

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# What does Beyoncé mean to young girls?

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**Abstract**

With the release of Beyoncé's 2013 eponymous album, culture critics charged all in on whether Beyoncé is a feminist figure or an antifeminist product of capitalism, and yet, no one has asked younger people how her music resonates with them. This study examines the attitudes of young girls (aged 11–16) towards Beyoncé. They viewed "Girls Run the World" and "Flawless" in focus groups and were asked about their impressions of Beyoncé and her relationship to feminism. Through a grounded theory thematic analysis of the data, a relationship among the emergent themes manifested as follows. When Beyoncé highlights the girls' physical, race, class, sexual, and gender vulnerabilities, they counter with sexual respectability politics that result in an ambivalence toward Beyoncé who may be a feminist but is not the girls' role model.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

As critics and academics debated Beyoncé's significance as "a key figure for contemporary feminist media" (Durham, 2012, p. 36), I became curious about Beyoncé's significance for young girls, especially since research by Perry (2002) and Emerson (2002) emphasizes that popular music often contains contradictory messages in the lyrics and/or music videos that claim to empower girls and women. Because Zaslow (2009) asserts that too much academic research on girl culture neglects the actual voices of girls, and Chin (2001) documents how differing resources shape the consumption of girls of color in ways that prompt complex and sometimes contradictory experiences with popular culture, I decided to ask girls how they process Beyoncé as a popular culture icon.

The article proceeds with a description of a focus group and grounded theory methodology, chronological excerpts from each focus group, and an analysis of the emergent themes across groups. The girls in the sample contextualized Beyoncé through their lived experiences and concluded that Beyoncé may be a feminist but she is not their role model. Engaging Beyoncé heightened their sense of vulnerability which they countered with sexual respectability politics that ultimately resulted in an ambivalence toward her.

## 2 | THE STUDY

Fourteen girls were recruited via a snowball sample for five focus groups during the fall of 2014. The racial breakdown included five bi- or multiracial girls with at least one ethnicity being African American, four Latinas, three

African Americans, and two whites. Their average age was 13.9. Per focus group research recommendations, the groups were intentionally small and homogenous to maintain focus and create intimacy, and the girls' ages were within a two year age span to control for developmental differences (Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Wingfield & Mills, 2012). All groups took place in classrooms in Los Angeles County. Both parents and participating youth signed consent and assent forms per Institutional Review Board requirements. Group conversations lasted an average of 36 minutes in the presence of an African American interviewer and a Latina note taker.

Essentially, there were two sets of groups. In groups one through three, the girls were classmates and arrived together for the focus group. In groups four and five, the girls were strangers who met at the focus group. Girls were initially shown "Run the World (Girls)" (2011) which features Beyoncé in a desolate desert surrounded by a diverse group of stylishly dressed women facing off against a cabal of men in riot gear. Always the center of attention, Beyoncé dances as she sings about the influence of girls over men. Girls were given three minutes to freewrite to the prompt, "Write down everything you remember about Beyoncé's video."

Then they viewed "Flawless" (2013) and were again asked to freewrite to the same prompt for three minutes. "Flawless" begins with an excerpt of Beyoncé's childhood girl group appearance on *Star Search*. Then it cuts to an adult Beyoncé, alone against a gritty urban backdrop as she sings about the respect she has earned in the music industry. Eventually, she is joined by men and women who dance aggressively behind her. She samples audio from Chimamanda Adiche defining feminism as they dance in slow motion. The video ends with Beyoncé's male competitors earning a higher score on *Star Search*. These videos were chosen because they have been widely discussed as Beyoncé's most feminist and potentially problematic songs (Harris, 2011; Kendall, 2013; Little, 2014; Rosenberg, 2015). The videos and freewrites preceded each focus group to ensure that the girls shared a common experience with Beyoncé (Wingfield and Mills, 2012). Focus groups were chosen in lieu of individual interviews to (1) minimize the influence of the adult interviewer, (2) prioritize the girls' perspectives by creating a casual and safe space with other girls their age, (3) solicit a range of group-generated responses by encouraging the girls to discuss, agree, and disagree with each other (Horner, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Liamputtong, 2011).

After the freewrites were collected, the girls faced each other for a "collective conversation" (Liamputtong, 2011). Because the groups were held in one of their school classrooms or on the author's campus, the girls were initially in "student mode"—apologizing for incorrect language, acknowledging their nerves, and/or self-censoring—all of which seemed to ease by mid-focus group. Open-ended questions designed to avoid feelings of defensiveness or the pressure to be "right" guided the semistructured conversations (Hennessy and Heary, 2005). Girls were asked: (1) if they liked Beyoncé, (2) what they liked and disliked about the videos, (3) to define feminism, and (4) to discuss whether Beyoncé is a feminist.

