

## The Manifestation of Sexual Repression, Gender in Popular Music: A Case Study on Katy Perry

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### Abstract

Michel Foucault had discussed that the repression of sexuality was a manipulation of ideology by dominant group. He stated that sexual repression was nothing but a hypothesis that allowed the agencies of power (bourgeoisies, or males) to verbalize sexuality to satisfy their pleasures and desires. On the other hand, women repression has been long existed in popular music culture. The empowerment and independence of women, therefore, became a breakthrough in the history of popular music. However, the author made an assumption that the repressive hypothesis also occurred in this music-gender context. This paper critically analyzed Katy Perry's hit single "Teenage Dream" by applying Foucault's statements in finding the implication of the women repressive hypothesis. The study showed that the traditional context of sexual repression has been transferred to a masculinity-femininity conflict where the repression of women was only a hypothesis, raising a conclusion that the liberation of women in popular music is the pleasures of the patriarchy.

**Key words:** Repression of sexuality; Patriarchy; Repressive hypothesis; Popular music

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### INTRODUCTION

The idea of the repression of sexuality was originally raised by the French social theorist Michel Foucault. It is, in short, a theory stating that sexuality has been repressed among people, but then a bigger need for pleasure emerged. In contemporary arts, sexuality is always an unavoidable topic, no matter it is in films, music or artworks such as paintings and sculptures. In addition, arts such as music are always the communicative organ that connects social structures with musical form (Whiteley, 2000, p.36). In this case, my central argument is, how this repression of sexuality was transferred to an art form as the discourses that everyone is so obsessed with. This critical paper only focuses on popular music especially in pop genre, to see how sexuality is manifested in both lyrics and music videos by connecting with the theory from Foucault and the discussion from popular music.

Sexuality is an individual discourse that involves desires and pleasures. Music with the proliferating discourses around sexuality is a phrase that "evokes Foucault's (1981) theory of sexuality as a productive power in itself" (Shepherd, 2003, p.68). This statement helps to build a fundamental understanding that music is the discourse for sexuality. It is a platform for the construction of Foucault's concept of repression of sexuality. As we understand from Foucault's theories of sexuality, the main idea is not about sexuality itself being repressed but the dominated groups using power to control the ideology. In the process of finding the truth, it is the process of finding the power. Music as an art form, to some extent, distinguishes the difference between the two procedures for producing the truth of sex: *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*, and represents the notion of pleasure and body. Music is therefore another power domain that carries the idea of "reproduction" and the idea of "power".

However, by putting sexuality into popular music, it is essential to also associate it with gender issue, because sexuality in popular music is always discussed in a female

context. It is the gender issue that causes the sexual oppression in today's social situation. Patriarchy and male-dominant society has put what Foucault's repression of sexuality into a male-female dilemma. The question is how females break loose from the repression and how males have the power to control the sexual desire and pleasure. As Whiteley (2000) stated, gender conflict, replacing class, is established as the fundamental form of human conflict (p.2). For example, some feminists believed that sexual repression is based on the male-dominant society that the men repressed women's sexuality (Sawicki, 1991, p.30). Therefore, the analysis will also put Foucault's sexuality into a gender and power conflicts. Besides, these conflicts will be analyzed through popular music.

## 1. MICHEL FOUCAULT AND THE REPRESSION OF SEXUALITY

To start the discussion of Foucault and sexuality, here is a quote of how Foucault thought about power and the sexual discourse:

Foucault's theory explicitly broke with Freud's 'hydraulic' view of sexuality as a force that could be repressed, perverted or liberated, but that was essentially controlled by a power outside itself (the superego, as the internalization of social norms). Instead, Foucault substituted the idea that sexuality, from the nineteenth century onward, divided and proliferated into multiple sites of power and pleasure. Through these sites, new kinds of power were exercised over bodies, in a more specific way than previously, as new disciplines and institutions redefined pleasures in new discourse that identified individuals into groups (Shepherd, 2003, p.68).

The literature analysis takes three aspects from Foucault's philosophy of sexuality: repression, desire and body, to construct the fundamental framework for the following analysis of popular music and sex.

