

How the Three Waves of American Feminism Shaped Madonna's Domination of 1980's and  
90's Popular Culture

Research Question: In what ways did Madonna further American feminism in the 1980's and  
1990's?



*Figure 1: Mazur, Kevin. (2017). Madonna and Marilyn Minter at the Brooklyn Museum [Online image]. Getty Images, Retrieved from <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/madonna-noses-backstage-at-brooklyn-museum-on-january-19-news->*

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## Introduction

Beginning with Madonna's emergence onto the Billboard Music Charts with the release of her debut single *Holiday* in October of 1982, Madonna made a name for herself through both her music and erotic performances (Gitlin, 2011). Soon after *Holiday*'s release, Madonna dropped her self-titled album *Madonna* in September of 1983 which peaked at number six on the Billboard charts and remained in the top ten for ten consecutive weeks (Madonna, n.d.). However, as Madonna's fame began to grow she began to draw criticism for her blatant disregard of traditional cultural norms (Smith, 2015). The entirety of Madonna's career has been plagued with controversy from her 1984 performance of *Like a Virgin* in which she was nearly arrested for public masturbation, to her iconic 1991 interview in *The Advocate* in which she openly supported the LGBTQ community. Madonna is so much more than a celebrity or pop star. In fact, Madonna is a cultural icon who defined an era.

Madonna, who rose to fame in the 1980's was birth into a period of feminist evolution. At a crossroads between the echoes of the second-wave movement and the beginnings of the third-wave, Madonna found a way to be feminist that did not entirely fit into the older second-wave ideology nor the up and coming third-wave. Instead Madonna sought after and embodied a type of feminism that encapsulated not only the second and third wave movements, but created a feminism that was sexually liberating in a way that would not be seen in a wider scope until years following the conclusion of the third-wave movement (Paglia, 1992).

Madonna's reinvention of the female popstar, from the likes of her contemporaries such as Celine Dion or Whitney Houston into a sexually promiscuous, outspoken, and seemingly

rebellious figure would define the next generation of popstars. From those of the early 2000s like Jennifer Lopez to those of the 2010's such as Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Lady Gaga, or Miley Cyrus, all of them have come to embody the same sense of sexual liberation that Madonna carefully cultivated over the course of her career. Beyond this, Madonna knew the power she had and used it to promote equality, call out bigotry, and ultimately, build a feminism that was entirely her own (Paglia, 1992). The investigation will aim to investigate the three main waves of American feminism and connect them to Madonna through her videos, songs, interviews, appearance, and overall public persona. This leads to the question **in what ways did Madonna further American feminism in the 1980's and 1990's?**

## **American Feminism**

### The First Wave of Feminism (1830's-1930's)

The first wave of feminism was closely aligned with the abolitionist movement of the mid to late nineteenth century and the women's suffrage movement (Rampton, 2015). The movement officially began with the 1848 Seneca Falls convention in which over three hundred men and women gathered together to rally in support of equality for women (Rampton, 2015). However, the movement had informally begun in the decade leading up to the convention, giving the movement the momentum it needed to obtain larger scale support.

The movement saw the likes of Sojourner Truth, Alice Paul, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who are forever engraved into history due to the contributions they made in establishing a cohesive movement that fought for women's rights. While Sojourner Truth, who is just as, if not more, well known for her advocacy for women's rights was also an abolitionist. Truth, who was born into slavery, but eventually gained her freedom gave her iconic "Ain't I a Woman?" speech

at the Seneca Falls convention (Butler, n.d.). It is perhaps, the clearest example of the first wave's ties to the abolitionist movement as it addresses the inconsistencies in treatment between men and women, but also goes as far as to distinguish between the treatment of women based on race. However, Victorian America was much more concerned with the women's suffrage movement. The movement saw women and men fighting for women's right to vote and rallying against "the cult of domesticity" that pervaded American society (Rampton, 2015). So, while the movement began with a distinct anti-slavery position it would yield little to no progress for minorities. It wasn't until the second wave that women of color would begin to see similar progress to that which their white counterparts (Rampton, 2015). The most progress was made in the realm of women's rights and expectations. The conclusion of the first wave would see the addition of the nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution which granted women the right to vote and the 1920s saw a shift in the sexual expectations of both women and men (Clark, 2016).

