

Girls, Thots, and Heartbreak:  
Women in the Billboard 2021 Top Artists' Lyrics

Bachelor's thesis  
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# JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

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<b>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</b> <p>Erilaiset mediasisällöt, kuten musiikki, rakentavat osaltaan maailmankuvaamme ja sekä vahvistavat että haastavat asenteitamme. Etenkin musiikki on nykyisin isossa osassa arkeamme, jonka vuoksi tarve musiikin lyriikoiden kriittiselle tutkimukselle on kasvanut.</p> <p>Tässä tutkielmassa syvennyttään tutkimaan populaarimusiikin lyriikoiden naiskuvauksia kriittisen diskurssianalyysin ja feministisen kriittisen diskurssianalyysin avulla. Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan sitä, miten populaarimusiikki pyrkii osaltaan tuomaan esille, haastamaan, tai ylläpitämään sukupuolistereotyyppioita ja -rooleja. Tutkimus pyrkii myös vastaamaan kysymykseen siitä, onko itse-identifioituvien naisten ja miesten lyriikoiden naiskuvauksissa keskenään huomattavia eroja.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen data koostui neljän eri Billboard-artistin vuonna 2021 kuunnelluimmista kappaleista. Vuoden 2021 Billboard Top Artists -listan kärjessä olivat Drake, Olivia Rodrigo, The Weeknd ja Taylor Swift. Kappaleiden lyriikat osoittautuivat osaltaan hyvin heteronormatiivisiksi ja naiset kuvattiin usein hyvin parisuhdekeskeisesti, sekä parisuhteissaan alistuvammiksi osapuoliksi. Toisaalta useimmissa kappaleissa naisten sisäistä maailmaa kuvattiin monipuolisesti ja moniulotteisesti.</p>	
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# 1. Introduction

Music can be recognized as a way for artists to construe their worldviews, and we as listeners most often tend to resonate the most with music (and lyrics) that validate our feelings, beliefs, and mindsets (Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009: 297-298). In this thesis, I will examine the discourses associated with women in the lyrics of popular music. I will also compare the lyrics of male and female artists in an attempt to determine whether or not there are any notable differences in how artists of different genders tend to portray women. The lyrics for this analysis were picked from four Billboard's 2021 top artists songs.

The lyrics of an artist can be compared to the speech of that person, tailored to their audience in specific contexts to pass on their messages, outlooks on some issues, and even political stances (Middleton 2013), so they can be analyzed the same way any other speech act. In the case of this thesis, critical discourse analysis and feminist critical discourse analysis are used as tools to analyze the power structures, gender roles and attitudes present in the lyrics.

As mentioned, we tend to gravitate towards lyrics that consolidate our viewpoints, beliefs, and biases. Continuing to study the gender roles, stereotypes, and in the case of this study, attitudes towards women presented in any piece of media can give us some indication on how we tend to view these things. I would argue that the lyrics of one singular artist will not bear that much weight unless they find a way to be amplified by like-minded people. This is why in this thesis, I wanted to focus more on the music that gets listened to by millions of people gaining more airtime instead of just focusing on one hyper specific genre that might not affect that large of a portion of population. This is why the artists and the songs for this analysis were chosen based on their popularity in 2021.

Media exposure, including music, may influence the ways in which we react, behave, and relate to women (or any other marginalized group). Music with more pro-equality lyrics have been shown to improve our attitudes towards women, whereas music that objectifies and sexualizes women tends to reinforce negative stereotypes and sexist gender roles (Greitemeyer et al., 2015: 59-64). According to the Cultivation Theory, individuals repeatedly exposed to the same media perspectives and messages are more likely to accept them as reality (Gerbner et al. 1994, in Hall et al. 2011: 105), which highlights the importance of critical media and popular culture studies.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Language and Gender

The relationship between language and gender has been studied in varying ways by both linguists and gender scholars, ranging from the ways in which different genders use language to the ways in which language is used to build and maintain gender narratives. Until the last few decades, the study of gender and language has been rather heteronormative, but since the 1990's scholars have broadened their studies to include more non-heteronormative aspects of gender identities, challenging the binary ideals. This perspective challenges the idea that one's gender is simply tied to their sex; gender is also seen as something performed, and thus recreated through language use (Jones, 2016: 213).

The idea of gender as a performance draws largely from the work of Butler (1990), where they frame feminine and masculine identities as something that is achieved and actively performed and produced through cultural acts such as the ways we dress ourselves, how we present ourselves and the language we use (Jones, 2016: 212). Thus, language can both construct and deconstruct any heteronormative and binary notions of gender. Understanding the ways in which language is used to construct and uphold gender roles is crucial when studying the discourses presenting certain attitudes towards any gender identities.

