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Bakalářská práce

Univerzita Hradec Králové
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Feminismus v průmyslu popové hudby:
Mění se vyobrazení žen v textech populárních písní mezi lety 1980 až 2020

Bakalářská práce

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Feminism in the pop music industry:
The changing representations of women in popular songs' lyrics between 1980
and 2020

Bachelor's Thesis

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Cíl, metody, literatura, předpoklady:

The thesis focuses on the constantly changing representations of women in the field of popular music and how is this expressed through the lyrics during a particular period in modern history. The student introduces the topics of popular music, positive and negative representations of women, and puts the socio-political background of the years 1980-2020 into context.

The main focus is on feminism in the forms of not only objectification, sexualisation, and oppression, but also empowerment and new perspectives on the body image of women, all being expressed in the evolving lyrics of pop songs.

Using the recommended literature, the work analyses the changes in representations of women in both social and musical fields between 1980 and 2020 through the lyrics of a selection of popular songs. The thesis also shows how contemporary sociopolitical changes led to female empowerment, which then resulted in an era of self-sexualisation and the reappropriation of certain existing words traditionally used to demean and disenfranchise.

Finally, the student also considers both male and female artists' points of view and compare them in selected examples.

Práce se zaměřuje na neustále se měnící vyobrazení žen v poli popové hudby a na vyjádření těchto změn prostřednictvím hudebních textů ve vymezeném časovém useku moderních dějin. Student představuje témata populární hudby, pozitivních i negativních vyobrazení žen a uvádí do kontextu celé sociálně-politické dění v letech 1980-2020.

Obsah se tedy dotýká především feministických témat. Důraz je kladen hlavně na společenské fenomény objektivizace, sexualizace a utlačování, ale i následného vzestupu ženské pozice i nová pojetí ženského těla, a jak se všechny tyto aspekty projevují ve stále se vyvíjejících popových textech.

Práce za použití doporučené literatury analyzuje změny vyobrazení žen jak v sociálních, tak hudebních kruzích mezi lety 1980-2020 skrze texty zvolených populárních písní. Také ukazuje, jak některé novodobé sociálně-politické změny vedly k éře sebesexualizace i znovuužití některých slov, která původně ženy spíše urážela a degradovala. V závěru student také bere v úvahu rozličné pohledy mužských a ženských interpretů na daná témata a porovnává je na vybraných příkladech.

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FLYNN, Mark A., Clay M. CRAIG, Christina N. ANDERSON a Kyle J. HOLODY. Objectification in Popular Music Lyrics: An Examination of Gender and Genre Differences. *Sex Roles*. 2016, 75(3-4), 164-176. ISSN 0360-0025. Available in: doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0592-3

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HOOKS, Bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000. ISBN 0-89608-629-1.

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou/diplomovou práci “Feminismus v průmyslu popové hudby: Měnící se vyobrazení žen v textech populárních písní mezi lety 1980 až 2020” vypracovala pod vedením vedoucího závěrečné práce samostatně a uvedla jsem všechny použité prameny a literaturu.

V Hradci Králové dne

.....
Eliška Sedláková

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že bakalářská práce je uložena v souladu s rektorským výnosem č. 13/2022 (Řád pro nakládání s bakalářskými, diplomovými, rigorózními, dizertačními a habilitačními pracemi na UHK).

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Anotace

SEDLÁKOVÁ, Eliška. *Feminismus v průmyslu popové hudby: Měníci se vyobrazení žen v textech populárních písní mezi lety 1980 až 2020*. Hradec Králové: Pedagogická fakulta, Univerzita Hradec Králové, 2023. 97s. Bakalářská práce.

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Klíčová slova:

Feminismus, populární hudba, text, sexualizace

Annotation

SEDLÁKOVÁ, Eliška. *Feminism in the pop music industry: The changing representations of women in popular songs' lyrics between 1980 and 2020*. Hradec Králové: Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, 2023. 97 pp. Bachelor's Degree Thesis.

The thesis focuses on the constantly changing representations of women in the field of popular music and how is this expressed through the lyrics during a particular period in modern history. The student introduces the topics of popular music, positive and negative representations of women, and puts the socio-political background of the years 1980-2020 into context. The main focus is on feminism in the forms of not only objectification, sexualisation, and oppression, but also empowerment and new perspectives on the body image of women, all being expressed in the evolving lyrics of pop songs. Using the recommended literature, the work analyses the changes in representations of women in both social and musical fields between 1980 and 2020 through the lyrics of a selection of popular songs. The thesis also shows how contemporary sociopolitical changes led to female empowerment, which then resulted in an era of self-sexualisation, and the reappropriation of certain existing words traditionally used to demean and disenfranchise. Finally, the student also considers both male and female artists' points of view and compares them in selected examples.

Keywords:

Feminism, popular music, lyrics, sexualisation

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce má za úkol předvést, jak se proměňovala reprezentace žen v textech popových písní mezi lety 1980-2020. Dekádu po dekádě práce analyzuje texty známých interpretů (mužských i ženských) a představuje způsoby, kterými jsou ženy v písních portrérovány. Práce obsahuje variaci ukávek těchto hudebních textů bez cenzury a následně zkoumá jejich význam, zasazení do sociopolitického kontextu své doby a případný vliv, který takový text může mít na své posluchače. Pro pochopení širších souvislostí je každá dekáda představena z politického, kulturního a hudebního hlediska; navíc sleduje i vývoj feministického hnutí a jeho vliv na každou z dekad. To vše tvoří náhled do populární a feministické kultury posledních čtyř dekad a vyzdvihuje jejich hlavní milníky, představitele a autory, jež ženy ve svých textech spíše dehonestovali.

Práce v první řadě uvádí na pravou míru pojmy, se kterými bude pracovat: populární hudba a feminismus rozebraný dále na jeho stručné dějiny, návaznost k rasové problematice a genderové stereotypy a nerovnost. Zjišťuje, že populární hudba je velice těžko definovatelná, protože dominantní žánry se proměňují právě na základě jejich oblíbenosti, jejím úkolem je však primárně získat danou popularitu, aby se mohla prodávat. Zároveň uvádí, že za kolébku popové kultury označujeme především Spojené státy americké, proto se dále bude věnovat sociopolitickému kontextu právě tam. Feminismus (se svými kořeny již v devatenáctém století) se dělí na tři vlny, a jeho aktivismus již ženám vyhrál právo volit, zvýšil platy a do jisté míry osvobodil od zastaralých koncepcí patriarchy. V dnešní době se feministé zabývají i sexualitou či sebeláskou.

Jako první se pak představují osmdesátá léta. Amerika se nachází uprostřed studené války a prezident Reagan zastává tradiční konzervativní hodnoty, což má za následek tzv. „nukleární rodiny,” kdy se o domácnost a její finance staral primárně otec, mezitím co matka měla na starosti domácí práce. To ženy často vedlo k nespokojenosti, a dokonce i k rozmachu antidepressiv, které jim pomáhaly se alespoň myšlenkově vymanit z tohoto životního cyklu. Feminismus se v tu dobu začínal soustředit na fakt, že je v hnutí dbát i na rasovou problematiku, neboť ne všechny ženy prochází těmi samými problémy. „Osmdesátky“ také znamenaly příchod televizního kanálu MTV, jež umožnil hudebníkům vytvářet videa ke svým písním. Také to ale znamenalo, že kromě jejich textů někteří autoři vizualizovali své postoje k ženám – ty byly často sexuálního ladění. Tato kapitola ukazuje, jak ženy byly hodnoceny především na základě jejich vzhledu a autoři v nich viděli pouze objekt touhy či něco, co se dá vlastnit. V této

době ale přišla na scénu Madonna, která propojila svou tvorbu s šířením feministické agendy a její texty, videoklipy i živá vystoupení sloužila jako politické komentáře a svou šokující povahou ovlivňovala další kroky feminismu.

Devadesátá léta se nechala hluboce ovlivnit rockovou hudbou, především tzv. grungem, to dalo vzniknout mnoha známým hvězdám; kromě kapel Nirvana či Soundgarden také třeba další ženské interpretky – Alanis Morissette, která na scénu přináší nový pohled na vztahy a svým otevřeným a neotřelým způsobem reaguje na své předešlé partnery. Mainstreamová hudba je potom pohlcena chlapeckými a dívčími kapelami, z nichž práce ukazuje především Spice Girls, globální fenomén, který, ač notně komercializován, ukázal mladým dívkám po celém světě, že být žena není nic, za co by se měl člověk stydět, a ve svých textech propagovaly sebelásku a sesterství. Kromě toho se v devadesátých letech výrazně zpopularizoval rap a hip-hopová hudba, která se zaměřuje na rasové problémy ve společnosti a skrze své texty je komentuje a reaguje na ně. Jak práce naznačuje, rapová hudba byla doposud doménou především mužů, nicméně v této dekádě zaznamenává vzestup ženských rapperek, které bojovaly o svou pozici v tomto žánru. Práce ukazuje např. tvorbu rapperky Queen Latifah, která ve svých textech vyzdvihuje vlastní pozici a ukazuje mužům, že ženy toto zvládnou také. Pokud jde o „klasický pop“ a jeho texty psané muži, devadesátá léta stále vykazují známky sexuální objektivizace, role žen ve společnosti se sice zlepšila, ale stále jsou posuzovány především podle sexuální atraktivitu, což může mít za následek řadu mentálních neduhů, či dokonce poruch příjmu potravy u mladých dívek.

Nové milénium přineslo masivní vlnu technologických posunů, mezi něž řadíme například sociální sítě a streamovací služby, které umožnily šíření hudby mnohem rychleji. Díky internetu se rozšiřuje i feminismus a jeho cíle se začaly množit a modifikovat; od srovnání výše platů po práva LGBTQ+ komunity. Tato dekáda navíc přinesla mnoho nových popových ikon, z nichž mnohé byly právě ženy. Jak ale práce ukazuje na příkladu Britney Spears, některé z těchto idolků byly pouhým produktem marketérů, jež své svěřenkyně vykořisťovali a veřejně sexualizovali pro co nejvyšší profit. Sex stále přetrvával jako dominantní téma v populární kultuře, ať už šlo opět o degradující texty ze strany mužů, nebo právě o sebesexualizaci ze strany ženských hudebnic. Jedna z kapitol této dekády také zmiňuje, jak texty zástupců obou pohlaví interpretují jejich pohled na materiálnost ve vztazích a na tzv. „zlatokopky“ (ženy, které jsou se svými muži pouze pro peníze). Rapové žánry se stále držely na předních příčkách hudebních žebříčků, a i ty se nebály o sexu otevřeně mluvit. Kapitola „Lollipop“ ukazuje, jak někteří z rapperů užívali metafory lízátka pro svá přirození, a jak je lízátko spojeno s kulturou fetišizace mladých dívek.