### The Second Wave of Feminism (1960's-1950's)

Following a period defined by a series of world wars and conformity, the second wave of feminism was characterized by a refreshing consciousness of women's social inferiority. The issues of reproductive rights and sexuality became key components of the second wave movement. The invention of 'The Pill', or an oral contraceptive allowed women to be sexually active and maintain careers, giving women control over their bodies and increasing women's freedom to choose when to have children (Escoffier, 2015). In the context of the sexual revolution of the 1960's, in which multiple sexual partners, sexual expression, and comprehensive sex education were encouraged it is unsurprising that one of the biggest aspects of the second wave movement was sexual liberation (Escoffier, 2015). This included a public discourse on the natural nature of sex, orgasms, and masturbation, all of which were some of the

most taboo topics pertaining to female sexuality (Gerhard, 2001). However, objectification whether it be through porn or otherwise was generally frowned upon by second wave feminist (Bracewell, 2016).

One of the biggest wins of the second wave movement was the landmark court decision of *Roe v. Wade*. With the fight for reproductive rights at the forefront of the movement, the right for a woman to be able to choose whether or not to terminate a pregnancy was something second wave feminists favored (Rampton, 2015). While the topic of abortion within the movement garnered nothing but support, in the broader scope of the country it was quite controversial. Many groups, several of which had religious affiliation, protested throughout the duration of the hearing and even in the years following the decision arguing that abortion was morally wrong and was murder (Rubin, 1982).

While, the second wave saw the inclusion of women of color and those of different backgrounds in a stance of solidarity, the movement still didn't specifically address the issues of African American women or minorities (Rampton, 2015). While it was more inclusive and was born partially through the civil rights movement of the 1960's the third wave movement was the only feminist wave that was completely intersectional (Rampton, 2015).

#### The Third Wave of Feminism (1990's-2000s)

The Third Wave movement, unlike the two that preceded it were much more inclusive. The Third Wave advocated for equality across racial and sexual lines, bridging the gap between white feminists and queer or minority feminists (Rampton, 2015). The Third Wave saw the reclamation of sexual objectification and refusal by many feminists to be labeled as victims (Rampton, 2015). Many symbols of the patriarchy such as high heels, cleavage, and makeup were reclaimed by feminists who had abandoned them during the first and second waves viewing

them as symbols of oppressive male expectations of femininity and womanhood (Rampton, 2015).

The ultimate argument was that while high heels and makeup were representative of the stereotypical feminine norm that earlier movements had fought against, it was just as important to acknowledge that women did not have to abandon all sense of womanhood in order to be a feminist. The empowered feminists of the third wave understood that while the feminine women supported by the patriarchy was not necessarily representative of all women neither was the abolishment of traditional femininity. It was important for third wave feminists to clarify that feminine women could be empowered women as could the more masculinized versions. They argued that a woman could be multi-dimensional, and that portraying that a woman had to choose to be feminine and objectified or masculine and liberated was utter nonsense and went against the equality the movement was seeking to attain.

Third wave feminism encouraged women to be unapologetically themselves. It refused labels, so much so that third wave feminists often times refused the label of feminist as they found it too limiting (Rampton, 2015). Third wave feminism was revolutionary in that it stopped urging women to change in order to gain the rights and equality they wanted, instead the movement insisted that society needed to change its attitudes towards women. It was a type of empowerment that was not limited to a specific type of women, but rather embraced the idea that all women were deserving of equality. This allowed the third wave to become a means by which equality was promoted for all, including minority groups and those in the LGBTQ community (Heywood, 1997).

### **Madonna and Feminism**

Sexuality

Madonna's exploration into sexuality in her performances and videos is perhaps the most defining 'feminist' aspect of Madonna's career. Madonna leaned into the reclamation of objectification that was characteristic of the third wave movement instead of the anti-pornographic, anti-objectification sexuality promoted by the second wave (Peterson, 2017). Although the third wave did not begin until the 1990's, an entire decade after Madonna's career took off, Madonna embodied this aspect of the third wave starting with the release of her second studio album titled "*Like a Virgin*" in 1984.

