

The Portrayal of Women in Katy Perry's Selected Song Lyrics

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ABSTRACT

The present study entitled The Portrayal of Women in Katy Perry's Selected Song Lyrics aims at drawing the portrayal of women in the selected song lyrics and revealing gendered messages in the selected song lyrics as viewed in post feminism perspectives. Utilizing a qualitative research particularly descriptive method, the discussion of the present study is framed within gender studies and theory of post feminism. The result of the present study shows that most of women in *One of the Boys* album (2008) are portrayed through five portrayals highlighting women's physical appearance, women as sexual subject, women's passive behavior, and women's attitudes to cover their dependency on men. These portrayals support patriarchal ideology in which women are in accordance with patriarchal society's expectation. The present study also discovers that gendered messages in most of song lyrics in *One of the Boys* do not show the notion of post feminism by being passive and dependent to men. Nevertheless, several songs explore the theme of sexuality as one of feminism values.

Keywords: *Gender, Feminism, Ideology, Women*

INTRODUCTION

Generally, when lyric writers write a song lyric, they are influenced by their life experience and events. For example, a song writer who is brought up in an environment that values patriarchal ideologies may portray women inferiority in his or her song lyrics. The portrayal of women in song lyrics has been a particular interest, especially for the feminists. Many have tried to draw the representation of women in literature that is to a high extent still prone to mistaken description and or incorrect representation. This is also true for the representation of female character in song lyric .For instance, in a paper critiquing Pink's *Stupid Girl*, Leonardi and Dickinson (2007) discuss how each gender is being portrayed in the song when they say, "Females are constructed and portrayed through various negative strategies to be passive, shallow, unengaged, and disempowered creatures". They found that the song supports patriarchy by making the woman seem inferior to the man and having the man seem to be a more powerful figure in the song.

Song lyric, as a piece of literary text, also contains the message in both explicit and implicit way. It is almost impossible for any types of literary text for not having a particular meaning. The connection between song lyric and its message, then, emerges in view of the fact that a songwriter whether in a conscious condition or not, always influences their songs with their intended meaning. Gendered message as the deeper meaning focusing on gender relation in song lyric can be identified by emphasizing correspondence of lyrics and images as the elements in the texts (Silverman 2001, cited in Click and Kramer 2007).

Katy Perry is an American pop singer-songwriter whose most of her songs concerning on gender relation. Most of her lyrics elaborate realistic aspects since it reflects view, feeling, and voice of women. Katy Perry is also well-known as a singer-songwriter who often explores themes of sexuality in her songs as a tool to make female character in her songs powerful. However, there is an implicit meaning that can be

analyzed through that kind of portrayal. Considering that, this present study tries to uncover how women are typically portrayed in song lyrics written and sung by woman and what gendered messages can be derived from the song lyrics as viewed from a post feminist perspective.

For this reason, this present study chooses ten song lyrics from *One of the Boys* (2008) album by Katy Perry to be analyzed. The song lyrics are *Fingerprints*, *Hot n Cold*, *I Kissed a Girl*, *If You Can Afford Me*, *I'm Still Breathing*, *Lost*, *Mannequin*, *One of the Boys*, *Self Inflicted*, and *Thinking of You*. Katy Perry co-wrote every song on the album as well as writing three of the songs herself.

The data were collected through reading and re-reading to Katy Perry's selected song lyrics for several times. It is because the study mostly deals with narrative textual analysis. The data is collected from ten Katy Perry's song lyrics in the form of textual evidences that are selected and directed to answer the research questions. Framed by

gender studies and post feminist perspectives as its theoretical foundation, this present study utilizes text analysis in analyzing the popular song lyrics. Textual analysis helps reveal the way lyric tells different stories about women's expectations and experiences while at the same time enabling the researcher to read gendered messages in each song. The result of the present study is expected to provide new insights for understanding gender issues in media through a deep analysis of women's portrayal.

The concept of gender in the present time relates to the role of man and woman rather than just man and woman's biological sex difference. Gender is what people do, wear, speak to show who people are as their identity. Sex-role behavior is learned (French, 1985, p. 531). Thus, it does not mean because one is a female then she should be feminine. She appears to perform feminine qualities because she learns how to be feminine, not masculine. Patriarchy was to make men central (and women marginal) to human life (French, 1985, p. 91). French names

the term of human division as masculine and feminine principles. The principles assert that masculine experience is rooted in power-in-the-world, with its symbolized act: to kill. Meanwhile, feminine experience is rooted in nature, with its symbolized act: to give birth.

Popular songs have an important role in constructing gender in society. If a song is played over and over and everybody likes it, then the song becomes popular. Thus, what is represented in that song or messages that the song carries on must be well-known as well. Brown (2003) in his article states that popular songs form the background of car rides and social gatherings, and it also inform the adolescent about the adult world through the lens of the artists' lives, language and role modeling. For instance, if a popular female singer mentions about women wearing a revealing outfit in her song, then young girls would probably think that they should be wearing the same kind of clothing. It could also work in another way; if a male rapper uses a derogatory term refer to a woman in

his song, chances are other people will start using the same term to refer to women. The fact that a song can control someone's action and behavior indicates that music industry has a big impact on the way gender is constructed.

