote the song. (Dani, Focus Group 2)

Participants' emotional connection is heightened by their view that Kesha makes herself vulnerable through her open and honest stance with her global audience. It is well documented that female victims of rape and assault are often not believed and can be blamed and held responsible for playing a part in their abuse due to their clothing choices, sexual history, alcohol and drug consumption (Raphael, 2013). Participants understand the gendered relations of power that exist in such cases, perhaps more pronounced when the perpetrator is a powerful male music producer in a male-dominated music industry. By speaking up, Kesha opens herself up to potential criticism and participants considered this an embodiment of vulnerability.

Vulnerability is aligned with ideas of "passivity" and "victimisation" (Butler et al., 2016, p. 1), as well as "weakness and dependency" (Gilson, 2016, p. 71). Thus, vulnerability is a feminised and problematised concept, the characteristics of which

are assumed to be morally 'less-than' and powerless (Butler et al., 2016). Participants drew on the language of vulnerability when talking about the song, but interestingly, rather than framing vulnerability as a negative characteristic, they reconfigured what it means to be vulnerable. Instead of weakness, *making oneself* vulnerable is evidence of strength and, as suggested by Butler et al. (2016), the ability to create change. Indeed, some participants connected with Kesha's song *because* of the artist's apparent vulnerability:

> vulnerability is such an … encoded female trait. At least by, you know, historic, you know, um whatever, you know, what history's kind of taught us, so for me, it felt more um, not much of a reach for me to just be like [crying voice] "oh my god, Kesha I love you", like, "that's so cool, you're rising above", whereas the other ones, I had to like, I was more in my head I admit, whereas, she just got my heart. (Rory, Focus Group 2)

Participants celebrated vulnerability as an "encoded female trait". Kesha's performance was unashamedly emotional, and it invoked an unashamedly emotional performance in participants. Her vulnerability, materialised through her honesty and openness, enabled participants to align her embodied performance with traditionally feminine characteristics that helped them to connect with her feminist message that we cannot remain silent about gender-based violence.

Kesha's vulnerability was also assumed to have emerged as a consequence of "deep self-work", as outlined in the following:

Rory:	She obviously had to do some like, deep self-work and self-reflection in order to get [group: yeah] to write this song, um yeah, where as some of the other songs, they have different layers of like on the spectrum of pain you know, like this is quite-
Elizabeth:	Further developed
Rory:	Yeah, further developed, like it's almost *transformative* by putting praying in the title, essentially like, she said, she couldn't do it alone [Holly: yeah] sort of thing [Rory's emphasis]

Participants understand Kesha's song-writing process as a form of therapy in response to her experience; "[Kesha has] not healed, but like, worked through some of the process [of dealing with what happened to her]" (Holly). As discussed in Chapter Two, therapy and self-help are feminised practices of improvement and transformation (Riley et al., 2019b). Indeed, an individualised wellness industry has

emerged and thrived on the back of 'fixing' women. Participants, however, do not view self-help or therapy in a cynical way. Instead, they view individual emotional transformation resulting from therapy as having potential for social change, reflecting the argument made by Butler et al. (2016). In the minds of participants, making oneself vulnerable through therapeutic practice is a 'feminine' and therefore acceptable stance.

It is of note that participants assumed Kesha wrote the song herself when, in reality, it was written by her together with three male writers. The previous section discussed participants' assumptions that the sexualised performances of Little Mix were the result of an all-male production team[8]. In contrast, the 'femininity' expressed in this song leads participants to assume it is solely Kesha's voice. This further supports the claim that heteronormative performances of the female body and femininity are favoured by participants and assumed to be an expression of bodily autonomy and self-expression.

As with vulnerability, forgiveness and selflessness are often aligned with femininity (Furlane Štante, 2018). In the context of sexual assault, women are often expected to forgive their (mostly male) abusers (Butler et al., 2016). Participants construct Kesha's performance through the feminine discourse of forgiveness. In the video, Kesha sings to her abuser:

> And we both know the truth I could tell
> I'll just say this is 'I wish you farewell'. (Kesha, 2018a, song lyrics)

Although these lyrics don't explicitly say that Kesha forgives Dr Luke, they are interpreted by participants in this way. Participants collectively praised her for this, describing it as a "graceful reaction" (Indiana), "hugely big of her" (Elizabeth) and "that's so cool [Kesha], you're rising above" (Rory). Further comments included:

> she's actually just like, obviously accepted it and grown from it, and just forgiving him or the whole situation and then trying to rise above it. (Dani, Focus Group 1)

> it's kind of like, yeah, you put me through hell, you're an asshole, but I'm bigger and better, I'm stronger and I don't care for you, but I hope you change and that sort of stuff … I just thought it was hugely big of her and very powerful. (Elizabeth, Focus Group 1)

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[8] Little Mix's 'Woman Like Me' was written by two women and two men, none of whom were members of the group.

Kesha's forgiveness is presented in tandem with acceptance and "moving on" from her experience, again reflecting feminine tropes. In this sense, for participants, it is not just about Kesha sharing her story, it's about her soft and forgiving *response* to what happened. It is important for participants that she forgives her abuser because the triad of discourses — of "giving, forgiving, and caring" (Furlane Štante, 2018, p. 651) — are intrinsically associated with the performance of femininity. But, of course, there is a tension here too because, according to participants, Kesha is expected to perform the emotional labour and therapeutic work to process her abuse. But Dr Luke was not convicted for his crime. He walks free. And although Kesha has acquired her own freedom from the abuse, it was her burden and responsibility to do so. Critics of 'soft' feminism (hooks, 2010; Crispin, 2017b) would argue this song simply portrays a soft and "shallow" feminism (Cox, 2017, n.p.) that fails to enact structural change. But participants would disagree. They value the way Kesha identifies and contests structural inequalities arising from "capitalism and femininity and gender" (Holly).

Participants recognised the potential for Kesha to adopt an angry or aggressive stance towards Dr Luke. Indeed, one of the main ways they constructed Kesha as feminine, and therefore an acceptable model of feminine resistance to male violence, was through her non-aggressive stance:

> Kesha could have taken like, the completely opposite way and been really aggressive with it, you know, 'I hate you' sort of thing, but she's actually just like, obviously accepted it and grown from it and just forgiving him or the whole situation and then trying to rise above it, so [group yeah], she could have gone the completely other direction and been like 'I hate like all men', but she hasn't done it that way at all … like, she's not actually hating on what he [has done], she's just trying to hope he has a better life and sort of get better for himself. (Dani, Focus Group 1)

> Out of all [the songs we listened to in the first focus group,] I just kept thinking about it all week. [I liked] how she took the other [non-aggressive] option. How the other ones were quite angry or like growl, but she was so subtle about it. I quite liked it, kept thinking about it. I guess cause her song was so contrasting to all the other songs, it was just different. (Indiana, Focus Group 2)

Participants made sense of Kesha's performance in ways that constructed her as feminine and therefore an acceptable embodiment of resistance. They drew on normative constructions of the feminine in various forms to validate their appreciation for her calm, soft and forgiving response to her abuse. Indeed, they

appreciated to some extent her *non*-aggressive stance, which they hold in contrast with Halsey's 'Nightmare'. The next section will explore this further.