Initially, I reviewed the focus group verbatim transcripts (including nonverbal cues supplied by the note taker after the girls chose pseudonyms<sup>1</sup>) for emergent themes using procedures associated with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Focus group emergent themes from interactive conversations are unique because they are only possible via a group experience (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). To preserve the integrity of the girls' identity politics and personalities, the data is presented as chronological excerpts from each focus group where the girls discuss their initial impressions of Beyoncé, define feminism, and determine whether Beyoncé is a feminist. The analysis is based on an examination of the conversations as a whole and includes some excerpts not included in the data presentation. Quotes have been edited for clarity and readability.

Focus groups are important to feminist research because as Madriz (2003) notes, they "expose and validate women's everyday experiences of subjugation and their individual and collective survival and resistance strategies" (364). This collectivistic, validating approach is even more important for girls of color like the ones represented in this study who are increasingly the subject of qualitative research (Chin, 2001; Hains, 2012; Richardson, 2007; Wingfield & Mills, 2012; Zaslou, 2009). Although this small sample is not generalizable, this exploratory analysis describes some girls' opinions of Beyoncé and solicits a diverse group of young girls' understandings of the utility of feminism.

### 3 | FOCUS GROUP EXCERPTS

#### 3.1 | Group one

Beyoncé is inappropriate. At least, that's the consensus of the three 15-year-old first generation American Latinas who met after school to discuss Beyoncé. At one point, Kimberly, the most opinionated of the group, declared "Beyoncé looks like the girl version of Lil Wayne..." She explained,

*Because Lil Wayne promotes violence, sex, drugs and has a way with dressing which is like sagging, tattoos, always singing as money as the main theme that guys have to reach for, putting [women as] more like sluts on the side, and Beyoncé makes them seem like his idea is actually correct because she is showing that girls are sluts.*

The girls interpreted tattooed and pierced dancers, the sagging, and Beyoncé's "booty shorts" in "Flawless" as dangerously stereotypical representations of their community. Alejandra said it "gives a bad image of where we live." Lorraine added, "I agree with them, like, she's showing a video of where it's stereotyping that we live in a community of drugs, violence, and inappropriate clothing..." The girls unanimously expressed their discomfort with Beyoncé's inappropriate stereotypes, but when the conversation turned to Beyoncé's feminism, their opinions were mixed.

The girls defined feminism as women being in control, being leaders, standing up for themselves, and being equal, but diverged in their interpretation of Beyoncé's feminism and the role of women against the male police in "Girls."

Interviewer: With [our] definition of feminism in mind do you think Beyoncé is a feminist?

Kimberly: No. *Alejandra agrees*

Interviewer: Because...

Kimberly: Because she's not showing that women have control except in ["Girls"] she says that women do have control but she put guys as police officers, so in a regular society police officers have more control...

Lorraine: I think not everyone supports the laws of the police, so maybe she's trying to show that. From the whole people against police to women against men.

Kimberly and Lorraine were concerned about the role of police power in the video. For Kimberly, male police officers meant that men were controlling Beyoncé, but for Lorraine depictions of women resisting male police offers was empowering. Lorraine initially said Beyoncé was a feminist in "Girls" because "she is standing up for the girls to be leaders," but not in "Flawless" because "it doesn't seem like she is standing up for anything." Lorraine described the "craziness" of "Flawless" and admitted that she did not understand the video or its definition of feminism until Alejandra suggested, "Maybe to say that there is a lot of like commotion of what feminist is to other people and maybe some people say that it's this way, but they don't hear them." Although Kimberly left early and did not have an opportunity to change her mind, Alejandra conceded Beyoncé may be a feminist. Lorraine declared that Beyoncé is a feminist because she stands up for equal rights but still dresses inappropriately.

#### 3.2 | Group two

The four African American girls in group two were friends invited to the author's campus by an undergraduate research assistant. The two biracial African American girls were fourteen-year-old twins who generally agreed with each other, but Kella was more outspoken than her twin Renee. At twelve, Maria was the youngest and often deferred to the twins. Kella and Layla (also age 14) had the most divergent opinions about Beyoncé. The conversation opened like this.

Interviewer: How do you feel about Beyoncé?

Layla: I love her. I feel like in her music she makes women feel like they have more power and control 'cause usually men they're the ones who are always working and they do more stuff than women do and I think she wants women to feel like they can do anything a man can do.

Kella: I don't like the music videos she did, and I'm not a big fan of her really because in the videos she made it seem like... we can be as good as the guys or better than them but in a sexual way. I don't like the clothes that they use. It's really inappropriate, and I don't think it has a good influence on the girls nowadays.