Poslední dekáda znamenala veliký progres pro feminismus. Díky sociálním platformám jako je Facebook a Twitter je pro něj snazší bojovat s misogynií hned, jak se někde objeví. Tento rozmach má na svědomí také početná odvětví feminismu, kdy už nemůžeme mluvit o jednom společném cíli hnutí. Důraz je kladen především na individualitu – ať už jde o rasu, sexualitu, gender, nebo nově i váhu. Toto všechno spadá pod nové hnutí z této dekády, tzv. body-positivity (neboli tělesná pozitivita). Účelem tohoto hnutí je především sebeláska a boj s předsudky vytvářenými na základě vzhledu. Propaguje, že každé tělo je krásné, nehlédě na jeho velikost, barvu nebo třeba postižení. V popové hudbě se tak objevují dvě výrazné autorky, jež ve svých textech uplatňují body-positivity a svou personu staví na těchto principech – Lizzo a Megan Trainor. Mezitím co Trainor zpívá o své nadváze, stále může být považována za objektivně atraktivní, což vyvolává otázky ohledně autenticity a validity jejího poselství. Na druhé straně Lizzo je obézní Afroameričanka, která se na sociálních sítích denně setkává s vlnou urážek a nenávisti, což dokonce vedlo k zamknutí jejího twitterového účtu. Tato kauza poté vytvořila internetový diskurz ohledně tzv. fat-shamingu (=zostuzování obézních) a rozdílech jeho aplikace na muže a ženy. Další feministickou i ženskou popovou ikonou je Beyoncé, která se svým působením podobá Madonně. Přestože její role ve feminismu je pro některé sporná, kapitola o ní ukazuje její přínos v hnutí, především opět skrze texty jejich písní. Reprezentace žen v popovém průmyslu se nepochybně zlepšila, nicméně i v tomto století se stále můžeme setkat se sexualizací, objektivizací, misogynií, či dokonce glorifikací kultury znásilňování (kterou popisuje kapitola „Did men progress?“).

Závěrem vyplývá, že popová hudba kromě zábavy nepochybně slouží i jako zrcadlo společnosti a četné společenské jevy se promítají v jejích textech. Díky průřezu historií feminismu tato bakalářská práce nalézá obrovské posuny v rámci ženských práv, jejich rolí ve společnosti i evoluci popu. Nalézá příklady na všech rovinách – pozitivní i negativní – z pohledu ženského i mužského – a konstatuje následky působení těchto kultur na svá publika.

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Introduction

Popular culture is one of the defining aspects of modern society, connecting people worldwide (*Understanding Popular Music* x). This culture, including popular music, serves as a mirror of our society; reflecting the world, its social and political climates with all its features; struggles, movements, victories and many more. It has played a pivotal role in shaping and reflecting cultural narratives, often acting as a catalyst for social change and empowerment.

For several decades, women have been facing social challenges as “the lesser sex” in the world of men and patriarchy (*Feminism Is For Everybody* ix), resulting in such obstacles as being the target of sexualisation, objectification or even oppression. Throughout the years, the many attempts to change this internal structure gave rise to various movements and people advocating for feminism; some of them fight until this very day. The last four decades provided enormous changes in our society and in the general approach to women; both in an active way (from lucky female artists who got successful to a large number of 2010s pop stars) and in a passive way (how women are presented by men).

The ‘80s showed feminism’s newly gained momentum and its impact on popular music, including such artists as Madonna or Cyndi Lauper exploring their sexuality and gender identity. At the same time, the advent of MTV gave rise to the graphic sexualisation of women through music videos, accompanied by suggestive lyrics of the masculine gender.

The girls got “angry” in the ‘90s, leading to several movements including riot grrrls and girl groups with their new points of view, injecting their feminist spirit into their audience. Grunge served as a safe space for the lost youth, and rap music gained its significance when it reached the mainstream.

When the new millennium emerged, the world was getting used to the advent of the Internet, which brought many new possibilities to spread feminist messages worldwide and enabled further popularisation of music through streaming platforms and social networks. There were also many new female icons who captivated their audiences, creating huge fanbases to advocate for them.

The last decade meant very much for feminism as it got to experience its renaissance thanks to social platforms like Twitter or Facebook. Society can now connect globally, but in the real world, people are becoming more distant. Feminists can now fight misogyny in real time, meaning a big change for the better. Female rappers emerge from the male-dominated genre

with their self-sexualising lyrics and personae, exploring their expressions and reclaiming initially demeaning words, turning them into symbols of their power and individuality. The presidency of Obama raised questions about the LGBTQ+ community, and the following presidency of Trump polarised American society more than ever.

This thesis aims to show, decade by decade, how these cultural milestones manifested in popular music's lyrics. It will introduce each decade with its socio-political background and probe the lyrical expression of both women and men in their raw and uncensored form and analyse their meaning and possible consequences of such choice of words. After all, popular music influences the masses, so the ability to recognise harmful patterns is crucial to create a better world for all of us.

1 General overview

1.1 Popular music

Even though there is no equivocal statement of when popular music (pop) started because there is no particular demarcation of the term due to its everchanging border, there is a general idea of popular music definition in terms of this thesis. Pop cannot be considered a genre on its own; it is rather a variation. As the thesis will explore the decades' musical progress, it will show how particular genres influenced the mainstream, creating various fusions of sounds. Another issue is that art, and music especially, is so specific that we cannot determine its qualities objectively. The popularity of each song can be, however, measured to a certain extent. There are various charts over the world existing for decades, serving the purpose of determining the general admiration of works from the musical field. Based on these data, a certain definition of pop can be found.

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “pop music originated in the United States and the United Kingdom in the mid-1950s as a commercial and cultural category.” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2022). Pop music has long been associated with youth culture, and its history is closely tied to the social and cultural experiences of young people. Pop music's aim to reach youth audiences can be traced back to the emergence of rock and roll in the 1950s, which was marketed mainly to teenage audiences (*Understanding Popular Music* 36). Since then, popular music has continued to target youth audiences through its lyrics, musical styles, and marketing strategies.

One of the other defining characteristics of pop music is its emphasis on commercial success. Frith suggests that pop is a music industry product whose primary aim is to sell units and

generate profits. This focus on commercial success has led to the development of elaborate marketing strategies, celebrity branding, and other tactics aimed at maximising sales and profits. The music is made to sell; it has become a “mass culture” (Leppert et al. 137). Despite its commercial focus, pop music has also developed to be a vehicle for social and political commentary. Therefore, the various representation of women in such field is inevitable and plays an important role in the whole socio-political happening during the decades mentioned.

In the following decades, pop music continued to evolve and adapt to changing cultural and technological trends. Concerning the thesis, the essential output sources are the United States and the United Kingdom, as they are considered the cradle of popular culture during the next few decades, influencing the majority of the world and still setting trends even nowadays. As stated by Shuker: “The United States and the UK are the key historical sites in the development of popular music and represent the continuing, albeit declining, Anglo–American dominance of the international market.” (*Understanding Popular Music* 10).

1.2 Feminism

According to the National Organization for Women, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression.” (source: now.org/why-we-march/) This definition, however, is very general, as the feminist movement continues throughout the years, and its agenda changes based on current social events.

In the common public with poor education and/or interest in feminist topics, the misconception of feminism causes issues that retroactively sabotage the movement’s purpose. For centuries women have been fighting for equal rights and treatment in terms of their citizenship, educational or employment opportunities. This is what we actually recognise the most as feminism. It is a social, political, and cultural movement that aims to achieve equality among all genders and promote the rights and opportunities of women and other disadvantaged groups, minding the race, sexual orientation and/or sex.

In the most general way possible, feminism can be claimed to be fighting patriarchy. For further purposes, patriarchy can be defined as “a system of structures and institutions created by men in order to sustain and recreate male power and female subordination” (qtd. in *Women and Popular Music* 45). The phenomenon occurs in various forms and institutions through different cultures, whether it is high politics or something as “unimportant” as the music field.

Due to various misconceptions presented by patriarchal media, feminism is often considered “antimale” (*Feminism is for Everybody* 1). This comes from feminist’s aim to liberate women

in terms of their bodies, body images, rape culture and financial aspects, such as the “pink tax” (=phenomena dealing with various products being marketed as vastly more expensive for women than the same products marketed for men) or pay gaps between men and women. The mass media (often ruled by conservative men as well) only deepened the hatred towards feminists and gave rise to the idea of them being all lesbians. Connected with the embedded homophobia, it was almost certain that feminism became highly misunderstood and disparaged (*Feminism is for Everybody* 67–98). The issue reaches, unfortunately, both sexes; therefore, women sometimes mistake (and act on) the topic of feminism as well, which leads to a rabbit hole of whole other concepts and ideas about the issue, not relevant to the actual aim.

Feminism fights for both men and women in terms of gender equality. According to Yoriko Ishida, it is not only a “male-female”, but also a “male-male” relationship that falls under the patriarchal domination umbrella (Ishida 2). The so-called “toxic masculinity” puts as much pressure on various males as well as females and is again presented by modern media to society, even in the form of popular music. This all creates an unhealthy environment for all genders and forms gender-based dogmas; retrospectively, such occurrences led to establishing cultures which are now hard to break down (see *1.2.3 Gender stereotypes*).

The feminist movement has a rich history, yet its most principal and “famous” rise happened in the second half of the 20th century. Generally, it is divided into three waves. The first one can be traced back to the 19th century when women began advocating for their right to vote and participate in political life. This movement, known as the suffrage movement, was focused on securing political rights for women and was led primarily by middle-class white women. The 1960s and the 1970s brought the second wave of feminism, which expanded feminist activism, including issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and sexual harassment. This wave of feminism was more diverse and inclusive than the first wave, and it included women of colour, working-class women, and women from the LGBTQ+ community. In the 1990s, the third wave of feminism emerged, and it now focused on issues of intersectionality, sexuality, and gender identity. This wave emphasised the importance of recognising and addressing the intersecting forms of oppression that impact women, and it sought to create a more inclusive and diverse feminist movement. Alternatively, “the third wave refers to a continuation of, and a reaction to the perceived failures of, second-wave feminism” (Odhiambo & Mutuku 1).

In terms of the thesis’ aim, the history of feminism is closely connected to popular music, as music has played an important role in feminist activism and the expression of feminist ideas.