Making sense of Halsey: Towards an unacceptably masculinised performance

The second song featured in this section is Halsey's 'Nightmare' (2019; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_dqfcvTZik), which has also been widely described as a feminist anthem (Dodys, 2019; Rolling Stone, 2019). Halsey sings less about a particular man and focuses instead on the systemic physical, emotional and social violence men inflict upon women (see Manne, 2017). The imagery in the video, including the performers' body language, is aggressive. Halsey's anger about the systemic inequality and violence that women experience is also communicated through the lyrics — "I'm tired and angry, but somebody should be" — delivered aggressively, especially when she shouts the lyrics in the chorus. The video also features aggressive dancing and a recurring scene of women fighting, which features a bloodied woman and others cheering her on (Figure 20). The lyrics further speak to the everyday micro-aggressions women experience at the hands of men (see Manne, 2017):

> I, I keep a record of the wreckage of my life
> I gotta recognize the weapon in my mind (Halsey, 2019, song lyrics)
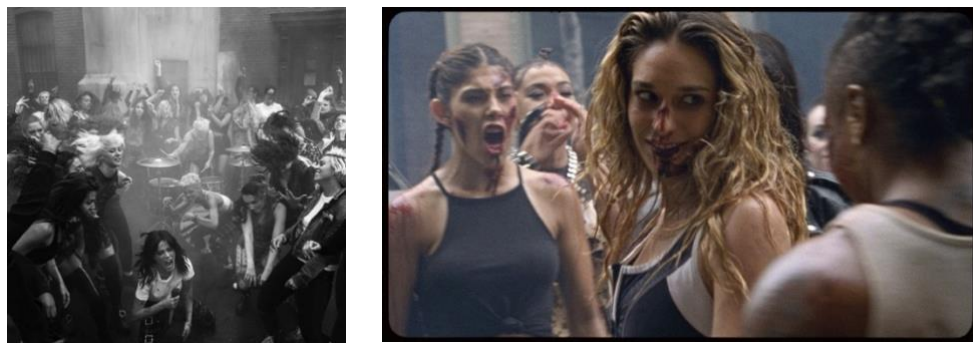
Figure 20: Stills from 'Nightmare' – Aggression, blood and female fight club

The video challenges heteronormative constructions of femininity in numerous ways. Gendered clothing norms are contested through wearing suits with slicked back hair and attention is drawn to unrealistic constructions of feminine beauty through reference to cosmetic surgery and the diet industry (Figure 21). These ideas challenge the violence of heteronormative feminine beauty standards and are also reflected in the lyrics:

> I've pinched my skin in between my two fingers

And wished I could cut some parts off with some scissors. (Halsey, 2019, song lyrics)


Figure 21: Stills from 'Nightmare' – Beauty standards

In contrast to Kesha's acceptably feminine negotiation of male violence, participants were less enamoured with Halsey's song about gender-based violence (including the violence subjected by a cosmetic surgery industry), although this was not revealed straight away. Participants initially thought the song was "cool" (Rose) and her anger at a patriarchal system that continues to oppress women and produce gendered inequalities resonated: "fuck the patriarchy" (Elizabeth). They especially related to the lyric "come on lady give us a smile / no, I ain't got nothing to smile about" as they all had stories of men telling them to smile. In the first instance, they commended Halsey for the way she used her global platform to challenge gendered norms, including traditional portrayals of femininity and the everyday harassment of women by men. For example, participants liked the scene in which she wears what resembles a man's business suit:

It's also cool to notice as well, when she was looking more androgynous in like the kind of street shots, she looked really comfortable and like, in her element. (Rory, Focus Group 1)

Although clothing for women is less bound by gender roles and tradition than it has ever been, restrictions remain (Markova & Yao-Hue Lo, 2019). However, the androgyneity of the clothing presented in the video challenges traditional heteronormative constructions of femininity (Yu et al., 2017). Participants interpreted the clothing choice as contesting norms that sexualise and objectify women through extensive exposure of the skin. Historically, the man's suit has been associated with "athleticism, seriousness, sexuality and strength" while women's dress with "superficiality and frivolity" (Hollander, 2016, n.p. [abstract]). By subverting the gendered nature of the suit, Halsey 'borrows' the signifiers of athleticism, seriousness, sexuality and strength and denies the frivolity of women's clothing. Notably, research shows that it is "more socially acceptable for female models to wear traditionally male clothing, but not for male models to wear traditionally female clothing" (Markova & Yao-Hue Lo, 2019, p. 1; see also Yu et al., 2017). It is interesting to note that participants did not discuss the suit as being

masculine *per se*. Rather, it was constructed as androgynous — the sartorial preference of indeterminate sex. For participants, androgyny offers a material pathway for thinking through the fluidity of gender and challenging narrow essentialist classifications of gender. But importantly, while they understood the clothes as outside feminine dress codes, they did not construct this as masculine. In this instance, Halsey has challenged feminine norms in a way that falls within the continuum of acceptability.

Another way that participants felt Halsey challenged traditional bounds of femininity, and one that produced an ambivalent subject position, was through aggressive scenes in the video. As pointed out by Holly, there was a lot of "angst" in the video which featured "like hate and like blood and a lot of violence in there" (Elizabeth). The scene depicts Halsey and other women bloodied and bruised with ripped clothing on a dirty street corner. They take turns to fight each other, cheered on by the all women crowd. Other scenes feature Halsey being strangled by another woman, later singing direct to the camera with blood coming down her face and in her teeth (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Still from 'Nightmare' – Bloodied teeth

The relationship between aggression and masculinity is well documented (Satterlund, 2017; Sharman et al., 2019) but rather than being condemned by participants for aggressive depictions, the "female fight club" scene (as named by Holly) was viewed positively:

Rose:	I like that, that was cool
Ruby:	Yeah! What did you guys think of the female fight club?
Rose:	I kind of like, love that. I love doing like, fighting and stuff and Muay Thai and kickboxing, I think it's like the funnest thing ever and like a good stress release, so, whenever I see someone like ... I'm like go you, get that [group laughs]
Elizabeth:	I like the strength behind it
Rose:	Yeah!
Elizabeth:	And just like showing how strong women can be
Rose:	Yeah, so it was so cool to see that

"The funnest thing ever" speaks to Rose's love of Muay Thai and kickboxing. When she spoke of her sport, she was excited and full of enthusiasm. She recognised herself in the images on the video and recalled how much she enjoyed it and loved seeing others enjoy it, despite the violence depicted. Elizabeth too adds to Rose's enthusiasm, speaking to the strength of the fighting women. Their response is indicative of gender-inclusion in martial arts that "positions fighters as empowered heroines who challenge and contradict the disenfranchising effects of body discipline" (McClearen, 2018, p. 43). The celebration of individual empowerment through fighting is writ large in the video clip, enacted as it is through the female body.

The clip is also valued by participants for the way that, to them at least, it appears to be constructed by women for women. The video centres strong, powerful, independent women — and only women. No men feature in the video at all. Unlike the other videos explored in the focus group, this music video *was* produced by an entirely female team (Tuccillo, 2019). However, while the gender mix of the production team was important for making sense of other music videos (for example, it justified participants' disconnection from Grande's 'God is a Woman'), participants did not have the same response here.

I argue, however, that there is a tension in the video that undermines its feminist orientation. The video promotes the idea that women need to fight in order to protect themselves from the violation of men. This misses the feminist point, in that it is not the responsibility of women to protect themselves from men. Similarly, the video fails to hold men accountable for their actions, instead communicating a stance whereby violence against women is the norm and is not going to change. An abundance of literature suggests self-defence classes can empower women to address violence against women, raise self-esteem and challenge gender norms (Standing et al., 2017; Jordan & Mossman, 2019). Research even suggests self-defence classes play an important role in sexual assault preventative measures (Hollander & Cunningham, 2020) resulting in "significantly less sexual assault … significantly greater self-defense self-efficacy, more accurate knowledge about sexual assault and the possibility of resistance, and less self-silencing" (p. 187). But, as pointed out by Mardorossian (2002), "when feminists advocate self-defense as a solution to rape, they cannot help but provide more fodder to a culture that is already too eager to promote change, one woman at a time, rather than to root out oppression" (p. 268; see also Mardorossian, 2003). Such a solution fails to address wider patriarchal structures and damaging masculine traits of control, violence and power, and encourage women to simply *lean in* (see Sandberg, 2013) to the solution of violence themselves. So, although this music video does good work to challenge

gendered norms in other ways, this scene returns to a system that brings violence against women back to women. And participants have also internalised this system.