It is important to recognize that it is not possible to fully detach our gender identity from the rest of our identities, so when studying attitudes towards women, the intersectionality of multiple identities has to be considered (Jones, 2016; Lazar, 2017). For example, misogyny experienced by a black woman rarely comes without accompanying racism or colorism, and I doubt there has ever been a single trans woman who has not met the unfortunate combination of transphobia and misogyny.

When analyzing discourses discussing women, one has to consider what kind of women are present in the discourse; is it women in general, or a specific group, such as women with lower income, women of specific ethnicity or class, or non-cisgender or queer women. And of course, it is just as important to consider these factors with the speaker (or, in this case, artist) as well. The sociocultural background of an artist needs to be taken into account when examining the discourses found in their lyrics. To analyze the social construction of gender roles and gender biases in the lyrics, I am using the approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA).

## 2.2 Popular Music Lyrics and Gender

### 2.2.1 Popular Music

As this thesis discusses the category of *popular music*, it is important to define what is meant by the term. Roy Shuker (quoted in Hawkins, 2017: 4) describes popular music as “a shorthand for the diverse range of popular music genres produced in commodity form primarily geared towards an Anglo-American market”. According to Shuker (in Hawkins, 2017: 4-5), a central characteristic of popular music is its production for the masses, targeting predominantly the youths, making the definition not purely musical, but also socio economical. Pop music has been widely recognized as the most mainstream popular music, meant for larger audiences. According to Statista’s 2018 (Richter, 2018) statistics, 64 percent music consumers listen to pop music, with rock being listened to by 57 percent and dance/electronic music by 32 percent.

Even though most popular music today adheres to heteronormative societal conventions when it comes to portrayals of gender roles or relationships, some artists have challenged these conventions in their lyrics and musical imagery. Older artists such as Freddie Mercury, Prince, Joni Mitchell and Grace Jones, and newer artists such as Miley Curys, Harry Styles and Frank Ocean have challenged the conventional gender roles and sexual identities perpetuated in popular music. According to Middleton (2013) the disciplines of popular music studies have developed during the same time period as second-wave feminism, and thus feminist and queer critiques have affected the ways in which popular music and popular culture is studied.

However, there are still patriarchal notions and conventional gender roles present in a lot of popular music lyrics; in fact, Kalof (1993) has even suggested that because of the ways in which sexual relationships are reflected in the lyrics, the sexual imagery of many pop songs “is so powerful that it ultimately defines what is masculine and what is feminine”. Because of this, popular music can work to both uphold and challenge gender stereotypes and biases.

### 2.2.2. Song Lyrics and Language

Middleton (2013) draws parallels between music and language, with both existing in related societal structures. Song lyrics rather rarely come without any social or cultural context; lyrics and music preferences have been found to reflect individuals’ beliefs, attitudes and even personalities

(Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009: 297-298). Lyrics serve as an essential form of communication, in that they tell stories, relay messages and “communicate with audiences in a manner similar to how people have conversations with each other” in real-life settings (Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009: 298). Gallée (2016: 22) argues, that by reflecting the time the lyrics were written in, they chronicle social developments and cultural currents the very same way language reflects social change. Lyrics can be compared to speech in the sense that they are “tailored to specific audiences in particular contexts. In a sense, genres of music provide messages for particular groups of people” (Gallée, 2016: 22). Thus, critical discourse analysis can be applied to song lyrics the same way it could be applied to any speech situation.

### 2.2.3 Gender in Popular Music

Gender can be constructed in popular music the same way it can be constructed in any other social setting by the ways it is performed (Alexander, 1999). Gendered discourses in popular music can be analyzed by the types of gender representation there is to be found in the lyrics: how the artist represents their own gender and themselves in their lyrics, how they represent those of the same gender and how they represent those of different genders. Gallée (2016: 22) argues that how the artist positions themselves compared to the people they address or depict in their lyrics influences how listeners perceive and conceptualize their song content. Analyzing the way gender is constructed and performed in the lyrics can reveal specific ideological perspectives (Alexander, 1999), and how artists position themselves compared to other groups can also reveal power structures (e.g., gender stereotypes and gender biases) the artist is either trying to uphold or challenge in their lyrics.

