

## **She won't stop! Reframing the sexualisation of Miley Cyrus: A theoretical approach using Queer Theory to assess Cyrus's feminist potential through her on-stage performances**

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**Abstract** This article explores the feminist potential within celebrity pop culture by using Miley Cyrus as a case study, specifically examining her on-stage performances. It evaluates Cyrus's feminist stance through these performances and her resistance to negative responses. Queer theory serves as the primary framework to assess the implications of this feminist potential and its contribution to the broader feminist discourse. Miley Cyrus, an American pop singer and actress, began her career as a child star on Disney Channel's "Hannah Montana" (Kennedy, 2014). As Cyrus matured, she increasingly sought to distance herself from her Disney image, engaging in provocative behavior. Some argue that this was her attempt at achieving personal empowerment (Kennedy, 2014). This research aims to examine this attempt and understand its implications for feminism. A descriptive analysis identifies key findings and themes from queer theory, interpreting these themes within Cyrus's performances. A thematic analysis of her performances is conducted and assessed through the lens of queer theory. This study contributes to literature on feminist theory, particularly queer theory and feminist approaches, highlighting the complex relationships between celebrity culture and feminist debates. Further research is needed to uncover nuanced insights.

**Key Words: Celebrity Feminism, Queer Theory, Miley Cyrus, Pop Culture, Social Constructionism**

## Introduction

It is hard to ignore the phenomenal influence of contemporary pop culture and the growth of modern feminism (Storey, 2010). This paper is interested to explore the two concepts by examining Miley Cyrus's contribution to feminist discussions through her on-stage performances. This paper aims to queerly think about gender and sexuality, this way of thinking opens up questions about the social construction of such identities. This concept will be discussed throughout this paper using elements of Queer Theory to evaluate Miley Cyrus's on-stage performances. Miley Cyrus a 31 year-old American singer, songwriter and actress (born November 1992) who has long been an advocate for equality and diversity as she positively uses her platform to raise awareness of the issues facing marginalised groups. This awareness can be seen in several ways through her on stage performances. This paper is interested in examining these performances, to assess what understandings they can bring to a broader feminist discussion. It can be a powerful influence when a celebrity publicly identifies as a feminist, and this is important to consider (Keller & Ringrose, 2015). Cyrus first entered the celebrity industry as a Disney child star. Her quick rise to fame saw her become one of the most sought-after stars with over 200 million followers on Instagram and 69 million monthly listeners on Spotify. This manifestation of celebrity, however, exacts a toll that Cyrus knows all too well. Cyrus shifted her wholesome persona to a bad girl image professionally when she released her 2013 *Bangerz* album. This signified Cyrus's move from Disney child star to a 'racier' performer (Kennedy, 2014). The heightened level of scrutiny she faced saw the media dissecting her character, from accusations of setting a negative example to critiques of her perceived 'oversexualized' performances (Jackson et al, 2016). This paper is intended to take a different approach when assessing Miley Cyrus' performances. This will be done to explore if Cyrus's on-stage performances over the span of her career, can positively contribute to feminist representation.

## Literature Review

According to Sarah Casey and Juliet Watson (2017), celebrities are "key conduits through which feminism is mediated to larger audiences" (Casey & Watson, 2017, pp. 2). This suggests that celebrities can bring feminism to the mainstream population. The term celebrity feminism was first coined by Wicke (1994) who became the first person to critically theorise the concept. Wicke (1994) suggested that attention is needed to how feminism and celebrity culture inevitably mix in ways that may be both positive and negative, with limitations and opportunities. Celebrities have always played a crucial role in defining the specific feminisms that have emerged in western media (Taylor, 2014). In contemporary society, the rise of celebrity culture, opens the doors for a more direct impact on the general public, that can shape understandings of feminism.