The highlight in popular culture is in the role of media. According to Hall (cited in Hollows, 2000), popular culture is associated as local culture, something that is produced and consumed by people. Strinati (2004) states that popular culture is called as mass culture. She further says that in 1920s and 1930s, cultural products such as popular press, cinema and radio become the consumption of mass society. The popular culture media defines Postfeminism as Girl Power. It appeared in 1990s that the term Girl Power is identified as female empowerment (cited in Genz and Brabon, 2009). The term Girl Power is directly associated with music culture since the arrival of Spice Girl in 1996. Girl Power brings the idea of a celebration of self-belief in regards to friendship and independence.

To add more, there are debates regarding the definition of the term Post feminism. Faludi (cited in Gamble, 2001) asserts that all women are Post feminist now, which means that women have arrived at equal justice. He further mentions that Post feminism is viewed as reaction against second-wave Feminism.

Just when record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-1980s (more of them, in fact, than older women) and a majority of all women were calling themselves feminists, the media declared that feminism was the flavor of the seventies and that 'post feminism' was the new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women's movement.

From the explanation above, women who called themselves as feminists revile the women's movement at that time. The action comes from women who called themselves as feminists who reacted against the goals of feminist movement. This reaction is called as backlash. According to

Faludi (cited in Genz and Brabon, 2009) in society, backlash defines itself through media-inspired images. Media-inspired images persuade women that feminism is unfashionable and not worthy consideration.

Based on the analyzed data, the present study finds that women in Katy Perry's selected song lyrics are portrayed through five portrayals. The first portrayal is women are presented in attractive physical appearance. The second portrayal is women are treated as sexual object. The third portrayal is women are engaged in significantly passive behavior. The fourth portrayal is women are presented as having negative attitudes and the last portrayal is women are presented as having positive attitudes to cover their dependency on men. Each portrayal has different women's characteristics or traits. The characteristics are powerful, emotional, self-blaming, attractive, fickle, loyal, powerless, dependent, comforting, sexual object, and in solidarity with other women.

The way women are presented in attractive physical appearance and treated as sexual object reinforce the traditional assumption that woman is only valued from their body and its function. Furthermore, it is emphasized that woman is only believed as subordinate from man in society that defines woman as “lack” (Beauvoir in Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004). Women are also considered as weak creatures that need man’s protection and she does not have to be smart to attract man. This portrayal can be found in *I Kissed a Girl*, *One of the Boys*, and *Thinking of You*.

Meanwhile, the women’s portrayal as having passive behavior and negative attitudes simply imply that women are constructed and portrayed through various negative strategies to be passive, shallow, and disempowered creatures. The songs with these portrayals such as *Self Inflicted*, *Lost*, *I’m Still Breathing*, *Mannequin*, and *Hot n Cold* support patriarchy by making the woman seem inferior to the man and having the man seem to be a more powerful

figure in the song. The most interesting portrayal is women are presented as having positive attitudes to cover their dependency on men. At first, this portrayal seems to have a positive sense but if we take an in-depth comprehension towards the portrayal, there will be a negative sense. The women in *If You can Afford Me*, *One of the Boys*, *Mannequin*, and *Self Inflicted* become powerful, loyal, and comforting just to cover their need of the man’s love. These portrayals support Pearson and Pope (1976, cited in Savitt 1982) who state that “Patriarchal society views women essentially as supporting characters in the drama of life.” Most of the lyrics show how women cannot neglect the fact that they are men’s subordinate.

The present study also discovers gendered messages in each of Katy Perry’s selected song lyrics that are different one and another. The findings show that 8 out of 10 Katy Perry’s song lyrics under study have negative gendered messages creating the women’s need and dependency of the men. It is

evidenced in *Hot n Cold*, *I Kissed a Girl*, *If You can Afford Me*, *Lost*, *Mannequin*, *One of the Boys*, *Self Inflicted*, and *Thinking of You*.

Otherwise, *Fingerprints* and *I'm Still Breathing* are two song lyrics with its positive gendered messages which show great achievement of women. The themes of song lyric become broader, not only about the suffrage or equality, but also women's celebration in popular culture. In these songs, the women are consistent with efforts to empower women in initiating the decision and having a good self-confidence.

To sum up, most of gendered messages in Katy Perry's selected song lyrics are not in line with the term Girl Power in post-feminist which brings the idea of self-belief in regards to friendship and independent (cited in Genz and Brabon, 2009). Most of the song lyrics under study convey dominant gender role expectations in romantic relationships where men are depicted as more inclined to leave their lovers while women remain painful as a consequence.

Relying on the findings and discussions in the previous explanation, it can be concluded that *One of the Boys* album (2008) supports portrayal of woman to be in accordance with patriarchal society's expectation. Most of women in this album are presented by performing traditional gender assumption to be feminine. In *One of the Boys* (2008), Katy Perry demonstrates women's quest for freedom and power both sexually and personally. Despite all this, the gendered messages in most song lyrics exhibit feelings of low self-esteem and admit to a certain dependency on men.

Regarding the investigation on song lyrics, the present study suggests that further researchers may discuss some other researchable issues in popular music study, for instance the identity construction in song lyrics, character's development in song lyrics, and the uniqueness of narration in song lyrics. Further study of portrayal of women and gendered messages can also be conducted by obtaining the data from particular novels which currently emerge as medium to portray the

issues of woman's portrayal and gendered message.

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