In their study, Carpentier et al. (2007: 13-14) found that the gender of the artist affects the way listeners evaluate and perceive song lyrics, which highlights the importance of considering the gender of the artist when analyzing their lyrics. Considering the background of the artists provides necessary context to the power structures present in their lyrics when analyzing specific discourses found in them. According to Weitzer and Kubrin (2009: 4), even though in popular music gender stereotypes presenting men as superior and marginalizing women are abundant, the lyrical portrayals of women seem to have become more diverse and complex, and women’s roles in society have begun to shift in the lyrics. It is still important to note, that despite this progress negative and even derogatory portrayals of women are still more common (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009: 4).

According to Wright and Qureshi (2015: 229-230), many pop, R&B, and rap song lyrics tend to objectify women, contain descriptions of sexual violence against women and define women's worth based on them having a (male) partner, as well as portray women as not valuing themselves. African American women also tend to be more likely to be objectified in music videos than women of other ethnicities (Wright & Qureshi, 2015: 230), though there is no mention of whether or not this trend is also present in the lyrics. Hall et al. (2011: 113) even argue that "popular music can teach young men to be sexually aggressive and treat women as objects, while often teaching young women that their value to society is to provide sexual pleasure for others".

As mentioned, gender can be performed in song lyrics the same way it can be performed in any text, and the ways in which women and womanhood is depicted in popular music lyrics can give us one way to see how women are being portrayed in popular culture and media. Music that marginalizes, objectifies, and demotes women can reinforce sexist gender roles and harmful stereotypes (Hall et al., 2011: 106).

Misogyny in rap and hip-hop has been studied before (for example, Armstrong, 2001 and Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009), but a broader look into other genres of music is still needed. Interestingly, Greitemeyer et al. (2015: 59-64) found that listening to music with pro-equality lyrics might improve attitudes towards women, and past studies have found that media exposure may influence the ways we behave and react towards women, which is why it is important to keep studying the ways in which popular culture discourses portray women and other marginalized groups.

## 2.3 Critical discourse analysis

### 2.3.1 CDA and Gender Studies

Even though there is not one homogenous form of critical discourse analysis (CDA), but rather a range of critical linguistic approaches under the umbrella CDA, most (if not all) scholars utilizing CDA view language as a means for social construction, that has the power to mold society while simultaneously being molded by it (Machin & Mayr, 2012). As Machin and Mayr point out, CDA is not that concerned with how language is used, "but in the linguistic character of social and cultural processes and structures" (2012: 4).

Fairclough (2017: 13) lists CDA as a form of social analysis, with the main focus being on how discourses are related to other social elements, such as ideologies and power. The goal of CDA is to offer explanatory understanding of the relations between language (or discourse) and other



aspects of social and cultural structures, by offering critiques of discourses “as a way into wider critique of social reality” (Fairclough, 2017: 13).

Critical discourse analysis aims to enhance critical consciousness about the discursive aspects of harmful social processes and structures, such as discrimination, dominance, and power imbalances, and thus, studying discourses having to do with gender biases and gender stereotypes has been an important aspect of CDA (Lazar, 2017: 372). As popular music can reproduce, reinforce, and challenge these power structures (Hall et al., 2011: 106), CDA can be used to analyze popular music lyrics the same way it can be used to analyze any text.

Linguists studying the intersection of gender, sexuality, and language use CDA combined with feminist theory to examine the ways in which specific discourse contexts uphold heteronormativity and the gender order associated with it. CDA is concerned with identifying and dismantling these discourses by examining the power structures of particular ideological discourses (Jones, 2016: 219). Language and gender studies have demonstrated that there are vast inequalities when it comes to women and men’s representation, experiences, and opportunities, and has shown how these are reinforced and perpetuated by specific discourses.

These studies have also examined how these gender ideologies are reproduced and reinforced by media (Jones, 2016: 220). As linguists have become more aware of the intersectional links between gender and sexuality and have begun to challenge the binary and heteronormative ideas of gender, the study of non-normative sexual gender and sexual identities has become crucial to applied linguistics (Jones, 2016; Gray, 2016). Thus, CDA combined with feminist theory can provide useful tools for studying gender portrayals in popular culture in more comprehensive ways.

### 2.3.2 Feminist Critical Discourse analysis

Feminist critical discourse analysis is a political perspective investigating the variety of intricate ways by which gender ideologies upholding gender power imbalances become socially normalized and widely accepted in specific discourse contexts. FCDA also aims to discover ways to challenge these inequalities by pointing out both the obviously blatant forms of sexism as well as the more subtle forms of it. As the sexism present in popular music might not always be blatantly obvious, FCDA’s disciplines can offer more insight to analyzing the ways in which women are presented in the lyrics.