Throughout the interview, the three girls tried to convince Layla that Beyoncé's "gyrating" and clothes proved that Beyoncé does not respect herself. Despite these critiques, all of the girls agreed that Beyoncé is a feminist.

Layla: A feminist is a woman who doesn't depend on a man for anything. She's very well independent, like she has her own house, her own car. She doesn't need to depend on no man, not at all – for no financial issues – maybe for a little emotional support but that's all, like nothing else. *All laugh*

Renee: Yeah, like she has her own back.

Layla: So strong, independent woman who believes that all women should have rights like men should have rights.

Maria: Like we run the world. *Looks at Layla*

Kella: Yeah.

Layla: Like, women they can be a firefighter; they can be a police officer. Like, they can do pretty much anything a man can do.

For this group, inappropriate sexuality did not undermine Beyoncé's feminism per Layla's definition.

### 3.3 | Group three

Group three was the most excited to be on a college campus contributing to research. This likely had less to do with Beyoncé and more to do with the fact that college is very cool when you are 11. The most multiracial and youngest focus group participants were relatively noncommittal in their feelings about Beyoncé. Gabriella set the tone when she announced, "She's inappropriate. I don't really feel comfortable watching those kind of videos." The conversation explored Beyoncé's many contradictions including her relationship to feminism which the girls defined as believing that men and women should be equal.

Interviewer: Do you think that Beyoncé is a feminist?

Hannah: Mmm *sounds undecided*. Kind of, because I think – 'cause her songs they're mostly about women, like [she] doesn't talk about being equal with men. She's trying to say that women are better than men.

Interviewer: Is that still feminism, to say that women are better than men?

Hannah: I guess. Yeah.

Interviewer: Gabriella, what do you think? Is Beyoncé a feminist?

Gabriella: *Shaking her head flustered, quiet, nervous laughter*

Interviewer: You can say whatever you're thinking.

Gabriella: I don't really know. Like I don't know how to describe all this stuff' cause...

Interviewer: Because it just doesn't seem to match or it's just not interesting to you or doesn't seem important?

Gabriella: I don't know. I just don't get the videos. Why would she do that?

Interviewer: Because there are better ways to show that men and women can be equal?

Gabriella: Mmm hmm.

Interviewer: Okay, Mia what do you think? Is Beyoncé a feminist?

Mia: I don't know, but I feel like the women do more work than men do in everyday life. Like there was this one kid, he said, he told Gabriella, it was at school—he told Gabriella that women are supposed to do the cooking, cleaning, and the laundry and everything and that men are supposed to work.

Gabriella: Yeah *nods*

Mia: And I told him that's not true. It should be equal like the men do some of the cleaning and then the women do some of the cooking. Yeah they should be equal.

Gabriella: Like – maybe if like one day the woman did the cleaning and the man did the cooking and then they switched off and it would be equal that way.

Equality was very important to the girls and it was difficult for them to find evidence of it in Beyoncé's videos.

### 3.4 | Group four

The girls in group four were strangers to each other, and although their parents had signed the consent forms, they were dropped off at the author's campus and in typical teenage affect, looked as if they would rather be anywhere else on a Saturday afternoon. Although both 16, Bobbi and Whitney were night and day personalities. Whitney, who is African American, set the tone for the conversation when she said,

*I don't know how to like explain it. I just don't like her. I feel like she puts on an image that every little black girl wants to be like perfect, super rich with a big husband, blond hair, light skin, and it's not like that, that's not really realistic for everybody. So you know, she doesn't seem right.*

Bobbi, who identified as Caucasian, avoided eye contact and started looking down at her hands while Whitney spoke. She was hesitant to disagree when asked for her opinion. "Well...I don't know. I kind of like - I don't know. I kind of disagree with that but not really because I don't have that like point of view. But like I don't know. She's like saying like you should like love yourself for who you are."

Bobbi interpreted "Flawless" as empowering while Whitney described "Flawless" as "distracting." While there was no common ground for their divergent opinions of Beyoncé, they agreed that a feminist is strong, independent, and believes in equality between men and women politically, economically, and socially, and that Beyoncé is a feminist.

Bobbi: Well... because of the message that she tries to convey in her songs and stuff like that.

Whitney: I mean I guess she's kind of equal, like you know, gender-wise, being in the industry. She's pretty much in the league with like all the men so ...

Bobbi: And it is a male dominated industry.

These girls initially focused on Beyoncé's economic feminism and her status in a male dominated industry.

