



## Lady Gaga and Feminism: A Critical Debate

### LADY GAGA EST UNE FEMINISTE? UN DEBAT CRITIQUE

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#### Abstract

This paper critically explores the work of Lady Gaga through her music videos, debating whether or not she should be perceived as a symbol of female power. With unclear representations of sex, violence, and power in her videos, it is debatable as to whether she is a gendered warrior fighting for the advancement of women or if she is a pop-cultural representation of hyper-sexualized violence against women in the media. Through this debate, it is argued that Lady Gaga fuels a continuing war against women's bodies by: a) turning violence against women into a commodity, b) normalizing violence, c) dehumanizing herself, and d) generating unrealistic expectations of female empowerment.

**Key words:** Sex; Violence; Power; Music; Feminism

#### Résumé

Cet article explore le travail critique de Lady Gaga à travers ses clips vidéos, de débattre si oui ou non elle doit être perçue comme un symbole du pouvoir féminin. Avec les représentations claires de son sexe, de violence et de puissance dans ses vidéos, il est discutable de savoir si elle est un guerrier sexué qui lutte pour la promotion de la femme ou si elle est une représentation pop-culturelle de l'hyper-sexualisée violence contre les femmes dans les médias. Grâce à ce débat, il est soutenu que Lady Gaga carburants d'une guerre permanente contre le corps des femmes par: a) transformer la violence contre les femmes

en une marchandise, b) la normalisation de la violence, c) se déshumaniser, et d) générer des attentes irréalistes de l'autonomisation des femmes.

**Mots-clés:** Sexe; Violence; Pouvoir; Musique; Féminisme

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#### INTRODUCTION

It is the first day of class and 400 eager students pack into the lecture hall to begin an exploration of Criminological Theory. The professor, wanting to catch their attention and add some vigor from the outset, opens the course with an up-tempo music video: Lady Gaga's *Paparazzi* (2009), a song with international success at the top of music billboard's in the United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand. The video opens with a physical struggle between two supposed lovers: one, Lady Gaga the other, an unnamed man. The struggle ends with the man pushing Lady Gaga off of a balcony. As she falls, the music begins. In the classroom, this vivid display of violence is met with thunderous laughter. The video continues, depicting Lady Gaga's rehabilitation from the fall, as well as a series of images of near-naked women strangled, suffocated, and/or killed in various still shots. The music ends with Lady Gaga's murderous revenge on the man. The classroom erupts in applause. Hoping to capitalize on the excitement in the room, the professor poses two questions to the students: What does this video say about Western culture? What does it say about the status of women in Western culture? For the first time, the great mass of students is silent. They are either

unsure or unwilling to comment.

This work aims to fill some of the silence that filled the classroom. It seeks to provide some feminist commentary on the wildly bizarre, pop cultural icon, Lady Gaga. This work will begin by detailing the overarching themes of Lady Gaga's videos, including the interconnections of sex, violence, and power. A debate then ensues as to whether or not Lady Gaga can be considered a feminist symbol or not.

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## 1. REPRESENTATIONS OF SEX, VIOLENCE, AND POWER

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The three central themes that shape Lady Gaga's music videos are sex, violence, and power. As the following will explore, these themes are often interwoven in Lady Gaga's music videos to construct a series of violent sexual imagery. The images are presented throughout these videos to produce a consistent narrative of sexualized violence and murderous revenge.

As previously noted, the *Paparazzi* video opens with Lady Gaga and an unnamed man kissing in bed before moving to a balcony to continue their forays. This sexual encounter merges into a violent one as Lady Gaga is seen being pushed off the balcony by the man. The video then shows still shots throughout of near-naked, violently murdered women. The video concludes with Lady Gaga poisoning the man who threw her off the balcony.