FCDA gets its principles from both CDA scholars and current feminist theory, combining the foundation of ‘Second Wave’ feminism to the more progressive ideas of ‘Third Wave’ feminism (Lazar, 2017: 372-373). Thus, FCDA criticizes structural inequalities while also developing a more nuanced “understanding of gender politics, arising from feminists’ current uptake of post structural, transnational, queer, postcolonial and intersectional theories” (Lazar, 2017: 372). As popular music lyrics tend to reflect current social and cultural currents (Middleton, 2013; Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009), they are best analyzed with theories and disciplines that reflect societal changes and the intersectionality of different identities, in the ways that FCDA does.

### 3. Present study

#### 3.1 Research aim and questions

The aim of this study is to explore the ways in which women are presented in the lyrics of popular music. The focus will be on whether the lyrics tend to challenge pre-existing gender stereotypes and biases, or do they rather uphold harmful attitudes. I will also compare the differences between male and female artists lyrics. My research questions are:

1. What kinds of discourses describing women and womanhood can be found in the Billboard 2021 top artists’ lyrics?

As stated earlier, the ways in which women are presented in media and popular culture may influence the ways we view women, and how we react and act towards them. Analyzing media and popular culture texts, such as song lyrics, can offer us the means to examine the ways in which we build womanhood, how we categorize women and what kinds of attitudes are presented towards women. As language can be used to produce and perform gender (Butler, 1990; Jones, 2016), by analyzing the discourses used to describe women, we can see how feminine identities are performed and produced in the lyrics. Understanding how language is used to construct gender identities and gender roles in popular music can reveal attitudes and ideologies present in the lyrics.

For me, the most interesting things to examine while doing the analysis will be whether the idea of women and womanhood tends to be more binary and adhering to heteronormativity, or if we are starting to see some more ambiguity and complexity in gender identities and the ways in which they are performed and portrayed. It will also be interesting to see whether the attitudes towards

women will be more positive or negative. As Weitzer and Kubrin (2009: 4) state, during the early 2000's the portrayals of women in popular music had become more complex and diverse even though more negative descriptions of women tended to be more common, so it is interesting to see if this has progressed in any way in during the 2020's.

## 2. Are there any notable differences in the lyrics of self-defining male and female artists?

As mentioned before, the gender of the artist has to be considered when analyzing their lyrics, as the gender of the artist tends to affect the way listeners evaluate and perceive their lyrics (Carpentier et al., 2007: 13-14). How the artists position themselves compared to those of their own gender and to those of other genders has to be considered when analyzing any gendered discourses found in their lyrics, and when one analyses the power structures of those discourses.

In this analysis, the gender of the artist is determined by the way they identify themselves. Luckily, as artists are public figures, it is quite easy to find a lot of media and social media content in which they refer to and discuss their gender identities. The assumptions I have made about the artists gender are based on the statements they have made about themselves in interviews, in their social media posts and, of course, in their lyrics.

One of the main focuses of this analysis will be on whether or not there are any differences in how different genders portray feminine identities and womanhood, and the attitudes they convey in their lyrics. As all of the artists at the top of the most listened lists (at the time of this study) have identified themselves as either male or female, I shall focus on the differences between male and female artists.

## 3.2 Data and methodology

The data consists of the song lyrics of the top four Billboard artists in 2021, based on their end of the year charts. The top four artists in 2021 according to Billboard Charts in 2021 were Drake, Olivia Rodrigo, The Weeknd, and Taylor Swift. These artists produce music mostly in the genres of hip-hop, rap, and pop. The songs from these artists were chosen by their popularity on the most used streaming platforms. The songs chosen for this analysis were:

Drake: Way 2 Sexy (ft. Future & Young Thug)

Olivia Rodrigo: Driver's License

The Weeknd: Save Your Tears

## Taylor Swift: All Too Well

According to YouGov's International Media Consumption Report 2021 (Nguyen, 2021), the most used music streaming services in the United States are YouTube (44% of listeners) and Spotify (27% of listeners). For people between ages 18-34, YouTube is used by 53% and Spotify by 45%. As popular music is produced for the younger masses (Hawkins, 2017: 4-5), and as most young population tend to use YouTube and Spotify to stream their music, I have chosen the songs for this analysis from these four Billboard top artists based on their popularity on the two streaming services during 2021, with the only limitation being that they had to have some mentions of women (this including female artists describing themselves).