From protest songs of the suffrage movement to the anthems of the second and third waves of feminism, popular music has served as a powerful tool for feminist expression and activism. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist musicians like Joni Mitchell, Carole King, and Joan Baez used their music to challenge gender roles and stereotypes and to promote women's empowerment and equality. Pop continued to serve as a significant platform for feminist activism and expression in the 1980s, with performers like Madonna and Cyndi Lauper using their work to question sex norms and uplift women. The Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s, which came out as part of the third wave of feminism, used punk rock music to address issues of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Today, feminist themes can be found in popular music across many genres. Music has allowed women and marginalised communities to express their experiences and perspectives and challenge dominant narratives and power structures.

1.2.1 Feminism and Race

Another importance in terms of what feminism stands for is the question of ethnicity. Everyone's experience is different based on their religion, culture, location or even their family circle. This results in various disagreements when it comes to who should represent all of these issues. The experience of improper treatment will come differently, for example, from women of colour or lower-class female workers. Additionally, some mainstream feminist movements have sustained the exclusion and marginalisation of women of colour by failing to address issues that disproportionately affect them, such as police brutality, immigration reform, and access to healthcare. "Mainstream patriarchy reinforced the idea that the concerns of women from privileged-class groups were the only ones worthy of receiving attention" (*Feminism is for Everybody* 40). This can lead to a sense of alienation and frustration among women of colour, who may feel that their voices and concerns are not being heard or taken seriously.

Especially black women (and black people in general) deal with various inconveniences remaining still from the times of slavery. According to Hooks, "a devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years" (*Ain't I a Woman* 53). This means that, in this case, the experiences of women of colour, particularly black women, have been shaped by a long history of systemic oppression and exploitation. The legacies of slavery, colonisation, and racism continue to impact the lives of black women today, and these experiences must be recognised and addressed within feminist movements. It is essential to acknowledge and centre the voices of women of colour in discussions of feminism and to work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society for all women, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or

socioeconomic status. This requires a commitment to intersectional feminism, which recognises the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression and seeks to address them all.

Intersectionality refers to the idea that women experience oppression in different ways based on their intersecting identities and social locations. For example, a white middle-class woman may face gender-based discrimination, but she may also have access to certain privileges based on her race and class. On the other hand, a woman of colour from a working-class background may face both gender-based discrimination and racial and class-based oppression, which can compound and exacerbate each other.

The issue with women of colour regarding feminism also reflects in popular music. Historically, the music industry has been dominated by white men, and women of colour have faced numerous obstacles in trying to break into the industry and achieve success on their own terms. They often face the double bind of being hypersexualised and objectified while also being subject to racist and sexist stereotypes. For example, black women in hip hop and R&B are often portrayed as overly aggressive, hypersexualised, or “angry,” perpetuating harmful stereotypes that have real-world consequences.

1.2.1 Sexism

Sexism is a form of discrimination or prejudice based on a person’s gender, typically against women and girls. As Described by Sara Ahmed, it is “a set of attitudes that are institutionalised, a pattern that is established through use, such that it can be reproduced almost independently of individual will” (10). It has a long history and is deeply ingrained in many cultures and societies around the world. Sexism can take many forms, from overt acts of discrimination and violence to more subtle forms of bias and prejudice. In many societies, women have been traditionally relegated to secondary roles in the home and workplace and have been denied access to education, political power, and other opportunities. These gender-based inequalities have been reinforced by sexist attitudes and beliefs, which perpetuate harmful stereotypes about women and their abilities.

In combination with sexism, there is a high chance of meeting the term objectification, as well. “Objectification theory refers to a woman’s body being treated as a scrutinizable object by being separated from her persona” (White 609). In practice (and in music), this is reflected by the frequent reduction of women’s qualities only to their looks or ability to perform sexually. White further describes using women as “mere decorative objects” whether in music, advertising, or even in real life (609). Such an approach could result in mental health issues, eating disorders,

and self-objectification or even can affect men (if they do not have their “decoration,” they are considered less of a person).

Despite advancements achieved in the area of gender equality, sexism is still a problem in today’s society. In many facets of their lives, including their job, media representation, and reproductive rights, women continue to experience discrimination and unfair treatment. Women frequently earn less than males for doing the same work and have obstacles to career advancement. In addition, women are frequently objectified and sexualised in media and advertising, reinforcing negative stereotypes and fostering a misogynistic culture.

In many parts of the world, access to reproductive healthcare and rights, particularly access to safe abortion and contraception, is still limited. This lack of access disproportionately affects women and can lead to unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and maternal mortality. Addressing these issues is crucial for achieving gender equality and empowering women worldwide.

Such attitude towards women is associated not only explicitly with lyrics or music videos as far as pop music is concerned, but also in the background along with the work of the artists themselves, various executives, producers or even whole labels.

1.2.3 Gender stereotypes

Gender is a socially constructed concept that refers to the cultural, social, and psychological traits and characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity (and ultimately nonbinarity). It is a complex concept shaped by a wide range of factors, including biology, culture, history, and social norms. Like other stereotypes, these come from the general/daily perception and are automatically applied to the whole target group of people (Eagly & Steffen 735). These can also vary across cultures and time periods. While some stereotypes may be universal, others may be specific to certain societies or historical contexts.

As far as Western culture goes, gender comes with a wide range of stereotypes occurring daily in various forms, music included. Such an occurrence means some kind of performativity in terms of the standardised appearance of oneself. “The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body.” (Butler XV). This undesirable social construct can be harmful and limiting, as it reinforces gender norms and can lead to discrimination and inequality; it results in standardised body image for both men and women, creating a hostile environment for those who do not necessarily fit into these standards;

this all instead makes space for eventual rebellions or disorders, not to mention the mental impact of those, who consume these ideas and try to fit them. It is rather the women who are prone to being victims of such propaganda, as according to Nielsen statistics, in 2019, it is still the female sex that consumes mass media more than their opposites (www.nielsen.com).

Despite the looks, another big emphasis is being placed on the relationship between what we consider feminine and masculine. Women are often seen as weak and emotional, whereas men should be straightforward and rational. Men should protect women, and women should repay them by being polite and welcoming. Feminine = pretty; masculine = strong. The other issue concerning the depiction of this relationship is the sexual objectification of women or, on the contrary, over-sexualisation from the female perspective. These gender stereotypes have been perpetuated by media and societal norms, leading to harmful consequences such as body shaming, discrimination, and limited opportunities for individuals who do not conform to these traditional gender roles.

In the past of feminism and popular music, gender stereotypes have been very influential. Over time, music has frequently been used to support gender norms and spread harmful beliefs about men and women. Many popular songs feature lyrics that objectify women and support stereotypical gender roles. These songs frequently depict women as sexual objects or passive recipients of male attention, reinforcing that a woman's value is determined by her physical attributes and ability to please men. The frequent portrayal of men as aggressive and assertive also perpetuates the idea that masculinity is primarily defined by physical strength and emotional distance. These gender stereotypes, which have persisted over time in different forms, have significantly affected people and society as a whole.

1.3 Ratio between genders in popular industry

The patriarchal influence results in an imbalance between female and male singers. In 1990, Groce & Cooper claimed that “approximately 90 per cent of all recording artists and attendant personnel in the music business are men” (qtd. in Groce & Cooper 221). However, it was not always like this. The first half of the 20th century brings the invention of microphones. Men resisted using these as they were “too artificial”, so women took their chance (*Understanding Popular Music* 53). After that, shortly before rock and roll took place in the 1950s, “women occupied one-third of the positions on the singles charts”. This number went progressively down, and by the year 1985, it was only 8 per cent (Groce & Cooper 221).

In general, women did not have such opportunities as men, as they were constantly rejected, with their pieces of work went mainstream. They were often presented “less desirably than males” in music videos, that being “both behaviorally and occupationally.” Usually, there was no female shown in a prominent occupation, such as an office or manual work; these were more fitting for males (Seidman). Groce & Cooper then found out that “women in local-level rock and roll bands” did not only “experience inequality in terms of input into the decision-making process,” but they also “experienced inequality at the other end”, meaning lower material compensation (227).

This gender imbalance in the music industry has had a significant impact on the representation of women in popular music and the messages conveyed through music. Female musicians and their music have often been overlooked and undervalued, leading to a lack of diverse perspectives and experiences in the music industry. Feminist music critics have been addressing the issue of gender inequality in music for decades, but their work has not always been taken seriously as well, especially by academic institutions. It wasn't until 1988, when the conferences at Dartmouth and Carlton Universities (Canada) emphasised a feminist critique, that their work began to gain recognition (*Women and Popular Music* 41). This highlights the systemic gender biases that exist within academia and the music industry. It also shows the importance of feminist activism in pushing for change and challenging the status quo. Through their critique, feminist music critics have exposed the ways in which gender inequality operates within the music industry and have advocated for greater representation and opportunities for women in music.

This imbalance has also resulted in a lack of representation of feminist ideas and themes in popular music and its lyrics in general. As mentioned earlier, music has played a crucial role in feminist activism and expression, but the patriarchal influence in the music industry has made it difficult for women to have their voices heard. The limited opportunities and biases in the industry have also perpetuated harmful gender stereotypes and reinforced traditional gender roles. However, there have been efforts to challenge and change these inequalities, such as the rise of feminist music festivals and organisations, the creation of women-focused music awards, and the increasing visibility of female musicians and producers in the industry.

2 The 1980s

The 1980s in the United States was a decade of significant socio-political change. The country was just entering the conservative era of the Reagan administration, which only emphasised

conservative gender roles and family values. He brought back “the rhetoric of containment, with its support for Cold War militance and called for a “strengthened “traditional” family” to create a latent impression of national and local security (May 255), which led to a backlash against progressive movements and social changes, particularly those related to gender and sexuality. This conservative shift in politics also significantly impacted women’s reproductive rights, with Reagan being a vocal opponent of abortion and advocating for restrictions on access to contraception. The feminist movement faced significant challenges during this time, as their efforts towards gender equality were met with resistance from the government and conservative groups.

Besides that, it was a decade of significant social, political, and cultural changes, with a distinct aesthetic and attitude that continues to influence popular culture to this day. The era was marked by a focus on excess and consumerism, with a flourishing of new technologies, including the advent of personal computers and the internet. Musically, the ’80s saw the rise of pop, hip-hop, and electronic music, as well as the emergence of music videos as a powerful cultural force (see *2.2.1 Advent of MTV*). Fashion was characterised by bold colours, oversized clothing, and exaggerated silhouettes, with trends like shoulder pads, big hair, and leg warmers becoming iconic symbols of the decade. In terms of politics, the 1980s saw a conservative turn, with the Reagan administration promoting policies that favoured the wealthy and big business. The era was also marked by significant activism, particularly around environmental issues and nuclear disarmament. Overall, the 1980s was a dynamic and influential era that continues to shape popular culture to this day.