Participants negotiate ideas of femininity and masculinity (see Brown & Tappan, 2008) as they make sense of the Halsey video. They do so in ways that push traditional boundaries of gender about clothing choices and sporting and defensive practices. In general, participants talked about the way that Halsey challenged prevailing ideas about being feminine. One of the most prominent societal expectations of women is adherence to strict codes of bodily beauty (Bordo, 2004). Certainly, these codes have changed in recent years; the 'Kardashian booty', for example, has replaced an earlier preference for a smaller 'peachy' bottom (Sastre, 2014). The point to highlight here, however, is that the very fact that beauty standards have changed only serves to underline the "constant project" of being a woman (Sastre, 2014, p. 130). Women are perpetually positioned in the pursuit of predetermined, but ever-changing standards where constant "regulating, disciplining and controlling the body" (p. 130) to fit these standards is necessary. And failure to adhere can result in social punishment (Foucault, 1990). Halsey contests these strict and restrictive standards in her video. She highlights the emotional damage that is done to young women who feel they must conform. While participants valued her stance, they also described the scene as "gruesome" (Holly) and confrontational. Holly captures this ambivalence in the following:

> I think the 'I pinched my skin in between my two fingers and wished I could cut some part off with some scissors' [lyric] and they had like the body with the dotted lines and stuff, I think that was quite, kinda confronting in a way as well, um, rather than it being like 'wish I was thinner', it's like, cut some parts off with some scissors, it's quite a gruesome image [group: yeah] and then realising that actually so many people, like would relate to that [Elizabeth: mmm]. (Holly, Focus Group 1)

This moment represented a transitional point when discussing the video, moving away from appreciation towards ambivalence. Holly (and others) recognised Halsey's desire to alter her body to align with dominant standards of beauty; the image, and the societal demands it depicted, resonated with them. But there was also notable discomfort as they reflected on the "gruesome" imagery and what Holly describes as "the body". This phrasing is revealing. In the very moment Holly acknowledges that Halsey challenges body standards for women, she adopts the objectifying language of the industry in which women become objects and bodies for the (viewing) pleasure of others (Lieb, 2018; Frisby & Aubrey, 2012). The scene represents a shift in thinking for participants as they began to feel uncomfortable about the way that

Halsey challenges gender norms, confronted by the imagery and language used which was thought to have crossed a line of acceptability.

The reframing of Halsey's video as overly "masculine" and "aggressive" continued when participants talked about two scenes in which Halsey grabs her crotch. In the first, Halsey is dressed in an animal print leotard with 1950s bright red bouffant hair. At the start of the video she vacuums with a fake smile, ostensibly conforming to a 1950s housewife role, but later throws the vacuum across the room, in a defiant rejection of the gender role (much like depictions in Little Mix's 'Woman Like Me'). The scene ends with Halsey grabbing her crotch. In the second, she sits alongside ten women all dressed in white, glamourous lingerie as they dance around her while she grabs her crotch, before she stands, holding up a newspaper with the headline, "it's our turn", and lyrics from her own song, "No, I won't smile, but I'll show you my teeth" (Figure 23).
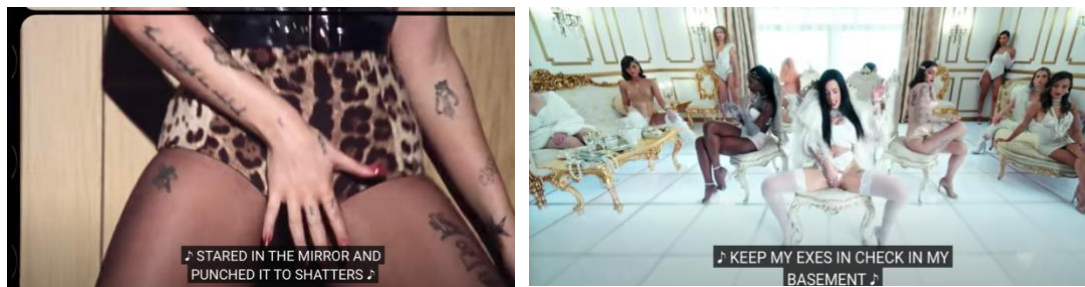
Figure 23: Stills from 'Nightmare' – Halsey grabbing her crotch

Elizabeth, who identifies as feminist and is a vocal and spirited promoter of gender equality, found the scenes "shocking":

> One thing I saw when she like kept grabbing her crotch, it was quite like *shocking*, but then I sort of realised [why] this was *so uncomfortable*, like we never see women doing that, *it's like a typical man thing to do*. And I was kinda like, 'oh my god' and then I was like 'oh wait, [group laughs] we see it all the time' [group laughs] (Elizabeth, Focus Group 1, my emphasis)

"A typical man thing": grabbing one's crotch is, it seems, a masculine practice. It signifies dominance, autonomy and power, and in the world of hip-hop where it is a common and prominent feature of many male performers, it symbolises "greater virility than their opponents" (LaBoskey, 2001, p. 114). Perhaps this is not surprising given the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, bragged about grabbing women by the pussy. Not only do men have autonomy over their own bodies, some also claim ownership of women's. In the video, Halsey subverts the signifiers of masculinity by grabbing her own crotch and doing so in a defiant way:

the first scene is filmed as a close-up and the other features Halsey staring straight down the camera to the viewer. Halsey is not the first to do this. Over thirty years ago, Madonna featured the crotch-grab in 'Express Yourself'. Her performative body was described by scholars at the time as "dynamized in a constant conflict and rearrangement of signifiers [that are] dissonant from their own constructions of gendered bodily norms" (Schwichtenberg, 1992, p. 124). Like Madonna, Halsey flirts with the rules of gender, challenging limited and narrow constructions of femininity that deny women power over their own bodies.

However, Halsey's crotch grab was not so readily received because participants felt it was not deemed a feminine act. It evoked "shock" and "[dis]comfort" among participants who began to revisit their positive view of Halsey's video. Where their position had been favourable, it began to shift, calling into question whether Halsey's depiction was in fact too masculine; had Halsey's destabilisation of the gender binary gone too far? Participants' views of other artists who grabbed their crotch in music videos perhaps reveals why there is a tipping point that Halsey is considered to have crossed. Miley Cyrus, for example, grabs her crotch repeatedly in 'Mother's Daughter', but this was not deemed masculine and nor was it viewed negatively. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, Cyrus' crotch-grab was book-ended by overt feminist messages. There was no doubt in the case of Cyrus that the song and the video were to be read as feminist. However, where Cyrus presented certainty, Halsey generated uncertainty.