The girls further identified Beyoncé's feminism in "Girls" where she subdues "powerful, strong creatures" and where the men needed "shields and stuff" because the women were "something to be reckoned with." This symbolic power was less identifiable in "Flawless." Whitney enjoyed Adichie's quote but thought Beyoncé looked like a "whore." Bobbie explained why she disagreed: "she does wear revealing clothing, but it doesn't like make her like a whore or anything. It's like her own body like she could do what she wants." Bobbi admired Beyoncé for her sexual freedom whereas Whitney despised her for it. The girls did agree, however, that pop culture is not necessarily the best place to convey feminist messages because the sound, visuals, and format are too distracting especially to boys who need the message the most. Beyoncé may be a feminist, but it can be difficult to tell just by looking at her.

### 3.5 | Group five

The girls in group five were agreeable strangers. Before they were even asked, fifteen-year-old Emily initiated the conversation by declaring that she liked that Beyoncé stands for feminism and sixteen-year-old Natalie agreed that Beyoncé wants "equality of the sexes." Video evidence of Beyoncé's feminism included "showing that she was in charge" in her salute to the man at the end of "Girls" and Adichie's definition of feminism in "Flawless." Emily observed that "in ["Flawless"] she was definitely more edgy than she usually is and behaved more like how some people would portray men to behave." Natalie suggested Beyoncé seemed more "herself" and "free" and therefore more empowered in "Flawless." In direct contrast to the girls in group one, they celebrated her choice to dress however she wanted as a feminist decision. Nonetheless, neither of them looked up to her as a personal role model.

Natalie: But like some of her like her moves, like her dance moves and her music and stuff, it's very sexual. So yeah. I could see why people wouldn't think she's a good role model.

Interviewer: Do you think she's a good role model?

Natalie: *Smiling* I don't really see artists as role models. I just see them doing their job.

Interviewer: Okay, and what is their job?

Natalie: To write music if they're a singer.

Interviewer: Emily, do you see Beyoncé as a role model?

Emily: Um... I don't really look up to artists either... I do think some things that Beyoncé stands for like I said like the wanting feminism... But I don't—I guess I see her as a role model.

Interviewer: You see her as a role model for other people but not for yourself.

Emily: Yeah. I can see why some people look up to her. I mean... I do look up to her for some things like...

Natalie: She's very confident with herself.

Emily: Yeah.

Interviewer: All right. So we can look up to her confidence. Any other aspects of Beyoncé that you two could agree you would look up to? *Long pause*

Natalie: No, not really.

Group five opinions were less polarizing than the other groups. Both girls agreed that feminism was important and Beyoncé represented feminist principles because Beyoncé is agential.

## 4 | ANALYSIS

Although the focus groups were guided by direct questions about their like or dislike of Beyoncé and her relationship to feminism, the girls' answers led to a wide range of topics from which the three themes of vulnerability, respectability, and ambivalence emerged. Additionally, a relationship surfaced among the themes wherein the girls' felt vulnerability was countered with sexual respectability politics that resulted in an ambivalence toward Beyoncé.

### 4.1 | Vulnerability

Vulnerability manifested via an unattainable body image, a stereotypical gaze, and impropriety. Layla in group two and Whitney in group four described the vulnerability that accompanies an inability to embody Beyoncé's physical appearance. When asked how Beyoncé made her feel about her body, Layla admitted, "I want to say insecure, but it kind of makes you wish your body was like that because that's what guys like nowadays." The most avowed fan in any of the groups was the lone girl who admitted to feeling insecure when faced with the image of Beyoncé that she admired so much.

Whitney did not speak about herself but described peers desperate to look like Beyoncé. She explained:

*Like people will start up these whole arguments about Beyoncé: why she's the best, why she's the greatest, why they want to be, how they want to be exactly like her and how there are people saving up money right now to get skin bleaching and to get extensions and have their hair dyed. You're going through these lengths that you shouldn't have to go through. You should be comfortable with you. And yeah, Beyoncé's talking about it but she's not really being her... Being flawless is not wearing makeup, not wearing wigs, things to make you, you know, better than you.*

Becoming vulnerable to Beyoncé's beauty standards, which, as Whitney notes, are not even naturally attainable by Beyoncé, can effects girls' self-esteem and their finances as they save money to remake themselves in her image. Moreover, Whitney alludes to a distaste for Beyoncé's adoption of normative white feminine beauty norms. Her blond hair extensions and light (bleached) skin remind black girls that appearing beautiful is akin to appearing as white as possible. Vulnerability manifests in the insecurity of young girls who are reminded by videos like "Flawless," that they are full of flaws.