Miley Cyrus can be argued as an example of using her celebrity platform to promote feminism. Cyrus undoubtedly has left an indelible mark on popular culture, maintaining a prominent presence in the public sphere for more than a decade. The span of her career saw

her grow from a Disney channel child, to one of the the most popular female artists of this decade. After her time ended on Disney channel's Hannah Montana, she reinvented herself in the image of a more mature popstar (Kennedy, 2013). Cyrus boasts a catalogue of successful albums, among them "Bangerz," "Can't Be Tamed," and her most recent release, "Endless Summer Vacation". The BBC (2023) deemed her the ultimate 21st century pop star for her range of contributions to the music industry (Savage, 2023). A public figure of her calibre can use their influence to speak out or highlight social and political issues. In an interview with Rolling Stone magazine Cyrus proclaimed she thinks she is the '*biggest feminist in the world*' (Cyrus, 2013, cited in Rolling Stone). Cyrus exhibits a fearlessness in pushing boundaries, whether through provocative acts like swinging naked on a wrecking ball or engaging in onstage twerking. Cyrus's actions mean she is often a hot topic for debate, with the media scrutinising her every move. Nonetheless, Cyrus has always maintained agency over herself and rejects conformity to societal norms prescribed for women. In 2013, Cyrus claimed "*I know what I'm doing, I know I'm shocking*" (Cyrus, 2013, cited in Rolling Stone magazine), she believes it is her way to demonstrate empowerment. Agency in feminism can be defined as the capacity of individuals, particularly women, to act autonomously and make choices that reflect their personal interests, opinions, and desires, free from coercion or undue influence (Davis, 1991). Furthermore, in a 2023 interview with British Vogue she reiterates this comment stating "*I was creating attention for myself because I was dividing myself from a character I had played. Anyone, when you're 20 or 21, you have more to prove*". This agency and empowerment are an aspect that this paper will consider when assessing the on-stage performances. It will also consider how the over sexualised performance can inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes about women's worth being tied to their sexuality or physical appearance.

### Queer Theory

This paper engages with key findings from sociological theorists Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich and Michael Foucault. The term Queer theory first appeared in academia in a 1991 article by Teresa de Lauretis. The article titled Queer theory: Lesbian and gay sexualities in 1991 aims to make sense of challenges to normality (Hall, 2003). Lorber, 1996 argues that "*Sociology assumes that each person has one sex, one sexuality and one gender which are congruent and fixed for life. A woman is assumed to be feminine female, a man a masculine male with heterosexuality the uninterrogated norm*" (Lorber, 1996, pp. 144). Queer theory deconstructs these concepts by highlighting the constructed nature of sex, gender and sexuality. This rethinking queerly opens a new understanding of old concepts (Valochhi, 2005). In the process of gender identification, influential social institutions such as the state wield substantial power in shaping and moulding individual perceptions and expressions of gender. Social scripts and social labelling in this way limit how these identities are learned and acted out. This notion is best exemplified by Judith Butler's work on how sexual and gender identities are constructed through performativity (Butler, 1990). According to this theory, sexual and gender identities are performatively constructed by the very manifestation of the gender and sexuality that are assumed to produce them.

## Gender and Sexuality Performativity

### *Gender*

Judith Butler is one of the leading academic contributors to the field of queer theory and feminism, known for their work on gender performativity. Butler's book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990) incorporates what would now be considered a Queer perspective on the production of sexuality with a concern of gender regulation and the subordination of women. Butler suggests that gender is a social construct, that has been established over time through behaviours and language. This construction has created a conventional idea of gender and sexuality. The constructed ideas of gender and sexuality has facilitated the oppression of homosexuality and the dominance over women (Butler, 1990). Butler argues that 'woman' as a concept is flawed since how it is defined leads to the identical exclusionary behaviours that feminism purports to oppose. According to Butler, gender is not a fundamental quality or nature, rather; it is a set of behaviours in constant repetition that gives the illusion that there is a fundamental nature. Individuals assigned male at birth are frequently informed they are boys, starting even in their youngest years. They are often encouraged to conform to their gender, to be assertive and not express emotions. Individuals assigned female at birth are told they are girls and are taught to be nurturing and timid to not take up too much space (Butler 1990).