2.1 Feminism in the ’80s

The ’80s, in terms of feminism, were mainly a transition point between the second and third waves, as the second wave reached its peak the decade before, and the third wave was still in the making. According to Odhiambo & Mutuku, “second-wave feminism signalled a rapid increase in legal reforms and grassroots organising”, and it “transformed societal understandings of women’s issues as it touched on every area of women’s experience—including politics, work, the family, and sexuality” (5). Feminists in the 1980s explored issues related to identity and intersectionality, highlighting how gender intersected with race, class, sexuality, and other factors to shape women’s experiences of oppression and discrimination.

In the early 1980s, there was a resurgence of feminism, particularly in response to the Reagan administration’s efforts to restrict women’s access to abortion and birth control. This was also a time when many women were entering the workforce in larger numbers, and there was a

growing awareness of the gender pay gap and other forms of gender inequality. Odhiambo & Mutuku further mention that one of the other driving forces for change was the “frustrations of college-educated mothers” whose “discontent” with their popular suburban lifestyles compelled their daughters elsewhere (5). Just as importantly, the question of pornography and its relation to rape culture has been brought up. “This was an important social issue, yet the way it was promoted on campus and off was turning women once again into helpless victims” (Paglia 13). Pornography could easily go hand in hand with the new phenomena of music videos, resulting in various issues further elaborated on in the following chapters.

However, actions held by the ‘80s feminists resulted in women having more representation in media. This was particularly evident in the music industry, where female artists like Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, and Janet Jackson broke through and achieved mainstream success, using their music and lyrics to challenge gender norms and address issues of sexuality and empowerment. However, despite these gains, women’s representation in media remained limited and often objectified, particularly in the areas of advertising and fashion.

Even though the second wave explored intersectionality, another issue was the implementation of women of colour into the movement. Women of colour had to deal with backlash whenever they spoke out and addressed racially related topics. Feminists gained a certain amount of popularity, yet it was still mostly white women who were heard (*Feminism is for Everybody*, 16). Nonetheless, the ‘80s played an important role in raising awareness of these issues and working to challenge the status quo, laying the groundwork for continued progress in the decades to come.

2.2 Music in the ‘80s

Electronic elements in music have risen, preceded by the disco genre back in the 70s. Besides “traditional” artists, such as Michael Jackson or Madonna, the new phenomenon of “sampling” (=reuse of already existing records) emerged. The technique settled mainly in “rap, hip hop, ambient and rock styles” (Middleton et al. 5). Ultimately, it allowed artists to experiment with their music more, but it also brought up the question of musical theft.

Middleton additionally describes the rise of CDs (=compact disks) which brought new artistic perspectives and easier reach to one’s audience. “Just as sampling recombined the old and the new, so the rise of the CD saw the repackaging of old musical artefacts using new technology and created a new, post–twentysomething market for popular music” (Middleton et al. 5).

Musically, the 1980s was a decade of innovation, with the rise of new wave, punk, hip hop, and other genres. These genres often provided a platform for marginalised voices, including women and people of colour, to express themselves in ways that had not been possible before. The emergence of new wave, punk, and electronic music also marked a departure from the disco and rock-dominated sounds of the 70s. The '80s saw the rise of iconic artists like Michael Jackson, Madonna, Prince and Whitney Houston, who broke boundaries and challenged traditional gender roles in their music and performances.

Hip-hop was also gaining popularity, primarily among black and Latino youth in urban areas. Artists like Run DMC, LL Cool J, and Public Enemy became cultural icons, using their music to address issues of race, poverty, and police brutality, explicitly rapping about ghetto lives, which connects to feminists' emphasis on intersectionality at that point in time. "Complex generational and class connections made black American rappers popular with large white audiences" (Middleton et al. 15). The reality of rap music setting foot on the mainstream music scene built the base for later female rap artists and their brand-new seizing of sexuality in their lyrics.

Earlier this decade, women's representation in popular music during this period was still often limited to narrow and stereotypical roles. As it progressed, women's representation in popular music became more diverse and complex. More women artists and songwriters were gaining mainstream success, and their lyrics often reflected a broader range of experiences and perspectives. However, sexism and gender inequality continued to be pervasive issues in the music industry, and it was not until the 1990s and beyond that women began to achieve more parity and representation in popular music.

Generally, even though popular music may seem centralised (especially around the music videos), it was actually getting diversified in various measures. The new technology (and most importantly, the ability to create digital copies of recordings) enabled artists to cross through various genres and media. Radio broadcasting still held its importance in terms of commerce as much as its "younger sibling"—television. "Rock charity concerts such as *Live Aid* and *USA for Africa* publicised campaigns against injustice and raised money on their behalf" (Middleton et al. 14). With each step, it was easier for musicians to reach their audience and spread their message through the means they wanted, whether it was objectively positive or negative.

The most important emergence of the 1980s was, nonetheless, the music videos and MTV. MTV provided a platform for artists to showcase their music and connect with audiences across

the country. The rise of music videos also led to a new focus on the visual aspect of music, with artists like Madonna and Michael Jackson using elaborate sets and choreography to enhance their performances.

2.2.1 Advent of MTV

MTV, or Music Television, was launched on August 1, 1981, and it quickly became a cultural phenomenon. It was the first 24-hour cable television channel devoted exclusively to music videos, and it had a profound impact on the music industry and popular culture. With MTV, music videos became an integral part of the music industry, and musicians who previously relied solely on radio play and live performances now had a new platform to reach audiences. MTV's influence extended beyond music, as it also showcased fashion, dance, and other aspects of youth culture. It also contributed to the rise of the music video director as an artist in their own right, with names like David Fincher and Spike Jonze making their early careers in music video production. The introduction and popularity of MTV in the 1980s paved the way for the widespread use of music videos as a music industry marketing tool, and it had a significant impact on the visual language of popular culture.

As a result of MTV's success, music videos became a crucial aspect of the music industry, and their influence on popular culture was undeniable. The visuals used in music videos often influenced the song's interpretation and artists' public image, making them an essential tool for promoting music and shaping an artist's brand. This development led to a greater emphasis on the visual elements of music, including fashion, dance, and performance.

In parallel, the increasing availability of home video technology led to the boom of the pornographic film industry. At the same time, music videos were becoming a popular form of entertainment and a major marketing tool for the music industry. Some music videos began to incorporate sexual imagery and themes; in some cases, the videos were criticised for their objectification and sexualisation of women. Music videos thus created a space where women's bodies were objectified, sexualised, and commodified. As Whiteley stated: "Rock, like pornography itself, places the feminine as the object of enquiry" (*Women and Popular Music*, 37), while rock is still one of the most dominant genres throughout all the decades mentioned in this thesis. This led to debates about the representation of women in popular culture and the impact it had on society's perception of gender roles. Some feminist scholars argue that music videos perpetuated gender stereotypes and objectified women, while others believe they provided a platform for women to express their sexuality and challenge traditional gender norms. The debate intensified with the rise of feminist activism in the 1980s, which brought

attention to issues of gender inequality and the objectification of women in popular culture. Some feminist activists called for greater scrutiny of the content of music videos and for the industry to be held accountable for its impact on society.

During the emergence of MTV, several music videos were considered inappropriate due to their explicit content. One such example is the music video for *Girls on Film* by Duran Duran, which featured partial nudity, fetishistic scenes, and simulated lesbianism. The video was controversial at the time for its sexual content and objectification of women. It features scantily clad models engaging in various erotic acts, including a mud-wrestling scene and a simulated lesbian kiss. The video was initially banned from MTV and other music channels. However, it eventually gained notoriety and helped to cement Duran Duran's status as one of the biggest bands of the '80s. The controversy around *Girls on Film* was part of a more considerable debate around the objectification of women in music videos and the negative impact it could have on young viewers.

Another example is Madonna's video *Like a Virgin*, featuring provocative dance moves and suggestive imagery. The music video, released in 1984, was again seen as controversial and provocative. In the video, Madonna wears a wedding dress and performs sexually suggestive moves on a gondola in Venice. The video caused controversy due to its sexual themes and Madonna's unapologetic display of her sexuality. Some critics accused Madonna of promoting promiscuity and disrespecting traditional values. However, others saw it as a bold statement of female empowerment and liberation from restrictive gender roles. Madonna herself has stated that the song and video were not meant to be taken literally but rather as a metaphor for the idea of being reborn and starting anew. The video sparked a conversation about the depiction of female sexuality in music videos and popular culture.

Similarly, the video for *I Want Your Sex* by George Michael was also deemed controversial due to its explicit content and sexual imagery. One of the most controversial music videos of the 1980s was released in 1987. The video was deemed provocative and was heavily criticised for its sexual content and themes. In the video, Michael sings about the importance of sexual freedom and expression while images of semi-nude couples and sexual acts flash across the screen. The scenery depicted in the video, along with the song's explicit lyrics, caused an uproar, with many people accusing Michael of promoting promiscuity and immorality. The video was initially banned by several TV networks, including MTV, and was the subject of much controversy and debate. Despite the controversy, the song and video were a commercial success, reaching number two on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in the United States. The video's

impact on popular culture and attitudes toward sexuality and sexual freedom in the 1980s cannot be overstated. It also proves that it is the controversy that can help boost the popularity, and ultimately, it sells.

These videos, along with others like them, were criticised for promoting a hypersexualised and objectified view of women in popular culture. While some argued that these videos were simply harmless entertainment, others saw them as contributing to a larger societal issue of misogyny and sexism. The debate surrounding the impact of such videos on society is ongoing, with some advocating for greater accountability and responsibility from content creators while others argue that individuals should be free to consume whatever media they choose without censorship or judgement. Ultimately, the question of how to strike a balance between artistic expression and social responsibility remains a complex and nuanced one.

2.3 Sex sells

The concept of sex has been used as a marketing tool for centuries, and the music industry is no exception. The phenomenon of using sex to sell music has been a constant throughout the history of popular music, and the 1980s saw an explosion of sexually explicit lyrics and music videos. The emergence of MTV in 1981 brought music videos into the mainstream, and with it came a new era of graphic sexuality in popular music. Subsequently, popular music became a space where women were objectified and hypersexualised, and their worth was reduced to their physical appearance and sexual appeal. The music industry saw women as commodities, and their bodies were used to sell records. Female artists were pressured to conform to narrow beauty standards, and many felt that their success was contingent on their ability to perform as sexual objects.

