

14th ICLLCE 2019 Kuala Lumpur 021-017 Ayu Fitri Kusumaningrum

Female and Male Gaze in Popular Songs: How Women (Really) Love Their Bodies

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Abstract

Loving yourself becomes a prominent tagline in the twenty-first century which is imported across the globe to promote self-confidence. This popular tagline can be found in many different fields, such as literature, arts, films, even music. In Meghan Trainor's *All About That Bass*, the song is said to promote women's self-confidence by loving their bodies. The similar thing can also be found in One Direction's *What Makes You Beautiful*, the message of women's self-confidence is implied throughout the lyrics. Both songs have been expected to represent how women should love their bodies. Indeed, one significant thing from both songs is the depiction of ideal women, but the stereotype of ideal women has been restricted only in their bodies and faces. If talking about ideal women then, the beauty myth discourse will be discussed. Beauty myth becomes social control that uses the image of women's beauty to hegemony all women. In that case, a question about whose perspective to be used in loving oneself has risen. Do women in both songs see themselves through their own eyes? Or do they appreciate their bodies through men's perspective? Using feminist theories, this research is aim to prove that the two popular songs do not precisely represent how women love or respect themselves. By applying the concept of the female and male gaze by Laura Mulvey and also the beauty myth by Naomi Wolf, this research finds out that both songs, which are said to promote women's self-confidence, in fact, portray women's self-confidence through male's perspective. Women in both songs have only a secondary perspective in loving and respecting their own bodies; they have been exposed by the masculinisation of the spectator.

Keywords: Female Gaze, Male Gaze, Beauty Myth, Masculinity of the Viewer, Self-Confidence.

Introduction

Nowadays, there are many women empowerment songs delivered by both female and male singers. Taylor Swift, Beyonce, John Legend, and Bruno Mars are some singers who promote women empowerment songs. Those songs usually try to boost women's confidence through lyrics that empower them. However, if the lyrics studied further, apparently some of those women empowerment songs are not 'purely' empowering women because behind the lyrics that seem to be trying to 'strengthen' women, there are actually men who control everything.

This paper then uses two popular songs by Meghan Trainor and One Direction entitled *All About That Bass* and *What Makes You Beautiful* as the focus of the study because both songs are targeted at female audiences. *All About That Bass* is written by

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Meghan Trainor and popularized in 2014. Promoting the bubblegum pop genre, Trainor succeeds in attracting the attention of many audiences by ranked number 1 on the Billboard chart. *All About That Bass* can be said as a unique song because it is different from other songs; it does not feature thin models, instead, Trainor displays models with big size. On the other side, *What Makes You Beautiful* is written by Rami Yacoub, Carl Falk, and Savan Kotecha, and popularized by famous boyband One Direction. That song succeeds in attracting the attention of many young women because the song is full of sweet praise for women.

One significant thing that can be seen from the two songs is both of them aim to increase women's self-confidence by making women love themselves just the way they are. While this is a good discourse, in fact, the two songs are not 'really' empowering women because the point of view that is used to strengthen women is not women's perspective, but precisely men's perspective. The controlling male gaze, as expounded by Laura Mulvey (1989), was principally incriminated for the objectification of womanhood not only in film but also in other areas where the advancement of women had been impeded or stifled (Despotopoulou, 2004: 569). This means that men become the active subject and women are passive in the frames of the narrative. While Mulvey explores the objectification of women in cinema and Monk-Turner, Elizabeth, et al. (2008) explore the related topic in magazine product advertisements, this study wants to explore it in popular songs.

Talking about objectifying women, the focus will be on images of women portrayed in the lyrics of the songs. The image portrayed in both songs concerns only about women's ideal figure which can lead to the beauty myth concept by Naomi Wolf. According to Wolf (2002), the beauty myth tells a story about the quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it (Wolf, 2002: 12). Wolf added that this beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power. The qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable (Wolf, 2002: 13-14). Using the beauty myth, the objectification of womanhood can be said extending its 'claws' in controlling women. Similar to the male gaze, the beauty myth also sees women as the passive one and their existence is merely to please men as the active one.