Butler's (1990) work in *Gender Trouble* can be seen to reiterate Simon de Beauvoir (1949) claim 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman' (de Beauvoir, as cited in de Beauvoir vintage, 2011). The central claim from de Beauvoir is that men fundamentally oppress women by categorising them as other. Men are seen to be the stronger, dominant oppressor with a hold over women. This concept has been reinforced in societies through language and behaviours. De Beauvoir's claims that while it is instinctive for individuals to view themselves in contrast to others, this approach is flawed in the realms of genders (Vintges, 1999). By defining woman as other, man is effectively denying the humanity of women. De Beauvoir's work influenced movements within the second wave of feminism and contributes to the notion that gender is socially constructed. Her analysis challenges traditional notions of femininity and highlights the need for women to assert their autonomy and agency in patriarchal society. Feminist scholars Butler and De Beauvoir bring attention to the hierarchy of sexes and promote an equal stance among both men and women.

### *Sexuality*

Definitions of sexuality are reliant on gender and if gender can be understood to be socially constructed, the same would apply for sexuality. Adrienne Rich's essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980) examines the social construction of sexuality, particularly the ways in which heterosexuality is enforced and normalized in society. Rich argues that heterosexuality is not an innate orientation but rather a social construct that privileges certain forms of relationships and marginalises others. While Rich's work came before that of Butler, the work of gender performativity ties in well with Rich's

understanding of sexuality. Rich believes that a variety of factors including cultural representation of relationships and sexuality, institutions of law and economy, favour heterosexual relationships and norms, pushing individuals to conform to societal norms which re-enforce heterosexuality as the standard. Rich argues that women are forced into heterosexual relationships in order to achieve social and economic stability, this can restrict their opportunities for personal and professional growth (Rich 1980).

Michael Foucault, the French philosopher, contributed significantly to the field of gender and sexuality studies and can be seen to be central to the development of Queer theory. Foucault suggested that understandings around sexuality have been socially constructed and have created categories of people based on their behaviours and desires (Foucault, 1990). These categories according to Foucault have been used to create a hierarchy of power. In order for Foucault to challenge the dominant view of the connection between sexuality and repressive power, he had to consider the nature of power. His main argument concluded that power is not always oppressive but rather constructive (Foucault, 1990). It does not work by suppressing and prohibiting the true and authentic expressions of sexuality. Instead, it is produced in the ways individuals view their sexuality through cultural norms and practices.

These understandings underscore the importance of critically engaging with representations of gender and sexuality in popular culture, highlighting the potential for both reinforcing and subverting dominant norms. By applying feminist and Queer theory to analysis of cultural artifacts such as Cyrus's performance, the research deepens understandings of the complexities surrounding gender identity, sexuality and power in contemporary society. Drawing upon these theoretical frameworks, this paper explores the performance of gender and sexuality in popular culture, through the lens of Miley Cyrus's on-stage performances, to assess the extent to which they conform or challenge gender norms and expectations.

## **Methodology**

This research paper adopts an interpretivism paradigm, a methodological approach used in the field of social sciences that explores the motivations and reasoning behind certain social situations. This approach works on the assumption that reality is socially constructed through shared ideas and experiences (Myers, 2008). Miley Cyrus is used as a case study to explore celebrity feminism and whether she challenges or conforms to societal expectations. The methodology involves a literature review of Queer theory and an examination of recorded performances.

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected from five of Cyrus's performances spanning her career. It includes performances by Cyrus at various points in her life because it aims to examine her body of work across the course of her career. The performances were chosen from a larger selection of performances. The performances to be included were all broadcasted on television and had

hit headlines in the media. By selecting performances that span from the start of Cyrus's career to the present day, and specifically focusing on those that were showcased on television with high audience engagement, this research paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of her evolving artistry and impact on popular culture. By examining performances from different stages of her career, ranging from her early days as a Disney Channel star to her more recent ventures into pop and rock music, the research seeks to trace the trajectory of Cyrus's artistic development and the evolution of her public persona. This approach ensures that the analysis captures key moments in Cyrus's career that have shaped her public image and contributed to broader discussions about gender, sexuality, and identity in contemporary media.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis is a research technique used to assess qualitative data, it involves searching for patterns within in the data and identifying themes (Becker et al, 2013). The analysis, rooted in social constructionism, involves interpreting the meanings of these themes through a feminist perspective. Thematic analysis is employed to identify patterns and themes within the performances, focusing on agency, visibility/representation and breaking societal norms. Agency in feminism refers to individuals' ability, especially women's, to act freely and make decisions that represent their own interests, views, and wants without being coerced or subjected to undue influence. It underlines how crucial it is to acknowledge and value women's autonomy and self-determination in a variety of spheres of life, such as intimate partnerships, sexual orientation, professional decisions, and social engagement (Davies, 1991). Visibility is the acknowledgment, representation and amplification of marginalized voices, experiences, and contributions across a range of social contexts (Schroer, 2014). Breaking societal norms involves challenging or disregarding the established expectations, customs, or behaviours that are widely accepted within a particular society or culture. This can encompass a wide range of actions, from questioning traditional gender roles to advocating for social change (Giddens & Griffiths, 2006).