The '80s' lyrics were abundantly sexual in general. One of the prime examples of such sexualisation is *Girls Girls Girls* from the American band Mötley Crüe. The song objectifies and sexualises women by describing them in terms of their physical appearance and sexual availability. The lyrics describe a fantasy world of women who are “wild” and “crazy” and who are available for sexual encounters with male singers. The chorus of the song repeats the phrase *Girls, Girls, Girls* as if women are interchangeable objects for male pleasure.

Girls, girls, girls / Long legs and burgundy lips / Girls, girls, girls / Dancing down on /
Sunset Strip / Girls, girls, girls / Red lips, fingertips / Trick or treat, sweet to eat / On /
Halloween and New Years Eve / Yankee girls, you just can't be beat / But they're the
best when they're off their feet (0:41–1:20)

The lines “Long legs and burgundy lips” and “Red lips, fingertips” mentions the qualities of a generally desired woman. However, this depiction relates only to the physical appearance, suggesting that there is no other quality “needed” for a woman to be desired. A presentation like this only supports the idea of women’s purely aesthetical purpose and filters females out to be only the means of satisfaction to men. The sexual purpose of women is further elaborated on by the line “Trick or treat, sweet to eat,” which can be interpreted as performing oral sex on women while they are a “sweet treat” for those who come to get them. In the era of groupies, it could not be anybody else but the member of the band themselves who went to strip clubs to get such satisfaction.

You know she did me / Well, then she broke my heart / I’m such a good, good boy / I just need a new toy / I tell you what, girl / Dance for me, I’ll keep you over-employed / Just tell me a story / You know the one I mean (1:31–2:11)

Crazy Horse, Paris, France / Forgot the names, remember romance (2:40–46)

“You know she did me” and “I’ll keep you over-employed” are again pure symbols of sexual activities, as the phrase “to do someone” means to perform sexual acts on them. Being “over-employed” can be interpreted both by being busy having sex and working more than as a stripper, which again—leads to sex. The presence of strippers is amplified to a greater extent by several strip clubs mentioned in the song, such as Crazy Horse, Sunset Strip or Marble Arch. This suggests that women who work as strippers are always sexually available to men. Finally, the line “Forgot the names, remember romance” once again strips the women down only to their job as it perpetuates that the names of the girls he spends time with are not nearly as important to him as the acts he can perform on them.

I Want Your Sex is a previously mentioned song by George Michael that was released in 1987 and again promoted sexual acts in a highly explicit way. The song became controversial due to its blunt lyrics and was even banned in some countries.

I swear I won’t tease you / Won’t tell you no lies (Yeah) / Don’t need no Bible / Just look in my eyes / I’ve waited so long baby / Now that we’re friends / Every man’s got his patience / And here’s where mine ends / I want your sex / I want your love / I want your sex / I want your sex (0:51–1:28)

The lines “Every man’s got his patience” and “And here’s where mine ends” promote the male intention to go over consent and fulfil the physical need for sex. This “physical need” is

something men often argue when it comes to defending their sexually offensive behaviour. The idea that men have an uncontrollable physical need for sex is a harmful and outdated stereotype that supports rape culture and can lead to victim blaming. The notion is further supported by the line “Don’t need no Bible,” which through Michael renounces his religious beliefs just to have the pleasure already.

The lyrics also focus solely on the singer’s desires and do not address the potential partner’s desires, which reinforces the notion that men should control sexual activity and that everything should revolve around their pleasure. This, however, cannot be ultimately interpreted as Michael’s idea as it later turns out he is homosexual. Therefore, his intentions with women could not have been such as described in the song. On the contrary, the idea can be attributed to men’s relationships, too, as sexual offence knows no gender.

It’s natural, it’s chemical (let’s do it) / It’s logical Habitual (can we do it?) / It’s sensual,
but most of all / sex is something that we should do / sex is something for me, and you
/ sex is natural, sex is good / Not everybody does it / But everybody should / sex is
natural, sex is fun / sex is best when it’s one on one / One on one (2:49–3:23)

The lyrics speak of wanting to have sex with someone and not wanting to hide the fact. In the chorus, Michael sings, “Sex is natural, sex is good, not everybody does it, but everybody should,” which can be seen—on the other hand—as a challenge to traditional attitudes towards sex and sexuality, as well as promoting sexual freedom and empowerment. The singer himself said in an interview in 1988: “I genuinely believe it. I think sex is a natural part of life that everyone should fulfil. It’s a part of everyone’s life” (*George Michael interview 1988 on 60 Minutes Australia - Faith Tour 0:30–40*). Later in the interview, Michael is asked whether he is gay, to which he responds with an uncertain answer; on the one hand, he claims not to be, and on the other, he argues with the interviewer about how one’s sexuality should not be a concern for anybody. This throws light on the singer’s intentions with his music, making him one of the lead nonconform figures of the earlier popular music scene. Overall, *I Want Your Sex* reflects the sexual liberation and controversy of the ’80s, as well as the ongoing debates around gender roles and sexuality in popular culture.

2.4 “Mother’s Little Helper”

American people have been presented with an “ideal” lifestyle, the so-called “nuclear family”. This has eventually become a sort of aspiration for most American people. By the 1980s, the concept of a nuclear family had become deeply rooted in American culture, characterised by a

married couple and their children living together in a household. For women, this usually meant being the stay-home mother while the husband was taking care of the family, providing and therefore holding a dominant role in the house. Many of these housewives were coping with the pressures of domestic life by turning to prescription drugs. Valium (today known more as Diazepam) was one of the most commonly prescribed drugs at the time. Many women felt trapped in their housewife roles and had little support or recognition for their work. As a result, they turned to drugs as a means of coping with the stress and boredom of their lives. During the whole decade of the 70s and the first half of the '80s, "Valium was the most prescribed drug in the US, and sales peaked in 1978 with more than 2.3 billion pills sold that year" (*Valium Facts, History and Statistics*).

"Mother's Little Helper" by The Rolling Stones was released in 1966, which was before the second wave of feminism. However, its lyrics addressed issues that would later become important to the movement and that refer to the issue of stay-home mothers unhappy with their lives in particular. Rolling Stones remained popular for several decades, and their influence in music prevailed. During the '80s, after their slight downfall at the end of the 70s, Rolling Stones released six compilation albums with their greatest hits, one of them being *Singles Collection: The London Years* containing *Mother's Little Helper* and five albums with their brand new songs. These albums produced hit singles such as *Start Me Up* or *Waiting On a Friend*, which were popular and played heavily on radio and television during the 1980s. The band also continued to tour extensively during this time, playing in sold-out arenas worldwide. The song itself was often played on the radio during the 1980s and portrays women turning to prescription drugs to cope with the pressures of domestic life. This also means that such issues had been going on for more than a decade (if not longer), signalling no greater progress in terms of feminism and unsuccessful reduction of circumstances which pushed those women to these unhealthy coping mechanisms. The lyrics of *Mother's Little Helper* include the lines:

"Kids are different today," I hear every mother say / Mother needs something today to calm her down / And though she's not really ill / There's a little yellow pill / She goes running for the shelter of a mother's little helper / And it helps her on her way / Gets her through her busy day (0:01–36)

Cooking fresh food for a husband's just a drag / So she buys an instant cake and she burns her frozen steak (0:45–55)

What a drag it is getting old / “Men just aren’t the same today” / I hear every mother say / They just don’t appreciate that you get tired / They’re so hard to satisfy / You can tranquillise your mind / So go running for the shelter of a mother’s little helper. (1:25–45)

The lyrics can be interpreted as a commentary on the pressures that women face to conform to traditional gender roles, such as being devoted wives and mothers. The line “They just don’t appreciate that you get tired” speaks to the idea that women’s labour and contributions to the household are often undervalued and taken for granted, the same as the line “Cooking fresh food for a husband’s just a drag”, which even further elaborates on average chores and “musts” wives of that time had with no proper recognition and appreciation. The reference to “running for the shelter of a mother’s little helper” suggests that women are turning to Valium to cope with these pressures rather than receiving the support they need from society.

This “Valium epidemic” was damaging to women’s health and well-being. Long-term use of Valium and other prescription drugs can lead to addiction, physical dependency, and a range of physical and mental health problems. Finally, this reality only enhanced the idea that women’s only options for coping with the pressures of their lives were drugs and other forms of self-medication, which is a harmful and limiting message. It was a stark reminder of the gender inequalities and limitations women faced at the time, highlighting the need for greater support and empowerment for women in all areas of life.

Mother’s Little Helper can be therefore considered as a huge predicament of the series of events that took place several years later after its first release. Even though Valium consumption began earlier, the ’80s held their strong position in terms of the consequences this epidemic had. Needless to say, it is one of a kind, as far as the explicitness of the lyrics on this topic is concerned.

2.5 Woman as a possession

Connected to how often sex occurs in the ‘80s’ music and to the family standards in the US, an element of objectification in lyrics is very visible as well. Frequently, this reality is being presented as “caring” or even “loving”, which can deeply interfere with people’s beliefs about partnership. The idea of women as something to “have” was not limited only to music but was also prevalent in popular culture at large, as seen in movies and television shows of the era. Such objectification in popular culture, unfortunately, has helped to normalise toxic masculinity and gender inequality and has continued to have an impact on society today.

As an example, we can look at the 1983 song *Every Breath You Take* by The Police, which depicts a possessive and controlling relationship where the man is watching and monitoring his partner's every move.

Sting sings: “Every breath you take / And every move you make / Every bond you break / Every step you take / I’ll be watching you” (0:15–30) While the song is often regarded as a classic love ballad, its representation of women is problematic as it portrays women as objects to be possessed and monitored by men. It reflects the gender stereotypes and power imbalances that were prevalent in popular music at the time. The concept that women are passive and men have a natural right to control them is perpetuated by the song *Every Breath You Take*. Additionally, it supports the idea that men have a right to their partners and are capable of possessive behaviour toward them. The lyrics evoke the idea that women should tolerate—even enjoy—being watched and supervised by their partners, which is harmful and can normalise abusive behaviour in relationships. For young people who are still forming their views on gender roles and romantic relationships, this song can be particularly damaging. It could strengthen the belief that being in charge is admirable and even romantic, which could result in a cycle of abuse and relationship harm. In general, the song presents a problematic representation of women and relationships, and it is critical to analyse and challenge such representations in popular music.

