

Representations of Women:

A Media Intentions and Effects Analysis of the Popular Music Industry

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ABSTRACT

This thesis features a critical media effects analysis of the present United States music industry. Popular music and its associated production and promotion industry is overwhelmingly dominated by men and is correspondingly subject to the influence of dominant cultural ideologies. These ideologies include the oppression and marginalization of women and the furthering of their subordinate status within American culture. The projection of these inherently unjust principles not only reinscribes pre-established societal status quos, but also influences the general public to further internalize, develop, and reproduce them. These prompted understandings contribute to the lacking power and equality of women in society and actively hinder their advancement in the music industry as well as throughout the greater socio-cultural sphere. I conducted my research through the study of academic scholarship, reports, and articles associated with concepts of popular music and feminism, and further combined thematic conceptualizations of both to develop an analysis of the music industry and its associated intentions as a mass medium. In alignment with my research are the arguments and assertions that I will communicate through this report, and I will conclude with an analysis of the many progressive endeavors that have been chartered to mitigate the impacts of these realities.

Keywords: media effects, popular music, media, music industry analysis, feminism, women's studies, women in music, social hierarchies

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INTRODUCTION

I will introduce this thesis by disclosing that I am an avid music listener. In my life, I have always closely connected with the medium, and the musical composition of my favorite artists has elevated me in my best of times and aided me through my most difficult times. When I was young, some of my first childhood memories trace back to when my dad would practice songs on the guitar and would ask me to sing for him— experiences that contribute to my knowledge of most song lyrics by The Cure continuing fifteen years later. From those early years of my life and moving forward into my adulthood, music has always been something unique in the power of its impact on my mental, physical, and emotional being. My many experiences involving music, including attending my first concert at the age of ten, spending the entirety of my paychecks on summer music festival getaways, listening to music to cope with the loss of family members, learning how to play the guitar with my brother, working at a music venue (and the list goes on...), have not only served to deepen my appreciation for the medium, but have also fueled my intense connection with the numerous genres, playlists, artists, albums, and songs that continue to inundate my consciousness on a day to day basis.

I applied to the Communication Program at the University of New Hampshire because I knew that I would feel gratification and pride if I earned the knowledge and tools necessary to work in the field of music— a career path that I am actively pursuing today. Though, as I began taking courses in media studies and paired that gained knowledge with my interest in concepts of feminism, I quickly learned that the makeup of my beloved and anticipated professional enterprise was, like most media industries, overwhelmingly dominated by and representative of white male interest. As I proceeded in my education, I learned more about the cultural impact

that popular forms of media can foster within contemporary society, and drawing upon my background in women's studies and social justice, I began to listen more intently to the intrinsic components and ideologies that were being projected through music. Over time, I subconsciously became trained to notice the many oppressive and unequal representations of the female identity being portrayed through media, and in most all avenues of my participation with music today, it is rare that I find a song or an artist who abstains from such portrayals.

Prior to my exploration of these concepts, I never thought twice when men won more awards at the Grammy Awards or when I heard lyricism that blatantly served to sexualize and objectify women. I never considered why artists, even those who identify as female, would not only demonstrate complacency but would also serve to project unmistakably derogatory and discriminatory representations of women within their music. Only through my studies have I learned that these practices are calculated and are intended to uphold established cultural understandings regarding the place of women in society, and further evoke acceptance for inherently unequal gender relations in a widely subconscious manner. Although the concepts that I will analyze and the arguments that I will present within this thesis are not supported by widespread public opinion, my immense passion for the medium of music and my unwavering confidence in feminism's ability to foster a healthier culture have emboldened and empowered me to actively stand in opposition to the status quo regarding these issues. My understanding of the media's role in society, my interest in pursuing a career in music, and my demand for equality in all avenues of society have fueled my interests in the topics that I will discuss, and I hope this analysis will provide the reader with a more nuanced understanding of feminist theory and media analysis.

DISCLAIMER

Due to the nature of the content presented in this thesis, it is necessary to provide a disclaimer. Although many of the concepts analyzed in this thesis might apply to nearly all identities that stray from the culturally dominant, and the frameworks in question may very well expand beyond the industry of music into other prominent arenas of society, my studies and my garnered proficiency lie within the scope of popular music and women's studies. In this analysis, I will primarily focus on portrayals of female identity within music, how associated ideologies and intentions of the medium aim to project them, and the impact that these representations have on how women are perceived within United States culture. This is not to say that the female identity is in any way superior to other markers of identity or the intersections between corresponding identities. Additionally, my thesis is not intended to privilege my approach and concerns regarding this scholarship compared to other approaches.