Video footage serves as the primary data source, with rigorous watching and detailed description of each performance. Once this stage was completed, emerging themes were identified and given a code. These codes allowed for easy identification of each theme and shows what performances showcased which theme. The method of coding is a good tool for this research as it allowed for the labelling and grouping of similar concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The main findings highlight moments in Cyrus's performances that align with themes of agency, visibility/representation, and challenging societal norms. These themes are discussed in conjunction with Queer theory to provide deeper insights.

### **Performances**

1. 2009 Teen Choice Award Performance (Party in the USA)
2. 2010 Britain's Got Talent Performance (Can't Be Tamed).
3. 2013 Video Music Awards Performance (We Can't Stop).

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4. 2016 Maya and Marty in Manhattan Performance (Mash up I'm Your Man/I'm A Woman, cover of Leonard Cohen and Peggy Lee).
5. 2021 Stand by You Pride Special (Cover of Believe by Cher).

<b>Performance</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Code</b>
Teen Choice Awards	2009	A, C
Britain's Got Talent	2010	A, C
Video Music Awards	2013	A, C
Maya & Marty in Manhattan	2016	VR, C
Stand By You Pride Special	2021	VR, C

#### **Codes**

Agency = A

Visibility/Representation = VR

Challenging Societal

Norms/Expectations = C

Similarly, McNicholas Smith (2017) conducted a descriptive analysis to explore feminist potential from Cyrus's 2013 Video Music Award performances. The findings concluded that there is Queer feminist potential from Cyrus in this performance from the way she has visibility and attachment in the media. This research paper will expand on this finding and look at other performances to explore if there is an overall feminist representation within them. Feminist representation can be defined as the portrayal of women that challenges conventional gender norms, empowers female agency, and embraces diversity and inclusivity. It goes beyond simplistic stereotypes to depict women as multifaceted individuals with their own desires, ambitions, and complexities (Coleman, 2014).

There is limited available research that explores performances in such a manner. While McNicholas Smith (2017) provides a good example of examining Cyrus's performances, it only focuses on one and lacks a theoretical understanding. This research paper will attempt to achieve a more theoretical understanding of themes within Cyrus's on-stage performances.

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This will be done by considering if the performances showcase Cyrus following or challenging the binary gender expectations.

## Findings

### 1 *Teen Choice Awards (2009)*

Miley Cyrus performances at the 2009 Teen Choice Awards (TCA) can be argued to be the starting point of her rebellious days. The Teen Choice Awards was an award show from 1999-2019 that honoured achievements in film, television, music, sporting and social media. In 2009 Miley was a sought-out performer since her Disney channel show *Hannah Montana* first aired and was one of the performers at that years TCAs.

She enters the stage in an edgy look completed with leather shorts, a tank top on cowboy boots. She was performing her hit single *Party in The USA* and partied on stage is what she did. As the song reach the bridge, she steps on to a passing ice cream cart with a striper pole. As she is moved along the stage, she is dancing with the pole.

According to a Salon magazine article after the performances, there was approximately 2,750,00 google results for 'Miley Cyrus and pole' (Clark-Flory, 2009). Furthermore, there were more than 1300 articles published about the performance (Clark-Flory, 2009). This performance appears to showcase agency for Cyrus with her having fun on stage doing what she felt comfortable to do. Firstly, her choice of song and performance style represented a departure from her previous image as a child star. By selecting a more mature and contemporary song, Cyrus demonstrated her independence in determining her public identity and creative path that shifted from the innocence of her *Hannah Montana* character. Cyrus seemed to be completely in charge of her performance, emulating autonomy over her own body and image, from her energizing dance moves to her interactions with the crowd.