One 1980s famous song that represents a similar idea is *Hungry Like the Wolf* by Duran Duran. While the song's lyrics are not as overly possessive as “Every Breath You Take,” it has a similar theme of a man's obsession with a woman. The lyrics describe a man's intense desire for a woman and his pursuit of her, comparing his hunger for her to that of a wolf. Like *Every Breath You Take*, *Hungry Like the Wolf* perpetuates the idea of women as objects of male desire and reinforces traditional gender roles.

Dark in the city night is a wire / Steam in the subway earth is afire .../ Woman you want me give me a sign / And catch my breathing even closer behind .../ In touch with the ground / I'm on the hunt down / I'm after you / Smell like I sound / I'm lost in a crowd / And I'm hungry like the wolf. (0:10–55)

These lyrics describe the man's pursuit of the woman, whom he describes as “Woman, you want me, give me a sign.” He is “on the hunt” and “lost in a crowd,” driven by his desire for her. The comparison of his hunger to that of a wolf reinforces the idea of women as objects of male desire and perpetuates the scenario where men are the hunters and women are the prey. Songs like *Hungry Like the Wolf* are reflections of the power structures and gender roles that

dominated 1980s popular music. The song supports the idea that women are passive objects of male desire and that males are predatory and aggressive. This only supports the power imbalance between men and women physically and in a relationship. Moreover, the lyrics can also affect the way people perceive their own desires and relationships, shaping their ideas of what is acceptable or desirable in a romantic relationship, similar to *Every Breath You Take*. When it comes to relationships and gender roles, this form of representation may have negative consequences on people's beliefs and actions. These songs contribute to the already existing culture of objectification and sexism by depicting women as objects of male desire, promoting negative stereotypes and power disparities between men and women.

It is not only the objectification but also the parameters it brings with itself; in numerous occasions (as in similar, sexually themed lyrics), an element of perfection is present, describing the physical qualities woman should have, usually in combination with some kind of narration about her inner qualities and preferable behavioural patterns as well. If a woman does not fit these standards, she is not considered "worthy". Exposure to these sexually objectifying media may have a number of unfavourable effects, including increased self-awareness and negative body image, such as "appearance anxiety or body shame, depression, and disordered eating." (Flynn et al. 166)

2.6 Feminist Emergence in popular music

The rise of female artists who questioned conventional gender roles and promoted female emancipation was one way the feminist movement in the 1980s manifested itself in music. They sang about subjects that were taboo for women at the time, including sexuality, autonomy, individuality, and nonconformity. Musicians (primarily thanks to MTV) were becoming specific personas, and it was especially feminist musicians who took this opportunity to spread the message and used their work to question social conventions and advance gender equality. "The concept of masquerade" and "the possibility of using stereotypical aspects of femininity as a political tool" had been given a distinct focus by the resolute stance taken by artists like Annie Lennox or Madonna. (*Women and Popular Music* 216). Cyndi Lauper's music also challenged traditional gender roles by celebrating individuality and nonconformity. She promoted self-expression and encouraged people to embrace their unique identities. Their music was a form of rebellion against the patriarchal society that sought to silence women's voices. They paved the way for future generations of female artists to express themselves freely and without fear of judgment.

On this note, *Express Yourself* by Madonna is one of the best examples in terms of empowering lyrics. The song's lyrics encourage women to express themselves and demand respect and equality in their relationships. This message directly challenges the stereotypical depictions of women as passive objects of male desire. *Express Yourself* supports the view that women are active, assertive people with the freedom to create their own identities and pursue their own goals. Madonna further challenges conventional ideas of femininity and gender roles in both the song's performance and music video by dressing in a masculine suit and tie. In general, the song illustrates how feminist musicians in the 1980s used their work to promote female empowerment and pose social and political questions. The first half of the song goes like so:

Don't go for second best, baby / Put your love to the test / You know, you know, you've
got to / Make him express how he feels / And maybe then you'll know your love is real
/ You don't need diamond rings / Or eighteen karat gold / Fancy cars that go very fast

You know they never last, no no / What you need is a big strong hand / To lift you to
your higher ground / Make you feel like a queen on a throne / Make him love you 'til
you can't come down (0:18–1:06)

The lyrics "Don't go for second best, baby / Put your love to the test / You know, you know, you've got to" encourage women to aim for the best in their lives and relationships and to not settle for less than they deserve. This message leads women to prioritise their own needs and desires rather than simply catering to the needs of others. From another perspective, the lines "You don't need diamond rings / Or eighteen karat gold / Fancy cars that go very fast / You know they never last" debate the transience of material value, often connected with men courting women. She denies these values in the relationship and argues that what matters the most is the love, approach, and attitude people in relationships have toward each other. The other lyrics further supports this idea:

Long-stem roses are the way to your heart / But he needs to start with your head / Satin sheets
are very romantic / What happens when you're not in bed? / You deserve the best in life / So if
the time isn't right, then move on / Second best is never enough / You'll do much better, baby,
on your own (1:23–56)

The second half of this example also suggests that women should be active participants in sexual relationships and should not be afraid to communicate their desires to their partners. Plus, she elevates the inner qualities of a woman instead of just her physical appearance; this instance can be found especially in the line, "But he needs to start with your head". Madonna

escapes the foolishness of the material and physical world in terms of relationships and instead embraces the idea of it. From the perspective of the usual representation of women in lyrics back then, they are finally being called to find their worth further than on the outside of their skin. This is a powerful and meaningful message because it confidently challenges the prevalent dogma of women in relationships.

But the '80s were not just about Madonna, even though she is considered to be the most impactful and iconic persona of that time. Other women were coming together to bring their feminist messages into the world of popular music. For instance, *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* is a 1983 song performed by Cyndi Lauper. The song was a massive commercial success and became an anthem of sorts for women in the 1980s, “with the album (*She's So Unusual*) reaching no. 4 and selling more than 4.5 million copies” (*Women and Popular Music* 216). The song's lyrics celebrate women's desire for fun and freedom, promoting the idea that women can have just as much fun as men without being judged or labelled. The following lines show how Laupert interpreted her message:

I come home, in the mornin' light / My mother says, “When are you gonna live your life right?” / Oh momma dear, we're not the fortunate ones / And girls, they wanna have fun / Oh girls just wanna have fun / The phone rings, in the middle of the night / My father yells, “What you gonna do with your life?” / Oh daddy dear, you know you're still number one / But girls, they wanna have fun / Oh girls just wanna have (0:23–1:07)

The first two verses speak about rebellion towards the parents, who (as we can assume) disagree with their girl's “fun lifestyle.” This can symbolise the rooted cultural dogma about women and their “supposed” behaviour. Even though she rebels, she still assures her parents about her love and respect for them, as shown in the line, “Oh daddy dear, you know you're still my number one” she is just not comfortable with being boxed in the reality where the fun is only meant for men. The third verse provides another commentary on male dominance:

Some boys take a beautiful girl / And hide her away from the rest of the world / I wanna / be the one to walk in the sun / Oh girls, they wanna have fun / Oh girls just wanna have (0:48–2:07)

Lauper mentions “Some boys”, which is surprisingly sensitive to the idea of generalisation that is often connected with feminist topics. However, these “boys” she mentions are problematic as they expect their female partners to conform to their expectations and stay at home, so they are still obedient and are in no search for fun. These lines are accompanied by an important

scene in the music video. During the verse, Lauper is sitting by the television, where the scene from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923 drama movie) is shown. In the scene, Esmeralda, the female protagonist, is being kidnapped by Quasimodo. The inclusion of this scene in the music video could be interpreted as a commentary on the way women were often portrayed as helpless victims in various movies, contributing to the idea that women are to be possessed and should rather not take any action, just “go with what men say”. Alternatively, this could mean some subversion of gender roles by placing a woman in a position of power and control, watching the events unfold on television.

Another excellent example of a feminist musical piece is *Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves* by Eurythmics, featuring Aretha Franklin. The Eurythmics Lennox and Dave Stewart wrote the song intending to advance female independence and emancipation. The song's lyrics emphasise the value of standing up for oneself and defending one's rights, as well as the power and capability of women. The song's opening verses establish the tone for this message:

Now there was a time / When they used to say / That behind every great man / There had to be a great woman / But in these times of change / You know that it's no longer true / So we're comin' out of the kitchen / 'Cause there's somethin' we forgot to say to you, we say (0:12–42)

These lines assert that women are no longer required to be confined to the kitchen or to a supporting role behind a man, challenging the traditional gender roles that have been imposed on women for centuries. They suggest that women are capable of achieving greatness on their own and that they have their own voice and power.

The chorus of the song is mighty, with Lennox and Franklin proclaiming: “Sisters are doin' it for themselves / Standin' on their own two feet / And ringin' on their own bells / Sisters are doin' it for themselves” (0:42–1:02) The song's main message—that women are strong, independent, and capable of accomplishing great things on their own—is reinforced by the repetition of this line. Furthermore, the name of the song alone strongly suggests how women work together to create a better world for themselves and their future daughters.

Now this is a song / To celebrate / The conscious liberation / Of the female state Mothers, daughters / And their daughters too / Woman to woman / We're singin' with you / The inferior sex, has / Got a new exterior, yeah / We got doctors / Lawyers, politicians too (1:02–45)

These lines further elevate the role of a mother and the still-present bond among all women. The term “conscious liberation” is particularly significant, as liberation is the result of all the

centuries women have fought for their rights and dignified lives. At the end of the example, Lennox and Franklin fight the term “inferior sex” with the fact that by that time, there were already many successful female doctors, lawyers, and other essential positions done by women. It is important to constantly remember that women should no longer be considered the “inferior” or “second” sex and claim that they are an equal part of society to prevent discrimination or violence.

Additionally, they assert that women will not be silenced or ignored and are not afraid to be seen and heard. Overall, this anthem is strong and continues to uplift and empower women worldwide. Its message of power, independence, and equality is still relevant, nearly 40 years after its release.

Undoubtedly, the '80s played an important role in women's empowerment and its expression in music. It is not only the public who gets influenced by such a movement but also the many generations of other female artists who continue to spread feminist messages all over the world, actively fighting in a war that still has not ended yet.

2.6.1 Madonna

The significance of Madonna in this work is irrefutable; she combines both the popular world and feminism in a unique way, making her a perfect example of feminist emergence in pop music. Her work needs to be elaborated on in an individual chapter, as she has been linked to feminism in various ways. By claiming an audacious and provocative persona that celebrated sexuality and emancipated women, she defied gender norms and expectations. She investigated issues relevant to gender, power, and sexuality through her music, videos, and performances. Early works by Madonna, like “Like a Virgin” and “Material Girl”, can be interpreted as a critique of patriarchal norms that depreciate women as objects of sex or commodities (Schwichtenberg 151). Her songs and videos also addressed issues like sexual liberation, abortion, and the male gaze. Madonna's music and image challenged traditional gender roles by promoting female sexual empowerment and challenging traditional notions of femininity, as shown, for example, in her androgynous look in the *Express Yourself* music video. She often dressed provocatively and sang about topics that were considered taboo for women at the time, such as sexuality and female autonomy.