Depicting a similar narrative, in the music video *Bad Romance* (2009) Lady Gaga is drugged, tied-up, kidnapped and put up for auction, to be bought by the highest paying man at a futuristic auction. Lady Gaga is stripped of her outer garments and left struggling to cover her body while men bid on her. The video is essentially a depiction of a futuristic form of human trafficking. Lady Gaga, in typical near-naked attire, is depicted as a passive victim being illicitly bought and sold. At the end of the video, Lady Gaga strips to her underwear in front of the man who purchased her. In the final scene, however, the man is burnt alive by a fire-breathing weapon in Lady's Gaga's bra.

In the opening of Lady Gaga and Beyonce's music video for the song *Telephone* (2010), Lady Gaga is stripped to nothing but black tape covering her nipples and is shown to be physically dragged around a prison cell by two guards. In subsequent scenes of the video, two near-naked women fight in the prison, Lady Gaga wraps herself in crime scene tape to cover her naked body, and her and many other women dance throughout the prison in thong underwear and bras. Once released from prison, Lady Gaga and Beyonce drive to a restaurant and poison the patrons.

Each of these three videos depict extreme violence against women. Whether it is physical violence or sexual exploitation, these videos offer vivid depictions of male

power over women's bodies. However, these videos similarly end with images of retribution as men are seen to be violently killed. Lady Gaga appears strangely empowered through her violent revenge. By the end of each video she is not represented as the victim, but as a powerful women who has exacted revenge on the men who have abused her. These images beg the question: What is the aim of this recurrent theme? And what are the possible consequences and ramifications of this theme in popular media?

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## 2. LADY GAGA: A GENDERED WARRIOR?

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When Gloria Steinem, a well-known feminist writer, was asked on a recent radio broadcasting whether Lady Gaga could be a feminist, she mused that perhaps this could be so (CBC Radio- 2010). The following intends to explore this possibility further by entertaining the notion of Lady Gaga as a gendered warrior fighting feminist battles.

The focus on revenge against violence within Lady Gaga's music videos might be understood to carry feminist sentiments. In one regard, Lady Gaga herself could be seen as an image of female empowerment. She is an award-winning musician and performer, has notoriety throughout the world, and has incredible financial wealth. She might be said to be an icon of female power, giving young women hope that barriers are being lifted that have traditionally constrained the financial successes of previous generations of women. Reflecting this view, Forbes magazine recently listed Lady Gaga as number seven on their list of the most powerful women in the world.

Lady Gaga might also be seen as challenging repressive sexual norms in her style of dress and provocative dance moves, gestures, and lyrics. Her constant display of her near-naked body could be perceived as a sign of how far women have come in their freedom to display their bodies and perform their sexualities in a major public forum. Lady Gaga continues to push these boundaries with each new video she releases, suggesting that she might be a gendered warrior of sorts, fighting rigid constraints on female expression. In this light, Lady Gaga's work could be perceived as a sign of the increased liberation of women.

It could also be suggested that the theme of violence against women that is embedded in much of Lady Gaga's work might also be a means of drawing attention to the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse of women's bodies. For example, in the music video for the song *Telephone*, Lady Gaga is seen to be covering her naked body in crime scene tape. As this tape wraps her around her, her body is depicted as a crime scene of sorts. While this video appears to glamorize sex and violence with its provocative and violent imagery, it might also be understood be a critical statement on the ways in which women's bodies are abused and mistreated.

The still shots of near-naked murdered women in the *Paparazzi* video could be understood similarly. It might be argued that Lady Gaga is trying to draw critical attention to the media's obsession with representations of sex and violence. One aim of the video appears to be highlighting the means to gaining celebrity through attention from the paparazzi. Sex and violence appears to attract the attention of the paparazzi in the video. It is possible this inclusion could be understood to be criticizing the glorification of sex and violence.

The theme of revenge might also be relevant to an absurdist notion of feminism that dictates a violent physical warfare against men. Essentially, the narrative in Lady Gaga's videos appears to propose a singular solution to violence against women; women taking up arms, using physical violence, and seeking murderous revenge. Lady Gaga might be seen as an empowered gendered warrior who retaliates to being victimized by domestic violence, kidnapping, and human trafficking by donning a thong, poisons, and various weapons to kill the men who have made her a victim. Is Lady Gaga a gendered warrior? Or, does her imagery contribute to the empowerment of men and the continued subordination of women?