### 1.1 Repression and Power

As always, sex has been carefully confined nowadays. It is still not a topic that people can freely talk in public. Foucault (1978), in the 70s, expounded that "repression operated as sentence to disappear, but also an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (p.4). The repression of sex was first an agenda for politics. It was in the capitalism that the bourgeoisies tried to control the labor by not dissipating itself in pleasurable pursuits. Therefore, sex became a serious topic when people tried to talk about it. It was to the speaker's benefit that "we are conscious of defying established power... and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making" (pp.6-7). These statements doubtless pointed out the issue that the repression of

sexuality was a feint by the power class. Instead, it built the ideological discourse to the people. It was as Stuart Hall addressed that ideology was not produced by individuals' cognition but the already fixed ideological discourses that constructed individuals' beliefs (Larain, 1996, p.49).

Foucault acknowledged that the repression of sexuality was from these discourses. He addressed that the confession manuals from the Middle Ages by the Catholic elicited the rules of sexual discourses and therefore people have to follow the rules in order to purify their spirits. As Sawicki (1991) described, Foucault pull sexuality away from the imposing of restrictions on sexual expression and emphasized on "how power has produced our ways of understanding and taking up sexual practices and how these discourses...become the primary positions in struggles concerning sexuality" (p.39). What Foucault reinforced was the issue that sexual discourses were not something natural, but the production of dominant power, and they were the fact that under the modern societies, the dominant "dedicated themselves to speaking of [sex] ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret" (Foucault, 1978, p.35). With all these in mind, sexual repression, as Foucault reiterated, was a hypothesis only. On the contrary, it was this repressive hypothesis that allowed the agencies of power (bourgeoisies, or males) to verbalize sexuality to satisfy their pleasures and desires.

### 1.2 Desire and Pleasure

As the repressive hypothesis assumed, desire always associated with power (Foucault, 1978, p.81). In the confession manuals, people had to transform their desire to discourses (Foucault, 1978, p.21). This transformation was the representation of power, the power that controlled the personal desires and pleasures. The same power relationships happen between men and women. Men have the definite power in sexual discourses, through pornographic images and dialogues. Women, to men, are the sensory incitement of desires and pleasures. It is exactly like listening and recording process of the pastoral.

Foucault emphasized that sexual desire and pleasures were interrelated. Desire was aroused when seeing things that trigger pleasures. As a result, desires and pleasures did not necessarily relate to corporal temptation, but any sensory stimulus. In *ars erotica*, sexual pleasures and knowledge were from practice, both the body and the soul. In *scientia sexualis*, sexuality was brought to the level of knowledge-power. Although Foucault (1978) mainly concentrated on the difference of the objects of power, there is another aspect that can be concluded from the two different truth of sex. That is, how pleasure is manifested. For example, if music is an art form, it must be abstract and related to self. The rhythm and melody and even the visual images from videos, as the top-down instructions, construct these pleasures of self and evoke the desires. However, the lyrics from songs serve as the confession

that exactly tells the listeners what the truths are. Listeners then are aroused to have the pleasures of discovering and exposing the truth and in the “fascination of seeing it and telling it” (Foucault, 1978, p.71).

### 1.3 Body and Identity

As Danaher et al. stated (2000), Foucault discussed that the discourses on sex produce categories of sexual practices and sexual identity were determined based on how we were marked (p.133). In this sense, the body, signed as man/woman or attractive/not-attractive, formulated us as the objects and then transformed into discourses which shaped our way of living. As they further stated: “...although the ethics and the rules of social and sexual conduct may differ dramatically across history and cultures, sexual discourse-on practices, identity, or body type-contribute significantly to how societies establish the ‘truth’ of the subject, and the norms for the relations that subjects should have with themselves and others” (p.134). Therefore, women should have a self-evident identity that is different from men (p.141). They were in the passive role of the sexuality, and anytime women tried to be independent or dominant in the sexual relationship, or actively express pleasures, they were considered deviant.

With all these in mind, Foucault’s idea of the repression of sexuality was just the multiple power sites that disguised the inner purpose. No matter it was the *scientia sexualis* or the confession manuals, they all put sexuality into a discourse that benefited the listeners and the powerful ones. This might raise the question that will it have the similar system in the discourse of popular music and sexuality?