Throughout her career, Beyoncé has been (in)famous for courting the male gaze—especially a "backwards gaze" that focuses attention on her derriere (Durham 38), but for the Latinas in group one, she also directs a disparaging

gaze on poor communities. Upon viewing "Flawless," they were very concerned that the video decontextualized their community. The girls live in a predominantly Latino neighborhood in South Los Angeles whereas Beyoncé hails from a middle class family in Houston, Texas, and now lives in a New York penthouse. At nearly 17 years older than the girls, Beyoncé probably has very little familiarity with their daily lived experiences and likely had no intention as Lorraine said of "showing a video of where it's stereotyping that we live in a community of drugs, violence, and inappropriate clothing...." Yet, all three girls in group one resented the negative myopic gaze turned towards their neighborhood that failed to contextualize its inhabitants' experiences.

Chin (2001) describes a similar resentment when one of her urban black subjects Tionna shouts, "what are you looking at, you white people" at a "blue-haired white lady" in a passing car. Chin explains that Tionna's challenge "was to see beyond the act, to recognize her performance for what it was, an imitation of stereotypes held by others" (64). Absent an opportunity to confront the stereotypes imposed upon their community, the girls in group one felt vulnerable not just to one white lady but to the stereotypical gaze of innumerable passersby who can access the music video—none of whom they would be able to confront in the agential way that Tionna had. "Flawless" increases their vulnerability to the negative stereotypes of people who do not know them but have derogatory perceptions of the neighborhood from which they hail.

Impropriety was the most pervasive articulation of vulnerability. These interviews confirmed the girls' disavowal of Beyoncé's overt sexuality. The girls in group one ranked Beyoncé's inappropriate clothing on par with drugs and guns. Everyone except Layla in group two agreed that Beyoncé was inappropriate and Layla eventually admitted her "bootie shorts and a really tight shirt" make her look like she was "trying to be a bad girl." Mia summed group three's feelings when she said, "It doesn't look like she respects herself in real life. It kind of looks like she doesn't care about herself but ... she's telling other people to respect themselves." In group four Whitney used "whore" to describe her appearance, and the girls in group five generally liked Beyoncé but said she was not their role model.

Beyoncé's impropriety was most harshly critiqued by the Latinas in group one because it exposed a sexual vulnerability filtered through their cultural experiences. The Latinas felt strongly that it was women's responsibility to "not show so much of their body" and not provoke men. If some women act like sluts Alejandra said, "some people would see them and think all of us—all of women are like that which is not true." Kimberly believed that Beyoncé made girls look like prostitutes simply to promote herself and make a profit. The girls see Beyoncé as completely divested from their sexual and social vulnerability as Latinas. In their community, there are negative consequences for girls who dress and behave like Beyoncé. Sexual impropriety is not just a choice for them; identifying themselves as good girls is a matter of safety. Any over-sexualized woman makes them vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances.

The youngest girls in group three noted that Beyoncé's version of equality where women are ahead of men made them vulnerable to violence, and Gabriella argued in "Girls" "[Beyoncé's], like, girls are way better than you guys, you guys are nothing, we're more important" especially as she disrespectfully ripped off a man's badge. When asked if boys should be shown the Beyoncé video to learn that boys and girls are equal the girls unanimously responded: "No!" Mia argued it would make them "madder about how the women are on top and then men are on the bottom." They discussed an incident at school where a boy "hit a girl's butt" and when reported, the male teacher accused the girls of lying. It was not until they told a female teacher that the violation was addressed. Mia described an experiential vulnerability to boys when she implied that boys are already mad and could be made "madder" if Beyoncé's brand of equality where, as Gabriella noted, "girls are way better than guys" became popular.

Monnot (2010) argues that pop stars' lives show girls a "marvelous alternative to a difficult and depressing existence" (288). Their role and thus appeal is to create fantasy and escape for young audiences, but this did not happen for these girls. Instead, Beyoncé's unattainable beauty standards, stereotypical gaze, and impropriety remind them of their physical, race, class, sexual, and gender vulnerabilities. When Beyoncé highlights the reality of these vulnerabilities, the girls respond with respectability politics. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the phrase "politics of respectability." When used in reference to black sexuality it describes how black women counter negative stereotypes through an "aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility" (Thompson, 2009, p. 2). Respectability politics are a form of social mobility that allow women to create hierarchies that differentiate good (chaste and pure) women from bad (sexually lascivious) women. Respectability politics are also

raced when black and Latina women use them to move closer to white ideals of respectability or when they use them amongst each other to differentiate class status. These girls used respectability politics to counter vulnerability, ensure age-appropriate responsibility, and demonstrate respect for their mothers.