The temporal quality of the methodology used in this research enabled the emergence of these shifting viewpoints. The facilitated, reflective and analytical discussion allowed participants' ideas to shift and develop as we talked within and between each focus group, using others' ideas to further develop and challenge our own thinking as we talked. Other aspects of the focus group also helped to facilitate deeper reflective thinking about the music we watched. As described in the methodology (Chapter Three), at the end of the final focus group, I asked participants to rank the songs according to what they considered most empowering and most feminist. Their responses help to illuminate why they began to (re)frame Halsey in the way they did. In the ranking exercise, participants made comparisons between performers to describe how they viewed them. Halsey featured strongly in these comparisons, with participants having a lengthy discussion that juxtaposed Halsey with Kesha, in which the performers were attributed with masculine and feminine characteristics, respectively. As they compared, participants retreated further from the positive appraisal of Halsey and instead viewed her more negatively, describing her performance as overly aggressive and masculine. When asked what they preferred about Kesha's song, participants commented:

Just how she took the other option. How the other ones were quite angry or like growl, but she was so subtle about it. I quite liked it, kept thinking about it. (Indiana, Focus Group 2)

they were so different, like I like the angry side [of Halsey], like "angry but somebody should be" [lyric], it's like yeah, there's so much we need to sort out, but also the yeah, there's the calm approach to the 'Praying' song as well and just her voice is powerful as well. (Holly, Focus Group 2)

Participants' reactions were strongly gendered, reinvoking a gender binary, and readily mapping masculine (Halsey) and feminine (Kesha) practices onto the binary and appointing those practices as less acceptable and acceptable respectively. Characteristics they considered feminine, such as softness, vulnerability and subtlety, were valued over and above characteristics they deemed masculine, such as aggression and anger. Empirical research shows that it is more common for women to "express more vulnerable emotions, such as sadness, fear, and shame, rather than anger" (Sharman et al, 2019, p. 2; see also Fischer & LaFrance, 2015) while men "express more powerful and hostile emotions such as 'anger' and have less tolerance for emotions that display vulnerability, such as sadness and shame" (Sharman et al, 2019, p. 2; see also Fischer & LaFrance, 2015). Thus, a "gender-role-consistent pattern of emotion expression" (Sharman et al., 2019, p. 2) emerges in which women's and men's emotions are categorised into normative gendered codes. Vulnerability and emotionality are associated with femininity whilst power, aggression and strength are aligned with masculinity. These responses and their return to the binary raise questions about the role of feminism, including how women can challenge normative constructions of the feminine. A return to the work of Kate Manne (2017) is helpful for unpacking this.

As discussed above, the threat and experience of violence is a result of a patriarchal system (Manne, 2017) in which direct and micro-level acts of violence — physical and symbolic — are an everyday experience for women (Ahmed, 2017). Patriarchy is a violent structural system that enables men to feel entitled to feminine care and attention from women and simultaneously produces women as good patriarchal subjects who internalise the threat of violence and learn to be silent about experiences of violence at the hands of men. Misogyny works to enforce these social relations by praising women who fit patriarchal norms and punishing those who transgress them. Both Kesha and Halsey challenge these social relations by speaking out, but in different ways: in a 'feminine' manner (Kesha), and in a 'masculine' manner (Halsey). However, participants connect with and praise Kesha's "subtle" feminine response because it embodies femininity while they become uncomfortable with Halsey's aggressive stance. They hold Halsey to a high standard

and 'punish' her for falling outside of the bounds of femininity by disconnecting with her message. Misogyny, Manne (2017) argues, is the enforcement arm of patriarchy, which punishes women when they violate patriarchal norms and expectations (for example, by being aggressive) and reward women who reproduce the status quo (for example, by being feminine). Participants prefer Kesha's soft, forgiving and vulnerable response to gender-based violence because they have already internalised the body of ideas that normalises and naturalises male dominance. While this could lead to a charge of participants' complicity with the enforcement arm, the point Manne makes is that the system is not about individuals (men or women) hating women but is something that we are all implicated in through the ubiquity of the patriarchal system itself.

Conclusion

Participants' construction of a gender dichotomy to understand pop artists' performances reveal complex and normative understandings of gender. A distinction between sensuality and sexuality is mapped onto a moral code in which the former is viewed positively and therefore deemed acceptable, while the latter is considered morally less-than and therefore, less acceptable. Similarly, a distinction was made between vulnerable and aggressive performances that were mapped onto a gender binary of feminine and masculine. Participants felt *less* connected to those performances they deemed masculine and *more* connected to those they felt adhered to the norms of femininity. Participants are caught within a contradiction in which they are most at ease with heteronormative expressions of femininity as opposed to those that contest those normative gendered boundaries, thus leaving the hegemony of patriarchy intact.

It is hardly surprising that young women, such as my participants, revert to dichotomous constructions of gender, given the pervasiveness of patriarchy and the binary to which it gives rise. The binary itself, and the concomitant construction of women as 'less than' men (Walters, 2005), is a weapon of patriarchy that legitimises structural and systemic violence against women. This chapter has been framed around the gender binary – the dichotomous construction of gender, but like Manne (2017), I "regard the gender system — where people are divided into two mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories, of boys and men, on the one hand, and girls and women, on the other — as inaccurate and pernicious" (pp. 27-28). But given the misogynistic system that polices women to keep them in their place, it is understandable that young women are ambivalent about expressions of gender that contest heteronormative ideals.

It is important to consider, however, that the distinctions between these dichotomous categories (sensual and sexual; feminine and masculine) were not absolute. Indeed, in the first instance, participants expressed their appreciation of all the artists discussed in this chapter and their efforts to challenge gender norms and speak up about gender-based issues. It was only through sustained discussion that more nuanced ideas about "doing gender" emerged (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 125), resulting in a seemingly regressive return to the gender binary. It raises questions about a feminist research methodology that shifts participants' views of (a diversity of) gender expression from initial appreciation to distinct ambivalence. I argue, however, that the strength of the multi-stage research methodology was its capacity to foster in-depth reflection and engagement with the ideas being discussed. The reflexive space generated the capacity for internal change in thinking for participants who were able to "speak the unspeakable" (Keller et al., 2018, p. 22), including interrogating their own ideas about how women ought to be in the world. Ultimately, the research methodology created space for participants' ambivalent subject positions to be revealed, a point I return to in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 6:

"I wish you farewell" - Conclusion

Introduction

This thesis has brought two fields of scholarship together, feminism and popular culture, to examine how young women's ideas about feminism are shaped by pop artists' engagement with feminism and/or concerns about gender. The research shows that participants have high expectations of female pop artists; that they think pop artists should use their music platform in overt ways that challenge heteropatriarchal and heteronormative depictions of women, and advance a feminist agenda that empowers young women. Indeed, a moral discourse often underpinned their reflections, which materialised as dichotomous constructions of female performers' bodies. The dichotomy reflected a gender binary in which they expressed discomfort with performances they deemed too sexual or too masculine. They did not, however, have the same expectations of themselves as feminist; very few expressed overt connections to a feminist community or feminist agenda that demands structural change. Instead, understandings of feminism or appeals to gender equality were largely internalised, reflecting a private, less politically oriented position. Similarly, their understandings of female empowerment reflected a liberal, internal and fleeting state of being, rather than a stance that might challenge patriarchy and generate structural change (Rowlands, 1997; see Schutz, 2019 for debates on internal and collective constructions of empowerment). What became clear is that feminism and its relationship with pop music is complex for young women. And that discussions of feminism and its relationship with pop music revealed how complex it is for young women to negotiate their identities as women in a society still firmly rooted in patriarchy.

In this final chapter, I step back from the detail of the findings presented in the previous two chapters and consider the conceptual implications of this project. I focus on the ambivalent subject positions that are produced both for myself as a researcher and for the young women who took part in this project. I didn't approach this research thinking about the concept of ambivalence; however, the research design allowed for the deepening of discussion over time and this enabled participants' ambivalent subject positions to be laid bare. The research design reflected a feminist practice which centred participants' voices and enabled a

generative conversation to emerge *between* participants, and between participants and myself as researcher. A reflexive space was fostered in which participants could talk about their ideas, opinions, experiences and feelings in an embodied way across time. Being able to watch and listen to music together *in situ* allowed them to reflect both retrospectively and 'in the moment' on how that music shapes and influences them, serving as a vessel through which participants could discuss feminism and their ideas, this enabling nuanced ambivalent subjectivities to emerge.

The chapter begins by introducing some of the scholarship on ambivalence, before turning to two ambivalent subject positions that emerged from this research: my own ambivalent subjectivity as a young woman and feminist researcher; and participants' ambivalent subjectivity that arises as they navigate their own complex relationship with feminism alongside a contradictory relationship with feminist pop music that is bound by patriarchal industry norms. I conclude by discussing what such ambivalence means for the feminist movement, feminist performers, and the young women who watch and listen to them.