Actually, there is a reaction related to the male gaze study in which women voice their visual fantasy with a new perspective called the female gaze. Generally, the female gaze can be interpreted as a symbol of women's rebellion against the media and men. Through the female gaze, women are trying to oppose the 'gaze' rule by reversing masculinity qualifications for men, so that women no longer controlled by the male gaze and they can control their own eyes, even making men as objects of their visual satisfaction.

In *Vulture Magazine* (2018), directors, theater artists, photographers, and cinematographers openly discuss the redefinition of the female gaze. Ashley Connor in Telfer (2018) argues that "the 'male' gaze seeks to devour and control, and the 'female' gaze is more a frame of mind, where approach to subject and material is more emotional and respectful (Telfer, 2018)."

The female gaze views women as subjects to themselves who hold control of themselves not only in terms of the body but also regarding thoughts, actions, freedom, etc. The female gaze describes how or what women feel in more detail. Connor reveals that the role of the female gaze is not only a binary opposition to the male gaze; it does not only turn the gaze of 'men to women' into 'women to men', but it also helps women

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considering their qualities of individuals according to their own perspective, not men's perspective.

In the process of self-acceptance, worrying about people's judgment is a specter for women. Started with insecure about themselves (both physically or personality), *All About That Bass* and *What Makes You Beautiful* seem like they have a purpose to empower women. Trainor and One Direction want to bring the female control back to themselves. But after digging the lyrics which echo the theme of women empowerment more deeply, it is proved that both songs are still trapped by the male gaze. Both songs have not succeeded in describing women as a whole without intervention by the male gaze and the beauty myth.

This study then will examine how the songs chosen use female and male gaze in empowering women. This study aims to find out that women are still being objectified in women empowerment songs. The image of women portrayed in both songs indicates that women love their bodies by satisfying men.

In analyzing the songs, the concept of the female and male gaze and beauty myth will be used. In one of her essays, Mulvey (1989) states that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly (Mulvey, 1989: 19)." Mulvey argues that gazing has been defined by patriarchal society as a male activity while being looked at is the domain of females. Gamman and Makinen (1994) claim that women are accustomed to being looked at, being an object of a gaze, and likewise conceive of themselves as objects. Thus, through images, women learn what they must do to please the other who is looking at them (Monk-Turner, Elizabeth, et al, 2008: 203).

As Mulvey's argument hinges on the idea that the woman is presented as the object of the male gaze and is thereby rendered passive in the frames of the narrative (Jacobsson, 1999: 7), the male gaze positions her within a culture she cannot define on her own but only decorate (Despotopoulou, 2004: 575). To sum up, "woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning (Mulvey, 1989: 15)."

However, Stephanie McBride (1989) argues that within patriarchy and the capitalist mode of production, it is increasingly difficult to produce a strong and consistent range of alternative images (McBride, 1989: 19). As a result, women will construct their outer and inner selves according to the male gaze to get the 'ideal image of women', which later leads to the masculinisation of the spectator; a point of view which is also manifest in the general use of the masculine third person. This is similar to Wolf's idea about the beauty myth. Wolf argues that the beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power. The qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable. Wolf added that most urgently, women's identity must be premised upon women's "beauty" so that women will remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air (Wolf, 2002: 13-14).

In a recent article on Vulture Magazine (2018), some director, theater artist, photographers, and cinematographer discuss the female gaze; debating and redefining the female gaze. Ashley Connor in Telfer (2018) argues that the 'male' gaze seeks to devour and control, and the 'female' gaze is more a frame of mind, where approach to subject and material is more emotional and respectful. Babette Mangolte added that in the early 1970s [...] there definitely was the desire to invent a female gaze (Telfer, 2018). Women invent a

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new language to define themselves. In short, the female gaze here means that women use their own eyes to see themselves; women are the active subject.