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## 2. POPULAR MUSIC AND SEXUALITY

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In popular music, Shepherd (2003) stated that the music industry is under the patriarchal culture that it is “in the form of the all-pervasive, listening equivalent of the male gaze”, and these discourses both exclude female desire and generate sexualities as power and pleasure (p.68). In this case, popular music is a field that women are “repressed” by this male-dominant power and are reconstructed in a way that they are the objects of pleasure for males. Frith and McRobbie (1990) stated that music is both a means of sexual expression but also as a mode of sexual control (p.387). For example, rock music constitutes the traditional ideology of masculinity and femininity so that it expresses the sexual discourse, and pop music addresses the romance as the ideology of “domesticity”, which adequately present the mode of sexual control.

The problem is that women are also the objects of being looked and being desired. They are, in popular music, often constructed as the “other” (Whiteley, 2000, p.38). To some extent, women are repressed in this musical society. They are considered either as the provider, forgiver and the healer, in the maternal role, or as

the role that should be fulfilled to gratify the male sexually (p.39). All of these sexual ideologies can be revealed in the texts of popular music. The women’s liberation in the late 1960s has a huge influence in popular music, where in rock and pop, women generally participated in and gave out their voices. They challenged the traditional scientific determinism and the social ideologies of women and tried to break out from the repression.

### 2.1 Role of Females in Popular Music

Whiteley (2000) stated that in the 60s, women were portrayed as the fantasy figures that being looked. The song “Jennifer Juniper” by Donovan reflected a “pleasure of both narrator and listener ‘depends on the object of the look being unable to see him: to this extent, it is a pleasure of power, and the look is a controlling on... (Jennifer) can be looked at for as long as desired, because the circuit of pleasure will never be broken by a returned look’” (p.34-35). Voyeurism is the word Whiteley (2000) used for this imagined women representation. It is, to some extent, similar to what Foucault defined the scientific sexuality that the spectators were the advantageous ones. In addition, Longhurst (1995) illustrated that female singers also illuminated this ideological relationship in the lyrics, for example, the lyrics of Tammy Wynette’s “Stand by Your Man” sang the celebration of “women’s duty to men, implore women to enjoy subordinating themselves to men’s needs—lyrically the song is a ballad of sexual submissiveness” (p.122). One thing that needs to be noticed is that Wynette is a female singer, nothing is more depressing and “repressing” when such sexual submissiveness was sung by a woman.

With the development of society and popular music, the traditional sexual ideology is challenged. The notions of “equality of sexual pleasure” and “free expression” were dominant in rock music in the 60s. These notions were taken as meanings of a satisfying sexual relationship (Frith&McRobbie, 1990, p.388). This sexual revolution in the 60s aimed to abandon male control and be against sexual repression. However, with all these revolutions, music industry is still under the male-dominant principle (Frith&McRobbie, 1990, p.388). Whiteley (2000) criticized that when women advocated for sexual revolution, these liberating attitude may be interpreted by men as the “unlimited fucking” (p.38). Frith and McRobbie (1990) pointed out another field that popular music is under a male-defined notion of freedom that put girls in a “confessional” situation, which is dance music. They stated that pop music often leads girls and young women to the dance floor. For them, dancing with music is one of the activities that they can be active. However, it is, as Frith and McRobbie referred, also an activity that boys look for the female partners from these girls (p.388). Therefore, girls are given the freedom to express themselves on the dance floor, but all in all, they are the attractive pleasures that the boys can easily get.

Similarly, the emergence of Music Television (MTV) in 1981 put females in the middle of the visual imaginary spotlight. This visual appearance not only allowed women to build the audience recognition but also provided the platform for voyeurism to trigger the pleasures of seeing. This assumption was largely based on the statement that music industry was mainly the representation of male experiences, ideology and desires. Body in music videos, no denial, was the object to be looked at, while the signifier of sexual identity between genders produced the gender differences (McDonald, 1997, p.281). The body connected with identity and desires, so who were the viewers? Lewis (1993) indicated that MTV enacted "male adolescence discourse through a broad system of images that evokes boys' privileged position" in patriarchy (p.135). Lewis continued to point out that because of this male-privileged address, girls were excluded from the male discourses which became the "primary framework or terms of an argument, requiring parties interested in creating a female voice, to perform with the established terms of the problematic in play" (p.136).

