

The Image of Women in 2000s Pop Music

Author: Filippo Festuccia

As women struggle everyday to have their rights recognised (not only on a formal level but in every social context), anglo-saxon popular music is dominated by female artists. Since 2001, the year which commonly marks the decline of the "Boyband Era", the vast majority of popstars has been composed by women (either white, black or hispanic), with on the other hand genres like hip hop and dance being monopolised by male performers. One might think it is due to a triumph of women – or, on the other hand, that men prize attractive bodies and therefore make beautiful singers successful.

That the looks are relevant in pop music is nothing new or unexpected – The Beatles themselves became who they were only after a radical shift in their public image; despite that, one can often see pop artists criticised for being "image-oriented" instead of "music-oriented", as if "music" and "image" (or the care of it) were on opposite sides of a continuum. Indeed, many female artists use their quasi-naked bodies to communicate and promote themselves (especially in their videos), in such a way that their "authenticity" seems questionable. Could it be that what we see is just an oversized marketing stunt?

Pop music has a very important role in teen socialization, due to its ubiquity and the ease with which it can be accessed (it does not require any preliminary knowledge). The gender roles presented or directly portrayed by the world's most famous popstars – Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Amy Winehouse and Avril Lavigne among others – thus have a huge influence on thousands (if not millions) of teenagers all around the world.

Analysing those specific cases and famous studies on modern popular music, we will try, if not to provide answers to the aforementioned question, at least to gain a clear view of the current situation.

Feminist studies often take an "anti-" stance towards society and its expressions, stressing the need for a change. This approach fails to deliver if we speak of pop culture (and of course pop music), given that "pop" is strictly connected to the here and now, a manifestation of contemporary Zeitgeist with no intention or desire to last in the future. Therefore, second-wave feminist thinkers have confined themselves in studies which prescribe the needs of society as a whole – such as "undoing gender", which is seen as a highly desirable goal.

And, given the all-new accessibility to every kind of music (provided by audio/video streaming services such as Youtube or Last.fm), third-wave feminist thinkers find it needless to focus on pop music: they would rather write about artists which convey feminist messages (such as Björk or Courtney Love's band, Hole). However, the outcome of such an approach is a departure from today's mainstream society: how can we understand how a teenage girl builds her social and sexual identity if we do not accept that it comes from role models among the music business (other than books and movies such as *Twilight* or *Hunger Games*)?

Popstars are seen as "Divas": their fans identify with them, they try to become a part of their myth. And pop music is seen as openly feminine (male popstars deliberately choose to look androgynous), while rock is often perceived as masculine. Since rock is linked with "authenticity" and pop with "artificiality", we have "genuine male music" and "factitious female music" – again as opposite sides of a continuum. Alongside with that, we can clearly see a massive presence of gender inequalities in all major roles inside the music

business: A&Rs, managers, producers, sound engineers, roadies, even artwork designers are, in large majority, men.

However, even if some (or most) popstars take little part in creating the product they will help to sell, the product itself cannot be separated from the star. A pop song "exists" only because of the star who sings it; on the other hand, a rock band "exists" only because of the songs it writes. Pop music has a different skill set than other music genres (if not rock, one could say jazz): the looks, costumes, choreographies, live shows, videos and lyrics are as important as the "quality" of the tune.

Speaking of the lyrics, pop music focuses on love and/or romance, with little exceptions, and gets called "shallow" for it. But one could argue that a love song is among the earliest forms of cultural expressions (the first dating as far back as 3000 BC), and that it has been exclusive jurisdiction of male artists for centuries. The fact that now the roles have changed so much is hardly a sexist output of contemporary society: we could even try to call it a conquest for Western women.

For example, American popstar Katy Perry gained considerable success in 2008 with the hit *I Kissed a Girl*. Albeit the song is certainly not a heartfelt pro-gay statement, it shows a vast freedom of expressing unconventional sexuality without any open blame.

A woman expressing her feelings (or desires) in a pop song can certainly reinforce a stereotype, depicting herself as dominated by her man. But she can also present an entirely different kind of relationship – we can divide the different roles a popstar can take in three categories.

First, an independent woman, seeking pleasure or other forms of satisfaction

out of men, always keeping control over the relationship. This first group of popstars often uses s&m imagery to convey the message of domination. Second, a woman whose sexual identity is open and free to experiences other than heterosexuality. Third, a character so thoroughly developed that it escapes any sexual definition – it contains elements of heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and transsexuality. Such is the case of Madonna and Lady Gaga.

The idea that a singer is a strong, independent figure is further highlighted by the fact that a woman who sings is a woman who expresses herself, whereas sexual tools (as shown in fashion photoshoots or in commercials) are shown with their mouths open but passive (which indicates sexual availability).

However, the succinct costumes, often reminders of traditional role-playing outfits (for instance, Britney Spears played a schoolgirl in her debut single ...*Baby One More Time*), and the high degree of sexual poses shown in music videos have an influence on the fans, generating the feeling that said level of body exposure is "allowed" (or simply not frowned upon).