My purpose in writing this thesis is to demonstrate my learned expertise, that of which is specific to me and the path of education that I have pursued at the University of New Hampshire. I intend to draw upon my knowledge and interests and generate a cohesive and persuasive argument to promote comprehensive awareness for these concepts and, further, inspire social change and equality. If it is circumstantially possible, I encourage those interested in corresponding topics that lacked sufficient analysis in this thesis to allow your curiosity and concern to guide you into avenues of research. I feel empowered with the understanding that I have ascertained, and I hope that further consideration of these topics will allow others to expand the field and promote greater knowledge and understanding surrounding these issues.

SOCIAL HIERARCHIES

In the context of social, cultural, economic, and political hierarchies in the United States, privilege and oppression go hand in hand. In present American culture, privilege is understood as “one group [having] something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do,” (Johnson, 2018, p. 23). Privilege is, therefore, an inherent advantage that one group holds over another due solely to the nature of their identity in conjunction with pre-established social structures of common culture. Privileged status in the United States is often associated with markers that include but are not limited to sex, gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and physical and mental ability, and within these categorizations, dominant status is accordingly held by people of male, cisgender, white, wealthy, American, straight, Christian, able-bodied, and neurotypical identities (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2004, p. 63). Groups and individuals who lack or are indistinguishable in their possession of these identity traits are further subjected to some degree of subordinated status in the contexts of United States social, cultural, economic, and political environments (Frye, 1983, p. 11). This experienced subordination allows the dominant group to accrue resources through structural advantage. Consequently, the relationship between privileged and oppressed identities is inherently linked, as the oppression of marginalized groups serves the distinct purpose of permitting the power acquisition of the dominant group (Young, 2004, p. 1).

Thus, privilege matters in the context of United States socio-cultural proceedings because it provides an inherent, born route to power. Contrary to capitalist and neoliberal interpretations of the United States’ orientation as a meritorious enterprise, power and the ability to succeed in American culture are often linked to one’s index of privilege (Hall & Lamont, 2013, p. 2).

Although one's own identity may be comprised of a variety of both privileged and oppressed social categorizations, individuals who hold some degree of privilege correspondingly hold some degree of power, and oftentimes, the assumption of power occurs somewhat unconsciously (Liu, 2017). Power is understood within the American society as, "the process in which one party extracts compliance from another party, despite a conflict of interest, through the actual or proposed manipulation of resources representing commodities or tools in the control of commodities which the other party values," and it, consequently, becomes a highly coveted asset (Luckenbill, 1979, p. 98). Those who obtain and carry power in the United States often have greater access to financial, political, social, and cultural capital, that of which can drastically improve one's quality of life (Case, Iuzzini, & Hopkins, 2012). Therefore, power is an attribute of one's identity that is often intended to be kept, as lack of power is intrinsically associated with the absence of opportunity.

Though, in a highly developed society where, over the course of history, individuals have become increasingly educated and made aware of the injustices that these structures permit, their persistence is a calculated measure that is developed, implemented, and furthered by the dominant class (Jadhav, 2011). To keep power in the hands of the few, the public must be influenced to believe that either there is either nothing to question in terms of socio-cultural relations, or that the status quo regarding power is somehow justified. One prominent avenue for these messages to be broadcasted is through mass media and popular culture (Thompson & Tisdell, 2007). The utilization of the media to spread propagated news information for malintent is by no means a new phenomenon. Historically, dictators have shown to take advantage of the popularity and reach of the media to influence the general populous for their own personal and

political gain (Messinger, 2010). The evidence presented here is not an argument to designate American mass media as a dangerous distributor of propaganda, but some may argue that when the media is controlled by a select few individuals occupying the dominant class, the mediated material absorbed by the public is more often than not skewed in the ideological favor of that associated identity (Jadhav, 2011).

The result of this utilization of mass media for personal or political impact conditions the public to be unknowingly complacent in a system of injustice that can and often does work to further oppress and marginalize them (Pingree, Stoycheff, Sui & Peifer, 2018). The widely unaware nature of the public concerning the intentions of media in garnering subconscious support for particular understandings or ideologies serves a deliberate purpose. If the dominant class were to overtly preach to the masses that power should remain in the hands of only white, straight, cisgender, Christian men, the affected public (or otherwise, the majority of American people) might speak out and protest in dissent. Rather, the subtle essence of these suggestive and persuasive efforts is more effective as it conveys those intended messages through attractive and culturally sound means while also prompting people to connect via shared approval for these articles of mediated culture (Qin, Strömberg & Wu, 2017, p. 119-120). Conversely, in order for those individuals who recognize the hidden incentives of the mass media to garner awareness for them and promote comprehensive societal change, they not only need the cooperation of the masses, but also the support of at least some members of the dominant identity (DiAngelo, 2019, p. 19). Therefore, the inherent advantage of the dominant class paired with the grasp that they hold on public perception makes it extremely difficult to deconstruct existing social hierarchies.