Except for the already analysed song *Express Yourself*, Madonna enriched pop culture with others of her strongly-messaged songs and performances. One of these is *Like a Virgin*, commenting on the idea of marriage. While the lyrics of the song may not seem so controversial,

it is the music video—and ultimately—her live performance on MTV's *Video Music Awards* (*VMA*) that shocked the crowds. During this performance, Madonna wears a wedding dress (similar to the one in the music video, but shorter) and a belt with the words “BOY TOY” on it. Initially, she began performing as a “doll on a wedding cake”, but as the song continued, she stepped down from the cake, starting to striptease, and eventually humping the stage floor. The performance ends with a simulated orgasm, marking the performance as one of the most controversial shows the *VMAs* have ever seen (*Like A Virgin* (*Live MTV VMAs 1984*)).

This act could be easily criticised only as provoking and sexual, but there is so much to this than sex. What Madonna did here was a powerful commentary on how society approached women and premarital sex. With the belt signalling she is supposed to be played with and fake masturbating in the wedding dress, she addresses the “lost purity” and the whole stigmatisation of women who are sexually active before their wedding. She encouraged individual sexual emancipation and exploration of one's desires and advocated for those women who repressed their own sexuality only to become “boy toys” after they got married.

Lyrics-wise, Madonna provoked with her other song called *Like a Prayer* from the late '80s, which combines elements of sexuality and religion. A combination like this of course raised various questions about the meaning of the song. The lines “When you call my name, it's like a little prayer / I'm down on my knees, I wanna take you there / In the midnight hour, I can feel your power / Just like a prayer, you know I'll take you there” (0:42–59) connect her spirituality with her passion for a man. “I'm down on my knees” can be perceived either as kneeling in prayer or while performing oral sex. The second option is accompanied by the line “You know I'll take you there,” through which Madonna assures her partner to reach orgasm with her.

In the following lines: “I hear your voice / It's like an angel sighin' / I have no choice / I hear your voice / Feels like flying” (1:00–13), she describes the spirituality of the sex itself. The first two lines of this sample compare her partner's moaning to angel voices. She understands that sex can be a beautiful, intimate thing, similar to the spiritual connection with God. Through this means she contributed to the sexual emancipation of women in the '80s and supported the process of destigmatisation of sex in the general public. The way she handled and spread her messages was so ahead of time; in fact, the grasp of this topic is something that is dealt with by third-wave feminists rather than second-wavers. Due to its nature, there was not so much space for such radical statements in the '80s' feminism. But Madonna took her opportunity as the privileged one and fought for those who could not be heard as well as her.

In addition to her artistic contributions, Madonna has been vocal about her support for feminist causes and organisations as well. She has spoken out against sexism and misogyny in the music industry and society at large and has advocated for women's rights and empowerment. For example, she participated in the Women's March in Washington, DC, in 2017, which was organised in response to the election of President Trump and his controversial views on women's rights (*How Madonna's Call for Peace Became Trump's Ammunition*). Madonna has also supported various organisations and initiatives aimed at promoting women's health, education, and equality, such as Raising Malawi, a charity founded by Madonna herself that provides support to orphans and vulnerable children in Malawi (www.raisingmalawi.org).

Even though some may argue her feminism may have been overstated to become more popular, there is no denying Madonna influenced the direction of the feminist movement in the '80s and continued contributing to it in the following decades.

3 The 1990s

The 1990s in the United States ushered in a new era of socio-political developments, building upon the foundations laid in the previous decade. The political landscape was characterised by a shifting paradigm and a series of significant events that shaped the nation's trajectory. As the 1990s unfolded, the country experienced both triumphs and controversies, profoundly impacting social dynamics, gender issues, and cultural norms.

Economically, the 1990s saw a period of relative prosperity and technological advancement. The technology industry experienced rapid expansion during the dot-com boom, and the Internet began to be widely used (Batchelor 5). This revolution transformed various aspects of society, from communication and commerce to entertainment and media consumption. The rise of the Internet and digital media platforms profoundly impacted popular culture, music, and the way people interacted with information.

The 1990s were overall a decade of transition (both political and cultural) as the United States met evolving social dynamics and confronted pressing issues. It was a time of progress, setbacks, and a growing recognition of the importance of inclusivity, equality, and human rights. The decade laid the groundwork for future discussions and advancements in areas such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and social justice, shaping the path for the new millennium.

3.1 Feminism in the '90s

The presidency of Bill Clinton from 1993 to 2001 had a significant impact on the political and feminist happenings of the '90s. Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton made women's rights a priority in their political agenda. The Clinton administration pursued policies such as the *Violence Against Women Act* in 1994, which deals with “domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking” with a focus on the “development of coordinated community care among law enforcement, prosecutors, victim services, and attorneys.” (Modi et al. 254). Their support for women's rights created a valuable environment for feminist discourse. On the other hand, Clinton's presidency is enclosed by various (and largely medialised) scandals related to corruption and adultery. We need to mention the Lewinsky scandal at least briefly, as it is still relevant even today. Lewinsky was an intern at the White House Clinton allegedly had sex with, which led to later impeachment proceedings that were unsuccessful. According to Paglia, many feminists claimed that the incident happened due to a major power imbalance, a case in which it is hard to define consent properly. “The openly partisan tactics and special pleading of feminist leaders during Clinton's impeachment crisis killed their credibility and damaged core feminist issues” (Paglia 15). Lewinsky still suffers from this scandal as with the advent of social networks; she has been constantly targeted and bullied despite the mistake being made over 20 years ago. Plus, the discourse about consent becomes much more relevant in the following decades.

Regarding gender and sexuality, the 1990s witnessed ongoing struggles for LGBTQ+ rights and visibility. Communities were still being destroyed by the AIDS epidemic, which increased the urgency of finding a solution. Activism and advocacy efforts intensified, calling for greater awareness, healthcare access, and equal treatment for individuals affected by HIV/AIDS. The LGBTQ+ movement gained momentum, leading to significant milestones such as implementing the *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* policy (DADT) and the fight for marriage equality. Under the DADT policy, military officials were not allowed to inquire about an individual's sexual orientation and service members were not required to disclose their sexual orientation. However, if an individual's homosexuality became known through voluntary statements, investigations, or credible reports, they could still face discharge from the military (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2022).

In terms of the feminist movement itself, we refer to this era as the third wave of feminism. According to Heywood & Drake, the third wave is often interchanged with the term “postfeminism”, which, however, rather stands for “a group of young, conservative feminists”

who aggressively disagree and criticise the second wave (1). This again proves the various misconceptions feminism has been surrounded with since its beginning. So, what exactly is the third wave? It emerges from the unreached goals of the second wave, trying to do better this time but not directly fighting it as postfeminists did. It is more about inclusion in terms of gender, nationality, sexuality, or class. It “still fights for equal access and equal pay for equal work, but also seeks to transform the structures within which young people work” (Heywood & Drake 8). In conclusion, this wave of feminism was characterised by a focus on individualism, sexuality, and further even reclaiming derogatory terms and new points of view on women’s sexuality, as well as an increased emphasis on intersectionality and the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds.

In popular culture, third-wave feminism is reflected in the increased visibility and representation of diverse voices and perspectives. Women artists, musicians, writers, and filmmakers have used their platforms to address a wide range of topics, including body image, sexuality, reproductive rights, and the intersectionality of identities, and have begun to diversify from the “usual white women” who got most of the attention before. In most of the male-created media, the “perfect white blonde” character dominated them back in the ’90s, especially in movies. Newly, she was supposed to be perfect for more than her looks; now, she also excelled at school. We may appreciate the new perspective on women’s “perfectness” by concentrating more on what is inside.

Nevertheless, all of this puts a whole new level of expectations on a young woman. Now she must be perfect in her looks, and she has to be as smart as possible. As already mentioned, this has a considerable impact on particularly young women’s mental health and self-perception (McRobbie 257). Such a notion gets even more important in the ’90s because of the still-growing media industry and its ever-presence in people’s lives. The third wave tries to set females free from these beauty ideals and societal expectations and promotes all kinds of beauty, constantly pushing this idea further to the average media.

Feminism has also led to important changes in the workplace, with more women taking on leadership roles in various industries. This has resulted in a more diverse and inclusive workforce, with greater opportunities for women to succeed, thrive, and support the movement in their positions. Additionally, feminism has played a crucial role in shaping public policy. The feminist efforts have resulted in substantial gains, such as increased access to healthcare and education, as well as greater protections against discrimination and harassment.

3.2 Music in the '90s

Every decade has its characteristic style, and the 1990s were no different. One notable development of the decade was the mainstream popularity of alternative rock and a new genre called grunge. Bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Soundgarden achieved massive success, bringing a raw, authentic sound resonating with disillusioned and angst-filled youth culture. The music was characterised by distorted guitars, introspective lyrics, and a departure from the polished sound of the previous decade, often connected with various political commentaries, rebellion against institutions and society and general “disgust”.

The 1990s show some “significant inroads by women into the music industry”; however, production is still largely gendered in fairly traditional ways, particularly when it comes to positions of power (executives, managers and others) This tendency is especially noticeable in the fields of engineering and DJing, “where yet another history of marginalisation has accompanied an increasing sophistication in technology” (*Women and Popular Music* 4). This means that even though the feminist movement made huge progress and many new female artists have reached the surface, they are still very often managed by men. Their power over them caused various cases of sexual offences or other inappropriate behaviour towards women artists who were only trying to make their way through the music industry. In better cases, their creativity or how they presented themselves was suppressed, chopped and kept according to the needs of recording companies; after all, pop’s main goal was still to sell.

“The biggest musical trends of the 1990s” included the mainstreaming of “alternative,” “the growth of “world music” as a marketing category,” country music’s continued success in crossover genres, “the popularity of soundtrack albums”, and the sudden rise in popularity of Latin pop during the late '90s, caused by expanding cultural diversion in the USA (Middleton at al. 16). The ongoing popstars remained (Michael Jackson, Madonna, Prince and others), and some new icons showed up as well (Alanis Morrissette, Janet Jackson or Britney Spears), yet they were starting to get beat up by the new alternative wave, presented by such bands as Nirvana, Green Day or REM. Major feminist emergence in music manifested itself in the so-called “Riot Grrrl” movement, which will be further elaborated on in the next chapter.