In this thesis, I have used Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for analysing discourse (as described in Blommaert, 2005). First, the linguistic choices in the lyrics were analyzed as concrete instances of discourse. Aspects such as word choices, grammar and cohesion were considered, e.g., how meaning is created in the lyrics. Second, discourse as discursive practice was analyzed: how the aspects from the first dimension relate to larger context, e.g., how the discourses are "produced, circulated, distributed, consumed in society" (Blommaert, 2005: 30). As the songs and lyrics analyzed in this text do not just exist in a vacuum, one has to consider and discuss the artists producing and distributing the lyrics, as well as when and where they are circulated and consumed and by whom. Third, I have analyzed the discourses as social practice. The ideologies and power relations they convey, enforce or challenge are considered and discussed. Since the main focus of this thesis was on gender presentations, in addition to Fairclough's theoretical framework, this analysis also utilizes some aspects of FCDA to achieve a more nuanced understanding of gender politics and gender representations. The lyrics were not analyzed in their entirety, but rather I have chosen relevant excerpts and specific examples from the lyrics that show the ways in which women are positioned and described in them.

## 4. Analysis

The first part of this chapter will cover the individual analysis of each of the songs, using Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for analysing discourse. The second part of the chapter will then discuss the similarities and differences between the analyzed lyrics, in an attempt to

answer the question of whether or not there are notable differences in the ways in which male and female artists portray women in their lyrics.

## 4.1 Individual analysis

### 4.1.1 Drake: Way 2 Sexy (ft. Future & Young Thug)

Canadian rapper Drake's song *Way 2 Sexy* (featuring artists Future and Young Thug) was released in September 2021 as the seventh track of his album *Certified Lover Boy*, and it samples Right Said Fred's 1991 song "I'm Too Sexy" throughout its chorus and refrain. As the song name suggests, the lyrics are openly sexual, describing both the artist himself in a sexual manner, as well as the women portrayed in the lyrics. The song begins with lyrics stating that the artist is 'too sexy' for a multitude of things, such as his shirt, Milan, New York, Japan, or this world.

The most notable difference in descriptions of men (the artist) and women comes from the approach to sex and sexuality. It seems that men's open sexuality is seen as something to celebrate, something to gloat about, whereas women are shamed for the same behaviours. For example, the artists first states that he is "too sexy for that metro housin'", and then a couple lines later states "you a turnt up little thotty, ain't no wife about it. I'ma fuck her friends and send her back to metro housin'". These lines can be interpreted from a few different viewpoints.

First, I will discuss the term "thot" and its implications. Thot is an abbreviation meaning "that ho over there", used to negatively describe women who engage in or are perceived to engage in casual sex frequently (e.g., a "loose woman" or a "harlot"). The negative connotations of women having casual sex in these lyrics are highlighted even more by the statement "ain't no wife about it", giving the impression that these women are just objects to be used for sex, unsuitable for commitment or serious relationships. Becoming and being a wife is presented as something to achieve and to thrive to, but that position seems to be reserved for only those who have sex while in a monogamous relationship.

Second interesting narrative is the mentions of "metro housing". Metro Housing refers to community housing offering affordable housing to lower income people. Thus, when the artist mentions that they become too sexy for metro housing, it seems to imply that their sexiness is a positive attribute that lifts them up from lower-income housing, but for the "thot", or women in general, metro housing is used as a sort of a punishment for being sexy and openly sexual. As both Jones (2016) and Lazar (2017) have mentioned, the intersection multiple identities has to be

considered here: this could be interpreted to either imply that having sex lowers a woman's value (while increasing that of a man) to the point that they have to seek more affordable means of living, or when combined with the "wife" narrative, it could imply that since the woman will not become a wife they will not be able to rely on their spouses income, forcing them to find cheaper housing. While this assumes that women are often (if not always) dependent on their husband's earnings, this also creates a sort of a gold-digger narrative; the "thot" only seeks out male company to get access to their finances.

Interestingly, Drake seems to imply that he moves on from woman to woman quite fast; lines "I pop out, get ghost on a bitch, she don't know where I went" refers to the act of 'ghosting', abruptly and without explanation ending all communication and contact, and "I'ma fuck her friends' tell the listener that the artist has relationships with multiple women, though unlike in women, this behaviour is seen less as "thotty" and more as playboy-like and suave.

The objectification and sexualization of women can also be seen in lines such as "that's that action, her best work on her knees" and "I get cash wherever I fly, got bitches sexin' on me". Women are derogatorily referred to as "bitches" or "hoes" multiple times in the song, and both lines describe women in sexual acts. In fact, it seems that the only role women are given in this song is that of the "thot". Interestingly, Gray (2019: 37) argues that derogatory terms such as "hoe" or "bitch" have been so normalized, we tend not to think twice about hearing them in contexts such as popular music. Furthermore, Mulvihill (2021: 17-18) argues that popular music sometimes tends to represent psychological abuse (such as using slurs or calling someone names) "edgy and sexy".