Labeling Lady Gaga a feminist or gendered warrior requires some leaps in the interpretation of her work. While some feminist groups might hold her up as a feminist icon who empowers contemporary young women, it could also be argued that her work plays into a traditional script written by men for the benefit of men. If there is a gender war and Lady Gaga is a gendered warrior, which side is she fighting for? While it could be argued that Lady Gaga herself is a symbol of some form of power resulting from the wealth she has accumulated in her career as a musician and performer. It is less clear what the aims of her music and videos are. Furthermore, it can be questioned as to how much control she even has over the production of her music and videos.

Are the themes of sex and violence a means to cast critical attention on heinous crimes against women like physical assault, sexual violence, and human trafficking? Are these depictions aimed at criticizing the ways in which various forms of mass media glamorizing violence against women? Or, is Lady Gaga and her team of producers and agents capitalizing on the sale of sex and violence in her videos?

Despite the possible interpretation of Lady Gaga as a gendered warrior, it could also be argued that Lady Gaga is a contributor to the commercialization and continued perpetration of violence against women. In this sense, Lady Gaga could be bolstering an existing war against women's bodies through her performances of sex and gendered violence. It might be suggested that Lady Gaga fuels this war by: a) turning violence against women into a commodity, b) normalizing violence, c) dehumanizing herself, and d) generating unrealistic expectations of female empowerment.

### 3. SELLING [NON]-FICTIONAL VIOLENCE

The violence against women depicted in Lady Gaga's videos is a work of fiction. It is, however, darkly paralleled to the non-fictional violence that is routinely inflicted on women through physical and sexual violence. While Lady Gaga might have aims to shed critical light on these issues, it could equally be argued that she depicts this violence for the purposes of creating shocking imagery intended for entertainment.

The North American music industry is an industry like any other, built with profit making motives. One clear aim of the videos is to sell Lady Gaga. The intention is to lure the public into watching the videos, buying the songs, purchasing Lady Gaga posters and paraphernalia, and selling concert tickets. Themes of sex and violence might not be the feminist objectives of a gendered warrior but rather, a marketing strategy that has undoubtedly worked. The central product being sold in Lady Gaga videos might be best described as gendered violence.

Lady Gaga as a gendered warrior might also be a secondary product sold within her videos. As Lady Gaga is routinely depicted as a victim of various forms of gendered violence who strikes back with her sexualized body against the men who have harmed her, she becomes a commodified feminist symbol that equates female empowerment with sexuality and violence. If these are the products being sold, what are the ramifications?

### 4. BIZARRE VIDEOS; NORMALIZED VIOLENCE

In the absence of any clear critical perspective depicted in her videos, images of gendered violence serve to normalize and legitimate such acts. While most of Lady Gaga's videos appear set in a futuristic world that have little resemblance to Western culture in 2010, the realities of violence depicted are very real. When one watches her *Paparazzi* video he or she is left to question why still images of near-naked women having been strangled and otherwise murdered are presented throughout. What does the young woman who is watching think? How is the young boy who is watching to respond? What sense can a class full of Criminology students make of this?

While a subtle feminist agenda might be teased out by reading between the lines, what is clear is that violence is being portrayed. It is not explicitly problematized, it is simply the backdrop to Lady Gaga's songs. In so doing, it appears as routine. The status of woman as the inevitable victim of male violence remains unchallenged. It is not merely that viewers might become desensitized to the impact of gendered violence, but that it comes to be seen as normal and inevitable. Watching Lady Gaga's videos without a critical eye does give an impression of the normalcy of gendered violence in North American culture.