"Like a Virgin" featured many of Madonna's biggest hits such as *Material Girl* and the album's namesake, *Like a Virgin*. In the music video for *Like a Virgin*, a scantily clad Madonna can be seen seductively dancing in a wedding dress, however her VMA performance of the song in 1984 took the concept one step further (Madonna, 2009). In the 1984 performance Madonna once again dons a wedding dress, this time it is short and sheer with a belt that reads "Boy Toy" (see Fig. 2) (Madonna, 2018). The ensemble is a commentary on the way society views women who are sexually promiscuous and go against the norm of remaining a virgin until marriage (Inglis, 2006). Hence, she chose to wear a belt that labels her as a "Boy Toy" while wearing a wedding dress which is both representative of this expectation and is a symbol of purity. Her behavior during the performance furthers Madonna's social commentary on marriage. As the performance begins, Madonna stands atop a tiered wedding cake and in a striptease like fashion, sheds parts of the wedding dress ensemble from the veil to the hair clip, to the bouquet as she descends onto the stage



Figure 2: McGough, David. (1984). Madonna at 1984 MTV Awards [Online Image]. Getty Images Retrieved from <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/american-singer-and-actress-madonna-dressed-in-white-lace-news-photo/91342386>



(Madonna, 2018). Once on the stage Madonna takes everything one step further and begins to hump the stage floor (see Fig. 3 )and ends the performance lying on her back, appearing to have had an orgasm (Inglis, 2006).



Figure 3: Micelotta, Frank. (1984). Madonna... [Online Image]. Getty Images. Retrieved from <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/madonna-performing-on-the-1984-mtv-video-music-awards-at-news-photo/2417916>

The sexually explicit nature of the performance garnered a lot of criticism, many rendering the entire performance an example of Madonna's tastelessness (Inglis, 2006). However, the critics often did not look further than the surface of the performance. Madonna's self-objectification through her explicit demonstration of sexuality: the "Boy Toy" belt, the striptease-like descent, and stimulated masturbation were meant to be much more than an erotic, tasteless performance. Instead it was intended to comment on the way society views women who have sex before marriage. They are often objectified by men and reduced to nothing more than their sexual promiscuity hence the "Boy Toy" belt. Besides the main message, the performance also was a representation of many of the taboos surrounding female sexuality. The adverse reaction by many to the stimulated masturbation, while partially attributed to the culture at the time, was representative of American's disgusted attitude toward female masturbation and overt sexuality (Inglis, 2006).

Madonna's 1984 VMA performance, remains one of the most controversial VMA performances of all time, people still talk about and remember it today nearly 30 years later (Sanchez, 2018). The significance of the performance lies in the extent of the controversy. Madonna was doing something that had not been seen before. The manner in which she openly objectified herself, encouraged sexual exploration through masturbation or otherwise, and called

out the ridiculousness of society's pressure for women to remain virgins until marriage were representative of feminist values from both the past and the future. Self-objectification was a concept that was characteristic of the third-wave as women refused to allow society dictate how they behaved (Rampton, 2015). However, self-objectification was strongly discouraged by the feminists of the second-wave who saw overt sexuality as a sign of male oppression (Rampton, 2015). In this sense, Madonna was embodying one of the key messages of the third-wave of feminism before the movement popularized the idea. Surely, the concept of self-objectification as a form of empowerment had been thought of before, but not on a broad scale. Madonna was a pioneer and example of the way that self-objectification could be used as a form of self-expression and empowerment. Later in her career Madonna would replicate the idea numerous times, most obviously with song titles such as "Bitch I'm Madonna" and "Unapologetic Bitch" in which she uses the derogatory term 'bitch', often used against women by men, as a declaration that she does not care what anyone else thinks, objectifying herself in true third-wave fashion as a sign of empowerment (Pardes, 2014).

Madonna's "Like a Virgin" performance's theme of exploring one's sexuality has its roots in both the second-wave and third-wave movements. While the somewhat pornographic stimulated masturbation would have been too explicit for second-wave feminists, the overarching concept of exploration of sexuality was a second-wave principle that stemmed from the Sexual Revolution of the 1960's and subsequently the second-wave movement (Rampton, 2015). However, the second-wave movement discouraged the aggressive approach Madonna used to portray her sexuality, instead pushing for a much more delicate, "don't kiss and tell" approach (Paglia, 1992). Perhaps the beauty of Madonna and this performance is that it refuses to be delicate about the topic of sex. It is explicit, straightforward, and sets an example that sex is

something that is not shameful, an ideology that for the 1980's and even the beginning of the third-wave movement was quite radical (Rampton, 2015). Once again Madonna was exemplifying a feminist ideology that equally as innovative as it was controversial. Madonna was always looking to challenge the public's understanding of the world, usually by doing something so radical that people could not look away and the 1984 VMA performance certainly accomplished that goal (Paglia, 1992). Madonna's message was inherently feminist, it was empowering, but it refused to submit to the delicate, feminine feminism that was socially accepted. Through this performance Madonna represents her own values and beliefs about sexuality and femininity despite the controversy she would undoubtedly receive. She was unapologetically true to herself, a true feminist.