Lewis (1993) further illustrated that females have taken the access signs to the male discourses in music videos. One of the examples is that girls accessed to the street, where it was the symbol of male privilege, and earned their space (p.137). These female address videos, feminine style and fashion reinforced gender identity in an active way, for example, Madonna's "Material Girl" music video. This marked the emergence of female address and a practice that girls introduced their experience into popular music. However, as I discussed with Samson Young, the professor from City University of Hong Kong in Media Cultures, even in the music video of "Material Girl", men were still in the position of watching, the spectator or even the voyeur. Was this girls take-over movement, as one might be curious, a disguised confession in Foucault's words?

## 2.2 Is There a Musical Repressive Hypothesis?

Foucault argued that sexuality has been put in a repressive hypothesis that in fact proliferating sexual discourse. The question here is whether, in popular music, women and their sexual desires are in a repressive hypothesis. As stated above, the liberation of women in popular music probably was just the pleasures of the power system, namely, the male-dominant voyeurism. Cohen (1997) illustrated in her "Liverpool rock scene" case that gender roles were not pre-existing, but they were produced by males, who, through social practice and ideology, decided what males or females should and should not behave (p.34).

It was not to say that women voluntarily gave up their rights in music and their sexual desires. The power of the discourses in this case played the vital role and represses women and their sexuality. Women's desires therefore were situated as the secret. Then the emergence of women's liberation in the 1960s and the later post-wave feminism

in the 1990s somehow gave women the rights and the freedom to talk about sex and their desires and pleasures as well as their knowledge-power of the truth in sexuality. If Foucault has identified that the explosion of sexualities was in fact the solidification of the power system, would the explosion of female empowerment a way of this reinforcement of sexual discourse to patriarchy?

## 3. SEXUALITY OF FOUCAULT AND POPULAR MUSIC IN KATY PERRY

Shepherd (2003) illustrated that Foucault's notions of power and pleasure discourse have been worked with in popular music studies. Popular music, as the powerful discursive regime, generates "sometimes resistant discourses of sexuality" (p.68). The idea of resistance emerged in Foucault's parallel idea of "the pleasure that comes of exercising a power" and "the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power". In order to better analyze the relationship between Foucault's notions of sexuality and the sexuality in popular music, Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream" will be studied in a semiotic method here.

The reason to choose Katy Perry is that she is one of the controversial female artists in contemporary popular music industry. Perry was born in a Christian family which her parents were both pastors. However, she reached her stardom in 2008 with the controversial single "I Kissed A Girl" about homosexuality that received negative criticism from religion groups (Vena, 2008). Even with these controversies, she is now one of the most successful figures: her album *Teenage Dream* became the first female album in the history that has five number-one hits on the *Billboard*. Additionally, her bold and independent attitude and the sexual signs manifested in her music make it easy for people to compare her with Madonna. She also admitted that she wants to be like Madonna (Dinh, 2012).

The single "Teenage Dream" will be analyzed on both lyrics and visual texts. This is to see how sexuality is manifested in contemporary popular music and how power is exercised through the discourse of sexuality. Maybe, we can find out whether the repressive hypothesis exists in popular music and sexuality.

### 3.1 Lyrics

It is easy to find out how sexual relationship is portrayed in the lyrics of "Teenage Dream". This song is basically about when a man walks into a woman's life and everything is changed. However, unlike Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man", this song is not completely in a male-dominant ideology that woman is controlled and can only satisfy man's desire and pleasure. Instead, what Katy Perry sings describes the sexual dream that a woman wants and actively looks for.

When looking at the first verse, the sexual relationship seems to be very traditional that "I" was a wreck before

“we” met but “I” was brought to life because of “you”. However, what one needs to notice is how the words are placed. Two lines from the first verse, “before you met me...” and “Now every February you’ll be my valentine...”, show the dominant role in the relationship that girl has the power to choose her mate instead of being passive and waiting for the sexual control. Imagined if the lines were changed in this way: “before I met you” and “Now every February I’ll be your valentine”, the power discourse suddenly switches to the male-dominant relationship. Therefore, regardless of the superficial meaning of girls being changed by men, the signs of the interchange between the grammatical subject and object in the lyrics signify the change of the role of power. In addition, the first two lines of the verse: “You think I’m pretty without any make-up on. You think I’m funny when I tell punch line wrong” show that “I” can stay true and find the one “I” love. This staying-true attitude, to some extent, partially challenges the pornographic imaginary that women with make-up and sexy look. Her ignorance of the punch line also serves as the signifier of the stimulation of deceit, which is “I know nothing in this sexual knowledge but I know everything to cavort with you”.