Ambivalence – A conceptual framework

This chapter is conceptualised around ambivalence. While the Oxford English Dictionary (2015) defines ambivalence as "the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone" (n.p.), a sociological understanding of ambivalence is much more complex. According to Connidis and McLullin (2002a), individuals experience ambivalence when "social structural arrangements collide with their attempts to exercise agency when negotiating relationships" (p. 565; see also Connidis & McLullin, 2002b). Further, that ambivalence is created by the "contradictions and paradoxes that are imbedded in sets of structure social relations (e.g., class, age, race, ethnicity, gender) through which opportunities, rights, and privileges are differentially distributed" (p. 565). The reference to structure and agency, and the way each influences the other, is important. This moves the concept beyond discrete categories of individual ambivalence that are rooted in psychology and underpinned by subjective motivations and emotions (Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998). Instead, they put forward a social structural ambivalence that they describe as "contradictory normative expectations that occur in institutional resources and requirements (statuses, roles, and norms)" (Connidis & McLullin, 2002a, p. 558-559). In other words, they conceptualise ambivalence as the "interplay of individual action, human agency, and structured social relations" (p. 563; see also Coser, 1966).

Ambivalence can be transformative. Connidis and McLullin (2002a), for example, argue that a structure-agency approach to understanding ambivalence enables

change as one must recognise the individual and social factors that operate concomitantly in order for social norms to be reproduced or contested. When applied to the present research, pop artists who engage in feminist debates through their music generate an opportunity for societal change in that they work against sexist music industry norms. Young women, like my participants, watch these performances through the lens of patriarchy (and, at times, their own internalisation of the machinations of patriarchy), but also appreciate seeing a sexist system challenged. Feminist geographers of emotion, such as Liz Bondi (2004), write about *holding* ambivalence and mobilising it into productivity; for them, ambivalence is not something to be overcome. For Bondi (2004), it is about "creating spaces in which tensions, contradictions and paradoxes can be negotiated fruitfully and dynamically [while] acknowledging and not resolving something of the contradictoriness" (p. 5).

Such possibilities for transformation that emerge from ambivalence are helpful for unpacking the subject positions explored in this concluding chapter. An ambivalent frame highlights the normality of ambivalence as well as the transformative capacity of occupying such a subject position. As suggested by Butler (1997), we all hold multiple subjectivities that shift across different times and spaces. This suggests that we are all ambivalent in the sense that there is no singular subjectivity. Seeking the singular (perfect) self is impossible and living with ambivalence is more reasonable. These articulations offer new ways of thinking about the ambivalent subject position of researchers and their participants. I turn to this in the next section, before closing with consideration of the implications of ambivalence for the future of feminism.

Ambivalent feminist *researcher* subject positions

I started this research wanting to better understand how young women are influenced by feminist pop artists and their music and performances. Pop music has always interested me for the way it communicates norms about gender, body politics and even feminism. Pop artists who explicitly discussed their ideas about gender equality and their identity as feminist, were becoming increasingly more common and gaining popularity through their protestations about sexism and gender discrimination. While many of my female friends were excited about what they viewed as positive shifts in the music industry, I felt conflicted. While I was encouraged by the growing public discourse about feminist concerns, and the reach that some of the more famous artists enjoyed, I also noticed that women's bodies were often at the centre of these feminist messages. Even in the most overtly feminist music videos, women were often, for example, wearing little clothing, showing bare skin with exposed breasts and dancing was often highly provocative. If men were featured in the music videos, they were often love interests of the female pop artists, which I felt reinvoked the norm that women's value is measured in

relation to men, resulting in an unequal power relationship between men and women.

I wanted to explore this tension further through this research. With the knowledge that music has the power to shape and reshape meaning in people's lives (Lazar, 2007), construct feminist discourse (Bennett & Waksman, 2015; Besigiroha, 2010) and shape society's cultural fabric, I expected to find that young women would valorise and admire feminist pop artists, and be informed by them. However, as discussed above, the research revealed a disconnect between how young women talked in abstract ways about feminism and pop music and how they reacted to music and performances when performers challenged normative and essentialised ideas about gender. Participants held female performers to a high standard, and they measured their performance against reductionist social norms. This resulted in them often being affronted by singers performing in overtly sexual ways. Somewhat paradoxically, at the same time as they valued the performances they watched and the performers' attempts to challenge heteropatriarchal norms, they were also complicit in the on-going construction and reconstruction of narrow normative ideas. As a feminist social researcher, this was confronting. I hadn't anticipated the moral discourse that underpinned much of participants' talk and their opinions on the sexualised performances of feminist artists. And yet I should have.

I opened this thesis with my reflections following a feminist performance I attended where my own ambivalence was laid bare. Although I identify as feminist and speak out against those who express sexist views, I too carry the judgments articulated by my participants. But because these judgements feel counter to my feminist values, I keep them in a secret part of me, even though I know that they are bound by patriarchy. However, my own ambivalent subject position was validated as participants and I discussed these issues together, a possibility that emerged from the feminist methodological approach.

In the final chapter of Roxanne Gay's 2014 book, 'Bad Feminist: Essays', she writes:

> I am failing as a woman. I am failing as a feminist. To freely accept the feminist label would not be fair to good feminists. If I am, indeed, a feminist, I am a rather bad one. I am a mess of contradictions. There are many ways in which I am doing feminism wrong, at least according to the way my perceptions of feminism have been warped by being a woman. (Gay, 2014a, p. 314)

Like Gay, I confess I too am a mess of contradictions. Through university, and sociology in particular, I have discovered a feminist language that allows me to think critically about gender, my own femininity and my place in a patriarchal society. I use

that language to talk about gendered social issues both inside and outside the university and so it has become part of my public identity. But there is also guilt. Guilt that I am not doing enough or that I don't know enough – there's still so much more I should know. This translates as ambivalence about identifying as feminist. I feel pressure to be a 'good' feminist – to know more and to stay up to date with current feminist scholarship. At the same time, however, I know that feminism is not simply an acquisition of knowledge. It is also a state of being in the world; an identity stance that sometimes holds ambivalence. Through this research, and my engagement with my research participants, I now hold the view that these internal contradictions don't make me a *bad* feminist. Rather, they make me a feminist who lives in a pervasive patriarchal structure that perpetually produces what seems to be an "ineradicable inequality" (Higgins, 2018, n.p.; see also Ahmed, 2017). As Higgins points out:

> Despite all those years of working hard, of waiting till unfairness gradually ebbed away, of absorbing and internalising sexism, of building starry careers or else toiling away in menial jobs in the hope that their children would have it better, you could still be pinned to a bed or cornered at a party or groped, or leered at or catcalled by a man – simply because of your woman's body. (Higgins, 2018, n.p.)

Higgins powerfully highlights the feeling of helplessness that can accompany a feminist identity. Despite the work of so many feminists before me, as well as my own practices such as calling out sexism, attending women's marches and conducting feminist research, patriarchy still exists. At times, it can seem all pervasive with women still disadvantaged in a range of fields including health (Atinga et al., 2018) and education (Barberillo Nualart, 2012). As Higgins implies, it is through the body itself that women's power can be taken away. As a woman in a patriarchal society, my body is still perceived as 'less-than', and yet I must also carry out the work of protecting my body against assault. This tension contributes to the seeming impossibility of achieving gender equality in all spheres of life, a reminder that while there have been many gains, there is so much that still needs to be done.