Madonna's "Justify My Love" which debuted in 1989, was so sexually explicit the music video was banned from MTV. The video which features scenes containing nudity, sex, S&M, group sex, and pansexuality (see figs.4-5) which caused it to be banned based on grounds that it was too inappropriate for general viewing (Harrington, 1990). Madonna called the video 'a celebration of sex' in a Nightline interview in which she addressed the censorship of the video (Paglia, 1992). In the interview Madonna calls out MTV for censoring her video due to the explicit sex scenes and nudity but not censoring others that have violent or offensive themes (A Doss, 2013). Madonna explains the value such content has in teaching others to embrace their own sexuality, however, the video is very explicit even by modern standards and was better off without a feature on MTV (A Doss, 2013 & Paglia, 1992).

What the video, and Madonna, get right with "Justify My Love" is the way it explores sexual fantasies. The video does so much more than present the stereotypical sex scene, between a man and a woman. It celebrates sex as the intimate and expressive act that it is, delving into the

taboo worlds of group sex and S&M (Madonna, 2009). Madonna understands the complexity of sex, that it is not something to be ashamed of. Madonna exhibits a profounder understanding of sex than the feminists of her time, second or third wave did (Paglia, 1992). She sees past the surface and explores all of the varying dynamics and intricacies in detail in “Justify My Love” (Paglia, 1992). The video fits under both the second-wave movement which encouraged sexual expression and multiple partners and the third wave which promoted a much broader, masculinized sexual liberation, and was more inclusive to those in the LGBTQ community (Rampton, 2015).



*Fig 4: Madonna. (2009, October 26). Madonna-Justify My Love [Screenshot]. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np\\_Y740aReI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np_Y740aReI).*

However, the sultry, sensuous nature of the video conflicted with the delicate, feminine projection of sexuality that had been developed during the Sexual Revolution (Paglia, 1992). The video refused to show sex as beautiful, it looked beyond the artifice the second-wave feminists had built and showed it to be animalistic and rough around the edges (Paglia, 1992). Madonna was encouraging women and teens to explore their sexuality completely, to dive into their deepest fantasies, and even the taboo (Paglia, 1992). The sexual exploration of encouraged by Madonna was built onto the work of the second-wave movement, while simultaneously pointing out its limitations, and encouraging change in the audience's perception on sexuality. Madonna's video gave direction to third wave, which had formalized at the turn of the decade, and helped cultivate the much more masculinized, raucous sexuality that the movement advocated for (Rampton, 2015).

Race and LGBTQ Rights

In 1990 Madonna released “Vogue”, featuring the dance phenomenon known as voguing which had been popularized in the gay bar scene throughout the 1980’s (Madonna, 2009 & Shewey, 2018). The mainstreaming of the style gave visibility to the LGBTQ community at time when many were still ignorant about the LGBTQ community. However, the video for “Vogue” was not considered controversial as the general public was unaware of the dance’s origins.

Contrarily, Madonna’s interview in the publication *The Advocate*, Madonna took a much bolder stance in support of LGBTQ rights (Shewey, 2018). Madonna discussed the documentary



Figure 5: Madonna. (2009, October 26). Madonna- Justify My Love [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch>

*Madonna: Truth or Dare* in which cameras followed the pop diva and her dancers throughout her Blond Ambition World Tour, showcasing her dancers’ sexuality and lives in detail (Shewey, 1991). Madonna also discussed how she felt about her brother coming out as gay, of which she was very accepting, meanwhile Madonna called out her religious father for his ignorance surrounding the issue (Shewey, 2018). While today,

being LGBTQ is acceptable, in the 1990’s the entire concept was going mainstream for the first time. For the first time, President George Bush signed into law legislation that would looked into discrimination and attacks on homosexuals, becoming the first law to specifically address LGBTQ issues (Schmalz, 1992). As religious rights groups began to fight Bush and his support for the LGBTQ community, Americans were beginning to understand not only the concept of being gay, but the broader political and religious dynamics that the issue created. Madonna’s public support for the community came at a time when few celebrities were choosing sides on the issue.