The chorus of this song is the platform of pleasures and desires. The line “let’s go all the way tonight” is the metaphor of having the desire of sexual pleasures. The line “The way you turn me on” delineates the sexual practice. The line “Just one touch, baby I believe this is real...” depicts the somatic pleasures transferring to the sensory pleasures of believing this sexual practice. If considering the song as the story, the verse is the beginning of the story about a guy meeting a girl, and the chorus is the climax of the story where all these sexual practices take place. Besides, the word “dance” is the signifier of body and sexual identity, which will be discussed later in the video section. The phrase “in my skin-tight jeans” on the bridge of the song is another signifier to desire. Connecting with the following line “be your teenage dream tonight”, this part shows that “I” give away the vagina and have the incitement of pleasures, and this sexual practice is also the “teenage dream” for man to have the pleasure of touching and seeing.

All of these words can be interpreted as the confession of Katy Perry. Since the song is sung in first-person, it can be considered as an iconic sign of the personal portrayal of Katy Perry. By telling the sensory pleasures and each step of the act, “of reconstructing...the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and the quality of the pleasure that animated it”, this female-empowered discourse maybe is a way how the multiple power sites, which is the male-dominant music industry, put the *scientia sexualis* in the form of *ars erotica* to manipulate the discourse of sexuality. We can find the same discourse in the music video of this song (Foucault, 1978, p.63).

### 3.2 Video

The music video of “Teenage Dream” also explicitly expresses the sense of sex. First, the Blue-increased R.G.B color model of the images implied the warm and fantastic artistic conception that appropriately matches the “teenage dreaming” sense. In around 20 second after the beginning of the video, the scene focuses on a man in a boxing room, which is the typical masculine identity. This masculine identity can be read as the conventional portrayal of the pornographic sex which the bestial discourse takes place. This plays the similar role of the male lion in Madonna’s “Like A Virgin” music video (Whiteley, 2000, p.136). By showing this typical sexual identity, the position of power is clear. No matter it is in the convertible or on the beach, the sexual propensity Perry shows put her on the active position that, again, as the signified from “Like A Virgin”, “turned her love, metaphorically, into the Beast”. Of course, this “Teenage Dream” video does not have the palpable symbols to signify with, the later scene starts from the second pre-chorus shows Perry and the man making out in the hotel room turns these symbols into the sexual practices. The boxing room scene at the bridge of the song once again brings back the masculine body and identity, and leads to the climax of the sexual imaginary pleasures.

The dancing scene at the very end of the video, same as the word “dance” mentioned in the above lyrics section, signifies the sexual ritual. Mercer (1993) indicated that this dance is the incitement of the listener/viewer to dance, and this incitement is the “eroticization of the body” (p.98). On a female point of view, Lewis (1993) stated that dance is an activity of control, pleasure and sensuality for girls and it provides a “positive and vibrant sexual expressiveness” (p.140). The body of being seen and the pleasure of seeing all are reflected through dancing.

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### CONCLUSION

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All of these manifestations have no meanings unless audiences can interpret them. Longhurst (1995) took Madonna as example that the pleasures Madonna and her music give is “not the pleasure of what they say, but of their assertion of the right and the power of a severely subordinated subculture to make their own statements, their own meanings... [Madonna and her music] can exercise some control over [her female fans’] relationship to patriarchy and thus over the sense of their identity” (p.21). Look familiar? Yes, In Foucault’s (1978) notion of the truth of sexuality, “the pleasure in the truth of pleasure” (p.71), allow us to seek out the knowledge. This truthful confession is “inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power” (Foucault, 1978, p.59). The pleasure of discovering may be, for a long time, embedded with this society. Not only in the discourses of sexuality, but in many other fields of discourse.

However, what if the truth is defined by the powerful groups? If the power is so strong that it can produce the discourse and intrinsic modifications, allowing people to confess under the “imperious compulsion” (Foucault, 1978, p.62), how can this female empowerment be a liberal act? Therefore, one must consider that who make the definition of sexuality. As Alcoff (1988) described that women should deconstruct the self-definition and define themselves by using their own definition instead of the definition given by men (pp.368-369).

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