MEDIA EFFECTS

The phenomenon described within the previous section detailing the intent of the mass media in subconsciously influencing the public is closely related to two concepts of media effects scholarship— theories of framing and cultivation. Frames are understood as “portrayals of issues and events...[that] can be applied to a nearly unlimited range of topics” that serve to “push an agenda,” (Kuypers & D’Angelo, 2009, p. xiii). Cultivation theory is a concept that emphasizes the link between “a population’s constant exposure to mass media messages” and how that communication “[shapes] its members’ beliefs about the world,” (Fortner & Fackler, 2014, p. 99). These two concepts of media studies are commonly discussed within the realm of news, film and television analysis, but the wide reach and overwhelming inundation of music media within the lives of Americans today serves as a basis for the application of these theories to the field of music (Denora, 2000, p. 141). Also notable is the fact that although these theories are often categorized as separate entities of media influence, in this thesis, they will be discussed as formulaically different but thematically associated acts that correspondingly contribute to public perception surrounding a specified context (Potter, 2012, p. 40-41).

Media framing that is foregrounded by the dominant identity to project oppressive ideologies can be facilitated through a variety of means. Discussed in news and journalism analysis is the degree to which media outlets will both emphasize and exact a perspective surrounding an issue in efforts of influencing the public to understand it in a certain way (Martins, Weaver & Lynch, 2018, p. 99-100). In music media, these tactics are also utilized to elicit particular narratives and call the attention of the public to certain societal perceptions. For instance, the production industries that control and market popular music might prompt artists to

occupy particular personas or stress certain issues and circumstances while actively omitting others (McDonald, 2019). This guidance can be proposed through the offering of a particular platform, through the blatant control of an artist's creative endeavors, or through the decision to either invest in or relinquish an artist (Balaji, 2009). In terms of framing the female identity within music, these practices most often serve to present to the public the ideological perception that women are inherently inferior through demeaning, degrading, marginalizing, sexualizing, objectifying, gender role-eliciting, and violence-inducing thematics (Adegoke, 2019).

In terms of the cultivation theory of media effects, emphasis is placed on the public's subconscious undertaking and internalization of media messages in conjunction with their consumption habits (Fortner & Fackler, 2014, p. 99). In an analysis concerning the capabilities of television in influencing the general populace, media scholars James Shanahan and Michael Morgan note that the exposure, viewing habits, accessibility, and centrality allowed by television generate avenues for widespread influence (1999, p. 20-21). These factors, those which might prove to be identifiably more prominent within the modern age of streaming, can also be applied to the medium of music. Framed ideological contexts paired with the influx of music within public life allow and the medium to guide general interpretations regarding particular issues. Therefore, if the music that people regularly listen to frames the oppression of women as being the cultural default, the public will be more apt to internalize these contexts and reproduce them in other avenues of society (Cobb, 2016).

Media influence is an effective tool in swaying public opinion. The practice of foregrounding inconspicuous ideologies within a widely consumed cultural medium allows great potential for mass manipulation. Techniques and vehicles of media effects can and do serve the

distinct intention of allowing those who hold power to retain it while further subordinating others to ensure unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. The function of the media in predisposing the public to be receptive to dominant ideologies prompts these understandings to be assumed, reinforced, and reproduced within future social endeavors (Piazza, 2017, p. 205-206). The ways in which popular music frames and cultivates public perception surrounding women and other marginalized identities are discernibly oppressive, and corresponding factors of cultural and industrial proceedings create a vicious cycle of influenced reception and understanding, effectively prolonging social hierarchies.

MUSIC INDUSTRY

The evidence presented within the previous sections, that of which elucidates both ingrained socio-cultural identity hierarchies as well as the wide influence of mass media forms on popular opinion, is further supported by an analysis of the music industry's demographic structure. In alignment with other popular media industries within contemporary society including television and film— those of which have been subject to ridicule in recent years for their lack of diversity and encompassing representation— the music industry suffers a similar fate (Greenslade, 2015). Identifiable is a vast employment discrepancy between male and female identities throughout the media industry in question. According to a study conducted by the non-profit feminist media enterprise *Women in Music*, there is a general 70% male and 30% female representational divide across the United States industry (“The Stats”, 2019). Reinforcing this claim, *Forbes* has reported that “the gender ratio of male producers to female music producers is 47 to 1,” (Kelley, 2019). Additionally, women have been noted as comprising a marginal “21.7% of artists,” and “only 15 percent of women in the music business actually run labels,” (Schneider, 2019). Studies reported by *NPR* have proven even more bleak, as the news outlet has detailed that in analyzing “key roles” in the industry, only 3% of sound engineers and 2% of producers are women (Tsioulcas, 2019).