## 4.2 | Respectability

For example, it is curious that the first-generation Latinas felt that Beyoncé “showing that girls are sluts” would negatively impact them so personally. Perhaps, because of their immigrant experience, the girls are rooted in a respectability politics where their parents have instilled a disdain for “fast and loose (black) American women” who would interfere with their upward assimilation into white mainstream culture (Sharma, 2008). Being respectable means not being publicly sexual. Because race was not mentioned at all during the conversation and because the interviewer was African American, which may have caused them to self-censor, it is impossible to discern how much of the girls’ disdain for Beyoncé’s appearance may be because of her blackness and how much of it may be because of her Americanness.

Additionally, respectability politics were very important to the bi-racial African American and African American girls who also distanced themselves from Beyoncé’s inappropriateness. The notable exception was Bobbi from group four and Emily and Natalie from group five. Absent the sexism, classism, and colorism described by other girls, Bobbi and Emily, who are white, and Natalie, who is black and Polynesian, were less familiar with the oppressive experiences described by the other girls and less likely to critique Beyoncé’s impropriety. When Beyoncé makes girls of color vulnerable to sexual stereotypes and unwanted sexual attention, the girls countered her representations of their community/culture and themselves individually by describing her as inappropriate, a bad girl, someone who does not respect herself, a slut, and a whore. These derogatory terms distance the respectable girls from the not so respectable Beyoncé.

This distancing also occurs in age-appropriate respectability politics. In groups one, two, and four, the girls declared that they are not “fangirls.” They constructed themselves as girls that are too cool to like popular mainstream artists and too sophisticated to aspire to be like them. In doing so, they created a hierarchy where individuals like themselves who have discerning tastes are above the pedestrian desires of the masses. According to Lemish (1998), this is familiar teenager behavior that creates “identity boundaries” and hierarchies that allow the girls to distance themselves from pop stars (and sometimes their fans: 165).

Monnot (2010) introduces another form of age-appropriate respectability politics where girls know it is important for “them to preserve a certain image of purity requested by adult society, but at the same time (depending on the contexts) allowing them to embody femininity early on” (294). Age-appropriate peer pressure appeared in group two when the other girls pressured Layla into accepting that girls their ages (between 12 and 14) should not be fans of a woman who does not respect herself. Renee suggested that Beyoncé is only appropriate for teenagers 17 and older. In group four, Bobbi’s nonverbals suggested she was uncomfortable when defending Beyoncé’s sexual agency against Whitney’s assertions about her impropriety. The phenomenon recurs in group five where the girls generally praise Beyoncé but when pressed, can only identify her confidence as a laudable role model characteristic. Perhaps, Emily said that Beyoncé is not *her* role model even though she might be for someone else because Emily understands that as a young girl there is only so much she should tell an adult interviewer about her affinity for Beyoncé. Age-appropriate respectability politics expectations from both peers and adults may have limited the exploration of alternative perspectives on a sexually explicit artist.

On one hand, the girls know they are expected to look and behave like girls, but they also know that respectability demands responsibility which requires a certain level of maturity. Chin (2001) explains that when children’s lives are structured by “self-control, realistic assessment of personal and family resources, and contributions to the household—especially to mothers and grandmothers,” girls grow up being taught that respectability is akin to responsibility because their personal attire and actions reflect on their mothers, grandmothers, and sometimes the entire community (18).

The girls’ respect for their mothers is another type of respectability politics. They differentiated bad from good mothers. According to Whitney, bad mothers let their girls listen to and dress like Beyoncé. Per groups one and three, Beyoncé may be a bad mother because of the inappropriate example she sets for her daughter Blue Ivy who could grow up feeling “offended” and “insecure” when friends will inevitably talk about her mom. Six of the girls specifically

positioned their mothers in opposition to Beyoncé, describing them as respectable, intelligent role models who worked hard, overcame struggle, and created the best lives possible for their daughters. Lorraine's mother taught her not to show off her body. Kella's mom taught her to look up to God not celebrities. Layla's mom taught her to be her own person. Gabriella's mom keeps her "on the right side of the world." Whitney's mom taught her she could be anything she wanted. While the girls' affinity for their mothers is unsurprising for their age group, here the mothers were explicitly described as role models (Hains, 2012; Zaslow, 2009).

Zaslow (2009) notes a particular type of mother respectability that praises her independence and warrants her status as a role model. Her observation recurs within this data. Hannah said, "My mom is my role model because we went from being low to—we're getting higher like each step. Cause we used to live in like the \_\_\_\_\_ area and now we're living in a decent area. She got us from out of the dirt up." When asked if Beyoncé had a come up story, Hannah said, "No. Not really. She lived in Houston, Texas, and she had a really nice house when she was little and she was in a singing group.... So basically, like she was born almost already there, right at the top—not at the bottom."