#### 4.1.2 Olivia Rodrigo: Driver's License

American singer-songwriter Olivia Rodrigo's song *Drivers License* was released in January 2021 in the debut album of the young artist. This pop ballad describes the post-break up feelings of the singer and the accompanying heartbreak and jealousy. The lyrics begin stating that the singer has gotten her driver's license last week, making it rather clear that the singer is still very young. Getting her license has been something she and her ex-partner have been excited about, as it is something they have "always talked about" and the partner is described as having been "so excited for [her] to finally drive up to [their] house". The song's break up-theme becomes evident in the next lines: "but today I drove through the suburbs, crying 'cause you weren't around".

There are two ways in which women are present in the lyrics. First, in the descriptions of the artist herself: her feelings, her inner monologue, the things she describes herself doing, seeing, and

feeling. The second presence comes from the way she describes other women, or more so, the other woman, in her lyrics. The gender of the ex-partner is not mentioned, and no gendered terms are used when referring to them. They are only referred to as ‘you’, directing the message of the song to the past love interest. Though, it should be noted that in the song’s music video the ex-partner seems to be a young man. As mentioned previously, the gender of the artist has to be considered when analysing gender-portrayals in their lyrics as well, since the gender of the artist tends to affect the ways in which we perceive and evaluate their lyrics (Carpentier et al., 2007: 13-14). I shall first discuss the ways in which Rodrigo describes herself, and then the ways in which other women are described in the lyrics. This is done by analysing Rodrigo’s word choices, and how they relate to the larger context of the song (Blommaert, 2005: 30).

There are not that many physical descriptions of the artist herself in the lyrics. The lyrics mostly focus on her feelings, and some memories she has of her past relationship, as well as fantasies of what could have happened had the relationship not ended (“today I drove through the suburbs, and pictured I was driving home to you”). The descriptions of the emotions felt by the singer seem to be rather complex and multifaceted, ranging from feelings of betrayal and anger (“guess you didn’t mean what you wrote in that song about me” and “I just can’t imagine how you could be so okay not that I’m gone”), to longing (“’cause I still fuckin’ love you, babe”) and sadness. In their study, Bretthauer et al. (2007: 40) found that many women tend to sing about not being able to live without their romantic partner (usually a man), and Rodrigo demonstrates the same type of desperation in her lyrics.

Gender portrayals in the lyrics can also be analyzed by the ways in which others of the same gender are represented in them (Carpentier et al., 2007: 13-14). As stated, the song mentions one other woman: “and you’re probably with that blonde girl, who always made me doubt”. This other woman is portrayed as an object of envy and jealousy, embodying all the things the singer is “insecure about”. Mentioning the other woman together with the line “I just can’t imagine how you could be so okay not that I’m gone”, seems to be used to highlight that the past love-interest has moved on from the relationship faster than the singer herself has.

#### 4.1.3 The Weeknd: Save Your Tears

Canadian singer The Weeknd released *Save Your Tears* in 2020, but according to Spotify and YouTube chart the song has been very popular throughout 2021. The song combines synth-pop with pop-balladesque lyrics, describing him meeting his ex-partner either at a party or a nightclub

(“I saw you dancing in a crowded room”). Again, I shall begin by analysing word choices, and other concrete instances of discourse, and then relate them to the larger context of the lyrics (Blommaert, 2005: 30).

Like Rodrigo, The Weeknd uses the pronoun *you* to refer to his past love-interest, directing the message of the song to his ex-lover. At first, the gender of the ex-lover is not stated in any way, but in the second verse the singer refers to them as “girl”. Even though the only role given to women in this song is that of a (past) love-interest, the way the singer portrays the woman in his song is rather complex and multifaceted. The woman is described as showing a wide range of emotions, from happiness (“You look so happy when I’m not with you”), to sadness (“A single teardrop falling from your eye”), to heartbreak (“You could’ve asked me why I broke your heart”), to even some apathy (“And just pretended you didn’t care”). This would seem to follow Weitzer & Kubrin’s (2009: 4, 24) suggestion that the portrayals of women have started to become more versatile.

Even though this is a much less one-dimensional portrayal of women than that in Drake’s lyrics, and women are shown to lead richer inner lives, lines such as “said I’ll make you cry when I run away” and “but then you saw me, caught you by surprise, a single teardrop falling from your eye” could be read as giving the impression that the singer understands himself as having the power over the woman’s emotions. He has the power to take himself away from her causing heartbreak, or to insert himself into situations that cause her distress. Though the singer does beg the woman to “take me back ‘cause I wanna stay”, not quite the same level of power over his emotions is given to the woman.