Other than what is shown in music videos, the way the situations and characters are shown can make the difference: the camera might film in slow-motion or from downside up in order to emphasize a woman's sexual traits. What we understand is that in pop music there are traits which indicate a growing independence of female artists, and other aspects which show the persistence of gender stereotypes – therefore, analysing specific cases will prove useful.

Rihanna is a traditional, almost stereotypical dancehall singer: her songs speak of the dancehall itself, of clubs and parties and, when they dwell into relationships, it is always the man who is in a position of power. Almost

paradoxical is the situation depicted in the video for *Man Down* (single published in 2011): Rihanna seduces a man who then tries to rape her – the day after, Rihanna shoots him showing no signs of anger, just sadness and remorse. Despite being black (she is from the Caribbean), she is often shown with a fair complexion, a thin body and straight hair. In the covers of her albums, only her face is shown, in provocative poses.

Avril Lavigne comes from a totally different background (the all-white pop-punk of Green Day and Blink 182) and has changed her image many times through the years. She seems to swing between a street punk attitude and a decadent, almost goth style; but she never poses as a sexual object, even though she often depicts old style relationships, where a girl falls madly in love with a strong male figure. In only a couple of her videos (*Girlfriend* and *Hot*) she is seen dancing around in cheerleader outfits and, other than the beginning of *What the Hell* (where she sports a suggestive lingerie), she never exposes her body. Avril Lavigne has a girl-next-door quality – she apparently does not need to qualify her performances with sexual attributes.

Amy Winehouse has always been considered a rebel, due to her savage lifestyle – and certainly her looks set her apart from most popstars: despite being physically attractive, she showed tattoos and bizarre hairstyles, often sporting very casual or sleazy outfits. Amy Winehouse has the background of a "legit" musician, coming from the British tradition of soul music, and her lifestyle can be likened to 60s and 70s rock (male) singers. In her videos, she is shown as a strong, steadfast woman, willing to take the reins of a relationship – however, it's her vices that qualify her as frail and ephemeral. Therefore, Amy Winehouse stands out as a (virtually inimitable) cultural hybrid.

Lady Gaga is arguably the pop icon of her generation: her over-the-top looks

(which she creates personally through the so-called Haus of Gaga) clash with her artistic skills, her ridiculously long and elaborate music videos communicate at a whole new level of depth and intensity. Since Gaga controls every aspect of her work, she is able to add layers over layers of references, hidden meanings and double entendres, so that a song can be enjoyed on multiple levels. She is a "shock pop" artist – like Alice Cooper, Kiss and Marilyn Manson before her – who does not look for the approval of the generic audience but nods at specific groups (like LGBT associations). As the cover for *Born This Way* shows, Gaga is meta-human, and therefore not restricted by the categories of human sexuality.

There are other examples. Katy Perry is an old school pop talent: a girl who sings tunes written by others, with little-to-zero control over her "brand image". Adele, on the other hand, is a soul singer with no loud character superimposed on her personality, whose songs stay true to real life experience; her round appearance adds to the "realistic" feed but is not presented as a form of beauty (as opposed to Beth Ditto's "elegy of fat"). Kesha shows a solid rock background (citing even obscure acts) but delivers songs so manipulated by computer programs that they are nearly impossible to be played live. Her lyrics are lustful, her character is that of a girl who dominates men without taking much care. Lana Del Rey tried to become a popstar once, under her real name (Lizzy Grant); that first fiasco prompted her to change name, attitude and even appearance (she is rumoured to have undergone facial surgery), making her an artificial indie diva.

Caterina Caselli, president of Sugar Music and former popstar, sees Adele as the emerging popstar with the greatest chances of building a durable success – due to her vocal qualities and her composing style – and stresses the importance of individuality in creating a look to be associated with the songs. Michele Lupi, editor-in-chief for Rolling Stone Italia, favors Lady Gaga,

citing her entrepreneurial skills as the quality that can make a difference; Mr. Lupi affirms that to maintain a strong following a popstar needs to be strong psychologically and that some image-related marketing will never be enough to be successful.

From what we have seen, there is no general trend to draw sure conclusions from. Mr. Lupi's position (that every successful popstar has strong qualities, both in communicating herself and in being able to keep up with the fatiguing lifestyle) seems agreeable, however not all popstars are able to convey a message of independence and strength.

The image of women in pop music is far from a truthful rendition of society. Body types are pretty much standardized – thinner than the average, with emphasized sexual traits, highly athletic due to the intense choreographies. Relationships, on the other hand, show a gradual shift toward female empowerment, suggesting that the audience appreciates artists who are not afraid to take firm positions.

Nowadays, artists communicate constantly (through their social network accounts), posing as role models with every word they say. Most popstars seem to have developed new communicational skills to face this new challenge, and the audience rewards the artists who have learned to express themselves beyond the songs, in the space of a tweet or a Facebook update – showing more and more independence from labels, managers, producers and all the rest of the "team" which can help a popstar, but not create it.