While nowadays women are said to see themselves using their own gaze, in fact, there is no such thing as the female gaze. Natasha Braier in Telfer (2018) states that cinema with the male gaze in it has more than 100 years of monopoly regarding the portraying image of women. It has colonized the new medium from the start. It has become the official language of cinema, so the female gaze never has the opportunity to truly develop and become something that can be analyzed (Telfer, 2018). This study hypothesizes that there is no female gaze shown in *All About That Bass*. Meghan Trainor's women empowerment song is similar to One Direction's *What Makes You Beautiful* which clearly uses the male gaze in portraying the image of women.

Research Objective

The objective of this research is to declare that Meghan Trainor and One Direction's songs are not really empowering women because those songs accept the masculinisation of the spectator. Eventually, both songs deal with the male gaze.

Research Question

The research question of this study is how the songs chosen use female and male gaze in empowering women. The previous researches will be helpful in finding the answer to the question.

Literature Review

All About That Bass has been an interesting research topic since its debut in 2014. Chloe Angyal argues that Meghan Trainor's body acceptance anthem is disappointing because the song is a pretty flimsy form of self-acceptance since it uses men's approval. In another research, Ida Ottesen argues that Meghan Trainor falls short of being considered truly inspirational related to the subject of body positivity. Meanwhile, this study explores the same topic using Laura Mulvey and Naomi Wolf's concept by adding One Direction's *What Makes You Beautiful* as the sample involved.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative and text-based. The source of the data is lyrics of *All About That Bass* and *What Makes You Beautiful*. The analysis of scholars in the same sample involved will be included to enhance the logic of the research objective. This study will be mainly based on the original lyrics for data collection.

Findings and Discussion

Through close reading, both *All About That Bass* and *What Makes You Beautiful* apparently have the same pattern. Those women empowerment songs always insert insecurities experienced by women in the songs. These insecurities vary, from the outer to inner selves' problem. As for *All About That Bass*, the insecurity is about weight and physical appearance.

Yeah it's pretty clear, I ain't no size two

[...]

You know I won't be no stick figure, silicone Barbie doll

The lyric above shows that Trainor has got insecurity about her body. The use of the negative tone of 'size two' and 'silicone Barbie doll' indicates that Trainor is still trapped in the beauty myth which tells a story about an ideal image of women. Unfortunately, the

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ideal image of women portrayed in society is not a big one like Trainor, so she often attacks that ideal image of women in her song out of her insecurity.

*I'm bringing booty back
Go 'head and tell them skinny bitches that
No, I'm just playing, I know you think you're fat
But I'm here to tell you...
Every inch of you is perfect from the bottom to the top*

In another lyric, another attack on the ideal image of women is found. This time Trainor is more frontal in attacking the 'skinny bitches'. From the lyric above, it can be seen that there is an unpleasant tone describing those skinny women who are said to be the ideal image of women in society. The way Trainor addresses those women can be said as a rude one although maybe the purpose of the lyric is purely a commercial purpose which is to sell the song.

From the insecurity in *All About That Bass*, it can be concluded that Trainor needs to attack the ideal image of women to justify her own image. This study sees that the attack instead of empowering women, it will weaken the bond between women, indeed. If this continues, another question will have arisen: are women empowerment songs actually targeted at some kinds of women, instead of all women?

While *All About That Bass* shows the insecurity is about weight and physical appearance, the insecurity in *What Makes You Beautiful* is slightly different. The insecurity in that song is about personality and public appearance. Similar to Trainor's, this song is also kind of straightforward in telling its purpose.

*You're insecure
Don't know what for
You're turning heads when you walk through the door
Don't need make-up
To cover up*

Since the beginning of the song, clearly, women in *What Makes You Beautiful* are portrayed as having insecurity. The way women are described when they turn their heads indicates that they are afraid of making a public appearance. They do not feel comfortable when they are being looked at. Instead of attacking other women, women in this song merely go away from the crowd. They show their insecurity through their silent act; they are portrayed as passive individuals.