Layla also respected her mother. She said,

*My role model would have to be my mom... She grew up like kind of like poor and she didn't really have anybody to hold her up or anything, so she had to like come up with stuff on her own. So, I want to be able to come up with stuff on my own and not being able to depend on anybody else.*

In the same conversation, Renee said,

*[Beyoncé] kind of had a stable home and my mom, she didn't have that. [My mom] was like really on the bottom, really trying—plus she had me at a young age... "Wow!" where she is now is like, great. But I don't understand how she got there, to be honest, because she really didn't have anything. So I'm kind of like grateful for my mom and stuff like that. And Beyoncé, she kind of like had a little step up, and my mom, she didn't really have that.*

These girls reflected upon the lack of social support faced by their mothers to explain the difference between their mothers' struggles and Beyoncé's lack thereof. Whitney affirmed the other girl's comments when she said, "From what I've heard, she had a pretty good life, so I don't think she really gets to be in the struggle category." Not only is struggle a source of pride for the girls, but Beyoncé's distance from it further confirms their sense that she is unfamiliar with their experiences of vulnerability and has not earned their respect in the way their mothers have.

Furthermore, the girls consistently describe their mothers' triumphs with an uplift metaphor, but they do not describe how she was able to accomplish it. In fact, Renee admitted that she did not understand her mom's trajectory. Zaslow (2009) again identifies this as a familiar trope. In their daughters' eyes, good mothers are "isolated agents" who rely on "personal resiliency" in part because of a girl power discourse that suggests strong mothers "survive with no support, whose independence connotes fiscal and emotional autonomy." When in reality, strong mothers survive "with the support of public assistance, their families, and their own daughters" (116). This discourse of individualism further contributes to the respectability hierarchy between bad and good mothers by implying that bad mothers need support whereas good mothers are independently successful. Beyoncé is not the girls' role model. However, the way they discuss their mothers as role models without being able to explain how their moms overcame hardship, stems from the same brand of girl power feminism that Beyoncé uses to appeal to her audiences. Unpacking the girls' ambivalence toward Beyoncé's sexuality demands understanding Beyoncé as a branded commodity within the neoliberal feminism of girl power media culture.

### 4.3 | Ambivalence

Scholars like Durham (2012) and Hobson (2013) praise Beyoncé for resisting sexual respectability politics, shattering the silence surrounding black female sexuality, and engaging a public sexuality that liberates black women from an antiquated need for "sexual chastity for the greater good of social responsibility" (Lee, 2010, p. ix). However, Beyoncé's sexuality reminded the girls in this study of their vulnerability which they countered with sexual respectability politics. This process results in an ambivalence toward her where objectively she might be a feminist but personally she is no role model. Emerson (2002) also identifies this ambivalence among adult black women. She attributes it to daily "con-

flicting messages about their sexuality and femininity" (128) but at this stage in the young girls' development, they are more concerned with a feminism that supports equality than they are with a feminism that includes sexuality.

When Gabriella says, "I don't know. I just don't get the videos. Why would she do that?" she represents the girls who do not yet understand that "commodity feminism refers to the appropriation and de-politicization of feminist discourse to support commercial interests" (Hains, 2014, p. 34). As a commodity, Beyoncé is packaged and sold in a way that is most profitable—a package where femininity is constructed through explicit sexuality that is branded alongside feminism to appeal to diverse audiences (Riordan, 2001). Feminist is an indeterminate category of identification for performers and fans. Gonick (2007) suggests successfully presenting as a feminist entails tremendous ambivalence because the contradictory impulses of femininity and feminist make the realization of new ideals fraught with discomfort and impossibility. Zaslow (2009) describes commodity feminism as performative and not activist: "Feminist, then, becomes a cultural identity marked by cultural practices rather than a political movement activated by political practices; it becomes an individual marker rather than a collective strategy" (138).

Beyoncé's feminism, however, performs independence and equality—the recurring pillars of the girls' definitions of feminism. They point out her confidence, freedom of expression, and her economic success in a male dominated industry. In "Girls" they identified strong women coming together as leaders. They identified the self-acceptance as the intention of "Flawless," even if the visuals contradicted the lyrics. The ambivalence recurs, however, when, as Lorraine says, "she sends good messages in an inappropriate way" and contradicts herself claiming that she woke up wearing "mascara, eye liner, lipstick, and probably a bunch of foundation" as Natalie described. They prefer their mothers as role models of independence because Beyoncé had "a little step up" that their mothers did not.