In terms of production statistics, a 98% male to 2% female deviation is especially problematic, as much of the creative power and processes associated with the making of music is structured and manufactured by those in a producer's role. Popular educational outlet *Recording Connection* has noted in their article “what does a music producer do?” (2019) that:

The music producer oversees all aspects of the creation of a song or album... [including] choice of song, choice of musicians, instruments and vocalist(s) and how those instruments are played and those notes sung as well as where the song or album is recorded. Like a director is to a film, the music producer is to a song.

Rick Camp, an esteemed producer in the industry who has worked with many significant artists including Beyonce, Jennifer Lopez, and Usher, was further cited in the *Recording Connection* article (2019) as stating:

The music producer is in charge of either writing the material or if he didn't write it, he's in charge of organizing it and making it sound like a cohesive song. He calls all the shots on what's played, and when it's played, and how it's played, and the sounds that are used, or the vocals that are recorded if they're correct or not. The producer is in charge of everything.

Despite an artist's role in serving as the face of the music that is released for public consumption, in actuality, it is the producers who guide the narrative of most songs, records, and albums. Although some labels and producers stress the importance of artists writing their own material, most popular music is heavily subject to producer influence (Ingham, 2019).

To put these notions into perspective, one *NPR* analysis of the *Billboard Hot 100* song popularity chart has reported that "twenty three percent of the 700 songs in [their] sample had one of 10 male songwriters attached to them," and that, consequently, "we're allowing 10 men to set the norms," in popular music production (Tsioulcas, 2019). In addition, a University of Southern California study has noted that "only 12.3 percent of songwriters of the 600 most popular songs from 2012-2017 were female," (Hausch & Ruxton, 2019). This lack of

representation manifests even further than lack of voice in writing, and as *Forbes* study has described, only about 22% of artists who have released a top hit since 2012 have been of female identity (Kelley, 2019). These statistics may be in part due to the fact that industry executives—those who have been deciphered as being primarily of male identity—also control promotion and marketing efforts and have unrestrained control over which artists are popularized, those of whom might prove to be in alignment with the mission of the record label (Bruenger, 2019, p. 4796). Stacy Smith, the founder and director of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California, has concluded that despite the associated lack of “[representation for] the world that we live in” these numbers demonstrate, they hold tremendous influence and “directly [translate] to what is being told or communicated to audiences... about norms, about lived experiences — and we're seeing females shut out from this process,” (Tsioulcas, 2019). Seeing as how women account for 51% of the United States population, these numbers prove to be outrageous in the plight of equal opportunity and comparable representation (“U.S. Census Bureau...”, 2019).

Aside from these stark inconsistencies in music media representation, when women do occupy roles within the industry, they are often flagrantly undervalued. *Forbes* has identified the fact that “women executives get paid 30 percent less than men,” a number drastically exceeding current reports on average American gender wage gaps (Schneider, 2019; “Gender Pay Gap...”, 2020). Additionally, women in the industry have reported experiencing “their skills [being] discounted,” “[stereotyping] and [sexualization],” as well as the strain of having to “[navigate] both a male-dominated industry and the financial side of music,” (Schneider, 2019). Paired with these grievances, a study of women in the music industry conducted by *NPR* has also noted that

there is a demonstrated “lack of attention paid to women's contributions,” and that women are often “hit on... they [become] the object of innuendo, [and] they [feel] personally unsafe in certain situations,” (Tsioulcas, 2019). According to a Musician’s Union survey report concerning the prevalence of maltreatment in the industry, 48% of respondents stated that they had been subject to discrimination and abuse, and 85% of assault cases disclosed by women for the purpose of this survey went unreported. These unfortunate statistics could be attributed to the harsh culture of the industry, unequal power dynamics, factors of intimidation, or the frequent dismissal of assault claims by executives when they do arise (Savage, 2019). Additionally, artists have described that the role of producers and executives in “[attempting] to control [young female artists’] image and make [them] more commercially appealing by ‘encouraging’ [them] to lose weight and wear sexier clothing is a common scenario,” (Claire, 2019). Artist Lauren Aquilina has confirmed this sentiment by noting that during her emergence, she was told by industry executives that “to be successful, boys need to fancy you and girls need to want to be you,” (Claire, 2019).