Figure 1 Teen Choice Awards 2009 (Getty Images, 2009).

### 2 *Britain's Got Talent (2010)*

Miley Cyrus's performance at the Britain's Got Talent show caused quite a stir at the time in 2010 with headlines such as 'Miley Cyrus simulates lesbian kiss in front of family audience for Britain's Got Talent' (Daily Mail, 2010). Cyrus was there to promote her new album *Can't Be Tamed*; this was an album she was using to change her image from Disney child star to sex symbol in the music industry. As seen from her 2009 TCA performance this is something she was trying to do, and the album name itself is a give-away of a Cyrus's



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intentions. Adorned in thigh-high boots and a black leather leotard, Cyrus emerges on stage through open doors, performing the lyrics, "I can't be tamed, I can't be tamed".

Cyrus embodies the song's theme through her dynamic and provocative choreography. She engages in energetic dancing and grinding movements with her backup dancers. Midway through the performance, she pulls one of the female dancers close, creating the appearance of simulating a kiss. The lyrics suggest Miley is not letting anyone prevent her from pursuing her desires. Similar to the TCA performance, the Britain's Got Talent performance drew some controversy. The media reported on the outrage of Miley supposedly 'making out' with a girl. This is seen in the news headlines at the time (Daily Mail, 2010). The controversy, rooted in homophobia, was based on one flash second of a simulated lesbian kiss, causing such a public reaction.



Figure 2 Britain's Got Talent (Gotty, 2010).

The simulated kiss appears on screen for less than a second, yet Miley had to come out and apologise for the action. Taking to her official website Cyrus stated "*I promise you I did not kiss her. It is ridiculous that two entertainers can't even rock out with each other without the media making it some type of story.*" (Cyrus, 9 News, 2010).

If this was to happen in 2024, one might question if Cyrus would be expected to apologise for her behaviour. It is likely that Cyrus herself would not apologise now, She is happy with how she expresses sexuality (Setoodeh, 2016). While Cyrus demonstrates agency in these performances, the response to her action and her subsequent apology suggests that she was still constrained by heteronormative stereotypes at this time.

### 3 Video Music Awards (2013)

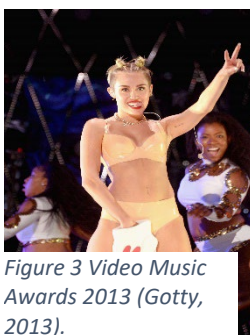


Figure 3 Video Music Awards 2013 (Gotty, 2013).

Miley Cyrus performances at the 2013 Video Music Awards is one of her most famous performances to date. This is largely due to the widespread controversy following the performance. ABC News (2013) reported that after the performance there were 306,000 tweets per minute more than the Superbowl<sup>1</sup>. The illusion for the performance suggests a psychedelic animation (McNicholas Smith, 2017) which is a reference to the song she is performing *We Can't Stop*. Cyrus shows no fear in

<sup>1</sup> Tweets is in references to Twitter the popular social media platform now known as X

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twerking<sup>2</sup> with her dancers. Mid-way through the performances the music cuts, the song changes and Blurred Lines by Robin Thicke plays. Cyrus is then joined on stage by Thicke dressed in a referee style outfit. A quick outfit change reveals Cyrus dressed in a nude latex two piece, paired with a foam finger. Cyrus uses this prop to dance seductively and grind against Thicke. The performance once again is showcasing Cyrus's agency over her performance. This was not a typical performance for the VMAs: Miley was pushing boundaries, and she was not afraid to use her body to do this. Like her hit song We Can't Stop, Miley won't stop. The controversy surrounding the performance primarily stemmed from its overtly sexualized nature and the perceived appropriateness of Cyrus's behaviour, particularly in the context of her transition from a Disney Channel star to a more mature artist. Critics argued that Cyrus's performance perpetuated harmful stereotypes about women and objectified her and her dancers (Jackson et al., 2016). However, in the years after her performance Cyrus has used this media attention for the greater good. "Not only was culture changed, but my life and career were changed forever...It inspired me to use my platform for something much bigger. If the world is going to focus on me and what I am doing, then what I am doing should be impactful and it should be great." (Cyrus for Wonderland Magazine, 2018).