Beyoncé also fails to make their environments more egalitarian. Mia and group three thought Beyoncé's version of women over men would make men "madder about how the women are on top and then men are on the bottom." Additionally, the girls were adamant that boys not be shown Beyoncé's videos as an introduction to feminism. In fact, groups four and five agreed they would be "sexually distracting" to boys. Furthermore, Beyoncé fails to help them process their stories of being victimized and silenced by male students' sexual behavior and "rape jokes" as well as teachers who accuse them of lying about inappropriate sexual contact. Despite embodying independence, Beyoncé bungles some of the important equality work that the girls need feminism to do. Ironically, when she does the work of commodity feminism, Beyoncé supports the girls in an unexpected way.

As a paradigmatic example of Zaslow's neoliberal girl power media feminism, Beyoncé touts individualism, personal choice, self-reliance, and self-determination—ideas that the girls' responses wholeheartedly embrace. Zaslow (2009) explains, "The discourse of individualism suggests that failure to achieve is due to personal inadequacies and reminds young women that 'they must take personal responsibility for success or failure because the choices appear to be all before them' (116). Similar to the girls in Hains's (2012) study, these girls were "unaware of structural inequalities" (132). Their respectability plans for resisting the vulnerability of an unattainable body image, the stereotypical gaze, and unwanted sexual attention are based on personal choices. Choosing to be oneself, to avoid watching stereotypical videos, and to dress appropriately will not disrupt a beauty industry that targets girls with the message that physical attractiveness is the most effective route to power, or untangle the complex political economy of music video production, or eradicate a patriarchal system where unwanted sexual attention and assault stem from men's desires for power and not women's sartorial choices.

Sexual respectability politics are grounded in the belief that if the individual changes the way she appears to others then others will change their perception of her. The girls cannot be blamed for their ignorance because "the concepts are rarely taught in elementary school, and U.S. children's television programming is ill equipped to address such issues" (Hains, 2012, p. 132). The girls' lack of awareness of how their mothers' uplift narratives occurred with assistance also participates in this individualist narrative that Beyoncé sings about when she asserts "girls run the world." As if girls everywhere could one day don pretty dresses and declare from henceforth on that they run the world, and it would be so. The most interesting contradiction is not that Beyoncé's videos do not match her lyrics or her feminism does not match her outfits, but that the girls critiqued her for not being a good role model even as their critiques espoused the girl power feminism that she models for them.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The girls' conclusion that Beyoncé may be a feminist, but she is no role model potentially exposes them to a "feminism lite." Emily said at the end of her interview that inserting feminist messages in the contradictory milieu of popular culture is "really not doing any harm just putting it out there." Hains's 2014 study of young adult women recalling their introduction to feminism as teenagers through the Spice Girls notes:

*Perhaps from this perspective, any dose of feminism in children's media is a good thing. Even though we may resent commodity feminism's commercial imperative, this study indicates that alongside the problematic content found everywhere in mass media—the promotion of normative femininity, the fetishistic consumerism—it can also introduce basic feminist ideas at an early age, which is more than can be said for most media texts (p. 45).*

"Flawless" offers Chimamanda Adichie's definition of feminist as "a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes." Several of the girls remembered the definition verbatim and agreed Beyoncé embodied it in some ways albeit not in others.

On the other hand, Beyoncé's commodity feminism perpetuates ideas about girls' and women's individual choices improving society at the expense of feminist notions of community, collective action, and combating structural oppression.<sup>2</sup> Riordan (2001) warns that the commodification of girl power can seriously dilute the potential to augment feminist agency and empowerment. Conceivably, this could also be happening. This ambivalence about Beyoncé and her contradictions contributes to the decades long debate about the best representations of feminism.

Most interesting, however, is the girls' delineation between feminist and role model. Their dominant concern is not Beyoncé's brand of feminism but how to wield sexual respectability politics to defend themselves against the body image, stereotypical gaze, and sexual impropriety her presence ushers into their lives. The notion of Beyoncé's inappropriateness that recurs in the girls' conversations is ultimately a tool in their arsenal for navigating a (hostile) world. As long as Beyoncé seems disconnected from this world, she is an ineffectual role model. This study further contributes to scholarship by highlighting the unique respectability strategies girls of color use when engaging pop culture feminism. Perhaps, the question scholars should be asking of youth about popular culture icons is not who is a feminist, but who is a role model for which populations and why.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Because the freewrite data is rich enough to comprise another study, it is excluded here.

<sup>2</sup> One could argue that in "Girls" Beyoncé promotes community, collective action, and countering structural oppression by uniting girls who combat the male police. However, they are identified as girls and not women, the collective action is dance, and, as the girls debated, they may still be under the jurisdiction of the male police. While Beyoncé is supported by her comrades in "Flawless," the chorus of "bow down bitches" neither suggests a broad feminine unity nor collective resistance.

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