Also deciphered through an analysis of industry proceedings is the absence of female recognition at popular awards ceremonies. A *Hollywood Reporter* article has outlined that “between 2012 and 2017... 90.7 percent of the Grammy nominees were male and 9.3 percent were female,” and that, correspondingly, “women only make up 21% of the Academy’s voting membership,” (“Recording Academy”, 2018). Although these percentages might very well align with prior outlined gender discrepancies in music production and artist identity, the corresponding factors of lacking representation serve to reinforce one another and create an unfortunately bleak state of affairs for women in the industry. Paired with heightened public

criticism of the Academy regarding these contexts as well as due to various identified instances of sexualization and abuse of women at the ceremony, the Academy has made efforts in recent years to better revere female artists (Ali, 2020). One example of this attempt was the celebration of Billie Eilish during the 2020 Grammys and her role in being the first woman to win all of the “big four” Awards, a prestigious Academy acknowledgment consisting of recognition for Best New Artist, Best Song, Best Record, and Album of the Year (Grein, 2020). Although this moment has been regarded as a symbol of progress for women in the industry, Eilish’s recognition has not been granted without caveat. It should be clarified that of the mere 22% of female artists that make up the industry, *Forbes* has revealed that “73% of female performers were women of color,” (Kelley, 2019). Coincidentally, even when women of color dominate the female artist subcategory, white women continue to be recognized at greater margins, an anecdote that serves as a stark identifier of industry intentions.

STATUS QUO

Women as an identity group have been oppressed throughout the history of American society. As detailed previously, the marginalization of women and other subordinated identities serves the distinct purpose of allowing power to be retained by those of dominant status (Young, 2004, p. 1). The upholding of these status quos can prove to be advantageous for those who benefit from them and they can be prolonged through a variety of formats— some of which have been discussed within this report— but all of which include general endeavors to strip women of their agency and their humanity (Cobb, 2016). Therefore, the highlighted efforts of the music industry in utilizing one of the most wide-reaching and culturally prevalent forms of mass media to convey those dominant ideologies is no coincidence (Chomsky, 2002). Although industry executives are often cited as attributing these oppressive representations to their marketability within the widely sexist sphere of common culture in which we live, consumers should be made aware of the potential for ulterior motives (Adegoke, 2019).

When the music that the public listens to is controlled by the dominant class and so blatantly portrays women as being less deserving of equality and respect, those listeners become either subconsciously or overtly conditioned to believe those notions to be true and to further incorporate them into their future endeavors (Piazza, 2017, p. 205-206). Most participating members of society are subject to these influences, and although women are a targeted identity, they are not exempt from the associated impacts. Often when women do internalize these conceptions it is through the assumption of implicit or unconscious bias (Agarwal, 2018). Implicit bias is understood within social science as “automatic activation of associations between the target group and negative qualities,” and it can serve to further oppress socio-cultural

identities through the belief that one's own identity and those who occupy it are inherently inferior (Jenen, Winqvist, Arkkelin & Schuster, 2009). When the public, and women specifically, are inundated by both male and female artists living, acting, and performing to meet industry standards at the discretion of producers and executives, it further reinforces the perception that women are predisposed to occupy lesser positions in society in alignment with cultural status quos. Implicit bias subdues the power of women in standing up for equality and change because it splinters the opportunity and power in collective allegiance regarding a specified cause (Brandt & Reyna, 2017).

Although popular music may not sound or appear to be categorically ill-natured upon first listen, research concerning lyric and video analysis has proven that popular music does often incorporate oppressive ideologies and can very well project influence through subconscious formats. Music psychologist Dr. Victoria Williams has noted that in listening to music, “[people] only have a certain amount of cognitive capacity to process something,” a factor of brain chemistry making it difficult for listeners to actively survey song thematics because concentration on these components might “[take up] all your focus, all your attention, and all your mental processes,” (“Music and Misogyny”, 2014). Though, when Williams conducted a study that overtly exposed women to the true and identifiably sexist nature of the songs that they were listening to, she reported that “women had a much more negative attitude about the nature of those lyrics when they read them, less so when they listened to them, and even significantly less so when they watched them in videos,” (“Music and Misogyny”, 2014). This study is representative of the hidden-in-plain-sight strategies that are utilized by media producers in efforts of pushing their agendas.

Despite the music industry's role in conveying influence within the public sphere, the industry's intentions and the according culture that is created as a result distinctly aligns with pre-established socio-cultural status quos. As recognized by esteemed sociologist of music Simon Frith, "[p]opular music culture isn't the effect of a popular music industry; rather, the music industry is an aspect of popular culture," (Frith, 2001, p. 27). In a society that has shown to so vehemently oppose the integration of women into positions of power and influence, the prolonged sexist projection of women in articles mass media that are primarily produced by men is an unfortunate but predictable consequence. Although people may be aware of these injustices, and despite the fact that they negatively impact a majority of the American populous, without large and organized groups of knowledgeable dissenters, overcoming these structures proves difficult. Cultural norms and American social structures prompt people to remain complacent in dominant systems, and because these injustices are not yet issues of wide recognition within the public sphere, individual disapproval is dissuaded by the imminent potential for negative public reception (Gil, 2013, p. 27-29).