### 4 *Maya and Marty (2016)*

Miley Cyrus was invited to perform on the stand-up comedy show *Maya and Marty*. The 2016 comedy show blends comedy sketches, musical performances, and celebrity guests into their show. Cyrus was performing a cover version of the classics *I'm Your Man* by Leonard Cohen and *I'm a woman* by Peggy Lee.



Figure 4 *Maya and Marty 2016* (Portman, 2016)

Cyrus dressed in a black tuxedo and top hat begins singing *I'm Your Man* in a deep husky voice, hitting all the big notes. As the song switches to *I'm a woman* Cyrus throws away the hat and rips off the trousers to reveal a black leotard while singing in her normal more feminine voice. This gender bending performance is a classic example of Cyrus not subscribing to the expected gender norms. She showcases she can do both and in doing so is bringing gender fluidity to mainstream media. This simple performance is good example of Cyrus showing that she does not need big theatrics to get her point across. Through her performance, Cyrus celebrated the diversity of gender identities and challenged the notion that gender is binary or fixed.

<sup>2</sup> Twerking is dance style originating in Africa (Gaunt, 2021).

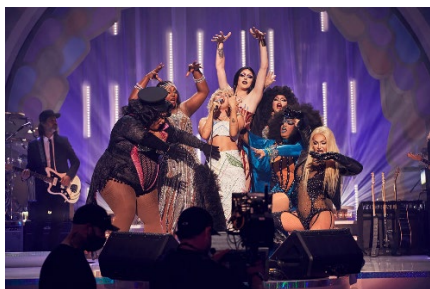
5 *Stand By You Pride Special (2021)*

Figure 5 Stand By You Special 2021

The 2021 Stand by You Pride special was hosted by Miley Cyrus in Nashville, Tennessee. The hour long special featured special guests and performers all to celebrate the month of Pride and show solidarity for those in the LGBTQIA+ community. Cyrus opens the show to thank everyone for coming and stating, ‘everyone is welcome here’. She performs her hit songs as well as some covers including, I’ll stand by you, which she dedicated to the audience. However, her stand out performances of the night was her rendition of Believe by Cher. Cyrus was joined on stage by 6 drag queens who danced in perfect synchronicity beside her.

This performance is showing visibility for the LGBTQIA+ community, highlighting the struggles they face which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Cyrus calls on the state of Nashville to be a safe place for the community and welcome everyone. “*Let’s be that place Nashville, where people of all identities feel at home*” (Cyrus, 2021, Stand By You Pride Special).

<b>Performances</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Teen Choice Awards (2009)	Agency Challenging societal expectations/norms
Britian’s Got Talent (2010)	Agency Challenging societal expectations/norms
Video Music Awards (2013)	Agency Challenging societal expectations/norms
Maya and Marty (2016)	Visibility Challenging societal expectations/norms
Stand By You Pride Special (2021)	Visibility Challenging societal expectations/norms

**Discussion**

### *Agency*

In sociology agency is defined as an expression of autonomy that goes against social institutions and structures and cultural forces (Shapiro, 2005). The story of Miley Cyrus's career has revolved around her agency in her performances, especially in the last few years. In this sense, agency refers to her capacity for conscious and independent choice-making regarding her public character, image, and artistic expression. This is evident in both Cyrus's professional and personal life, where she freely expresses herself as she chooses. Regardless of public or media scrutiny, Cyrus remains steadfast in her actions. She demonstrates agency by consciously utilizing her body as a source of empowerment. As previously mentioned in a 2013 Rolling Stone interview Cyrus is quoted as saying "I know what I am doing, I know I am shocking you" (Cyrus, 2013, cited in Rolling Stone). Cyrus's statement implies that when she takes the stage, she does so with deliberate intent, fully cognizant of her actions and their potential to generate shock and stir controversy. This would suggest agency and power over the performances. Power as described by Foucault allows for the dictation of what knowledge is produced across society (Foucault, 1990). In this case Cyrus is using her own power to have creative control over her performances and the image she puts out. Agency was found in three of the five Miley Cyrus performances. The first performance in 2009 set the precedent for what was to come from Cyrus. The TCA performance was Cyrus's attempt at power through her performance. She continued to demonstrate her agency in her 2010 and 2013 performances by her choice of outfits and the way she moved herself on stage and the way she interacts with her dancers. This agency indicates that Cyrus holds feminist potential in her performances in the way that she articulates herself while performing. She takes control of her image and her sexuality; by doing this she is asserting her agency and independence. Cyrus's agency in her performances is characterized by her fearless approach to self-expression, her commitment to social activism, and her willingness to challenge conventional norms. By asserting control over her image and artistic output, she embodies the principles of autonomy and empowerment, redefining what it means to be a modern-day pop icon.

