

“But then feminism goes out the window!” Exploring teenage girls’ critical response to celebrity feminism

Jessalynn Keller and Jessica Ringrose

The release of *ELLE* UK’s December 2014 “Feminism Issue” capped off a year where feminism has been increasingly visible within popular media cultures, including celebrity culture. Considering Beyonce’s MTV Music Video Awards performance before an illuminated backdrop of the word “Feminist” and celebrities like Taylor Swift and Jennifer Lawrence claiming allegiance to the f-word, Jessica Valenti’s (2014) recent acknowledgement of the increasing cool factor of feminism amongst celebrities seems particularly apt.

There has been a substantial amount of feminist critique of what we may call celebrity feminism; a form of popular feminism made visible recently by young celebrity women eager to publicly claim a feminist identity. We may contextualize celebrity feminism as part of the increasing prominence of what Catherine Rottenberg (2013) calls “neoliberal feminism.” This version of feminism recognizes current inequalities between men and women yet disavows the social, cultural and economic roots of these inequalities in favor of the neoliberal ethos of individual action, personal responsibility, and unencumbered choice as the best strategy to produce gender equality. Actor Emma Watson’s insistence in her *ELLE* December 2014 feature interview that feminism is foremost about choice for women and girls, for example, is indicative of this neoliberal imperative.

Yet, we do not aim to reproduce the excellent critiques made of celebrity feminism (Valenti 2014; Gay 2014) here. Instead, we examine teenage girls’ responses to

this version of popular feminism, perspectives which have been unexplored in both mainstream and academic discussions of celebrity feminism. This lack of attention to girls is troubling, considering that many of the celebrities performing feminist identities are marketed towards teen girls. Therefore, we ask how girls understand celebrity feminism, analyzing the tensions that it often raises for girls doing feminism in their everyday lives. To do so we foreground the voices of girls interviewed as part of their involvement with a feminist club at a London high school or their participation in feminist politics as bloggers. Girls' responses to celebrities like Beyonce and Emma Watson points to the nuanced and complex ways that young people are problematizing celebrity feminism.

Girls engaging with media representations of celebrity feminism

While many of the teens with whom we spoke are pleased that feminism is more visible within popular culture, most are skeptical of the representations of feminism by celebrities in the media, which they claim turns feminism into a "fashion." To wit:

***Kelly:** It opened my eyes a lot because you see more and more celebrities [talk about feminism] in their songs as well.*

***Interviewer:** Why do you think more celebrities might be turning to feminism?*

***Kelly:** I think it's like a fashion at the moment so many people saying that they are, and I don't know if they are actually or they're saying it to open a wider audience to them because it's becoming so widely known, it's becoming a fashion.*

***Monique:** A celebrity does something and people start to notice, but a celebrity will only do that because it's what they've been told to do, for their public image because they are a brand, they are a business themselves.*

This conversation reveals the girls' keen understanding of the "economy of celebrity" (Turner 2004) and their ability to critique the co-optation of feminism into celebrity brands. Their comments subtly suggest that feminism should not be treated as a "fashion" that will eventually fall out of trend, but instead requiring longstanding commitment. This sentiment is expanded upon by a U.S.-based teenage feminist blogger who tells Jessalynn that while there is "much more attention to feminism in mainstream media it's often a very surface-level feminism." She elaborates: "Much ink has been spilled about issues like 'leaning in,' but deep discourse about systemic inequality still has not penetrated the mainstream media." Here, we can see how girls not only question the authenticity of celebrity feminism as previous conversation demonstrates, but the content of this feminism as well.

A blog post by Eliza on the online teenage feminist community *The FBomb* about Watson's HeForShe campaign considers the validity of a campaign that seems to focus on men: "I'm not sure it makes any sense to dedicate an entire campaign about gender equality to men... This ultimately results in the conversation being about men, not women. Again. I just have the nagging feeling that this whole campaign is a big banner saying 'Feminism: women need men's help to do it right!'" Eliza articulates an important critique of Watson's campaign in that it's reliance on men seems to be attempting to make feminism less threatening to men – a strategy indicative of the "neoliberal feminism" we previously described.

Girls are also adept at identifying contradictory messages in media representations of celebrities as feminists as this conversation illuminates:

Monique: *Beyoncé represents herself as a feminist but still in the [Flawless] music video she's wearing skimpy things and stuff, and I know that's her but she's still like contradicting what she's saying. But as I was saying before, artists and actors are a brand so even if at heart Beyoncé wants to be a feminist, what she does has to please the fans, what she is is what the people want to see – Beyoncé couldn't give the concert in a long dress!*

Kelly: *But then feminism goes out the window!*

Monique: *She does empower women, but for example when she sung 'Who Run The World,' which is all about women being strong and women can do it and we're better than you guys... she's in this really skimpy dress that shows her boobs and her legs... Beyoncé can't have a concert without her corsets and really sexual dancing because that's her marketing. So even if she wanted to be a feminist at heart she couldn't be because her being a brand doesn't allow her to.*

The girls' conversation emphasizes the contradictions often found within versions of celebrity feminism in which the students regularly encounter. Yet the teens are not passively accepting these contradictions, but are committed to interrogating them – even if they lack the academic language with which to do so. The girls' discussion of Beyoncé, for example, gestures towards the issue of racialized sexualization, and they struggle to make sense how these sexualized images can represent feminism. Girls like Monique and Kelly are challenging postfeminist discourses (Gill 2007) that often equate sexualized displays of the female body as indicative of gender equality, actively questioning this logic through their own understandings and experiences of feminism.

While the teens often expressed ambivalence about celebrity feminism, many recognize a benefit in having feminist identities and discourses visible within popular culture. For example, Raquelle, a feminist blogger, claims:

It really doesn't matter what these celebrities think, but you kind of hold your breath because of course if they are positive on feminism it is kind of like a good feeling. Phew, we have one more high profile person on our side! And when you

find out that they are against feminism, you heart kind of sinks... It is so frustrating because they obviously have no idea about the subject. So I don't understand why they have never – no actually I understand why they have never learned about feminism.

Raquelle concludes by acknowledging of the lack of education that girls and boys receive about feminism, an issue continually referred to as problematic by the teens. Abby, a London-based teen also address the issue of education when she tells us, “I don’t personally believe that we should need to buy an *ELLE Magazine* to learn what feminist is, I think we should already know what it is by the time... we would be interested in buying *ELLE*.” Thus, the girls are suggesting that it’s not necessarily celebrity feminism that is troubling, but the lack of information about feminism and gender equality in the everyday lives of young people in both the UK and the U.S.

Conclusions

We are not suggesting that celebrity feminism is entirely problematic. After all, “popular feminisms” have a lengthy history within feminism and have been crucial in making feminist discourse accessible and relevant to those outside of the ivory tower (Farrell 1998). Like the girls featured in this paper, we are questioning the ability of celebrities to represent the complexities of contemporary feminist issues, including systemic inequalities, racialized sexualization, and a lack of feminist education, that are identified by the teenagers we discuss here.

However, we conclude on a note of hopefulness, as the girls whose voices we share are not contained by the representations of celebrity feminism they see within popular culture. Instead, girls are intent on shaping their own debates, producing their

own media, and negotiating the contradictions presented by celebrity feminism with a great deal of wit and sensitivity. This point is crucial to consider as we advance our analyses of feminism within celebrity culture, as this Forum section aims to do.

References

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