BACKLASH

In correspondence with the content provided in the previous section, music media's oppressive representation of women both remains and becomes the societal norm. Amidst difficulty in finding a cohort of people to support a widely unrecognized and underappreciated social justice campaign, it also becomes difficult to vocalize positions of dissent due to the potential for public ridicule (Crossley, 2010). When individuals in the industry or within the public sphere do stand in opposition to societal status quos or ingrained formats of structural oppression, they often become subject to forms of backlash. Backlash is understood within social science as "a strong adverse reaction to a recent event or political/social development or tendency," ("Backlash", 2011). Backlash in this identified context can occur in a variety of formats including but not limited to individual ridicule, dissent of fans, lack of industry promotion, absence of opportunity, or a label blatantly dropping an artist (Balaji, 2009). Impending threats of backlash can actively dissuade people and artists from speaking out for fear of public contempt and isolation (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010). Paired with the previously identified notion that the enlightened opposition must have a strong division of occupants as well as the support, assistance, and alliance of those who occupy the dominant class, attempts at countering status quos become increasingly difficult to facilitate (DiAngelo, 2019, p. 19).

Identifiable are multiple instances where proceedings of industry executives paired with associated reactions of the general public have served to elucidate the inherent maltreatment and backlash faced by women in music. Recently within the popular media sphere, singer Kesha Rose Sebert has stood up and filed grievances against the abuses of her producer, Lukasz Sebastian Gottwald, known professionally as Dr. Luke, for his role in "sexually, physically,

verbally, and emotionally [abusing her] to the point where [she] nearly lost her life,” (Johnston, 2018). Kesha has noted in her legal battle that amidst suffering from debilitating bulimia, Dr. Luke frequently ridiculed her weight stating that, not only was her body comparable to the shape of a refrigerator, but also that “A-list songwriters and producers are reluctant to give Kesha their songs because of her weight,” (Hogan, 2020). Kesha has also accused Dr. Luke of drugging and raping her while she was unconscious in 2004 prior to the emergence of her stardom (Hogan, 2020). Although Kesha has received a wealth of support from other female artists including Lorde, Lady Gaga, Lily Allen, and Taylor Swift— some of whom have worked with Dr. Luke— on Kesha’s multiple attempts to sue her producer and further absolve their production contract, judges have negated her claims stating that they were “not valid legal causes of action for scrapping a contract in New York,” (Hogan, 2020). Additionally, Dr. Luke has filed numerous counter suits, in one instance suing her for royalties on an album that he did not produce, and in another suing her for \$50 million in defamation claims. The lawsuits remain in progress and Kesha filed her most recent claim in March of 2020 (Hogan, 2020). Although Kesha was supported by some of her colleagues and has been recognized within the public sphere for strength and bravery, this case study is telling of the abuses and suppressions that female artists experience not only in their plight of reporting industry wrongdoing, but also in the normal endeavors of their professional lives.

Another prominent instance of industry and public backlash involves singer Taylor Swift and her battle with Scooter Braun, a recognized Los Angeles producer, artist manager, and industry executive who bought out Swift’s former record label, Big Machine in 2019. At the start of her career as an artist, Swift was signed into a divisively controlling record deal when she

was only fifteen years old. In her contract, her label was to own all of her master recordings, an agreement that would give them complete sale and distribution control over all of her music.

Swift knew a buyout was soon to occur and further attempted to secure the rights to her masters before the purchase was to take place, but the deal offered by her label was nearly impossible to facilitate in the anticipated span of time (Rogers, 2019). Braun entered the picture in 2016 while working as a manager for rapper Kanye West, an adversary of Swift upon his rude interruption of the singer while she was accepting a Video Music Award for Best Female Video at the 2009 VMAs. Braun was actively working with Kanye when he released his single “Famous”, in which the lyrics to the song read, “I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex, Why? I made that bitch famous,” and its corresponding music video which portrayed Kanye in bed with multiple women including a wax figurine of naked Taylor Swift, what she has referred to as an instance of “revenge porn,” (“Kanye West...”, 2016), (Grady, 2019). When an out of context video of Swift consenting to be referenced in the song was released by reality TV star and wife of Kanye West, Kim Kardashian, the public turned their backs on Swift and proceeded to utilize the hashtag #KimExposedTaylorParty and the snake emoji to disparage the singer (Grady, 2019). Artist and client of Braun Justin Bieber then proceeded to post a photo on Instagram of himself, Braun and West, taunting Swift by writing, “Taylor Swift what up,” (Grady, 2019). Paired with the difficult past of Swift including identifiable accounts of leveraged control and misogynistic sexism, Swift was rightfully enraged when she was alerted of the label buyout after it was already in commission, as Braun would be left with executive control over the entirety of her former artistic repertoire.