*So c-come on
You got it wrong
To prove I'm right
I put it in a song
I don't know why
You're being shy
And turn away when I look into your eye-eye-eyes*

Still portraying women as the passive one, the lyric above is another example in which the insecurity about personality is depicted. Being targeted at female audiences, the lyric puts them into a passive space where their voice is not expressed. The only voice talking about them even coming from outside, male's perspective. This song precisely supports the concept of male gaze and beauty myth in which women have no power to define themselves; they are being seen through male's eyes.

Overcoming these insecurities is not an easy task. It can be seen in both songs which actually still use the male gaze to boost women's self-confidence. In empowering women, indeed, both songs use outside approval, revealing how vulnerable women are.

Yeah, it's pretty clear, I ain't no size two

*But I can shake it, shake it, like I'm supposed to do
'Cause I got that boom boom that all the boys chase
And all the right junk in all the right places*

Trainor has to state that as long as boys have something from her to chase, it is not a big deal whether she has an ideal image of women or not. Although she has a big body, she still can be that 'ideal image of women' if the boys approve it. This indicates that in boosting her self-confidence, she uses the male gaze in seeing herself. Like it is not enough yet, Trainor has to emphasize that male's approval once again.

*Yeah my mama she told me, "don't worry about your size"
(Shoo wop wop, sha-oooh wop wop)
She says, "Boys like a little more booty to hold at night"
(That booty booty, uh, that booty booty)*

Boosting women's self-confidence regarding the size of the body, Trainor relies on the boys' point of view to do so. She even brings her mama's advice to keep the 'words' alive. Using boys' approval, Trainor encourages other women to accept their big bodies. Ironically, her way of empowering women indicates that deep down she has been exposed by the masculinisation of the spectator. She has no her own voice to define herself; she becomes the passive while men are still the active one who controls her gaze.

The use of the male gaze is even clearer in *What Makes You Beautiful*. Since the song is delivered by male singers, the subject and object of the song are pretty obvious. From the beginning to the end of the lyrics, women portrayed in the song are still being objectified even though the song is said to be targeted at female audiences.

*Everyone else in the room can see it
Everyone else but you
Baby you light up my world like nobody else
The way that you flip your hair gets me overwhelmed
But when you smile at the ground it ain't hard to tell
You don't know
Oh, oh
You don't know you're beautiful*

The lyric above states the obvious thing: women in the song have only secondary perspective in seeing themselves. The way women depicted in the song shows that they become the one who is being looked at while men are the one who looks at them. This is very crystal clear that women are being objectified. Their silent act means that they need outside approval to gain self-confidence.

*If only you saw what I can see
You'd understand why I want you so desperately
Right now I'm looking at you and I can't believe
You don't know
Oh, oh
You don't know you're beautiful
Oh, oh
That's what makes you beautiful*

This last lyric will emphasize how women are objectified in the song. It is said that women cannot acknowledge what men can see. In other words, women need men's approval regarding their beauty. Since their voice is not heard, it is men's voice which defines them. In short, women have been exposed by the masculinisation of the spectator in which they actually become the object of the gaze.

Limitations

The limitation of this study lies in its small sample songs, only analyzing two popular songs that use the theme of women empowerment. Besides these songs, certainly, there are many other women empowerment songs that will have different interpretations. However, this study aims to give a new perspective on the topic of the female and male gaze by analyzing songs instead of films, novels or any literary works.

Conclusion

All About That Bass and *What Makes You Beautiful* are said to promote women's self-confidence by loving their bodies. While this is a good discourse, if the lyrics are being studied closely, those songs do not precisely represent how women love or respect themselves. Using the concept of female and male gaze by Laura Mulvey and also the beauty myth by Naomi Wolf, this study finds out that both songs, which are said to promote women's self-confidence, in fact, portray women's self-confidence through male's perspective; they (really) love their bodies using men's point of view. As a matter of fact, both songs promote the masculinisation of the spectator in which women have only a secondary perspective in loving and respecting their own bodies.

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