The woman is described as walking past the singer while pretending to not notice him. The singer also states that she could have asked him “why I broke your heart” and that she could have “told me that you fell apart” instead of ignoring him. So, while the woman is shown to have a multitude of emotions, she seems to be portrayed as not communicating them or as giving mixed signals, creating a sense of indifference on her part.

#### 4.1.4 Taylor Swift: All Too Well

American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift’s song *All Too Well* was first released in 2012, but it was re-recorded and re-released in 2021 among some of her other older songs. The song could be categorized as country pop with some influences from soft rock. As with the other songs, both word choices, certain instances of discourse and cohesion are considered in relation the context of the



song (Blommaert, 2005: 30). As is the case with the other pop songs I have discussed in this thesis, this song is about heartbreak, a past lover and a relationship that has ended. The song begins by the singer describing sweet memories of the past relationship, telling the listener little moments the two experienced together, something she “can picture after all these days”. Swift then states “and I know it’s long gone and that magic’s not here no more, and I might okay but I’m not fine at all”, giving the first indication that this song is about a relationship that has ended a while ago, and which she is still recovering from.

While the song does mention other women in passing sentences (“your sister’s house” and “your mother’s telling stories...”), in regard to the story no significant roles are given to them. Though, it should be noted that even though the roles given to the other women in Swift’s song are not that significant, they are rather stereotyped (Collins, 2011: 290, 295), i.e., wives, homemakers and defined by their relationship to a man. However, gender portrayals in the song can be analyzed more significantly through how Swift positions herself and her past lover. In a manner similar to The Weeknd and Olivia Rodrigo, the song seems to be directed to Swift’s past lover, who is referred to as “you” throughout the song. As Swift notoriously writes most of her songs about the men she has dated, it is fairly safe to assume that the “you” in this song is a man.

The power structures in the lyrics are rather clear. The ex-lover, as mentioned, is described as cruel and even rather aggressive (“but maybe this thing was a masterpiece ‘til you tore it all up”), as well as a bit obsessive over her; she mentions a couple of times he is still holding on her scarf she had on the first week of them being together, claiming that it reminds him of her innocence and stating that he “can’t get rid of it”. Keeping the scarf could be interpreted as a metaphor for him taking her innocence for good, holding on to the scarf as a sort of a trophy. She also mentions there having been nights where he “made me your own”, a statement implying his ownership of her.

Swift gives the impression that she was rather young while still in the relationship; she describes herself having been wide-eyed and innocent (“and my wide-eyed gaze”, “’cause it reminds you of innocence”, ‘it’ referring to her scarf), using characteristics often given to younger people. Following this, Swift positions herself as a sort of a “victim” in the relationship and the resulting breakup. Swift describes how she walks home alone while he mails her back her belongings, giving the impression that she has been the one broken up with. She states her ex-lover “call(s) [her] up again to break [her] like a promise”, portraying him as holding the power over her, mentioning him being “so casually cruel in the name of being honest”.

## 4.2 Similarities and differences in the lyrics

In this section, I shall compare and discuss both the similarities and differences between the lyrics of male and female artists. I will compare and discuss the roles women are given, if there were any stereotypes being repeated in lyrics and the power structures in the lyrics.

### 4.2.1 Similarities in the lyrics

The Weeknd, Taylor Swift and Olivia Rodrigo all wrote about heartbreak and relationships that had ended, with both Swift and Rodrigo describing themselves as being heartbroken and trying to recover from either the relationship or the breakup after they themselves had been the ones getting broken up with. The Weeknd does mention that his heart had been broken in a previous relationship, but in this song particular, he focuses on describing the heartbreak of the woman he has left. Even Drake describes “ghosting” the women he raps about.

In the case of Swift, The Weeknd and Rodrigo, the choice to focus more on the woman’s emotions while not discussing the emotions of a man seems to reinforce the stereotype of women being the more emotional and sentimental individuals in any heterosexual relationship, while men are seen as the ones ending relationships and moving on more easily. In Drake’s case, the man leaving seems to have more financial consequences to the woman than emotional (sending her back to metro housing), but again, by his own description Drake seems to be rather unbothered by the idea of moving on from one relationship to another. As Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) found in their study, even though women and especially their inner lives are described as more diverse and complex in the lyrics, patriarchal notions presenting men as the more dominant characters and marginalizing women are still present in the lyrics.