Another instance of industry backlash can be identified in the case study of Keke Palmer, a former teen actress turned singer who, in her early emergence, was subject to the attempted molding and influence of the industry by executives at her label, Atlantic Records. Often in artist promotion, industry executives will guide female artists to occupy certain cultural images that are evaluated as being marketable in alignment with societal expectation, but are more realistically “cultivated by their biases,” (Balaji, 2009). Black Entertainment Television executive Paul Porter has even been cited as stating, “that's entertainment. That's the strip bar. That's the easiest interaction with an audience. It's the all-meat and no mind thing that's easy for any man to see. When you think of the young white artists, it's the same sexed image,” (Balaji, 2009). Throughout this process, Palmer was prompted to further urbanize and hypersexualize her image as a twelve-year-old, black, female performer. Upon Palmer’s realization of the intentions of these executives to both separate her from her artistry and force her to occupy a persona that was not natural to her, she refused to comply. Her convictions in opposing the efforts of her label led to their halted marketing efforts for Palmer's 2007 album, *So Uncool*. Although Palmer’s progress was hindered in the wake of this decision, she was eventually able to utilize and leverage avenues of self-promotion to rebuild her stardom. This case study demonstrates the pressures that female artists are subjected to in their promotion and the potentially devastating consequences that might arise when artists do decide to stand up for themselves (Balaji, 2009).

As is identifiable within these outlined case studies, aside from the normalized pressure, control, exploitation, and abuse that the industry exerts on female artists and musicians, those who attempt to stand up against these wrongdoings are further suppressed by industry executives

as well as those occupying the public sphere. The structure of the music industry today is designed to propel artists into positions of fame and success while reaping the monetary benefits of their talent, and if the ideologies of artists do not align with their corresponding industry or are not well received by the masses, labels will not risk a potentially difficult or unsuccessful promotion (Balaji, 2009). The music industry in its entirety is a \$19 billion enterprise that is comprised of several extremely powerful and influential public figures (McIntyre, 2019). These individuals intend to proceed in their endeavors regardless of what people they must disparage to succeed and despite what disapproval might arise. This notion spans across the music industry and into other areas of society, as is observable through the backlash efforts that have arisen in response to the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter political and cultural movements (Bower, 2019), (Smith, 2020). When pressure is placed upon an industry that is not accustomed to criticism and not willing or ready to break down the inherently oppressive structures that foreground its existence, industry players can mitigate the negative implications of these criticisms through industry force paired with public adherence.

FUTURE PROCEEDINGS

Although discussion thus far has analyzed the various negative frameworks of the music industry, and although the future might admittedly appear bleak, this thesis is incomplete without the outlining of present and future proceedings that have shown to hold positive potential for women in the industry. In alignment with recent grievances and grassroots campaigns of the public, the understanding populous has gained traction in their plight of encouraging more positive representational affairs (Lee, 2018). The influence of the internet and increasingly comprehensive media reports have prompted the public to take issues of gender misrepresentation more seriously, and in turn, people are becoming more aware of the many oppressions and injustices that media and popular music might intend to further (Lee, 2018). It should also be noted that although the industry has been referred to in a generalized sense within this analysis, not all genres, labels, and other avenues of music production are inherently ill-natured, as will be discussed throughout the remainder of this report.

Some forms of music media are more subject to dominant influence than others, and the degree to which sexist undertones are displayed within a particular article of music is dependent upon a variety of factors including, history of the genre or label, audience and consumer bias, and intentions of those in production roles (Neff, 2014). Throughout the history of popular music, identifiable are subgenres that have served to emphasize more progressive ideologies in media— one prominent example being the formulation of the '90s punk Riot Grrrl movement, which emphasized female empowerment and women's musical agency (Yarrow, 2018). Paired with this sentiment, some artists have described that retention of creative control— which is more often observable within smaller, independent, self-produced, or less financially dependent

recording contracts— can pave the way for more constructive and encompassing identity representations (Winegarner, 2018). On this front, there could be potential for positive change to occur as independent labels rise to account for a larger percentage of the industry than major labels (Resnikoff, 2018). Additionally, the introduction of streaming and the availability of self-promotion has allowed artists more control and flexibility in their endeavors than ever before, and it will be interesting to observe how the culture of the music industry will shift to account for this production avenue (Daniels, 2019).