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## 5. LADY GAGA AS DEHUMANIZED OBJECT

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While arguments have been made that Lady Gaga could be seen as a gendered warrior allied with ongoing feminist struggles, it could also be argued that she represents the continued objectification and dehumanization of women. The basis of the gendered warrior argument is that Lady Gaga is an active agent who is forcibly taking a stand against gendered violence through her music and videos. It might be, however, more appropriate to see Lady Gaga not as an individual, but rather as an identity that has emerged from a conglomeration of producers, managers, and music professionals. Lady Gaga's real name is Stefani Germanotta. Though she is credited as a writer on some of her music, there is an enterprise behind her success. An enterprise that appears to be predominantly powered by men (Herbert, 2010; Morgan, 2010; Parvis, 2010).

As previously discussed, some may regard Lady Gaga as a liberator of women with her sexually provocative styles of dress, dance moves, and gestures. She is a contemporary sex symbol who pushes the boundaries of acceptable female sexual expression. Her public displays of sexuality should, however, conjure up longstanding debates between feminist scholars surrounding pornography as being inherently oppressive or liberating (Cole, 1995; Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1987; McElroy, 1995; Morgan, 1980; Rubin, 1993). Echoing these debates, the question could be posed: is Lady Gaga sexually liberated or is she a sex object?

Many scenes within Lady Gaga's music videos blur into the pornographic. At times she is seen to be completely naked, with her genital areas covered by tape, hands, or a censorship blur. Likewise, there are scenes that are intended to emulate sex where men grind against her and grope at her genitals. While some feminists may argue that these sexual images represent liberation and empowerment, others would most likely suggest that these images depict oppression and exploitation. With a team of male producers and directors, some measure of the sexualized video scripts are certainly beyond her own free will and creative discretion. Furthermore, men are often depicted as sexually dominant over her. In one scene in the video for her single *Alejandro* (2010), several men grab at and grope her while she is completely naked.

While Lady Gaga might dress in revealing clothing, it could be suggested that this is not sufficient evidence to consider her to be a symbol of liberation. Women might be shown in low-cut dresses in Lady Gaga's videos, but with *Paparazzi* as an example, these women are strangled and suffocated. This does not appear to represent the sexual liberation of women, free from scripts dictated by men. In fact, it appears to reinforce traditional gendered norms of objectifying women and their body parts.

With such depictions, not only could it be argued that traditional norms of male sexual dominance are

normalized and reinforced, but also that women such as Lady Gaga are seen to be dehumanized. Lady Gaga becomes a sex object that is routinely victimized as she is bought and sold and violently abused. Her only agency is her ability to use her victimization and treatment as a sex object to bring men close to then commit the ultimate revenge: murder.

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## 6. IS LADY GAGA'S SOLUTION VIABLE?

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While the feminist motivations behind Lady Gaga's music videos might be relatively debatable, the viability of the solution these videos offer to gendered violence is not. A gendered warrior wearing a thong and fire-throwing bra, fighting male violence with more violence is an absurd solution that trivializes female victimization. With the impossibility of the enactment of this solution, the impression Lady Gaga's viewers are left with is that gendered violence is inevitable.

The solution proposed trivializes the experiences of victims of gendered violence. The videos deal with serious issues of violence against women that are far from fictional. To construct a solution that is so far from plausible, these videos make the reality of gendered violence seem like less of a serious concern. Similarly, it rests on a simplistic understanding of gendered violence that locates causes in individual men, rather than more complex understandings that take into account the role that cultural constructions such as these music videos play in formulating and reinforcing dangerous gender norms.

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## 7. WITHOUT LAUGHTER

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A new school year has begun and though now dated, the professor decides to show the same music video-Lady Gaga's *Paparazzi*- to a new group of students in Criminological Theory. This time, instead of leading with the *Paparazzi* video, the professor opens with a short clip detailing the deaths of 14 women in the 1989 Montreal Massacre at l'Ecole Polytechnique. The students are then asked: What does this video say about Western culture? What does it say about the status of women in Western culture? A student raises his hand in the back of the room and states "that feminism is still relevant." After a lengthy class discussion on the importance of continuing to fight for the rights and equality of all women and groups of people, the professor shows the *Paparazzi* video. Unlike the previous year where laughter was peppered throughout, the students in the class are silent as the video plays.

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