### *Visibility*

Miley Cyrus is no stranger to the fight for LGBTQIA+ recognition and visibility, this is seen throughout her career including her on stage performances. In 2014, Cyrus was inspired by the tragic death of a transgender girl Leelah Alcorn to set up her own charity The Happy Hippie Foundation (Setoodeh, 2016). The foundation is a non-profit organisation that aims to raise funds and awareness surround LGBT+ youth and homelessness (Happy Hippie Foundation, 2014). Through the Happy Hippie Foundation Cyrus has initiated various projects and campaigns to raise awareness and funds for LGBT+ rights and homelessness. Some notable initiatives include Cyrus launching the Backyard Sessions, a series of music performances featuring herself and other artists with proceeds going to the Happy Hippie Foundation. These sessions have featured LGBT+ themes and artists, helping raise awareness and support for the cause. This representation and visibility are needed for those in the

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community to feel comfortable with who they are. GLAAD (formerly known as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) reported in 2021 that 7.1% of adult Americans are LGBTQ+, with that number rising with each generation. The CEO of GLAAD Sarah Kate Ellis stated that thanks to the increase in visibility and representation more LGBTQIA+ Americans can be comfortable to be their authentic selves (GLAAD, 2022). The outrage after Cyrus supposedly kissed a girl on stage during her BGT performances indicates the deeply rooted ideas of traditional sexuality inscribed via heteronormativity. As stated by Rich (1980) there is pressure to conform to heterosexual norms in society; however, Cyrus serves as a prime example of challenging socially constructed views of sexuality, advocating for more positive representation of the LGBTQIA+ community. Through her actions and advocacy, she highlights the diversity of sexual orientations, emphasizing their myriad expressions of sexuality beyond traditional norms. As Rich (1980) contends, societal norms often reproduce and reinforce certain expectations. However, Cyrus has challenged these norms through her onstage performances, demonstrating that individuals need not conform to such expectations. In doing so she creates space for individuals to embrace their true selves authentically. Cyrus's Stand by You Pride 2021 was a prime opportunity for her to bring attention and visibility to the struggles faced by the LGBTQIA+ Community.

### *Challenging Societal Expectations/Norms*

The key findings from theorists Butler, Rich and Foucault suggest patriarchal society has created binary categories that males and females are supposed to fit into. Butler alludes to this in their findings, believing that gender itself is a social construction used to oppress women (Butler, 1990). It was found in all five of the performances that Cyrus was seen to challenge societal norms and expectations. This is largely due to Cyrus not subscribing to the gender rules she was expected to follow. Rich (1980) emphasised the importance of women finding their voices: Cyrus uses her performances to create empowerment and allow her voice to be heard in a deeper way than just her singing on stage. Furthermore, as Butler (1990) posits, women are often expected to conform to societal expectations of timidity, purity, and unobtrusiveness. Cyrus actively rejects these notions, a defiance that is evident throughout her performances. However, this way of acting often found Cyrus being portrayed negatively in the media. The 2009 TCA performance was her first attempt at showing the world she was ready to perform the way she wanted. This transpired to her 2010 BGT performance with her once again dancing on stage and kissing her female dancer. Despite the controversy surrounding both these performances, Cyrus still maintained her power for her 2013 VMA performance. The controversies surrounding this performance centres around the sexualisation of Cyrus. The media persistently oversexualized Cyrus for her performances, which Cyrus claimed were, in reality,



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expressions of her enjoyment in performing. In 2019, Cyrus publicly addressed this issue on her Twitter page, condemning the slut-shaming directed at her (Cyrus, 2019; see Figure 6). She expressed frustration with the misrepresentation of her image and highlighted the double standard, noting that men rarely face slut-shaming. These findings suggest that Cyrus is an example of using her celebrity status to promote the ideas of Queer feminism positively.