There is, however, another reason my subject position as a feminist researcher has been challenged throughout this research, which relates to debates about 'insider' versus 'outsider' research. Traditionally, research was considered more robust and 'objective' if the researcher was an outsider to the researched group (Parikh, 2020). This view has been strongly critiqued by feminist researchers, in particular, who stress the value of 'insider' research (Abu-Lughod, 1988; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Having things in common with the research group can be beneficial when carrying out research; it can enhance research design, and help with planning and recruitment due to the researcher's familiarity with the group (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015) and

greater likelihood that researchers will centre participants' interest and better represent their voices (Bridges, 2003).

In the context of this research, I share much in common with my participants. I too am a young woman residing in urban Auckland, listen to pop music and am interested in feminist and gendered politics. And there were certainly experiences and opinions I shared with participants, as well as different insights and experiences. One of the key concerns of insider research is that the researcher will unduly influence the position of participants (Greene, 2014). However, I found that my participants influenced me. Spending time with them, listening to their views and talking with them about the complexity of feminism in a contemporary world, caused me to reflect further on my own sense and understanding of feminism. It encouraged me to think critically about my feminist identity and the ambivalent subject position I hold. While I was aware of my own complex relationship and identity with feminism prior to commencing this research, the process of doing research with this particular group of women ruptured my own feminist position and meaning of feminism and the complexity of navigating patriarchal Aotearoa as a young woman. It highlighted for me how much work there is still to do, but also underlined how little capacity an individual has to effect change. It is the collective that has historically worked to challenge deep rooted structural gendered inequalities and it remains for the collective to continue this work.

Hearing from women themselves about their unique and complex experiences of being (in some cases, feminist) women, left me uncertain about the future of feminism and what might happen if we lose the capacity to unite in community in ways that encapsulate the complexity of contemporary intersectional identity politics. These complexities have created an ambivalent subject position for me as a young feminist researcher as I navigate this increased intersectionality and complexity of my own identity and the research I carry out.

Ambivalent *participant* subject positions

This research also reveals challenging and ambivalent subject positions amongst participants that play out in different ways. First, in the current social milieu, social justice issues are central. The #BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement now has global reach (Phoenix et al., 2020) and the rise of #MeToo and #TimesUp ensure that gendered issues, in particular concerns about sexual abuse and sexual harassment towards women, are central in public and popular discourse. New expressions of feminism continue to emerge; around the world, many young women are rising up to demand social change and gender equality (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003). However, this is in contrast to empirical evidence that suggests that most young women are not

interested in, and in fact sit in opposition to, the label feminist (Scharff, 2016; McRobbie, 2009). In some ways, this stance was reflected in the young women who participated in this research. There was reticence about identifying as feminist at the very same time as valuing feminist principles. This produces an interesting tension between young women's desire to create gendered change, but a degree of discomfort with the very movement created to achieve this.

This research also revealed ambivalence in the relationship between feminism and pop music. Female feminist pop artists embody ambivalence as they straddle a sexist music industry whilst also trying to carve out a feminist space through their music. As discussed in Chapter Two, the music industry has strict gendered standards that prioritise the "packaging" (Lieb, 2018, p. 9) of female artists over their talent; the sexualisation and objectification of women's bodies is a music industry norm. To put this bluntly, the pop star's body is considered her core asset. There is pressure for artists to conform to these standards but some pop artists, like those we watched during the focus groups, strive to challenge heteropatriarchal norms and instead promote and advance a feminist agenda. They do so in different ways: expressing anger and hostility towards a patriarchal system that devalues women and position women as less than (Halsey, for example); writing lyrics that borrow directly from feminist discourse and actively promote and advance feminist politics in all its diversity (for example, Miley Cyrus); and performing in ways that illustrate sexual freedom and liberation, and demonstrate bodily autonomy (Little Mix and Ariana Grande, for example). These expressions raise important questions around the traction and existence of the body positivity and rights to one's body movements.

Participants simultaneously held both liberal and conservative views about performances that sought to challenge heteronormative standards. Their position was liberal in so far as they enjoyed those pop stars who challenged industry norms through their music and performance. But they also had clear and high expectations of them. They expected a "political" and "radical" feminism that overtly challenged the patriarchal order. Participants expected to see few, if any, men in the music videos, arguing that this challenged music industry standards that positioned men as dominant and in control of women sexually. Participants wanted the music and the performers to contest patriarchy and to provide a model of what contestation might look like. They expected performers to be feminist role models.

However, they expected performers to do so in 'feminine' ways. Participants were ambivalent in that they simultaneously held quite conservative views of how women *should* perform, which caused them to perpetually negotiate their own engagement with, and sense-making of, the music, lyrics and performance. It became apparent that their understanding of the feminism on display was always located within

patriarchal discourse that continued to reflect a narrow and heteronormative construction of gender. Participants oscillated between their appreciation of the contestation of patriarchy and a tendency to return to those very same constructions of patriarchy. This ambivalence demonstrated the extent to which participants had internalised the very misogyny they appreciated seeing challenged, especially evident when discussing what they perceived to be overly sexualised performances.

These perceptions were heavily informed by patriarchal views. Participants were unable to appreciate the way performers, such as Ariane Grande and Little Mix, revealed their bodies and used their bodies in their performance; they considered these performances to be too sexy, too sexual, too radical. In other words, they were too much. They went too far beyond the realms of possible subjectivity for women and were deemed beyond discrete categories of acceptability. To make sense of these performances, participants returned to a gender binary and an overly simplistic mapping of femininity and masculinity onto the performances. They put forward reductionist and problematic ideas about overtly sexual women that communicate patriarchal views on heteronormative norms of being a 'good woman'.

A moral code permeated participants' discourse and materialised as judgement and discomfort around the sexual performance of female performers' bodies. Instead of advancing notions of women's autonomy, morality was underpinned by patriarchal discourses, including slut shaming. Participants used a normative rulebook to police the artists, using it as a measure against which they could judge their performances. Kate Manne (2017) is useful for understanding the ambivalent subject position of participants and, more importantly, the patriarchal processes at work. Manne's work interrogates the relationship between patriarchy and misogyny and argues that misogyny is the *police force* of patriarchy. More specifically, misogyny "functions to enforce and police women's subordination and to uphold male dominance … [by] governing [the] norms and expectations" of patriarchy (Manne, 2017, pp. 19-20). Misogyny is systemic, as opposed to individual people being misogynistic. Under patriarchy, so much of women's value is placed on their embodiment of feminine attributes, such as being agreeable, thin, caring and passive rather than aggressive (Milestone & Meyer, 2012). Given women's sense of value and worth is tied to these narrow constructions of femininity, women who transgress these attributes threaten the broader construct of what it is to be a woman. Those who transgress are policed not only by men but also by women. Although participants appreciated some aspects of the performances, they simultaneously policed the performers and, in doing so, upheld and contributed to heteronormative standards for women.

These six young women are not alone. Brady's (2016) exploration of celebrity feminism examined the online feud that emerged after Miley Cyrus likened her

performance in 'Wrecking Ball' (2013; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=My2FRPA3Gf8) to Sinead O'Connor's 'Nothing Compares 2U' (1990; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-EF60neguk). O'Connor rejected the likeness, pointing out that while both videos feature the artists singing direct to camera, Cyrus also appears in her underwear straddling a wrecking ball. A very public online spat between the artists ensued as O'Connor rejected Cyrus' seemingly sexualised performance and sought to distance herself from it, arguing that Cyrus should "refuse to exploit [her] body or [her] sexuality in order for men to make money from [her]" (O'Connor, 2013, n.p.). Cyrus breaching heteronormative standards is reframed by O'Connor as her being, at best, co-opted by the music industry or, at worst, complicit. Brady's (2016) research highlights how female celebrities who are deemed to have performed too sexually are viewed as rebelling against and refusing to "conform to conventional notions of femininity" (p. 431). The public remonstration of Cyrus is further evidence of a patriarchal system of slut shaming that treats women as less-than, a system in which my participants and myself are implicated. Interestingly, participants did not condemn Cyrus in the same way. Instead, they valorised her as a feminist icon, arguably because she did not perform in provocative or highly sexualised ways (at least not in the video we watched). This demonstrates that pop artists operate within a fickle industry; one moment they can be viewed as relevant and constructive and in the next they are viewed as problematic and counterproductive. Ultimately, the value of pop artists is temporal and elusive.