All the songs seem to portray women as the more submissive participants in their respective relationships. The Weeknd and Drake both describe themselves as the ones holding the most control over their relationships, being the ones that leave, though Drake seems to have more control over the woman’s overall circumstances when it comes to finances, housing and worth. Swift and Rodrigo describe themselves as being broken up with by their partners, not the ones leaving the relationship. As Mulvihill (2021: 16) points out, the “dominance, submission and coercive control” of women, especially, “continue to be eroticized (and romanticized) in the lyrics of contemporary pop music”; Drake and Swift most notably both describe men’s ownership or control of their female

partners, though they express it in rather different ways. Mulvihill (2021: 16) theorizes that this reflects the patriarchal thinking and cultural resonance of submission and dominance.

#### 4.2.2 Differences in the lyrics

In the lyrics of Olivia Rodrigo, Taylor Swift and The Weeknd, the ways in which heartbreak, relationships and a woman's emotions or her role in these situations were described followed the same formula. The one notable outlier in this set of data was Drake's *Way 2 Sexy*.

Both The Weeknd and Rodrigo used one gendered term in their lyrics, *girl*, to refer to women. Swift referenced a *mother* and a *sister*. The terms these three artists used to refer to women were rather neutral, though the term *girl* could be read to be a little condescending when referring to an adult woman. I would argue, however, that in the context of pop music other terms could seem too formal and awkward, hence the artists choice to use a more relaxed term.

The only artist using derogatory terminology when referring to women was Drake. Other than the use of pronouns she and her, women were referred to either as *bitch*, *thot*, *hoe*, or *(your) girl*. Overall descriptions of women were sexualizing, objectifying and rather negative. According to Gray (2019: 40), "it is not uncommon in rap to find lyrics that degrade women into merely objects or tools to be used for sex and to find lyrics that provide justification for engaging in acts that are violent or sexual towards women".

Based on this small set of data, genre seems to have a greater effect than the artists gender on the ways in which women are described and portrayed. As mentioned, the three pop songs were rather homogenous in their portrayals, whereas the rap/hip-hop lyrics proved to be the single outlier. Like Weitzer & Kubrin (2009: 24) mention, in the last decade or two the descriptions of women in popular music have become more complex and less one-dimensional, and the three pop artists discussed in this thesis seem to demonstrate that trend in their lyrics as well, even though women were portrayed as more emotional and submissive than their male partners.

The findings of this thesis seem to support the arguments presented in previous studies, such as Weitzer & Kubrin (2009) and Wright & Qureshi (2015), that rap and hip-hop music tends to include more derogatory and negative imagery of women than other genres. However, it is extremely important to note that this thesis discussed just one rap/hip-hop song, so it is not possible to draw any general conclusions based on just this set of data.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the ways in which women are represented and portrayed in the lyrics of popular music. The focus was on whether the lyrics tended to challenge pre-existing gender stereotypes and biases rather than upholding harmful attitudes. Part of the aim was also to find out whether or not there would be any notable differences between self-identifying male and female artists. The study consisted of the analysis of four songs from four Billboard top artists. The songs were chosen based on their popularity on the two most used streaming services, YouTube and Spotify. Three of the four songs were pop, and one of them was rap/hip hop.

Based on this small set of data, the genre of the song seemed to matter more than the gender of the artists when analysing the roles given to women and the ways in which they were represented. It should be noted, however, that this was an extremely limited sample in a small-scale study, so it is not possible to draw any definitive or generalizable conclusions on the effects of genre based on just this set of data. According to Weitzer & Kubrin (2009: 24-25) rap music tends to portray women as less equal than men and “seeks to resuscitate male domination”, and that could be seen in Drake’s lyrics as well. A study conducted by Gray (2019: 46) found that in music, women were more likely the targets of objectification, manipulation, sexual slurs and explicit content, gain a trend that could be seen in Drake’s lyrics. All of the lyrics portrayed women as the more submissive participants in their relationships.

In all of the lyrics, women were portrayed as (ex) partners of men, defining their roles based on their relationship to men and portraying women as somewhat relationship oriented (Bretthauer et al., 2007: 44). Evidently, all of the lyrics were rather heteronormative. However, in three of the four songs women’s inner lives were described as complex and less one-dimensional, supporting Weitzer & Kubrin’s (2009: 24) claim that the portrayals of women are becoming less superficial. However, this study was once again based on a very small set of data, and to achieve more comprehensive results it should be revisited with a larger dataset. It could also prove useful to combine critical discourse analysis with, for example, content analysis to be able to analyse repeating trends with more accuracy and more in-depth.

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