However, it is important to acknowledge that Cyrus' interpretation of feminism may not garner universal acceptance within scholarly discourse. Cyrus's journey reflects the challenge of navigating feminist ideals in a culture that often equates sexualization with empowerment. On one hand, her unapologetic embrace of sexuality can be seen as an act of defiance against societal expectations and an assertion of autonomy. On the other hand, using hypersexualised imagery as a form of rebellion risks reinforcing the very structures that limit women's freedom. Her provocative performances and explicit imagery challenge traditional norms and asserts her right to express herself on her own terms. However, this approach also raises questions about the effectiveness of using sexualised imagery to promote feminist ideals. Critics suggest that this kind of imagery can uphold the same patriarchal systems that earlier waves of feminism worked to break down. Sinead O' Connor's response to Cyrus's 2013 'Wrecking Ball' video encapsulates this tension (O'Connor, 2013). O'Connor who was an Irish singer-songwriter and activist best known for her powerful voice and outspoken views, criticized the sexualised imagery, suggesting that it played into a system that exploits women and uses them as commodities. She urged Cyrus not to allow herself to be manipulated by an industry that profits from objectifying women. However, Cyrus herself has addressed this letter in 2023 remaining unapologetic for her early career choices (Weisholtz , 2023). *"I had been judged for so long for my own choices that I was just exhausted, and I was in this place where I finally was making my own choices and my own decisions and to have that taken away from me deeply upset me,"* (Cyrus for Today News , 2023). Cyrus response 10 years on from the open letter offers a contradiction to O' Connor's thoughts. Cyrus suggests that her provocative choices were an assertion of her autonomy and a way to break free from the constraints placed upon her during her early career. Cyrus here is clarifying her agency and the power she had during these performances.

Figure 6 Miley Cyrus Tweet

### Conclusion

The findings from this article indicate that Miley Cyrus demonstrated positive feminist themes within her on stage-performances. Cyrus' performances challenge conventional gender norms and expectations. She brings into question traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. As demonstrated by key insights from Queer theory, challenging societal expectations requires confronting and defying established norms. The research suggests that Cyrus has used her on stage performances to positively promote feminist themes. When considering the concept of power, Cyrus uses her body as a symbol of power within in the performances. This power represents itself as Cyrus's agency in that she controls how she performs when on stage. Moreover, when thinking of Rich and Butlers work Cyrus promotes gender fluidity and sexual liberation. Rich and Butler both argue that

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gender and sexuality have been socially constructed over time to create traditional expectations of men and women. Cyrus's performances can be interpreted as a direct challenge to conventional gender norms. She dresses, dances, and interacts with her dancers on her own terms, demonstrating her commitment to breaking down the boundaries between gender and sexuality. Through her actions, Cyrus advocates for a more inclusive society.

All five performances demonstrated ideas that promote the acceptance of nontraditional ideas of gender and gender roles. This article suggests that the sexual nature of Miley Cyrus's on-stage performances was her attempt to break down the binary mould society put her in and her attempt to reclaim her authority. By having the agency over her performances, she also had the ability to breakdown traditional societal expectations. Overall, this article can conclude that when using Queer theory to assess Miley Cyrus on stages performances, there is positive feminist representation, promoting non-traditional ideas surrounding gender and sexuality. This allows for feminist ideas to be brought to a larger audience. This type of representation is vital to challenging binary traditions and create a more inclusive society. The media and society were intent on judging Cyrus for her antics but really, they should have been celebrating it as it was Cyrus's way of saying no to the standards society holds on women. She uses her on stage performances to include themes of agency, visibility and challenges societal expectations, these are all themes that can allow for positive feminist representation.

### Image References

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