Aside from these concepts, there have been many initiatives chartered in recent years to better allow and promote the voice of women in the music industry. Nonprofit organizations including *She is the Music*, *SheSaid.So*, and *Women in Music* have gained traction in recent years for their support of female artists through mentoring strategies and expanded opportunities both nationally and globally. Media companies including *Billboard*, *Rolling Stone*, *Music Row*, and esteemed music colleges including Berklee have also partnered with these organizations to better foster inclusion, support, and accurate representations of women in their music-related endeavors (“Women in Music”, 2019). *NPR* has also reported on new resources dedicated to the incorporation of women in music, stating, “earlier this month, the Recording Academy announced a new program: It's asking any business or individual who hires record producers or engineers to consider at least two women for any project. The initiative already has over 300 signatories; artists who have pledged to participate include Cardi B, Post Malone, Pharrell Williams ... and Ariana Grande,” (Tsioulcas, 2019).

In correspondence with these platforms for women's advancement, also held is the annual Women in Music Awards Ceremony presented by *Billboard* which is dedicated to

recognizing women in the industry across identity and genre in efforts of leveling the celebratory landscape for female artists (Aniftos, 2019). Additionally, aligning with what I have intended to analyze within this thesis, there have been recent curriculum adaptations within the sphere of higher education that serve to better account for research, analysis, and reports surrounding women in the music industry. These emphasized courses of study could contribute to more encompassing information and knowledge within the public and collegiate sphere to be utilized within future proceedings. They could also serve to empower women who are interested in pursuing a career in the music industry to proceed not with caution, but with power and intention to positively influence the surrounding culture and change the pre-established status quo (“Music Industry Analysis and Opinion”, 2019).

Although the music industry is often an influencer of oppressive ideologies, it also remains a product of internalized socio-cultural affairs. Although the present cultural climate in the United States has changed to become more representationally inclusive in modern society, it remains far from equal. Although women and allies have fought hard for and won previously omitted human rights in recent years, current systemic structures of political, social, cultural, and economic proceedings are not only inherently unjust, but they were built to allow for power to be retained by those in positions of dominance (Young, 2004, p. 1). To again reference Simon Frith in his sociological research, “the [music] industry has a significant role to play in... culture, but it doesn’t control it and, indeed, has [to constantly] respond to changes within it,” (Frith, 2001, p. 27). It is United States culture that influences mass media and entertainment, and these ideologies are reinforced and reproduced in a seemingly endless vicious cycle.

Whereas producers and industry executives are at fault for the prolonging of these oppressive ideologies, so too are the structures of United States social hierarchies. The only way to break the present cycle is to unearth the roots of cultural oppression and begin to build from the ground up. Mass media in its many endeavors could be utilized to effectively set the stage for this transformation through priming influence, but in order for this to occur, the industry must consider and be receptive to organizational and ideological change. Not only is it necessary for women to be involved in the conversation, but executive power must cease to be held by a select few industry executives and producers. The voices of the many are necessary to more positively and more realistically represent not only women, but other marginalized identities as well. To quote Lara Baker, the events manager at the Association of Independent Music “there are so many women wanting to get into the music industry, but a very small number of women at the top, so we’re trying to find ways to help them get there. The more women there are in powerful positions, the more the culture will change,” (Claire, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Being someone who is passionate about music and who intends to work in the music industry after I graduate from the University of New Hampshire, I experienced discouragement in my research. As presented within this thesis, there are many pre-established social and cultural hierarchies that make the progression and success of women in the music industry difficult to navigate. The disregard and lack of respect for the female identity that is present within these media industries feels bleak, and I am unsure what difficulties and dilemmas my future career path will present. But, through this research, I feel confident in the potential of people actively working behind the scenes to change the narrative. Now more than ever women and allies are standing up, criticizing oppression, and forcing change through boldness and bravery. The film and television industries have shifted in recent years to account for these oppositions, and I anticipate that more music research, analysis, and reporting will prompt a similar development.

I hope that this thesis has illuminated factors of society and media that might have been previously concealed. The suppression of women in music leads to the subordinated status of women in American culture and further diminishes the ability of women to utilize their full potential and advance within the national and world's sphere. To quote Julie Greenwald, chairwoman and Chief Operating Officer of Atlantic Records (Weatherby, 2017):

Now more than ever, it's incumbent on every one of us to raise up the next generation of female leaders, so at the future Women in Music events, the executive of the year will stand up here and thank a woman for being her mentor. Now it's time to change the industry for the better. It's all right here, in how we support each other, in how we're

committed to providing young women with a safer environment free from harassment and discrimination.

Although media and popular culture is a manifestation of generalized societal perceptions, it is now the time to utilize the knowledge and power of our beings to oppose current cultural standards and fight for the equal representation and opportunity of women in the industry as well as within the greater socio-cultural sphere. I believe that if the industries that so prominently influence us in our everyday lives were to actively change the structures of their ideological presentation, we as a nation could see a cultural revolution.

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