The public spat between Cyrus and O'Connor illustrates a specious myth about women: women are judgmental and pit themselves against each other. But this is yet another symptom of a patriarchal system (Ford, 2016). This is illustrated in the following poem by Carrie Rudzinski and Olivia Hall (2019):

> But isn't that the trick of the Patriarchy?
> To lift up an unattainable goddess superhero
> and teach both men and women to expect her to be real?
>
> We have been told to fight each other our entire lives,
> girls against girls, women against women,
> instead of against the system oppressing us. (p. 9)

This poem reveals the cruel trick of a patriarchal system that sets women up against each other in such a way that the machinations of the system are rendered invisible — much of the time, women (including the women in this study) are unaware of the rules of the system in which they are bound. Riley et al. (2017) saw this construction of "needing to belittle other women to create downward comparison" (p. 4; see also

Evans & Riley, 2014) as a result of intensified sexuality in contemporary society. This results in the policing of those who are thought to have gone 'too far' by transgressing normative bounds of femininity.

Evidently, despite female pop artists' attempts to challenge music industry norms, there is no guarantee those attempts will be well received. This research shows a continuum of acceptability emerges in which "radical" and "political" songs (as described by participants) that advance liberal notions of inclusivity (Cyrus, for example), are considered 'acceptable' feminism, while self-sexualisation, such as Grande and Little Mix, are framed as 'unacceptable'. Participants understand what such 'unacceptable' performances are seeking to do in terms of claiming bodily autonomy, but still struggle to reconcile this with industry expectations that women's bodies be on display for the pleasure and entertainment of a consuming public.

The (ambivalent) future of feminism

This chapter has thus far centred women's subject positions — both my own and my participants' — through the conceptual lens of ambivalence. I want to finish by considering what this ambivalence might mean for feminism. There is a danger that the language of ambivalence might suggest that young women, including myself, are simply uncertain about what they think, are sitting on the fence, unwilling to take a stand one way or the other. But this is far from the case. The feminism of young women, such as my participants, is not "too soft", as Crispin (2017b, n.p.) would suggest. Crispin posits that contemporary feminism has no value and is of no consequence in that it fails to challenge the patriarchal structures that produce gendered inequality in the first instance. As such, feminism has lost its radical potential (see also hooks, 2010). In the context of the music industry and ostensibly feminist pop artists, hooks (2014) has harshly critiqued Beyoncé, saying:

> I see a part of Beyoncé that is in fact, anti-feminist, that is a terrorist … from my deconstructive point of view … she's colluding in the construction of herself as a slave ... it's not a liberatory image. (n.p.).

It seems Beyoncé is worse than a "bad feminist" (see Gay, 2014a); she is a servant to patriarchy at the expense of women. However, hooks' demonisation of Beyoncé's overt sexuality goes too far. She denies Beyoncé's efforts to take back control of her celebrity image and fails to account for the way Beyoncé has (re)negotiated her own professional identity and stardom.

Critiques of women embracing and displaying their own sexuality places responsibility for a depoliticised feminism at the feet of individual women who

express their own lived experience of their bodies and their sexuality. Performers such as Beyoncé seek to rewrite the heteronormative code book and expand the possibilities of feminine sexual expression, and indeed, "we have to trust that women can be feminists, good role models *and* embrace sexuality" (Gay, 2014b, n.p.). Focusing on the individual artist instead of drawing attention to the patriarchal music industry in which these artists are operating *and* trying to challenge, misses the point. Their critical stance reinvokes the individualising rhetoric of contemporary feminism, which results in responsibility being placed at the feet of artists themselves. What becomes more important for the purpose of this debate is to interrogate the patriarchal system by considering the role of the music industry itself to harness feminism and use it to exploit the ambivalence experienced and expressed by participants.

That said, some argue that the music industry has hijacked the feminist movement, resulting in feminist artists and feminism itself becoming branded pawns in an industry seeking simply to sell music. The industry has leveraged the ubiquity and rising popularity of feminism (Levande, 2008), usurping feminist ideals such as female empowerment, and selling it back to a female audience (Levande, 2008). Empowerment, however, is not the only lever of the industry. Some also argue the music industry utilises feminism as a way to mask pornographic depictions of female pop artists (Iddon & Marshall, 2014), often through the lens of feminism and female empowerment (Levande, 2008; see also Levy, 2004). This sleight of hand has transformed the sexualisation of female performers into a feminist act ostensibly grounded in the body autonomy movement "under the pretext of female empowerment" (Levande, 2008, p. 302). A largely male corporate team prioritise the bodies of pop artists over their singing talent in order to sell products (Lieb, 2018) with girl groups in particular, being constructed as a "petri dish" for feminism (McDonnell, 2004; see also Levande, 2008). The music industry has the power to create and recreate norms around women and their bodies and performance (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012). This is particularly problematic when thinking about its power and reach to shape contemporary feminism. But participants' views did not reflect such a strong position; they valued the feminism performed and felt empowered as a consequence.

Instead of reading ambivalence as uncertainty and concerning for the future of feminism, it is more productive to read ambivalence as a pathway to foster change, as discussed above. Butler (1997) argues that we all carry ambivalence through our multiple subjectivities. Participants' (and my own) ambivalence in the context of such a ubiquitous music industry is understandable. Therefore, rather than thinking about whether participants' individualised and affective constructions of feminism and empowerment are effective in contemporary feminism to create change, the

conversation is better turned to living with this ambivalence given it is a feature of everyday life. In the context of feminism, ambivalence creates space for structural change when one recognises our own ambivalence in simultaneously straddling internal/individualised and social/structural understandings (Connidis & McLullin, 2002a; 2002b). Arguably, the feminist pop artists discussed in this research have created change for the feminist collective as they have challenged an overtly sexist music industry through their artistry. And indeed, my participants are implicated in this feminist success as they recognise this positive change and negotiate this through their own female subjectivity.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant advertisement poster

- Do you listen to pop music?
- Are you a woman, aged between 18 and 25 residing in Auckland?
- Do you want to discuss gender and the music industry with a small group of other women?

I'm looking for 6 to 8 women to participate in a research project on pop music and women's issues. I'm interested in how music shapes young women's understandings of gender-related issues.

Who am I?
My name is Ruby Cain and I am a student at Massey University. This research project is part of my Master of Arts in Sociology.

If you're interested, or for more info, please contact:

Appendix B: Email template to potential participants

Hey [potential participant's name]!

Thanks so much for your interest to take part in my research project on gender and pop music.

I have attached an information sheet for your perusal, which was prepared for participants interested in taking part in the project. It gives a brief outline of what's involved if you choose to take part, your rights as a research participant, and the project contacts should you need them.

Before we conduct the group sessions with everyone, I'd like to have a chance to meet up with you one-on-one so I can explain the research project and answer any questions you might have. So if you are still keen to take part, I'm keen to set up a time to grab a coffee to do this, so let me know when and where suits you.

Let me know if you have any further questions.

Thanks again,
Ruby Cain

"Run the world (girls)": Feminism and pop music

My name is Ruby Cain and I am conducting a research project about pop music and feminism. The project is part of my Master of Arts in Sociology at Massey University.