Madonna's support for the community can be traced back to her 1989 "Justify My Love" video in which she explores sex between both men and women as well as two men (Harrington, 1990). The video was a rare representation of bisexuality and pansexuality giving visibility to the wide scope of sexualities that the community encompassed (Harrington, 1990). Madonna's support of the LGBT community is a uniquely third-wave feminist position. The third-wave which was the most intersectional out of all the waves of feminism, supported efforts by minority groups to gain equality (Rampton, 2015). Beyond this, Madonna genuinely supported the community, it is advocacy seen by giving on screen representation of the gay culture and community in "Vogue", "Justify My Love", and "Madonna: Truth or Dare", giving an interview about the topic to a gay publication, and even hiring gay dancers in despite the public's opinion about the decision. Madonna was accepting of the gay community before it became an emblem of feminism in the 1990's. In fact, the documentary *Madonna: Truth or Dare* helped cast a light on the lives of gay men and educate many Americans on the ignorance surrounding the community by showcasing just how similar the lives of gay people are to the lives of the heterosexual majority.

Another issue in which Madonna took a public stance was the victimization of African Americans by the police and interracial marriage through the music video for "Like a Prayer". In the video Madonna witnesses the sexual assault of a white woman by a white man who promptly runs away once he has assaulted the woman. A black man rushes to the woman's aid at which point the police arrive and arrest the man without asking him for his recollection of events (Warner Bros. Records, 2009). The third wave of feminism which focuses on the rights of minorities, including the treatment of African Americans by police, fought against such treatment (Keenan, 2015). The character played by Madonna in the video finds the entire

situation to be appalling, and after seeking sanctuary in a nearby black church, decides to go to the police with what she had seen, thus setting the African American free (Warner Bros.



Figure 6: Warner Bros. Records. (2009, October 26). *Madonna-Like a prayer (Official music video)* [Screenshot]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79fzeNUqQbQ>.

Records, 2009). While the scene does perpetrate the “white savior” narrative in which a person of color can only be saved by a white hero, Madonna nonetheless calls attention to the issue of the victimization of African Americans by the police. We see similar movements today in the Fourth wave of Feminism which is more intersectional than the third wave (Rampton, 2015). The Fourth Wave has seen movements of the likes of Black Lives Matter which has fought against police brutality and victimization especially of African Americans (Rampton, 2015). Essentially, Madonna once again embodied feminism of the future, she brought ideas to the forefront of the American conscience which brought about questions on the treatment of African Americans that many Americans may not have thought of before. Additionally, the video gives representation to interracial love and sexuality by displaying Madonna kissing and making out with a black saint in a church (see fig. 6) (Paglia, 1992). While black actors began to seep into mainstream pop culture, roles in which interracial relationships and sexuality were shown were few and far between, in this sense Madonna advocated for everyone’s ability to love who they wanted (Keenan, 2015). Madonna’s advocacy for minority rights, both LGBTQ and black rights was for the time, a feminist position and forward-thinking stance. Madonna was not simply jumping onto the bandwagon, rather she was building the early foundations for the movement by calling out issues she saw because she

genuinely wanted to draw attention to them. She helped shape the third wave, as did many other artists and advocates alike, by representing a problem through her art.

## Conclusion

At her peak, Madonna embodied feminism from both the second and third waves advocating for shifts in the public's understanding of sexuality and the portrayal of sexuality in media as well as for the rights and representation of LGBTQ and African American persons in mainstream media. In many cases, she pushed for issues not because they were popular in fact, often times they had to yet to be incorporated into any major movements. Madonna was part of the societal pressure to examine specific issues more closely, and she based the issues she highlighted partially on past initiatives from the second wave, furthering many issues confronted by second wave feminists such as sexuality and minority rights through a postmodern lens that was characteristic of the third wave (Rampton, 2015). Madonna furthered American feminism by constantly creating controversy and encouraging an entire nation to take part in a discussion about the issues plaguing America. The exposure to different social issues through Madonna's work helped shape the next generation of feminists. From the likes of "Justify My Love" and "Like a Prayer" to the documentary *Madonna: Truth or Dare*, Madonna pushed the envelope of what was acceptable in terms of race, sexuality, and identity. Controversy paired with Madonna's pop-princess persona during the 1980's and 1990's allowed her work to have an impact, one that awoke a new generation of feminists who were ready to make the fictitious world of Madonna a reality.



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## Appendix



Figure 1: Madonna sporting a *Feminist* shirt while attending the Brooklyn Museum

Figure 2: Madonna's 1984 VMA outfit and has become an iconic piece of American pop culture history.



## Appendix



Figure 3: Madonna during her 1984 VMA performance at which point she begins the most sexual part of the performance that leads to public outcry.



Figures 4 & 5: Both screenshots from the music video for "Justify My Love" establish the explicit, sexual nature of the video.

Figure 6: Screenshot from “Like a Prayer” showcases one of the ways in which Madonna investigates interracial sexuality in through her music video.