Project description
This project investigates pop music, feminism, and young women's engagement in this platform. In particular, I am interested in finding out firstly how feminist pop artists use their music to contribute and engage in feminist and gendered debates; and secondly (and where you come in), how young women engage with pop music that gives them a sense of empowerment or strength as a woman. I would like to invite you to take part.

Here's what's involved if you choose to take part
If you choose to take part, we'll meet on three occasions. The first is one-on-one with myself in a café to get to know each other and make sure you understand the aims of the project, which will take about 30 minutes. To understand how you connect with pop music, I'd like you to create a portfolio of media on pop music. We will then have two group sessions with other young women, which will last about 2 hours each, where we will listen to pop music examples and discuss.
The focus groups will be audio ~~and video~~ recorded, transcribed, and I'll also take some notes. Only I'll have access to the recordings. Additionally, after I've completed the transcriptions of the focus groups, copies of the recordings will be destroyed.

Things to think about
To protect your identity and the group, you can choose a pseudonym that will be used in my final thesis and any further publications. Also, your identity and name will not be revealed by myself or other participants outside the research setting.
In appreciation of your participation, you will be provided with a $60 petrol or supermarket voucher of your choice.

Your rights if you choose to take part
You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:
- Decline to answer any particular question;
- Withdraw from the study (up until the day of the focus group);
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded

Project Contacts
This research project is carried out under the supervision of Dr Alice Beban and Dr Vicky Walters. If you have any questions or concerns about this project, you are welcome to contact myself, Alice or Vicky using the details below.

Master of Arts student researcher	Supervisors	
Ruby Cain	Dr Alice Beban	Dr Vicky Walters
█████████████	09 414 0800 ext. 83851	09 414 0800 ext. 43696

	a.beban@massey.ac.nz	v.walters@massey.ac.nz

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researchers named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researchers, please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz

"Run the world (girls)": Feminism and pop music

<u>Music portfolio instructions</u>

Before I get started on going through the task, I will confirm the dates of the focus groups and when I would need your portfolio back. The first focus group will ideally take place on Saturday the 27th of July, and the second one on Saturday the 3rd of August. I will need to get your portfolio back by Wednesday the 24th of July. These dates are subject to change if they don't work with some participants. I will touch base with you by Wednesday the 17th of July (one week before they're due back) to see how you're going and whether you have any queries, but feel free to get in touch with me throughout if you need.

The idea is for you to create a portfolio of media content from or about pop artists that gives you a sense of empowerment or strength as a woman. This can be music lyrics, music videos, social media posts from artists, performances at concerts or awards nights, or even memes. You are welcome to use other content from or about artists too.

I don't want you to stress about this or feel like you need to set aside extra time to spend working on this, so spend some time reflecting on the music you're listening to in your day-to-day life, and the artists you follow on social media, and see how it makes you feel. If you find yourself moved, connected, empowered, or even emotional about the music or content, then this could be key for your portfolio. On the other hand, if you're coming to the end of the allocated time, and you're worried you don't have enough content or no content at all, there's something to say about that too. So maybe reflect on why you haven't felt connected to any music/media content.

You are welcome to record this content however works for you. Examples are through creating a Google drive that you can drop content into, create a word document with a list of the content, or even just on the 'notes' application on your phone, but you are welcome to create your own way of collating this content. You are also welcome to write a little bit about each piece of media you record. You can then send me your portfolio electronically when you're ready (or by Wednesday the 24th of July).

Part of this content will be used and integrated into the first focus group session. The content won't be identified as yours, but you're welcome to claim it as a talking point

during the session. The idea of getting you to do this work and for using this content in the focus groups is to understand how young women connect to pop music and the influence pop music has on young women's sense of gendered debates.

"Run the world (girls)": Feminism and pop music

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have had the details of the study explained to me, my questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I understand that I have an obligation to respect the privacy of the other members of the group by not disclosing any personal information that they share during our discussion.

2. I understand that all the information I provide will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law, and the names of all people in the study will be kept confidential by the researcher.

Note: There are limits on confidentiality as there are no formal sanctions on other group participants from disclosing your involvement, identity or what you say to others in the focus group. There are risks in taking part in focus group research and taking part assumes that you are willing to assume those risks.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

I would like to be known as _____ in any written work resulting from this research.

- Would you like a petrol or supermarket voucher? Please circle

- Do you have any food allergies or dietary requirements? If so, please list below:

_____
_____

Full Name - printed _____

Signature: **Date:**

Appendix F: Focus group (1) interview guide

Introduction
-           Thank you for participating
-           Rules of engagement – safe and ethical space
-           Consent to audio record
-           Questions?

Schedule for focus group and instructions

Song order:

Ariana Grande – God is a Woman

Little Mix – Woman like Me

Halsey – Nightmare

Miley Cyrus – Mother's Daughter

Beyoncé – Formation

Kesha – Praying

General questions:
- What do you guys think,
- How are you feeling about the song?
- What do we pick up on?
- Anything different you notice?
- Does it resonate with you?

Additional questions:

- What does feminism mean to you?
- How does it make you feel?
- Why do you think you're reacting in this way?
- Why do you think you find yourself particularly engaged and connected to this artist/song/clip
- How did you feel about the artists in the video?
- What do you notice about the song?
- Do you feel connected to what the artist is trying to argue/engage in?
- What do you think are the big themes in this video?
- What do you notice about the artist's and performers' body?
- What are some key ideas about women you observed in the video and/or song?
- What do you think the artist is trying to convey/argue/engage in?
- Do you find yourself agreeing to what the artist is saying/conveying?

- How do you think, if at all, the #MeToo movement has influenced artists using their platforms to voice gendered issues?
- To help me understand what influence it has on your (daily) life, on what occasions do you listen to music that you feel empowered from and that connects you to their gendered debates. Why do you think that's the case?
- Do you think that the music industry is a useful platform to engage in gendered debates, or is music not about that?
  [Prompts: if we talk ab feminism]
- Just on feminism, I'm interested to see how you guys engage with feminism as a movement and as an identity. What does feminism mean to you guys? Would you call yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
- How politically active are you guys?

Conclusion:
- Thank you
- See you next week

Appendix G: Focus group (2) interview guide

For this second session, I wanted to delve a bit deeper into feminism and how you guys connect or don't connect with it. Part of why I was so interested in this topic is because I was understanding pop music as a feminist myself. As you can see, I've popped some little pieces of paper on the coffee table for you all. And I just wanted to begin by doing a little writing exercise. So we'll spend about five minutes, I'll do it too, and I want you to write down what feminism means to you, and whether you identify as a feminist or not.

- Writing exercise: What does feminism mean to you and do you identify as a feminist?
- Unpack/talk about that together

I also wanted to share with you guys my initial analysis from last week's session as an opportunity to get your feedback and further thoughts

- What I found really interesting from last week is that there seemed to be a tipping point where artists had gone too far. What do you think is behind that? What's going on there do you think?
- It seemed that you guys liked that Kesha was quite vulnerable and emotional in her song, which I felt was interesting cause it seemed like you guys were praising her for her classic feminine traits. What kind of traits do you think fulfil the feminist agenda?

Remaining:

- Play Beyoncé's feminist performance – what do you think of this public declaration of being feminist? How do you declare yourself as feminist?
- Janelle Monáe – PYNK. Do you think it's important for feminism to reclaim our sexuality?
- Lady Gaga – Women in Hollywood speech. Do you think that our clothing depicts us as feminist? To what extent do you think does the clothes we wear present us as feminist? How might you use your own clothing to communicate your alliance with feminism or gender equality?
- Nicki Minaj – Anaconda. What do you think, and is this feminist?
- Ranking exercises:
    - 1: Rank the songs in order of which ones had the strongest feminist message.
    - 2: Rank the songs in order of which ones made you feel most empowered/powerful as a woman

- Talk – why
- What does empowerment mean to you?