Another progressively growing genre was rap music, with many new female performers as well. Artists like Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa, and TLC used their lyrics to promote female empowerment, discuss sexuality, and critique societal norms. They broke barriers and opened conversations about feminism within the hip-hop genre. Male rappers like Tupac Shakur, The Notorious BIG, and Wu-Tang Clan dominated the charts as well. The genre eventually evolved

into a powerful force of self-expression, addressing social and political issues while also celebrating the art of storytelling and wordplay. Along with these, there is a visible rise of boy bands and girl groups, such as Backstreet Boys, Spice Girls, and Destiny's Child, who captured the hearts of fans with their catchy tunes and synchronised dance routines (see 3.5 *Spice Girls*).

Technologically, with the rise of computers being available to average households, music format has evolved as well; tracks were even more compressed to the new MP3 format, which was newly available for download on various internet sites, usually for money. When MP3 songs appeared for free, it was (and still is) considered piracy. "In contrast, many fans and artists celebrated the new medium's potential to subvert corporate control of musical life" (Middleton et al. 16). Companies fought hard so their music was not pirated, yet the morale of free music distribution is still debatable. Still technologically speaking, electronic music was also becoming more and more popular, and with the phenomenon of sampling, it was easier for producers to reach their creative aims.

3.3 Riot Grrrls

In connection with alternative genres (usually grunge rock or punk) and with feminism, it is crucial to mention Riot Grrrls, as the movement perfectly combines mentioned aspects and brings new perspectives to the table. Riot Grrrl was a feminist punk movement that emerged in the early 1990s, primarily in Washington DC and Olympia, Washington, and then spread throughout the rest of the US. It was a response to the male-dominated punk scene and sought to create a space for women to express themselves, address issues of gender inequality, and challenge societal norms. "Riot Grrrl is seen by many third-wave feminists as one of feminism's most active sites, one that spawned a new, specifically third-wave feminist culture that goes far beyond the music scene." (Heywood & Drake 204). The bands and activists who fall under this movement used mainly music, zines (self-published magazines), and DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos to spread their message and empower young women. "Activists in Washington, DC, for instance, first came together to produce girl-oriented music and fanzines" and then "included literacy projects, self-defence projects, and empowerment initiatives in the wider community" (Heywood & Drake 17).

Generally, they were fighting against male scrutiny; part of such actions was, for example, the reappropriation of some words that originally existed to demean women. They played with conflicting images and stereotyped conventions, e.g. the appropriation of "girl" and their assertive use of the term "slut". (*Understanding Popular Music* 233). Moreover, a corresponding social rebuild has taken place in the field of LGBTQ+ people, with the similar

reappropriation of words such as “queer”, “fag”, or “dyke”. Using various means, queer people were starting to turn “deviance into something positive” and letting the world know that they were here and are not going anywhere (*Sexing the Groove* xxix).

The movement was so crucial mainly because most of the alternative wave was consumed by the third-wave feminism generation itself. The youth was doing it for the youth. This way, the generation grew up with different standards than those before them. Music could (and still can) provide an escape for young people; the authors are letting them know they are not alone with their struggles and that there are options, whether it is about love, queer problematics, rage against the system or anything else. As Leonard mentions, “The riot grrrl gigs also allowed for previously silenced voices to be heard” (121). Their shows and lyrics provided the comfort of these thoughts being put into some physical appearance, having an eventual psychological effect on those who chose to listen to some song.

According to Whiteley, there is a certain notion that connects the movement with the so-called “queercore” and the whole lesbian emergence during the 1990s. There were such celebrities as k. d. lang or bands like Tribe 8, Random Violet, and Team Dresch, who “are indicative of a new phase of feminist politics and ideology” (*Sexing the Groove* xxx). Furthermore, there were bands synonymous with Riot Grrrl, like Bikini Kill, Sleater-Kinney, and Bratmobile who used their music to address issues such as sexism, sexual assault, and the male-dominated music industry.

One of the most symbolic songs representing the movement was *Rebel Girl* by Bikini Kill, written by the lead vocalist Kathleen Hanna in 1993. The song starts like this:

That girl thinks she’s the queen of the neighbourhood / She’s got the hottest trike in town /
That girl, she holds her head up so high / I think I wanna be her best friend, yeah (0:21–36)

In these opening lines, the song introduces a confident and assertive girl who is admired by the narrator. The girl is portrayed as someone who stands out in her neighbourhood, exuding a sense of self-assuredness. The narrator expresses a desire to be close to this girl and become her best friend, highlighting the admiration and the aspiration for a strong female connection. In other interpretations, this could even mean some sort of sexual attraction, promoting the queer wave happening by the time the song was released.

The lyrics further highlight the transformative power of this girl's presence. Whatever she does, there is a sense of revolution in the air, which is presented in the lines "When she walks, the revolution's comin' / In her hips, there's revolution / When she talks, I hear the revolution / In her kiss, I taste the revolution" (1:04–19)

Her mere existence challenges the status quo and inspires change. The lyrics capture the admiration and fascination the narrator feels towards this rebel girl, recognising her as a force of empowerment and transformation, which is further shown in the lines:

Love you like a sister always / Soul sister, rebel girl / Come and be my best friend / Will you, rebel girl? / I really like you / I really wanna be your best friend / Be my rebel girl (2:22–38)

The song also addresses the judgments and labels that society may place on this girl, such as being called a slut, depicted in the lines "They say she's a slut, but I know She is my best friend, yeah" (2:00–08) Despite the derogatory remarks, the narrator remains loyal and supportive, considering her as a best friend. The lyrics challenge the double standards and slut-shaming prevalent in society, affirming the narrator's unwavering support for the rebel girl. In the version recorded for the movie about Hanna, there is also the word "dyke" instead of "slut", which carries a similar message; dyke is an offensive term for a lesbian who appears rather masculine. Yet in this context, she is appreciated for expressing herself and showing off her sexuality manifested by reappropriating the formerly derogatory term into something "cool".

Through its lyrics, *Rebel Girl* celebrates female empowerment, individuality, and the importance of rebellion against societal norms. The song encourages listeners to embrace their unique identities, stand up for themselves, and find strength and inspiration in strong female figures. It embodies the spirit of the Riot Grrrl movement, which sought to challenge patriarchal structures and promote feminist ideals through music and activism.

3.4 "Jagged Little Pill"

Jagged Little Pill is a seminal album released in 1995 by Canadian singer-songwriter Alanis Morissette. It marked a significant turning point in Morissette's career, catapulting her into international stardom and establishing her as a prominent voice in the alternative rock and pop music scenes of the 1990s. The magazine *Entertainment Weekly* even labelled her as a "The Quiet Riot Grrrl" as even though she is not that alternative, she still somehow represents the ideas the movement stood for.

With its raw and introspective lyrics, angsty vocals, and a fusion of rock, pop, and grunge influences, *Jagged Little Pill* resonated with a generation seeking authentic and relatable music. The album delves deep into themes of love, heartbreak, self-discovery, and empowerment, capturing young adulthood's various emotions and experiences. It became an instant classic, earning critical acclaim, multiple Grammy Awards, and one of the best-selling albums ever. *Jagged Little Pill* not only left an indelible mark on the musical landscape of the 1990s but continues to inspire and connect with audiences today.

What is so important and groundbreaking about this album is the approach of Morissette towards her own experience and her open description of it. HBO's documentary *Music Box* includes an episode about her career with Morissette describing her way to the top with all of the positive and negative circumstances, including various sexual offences at a very young age and abusive behaviour from the side of her previous management, combined with substantial creative suppression.

What absolutely skyrocketed her career was the song *You Oughta Know*, which describes just how mistreated she was when she was younger, particularly in her relationship. The song starts right with one of the most potent lines of the decade, going:

I want you to know, that I'm happy for you / I wish nothing but the best for you both /
An older version of me / Is she perverted like me? / Would she go down on you in a
theatre? / Does she speak eloquently / And would she have your baby? / I'm sure she'd
make a really excellent mother (0:01–37)

These opening lines convey a mix of conflicting emotions. She expresses that she moved on and wishes her previous partner and his new girlfriend well, but there is also a tinge of bitterness and curiosity. She questions whether the new partner shares the same intimate experiences they had in the past, creating a sense of lingering attachment. The lines "Is she perverted like me? / Would she go down on you in a theatre?" were very explicit for their time (and especially if coming from a woman), suggesting that Morissette performed oral sex on this person while at the theatre. The last lines sarcastically question the qualities of the new partner. She wonders if this person possesses certain desirable traits or if they could potentially create a life together, subtly insinuating that their relationship lacked these elements.

In the chorus of the song, the narrator confronts the person directly, reminding them of the emotional turmoil they caused, coming from the lines "And I'm here to remind you / Of the mess you left when you went away / It's not fair to deny me / Of the cross I bear that you gave

to me / You, you, you oughta know” (0:55–1:17). She asserts her right to express herself and won’t let the pain she experienced go unacknowledged. The repetition of “you, you, you oughta know” emphasises her demand for recognition and closure.

Many of her fans claim that Morissette helped them through their breakups, mainly because she was so expressive about her feelings, and they could find themselves in her lyrics. “It was a slap in the face / How quickly I was replaced / And are you thinking of me when you fuck her?” In these lines, she expresses how hurt she is when her ex-partner finds a new one so quickly. It left her feeling unimportant because she was “easily replaceable” in the relationship, which many people can relate to after a breakup. The last line from this example asks a question many were afraid to ask. She asks if he is thinking about her, at least during sex, while she thinks about him all the time. Sex is considered something intimate two people can have between each other, so it can be easier to remember the previous partners. On the other hand, it can also create unpleasantness because it is so intimate, and they think about someone else at the time, so the question can be interpreted as well as that she almost wishes he would think about her, which would ruin the act.

Without any euphemisms, she describes what had been going on in the relationship, and she is not ashamed to show it to the world, creating a powerful message for those who may be possibly scared to speak about these things, as sex is still prevalent as a taboo topic to speak about. She validates her own feelings, expressing how unfair it is when one moves on too quickly while the other half is still left hurt. With this song, she provided the same mental validation for many other women and even men who were left in a similar position and empowered them to move on as well. Plus, she opened a new, raw point of view on the relationship discourse in popular music.

3.5 Spice Girls

In the vibrant and dynamic landscape of the 1990s music scene, boy bands and girl groups rose to unprecedented popularity, captivating audiences with their infectious tunes, synchronised choreography, and charismatic performances. These groups became cultural phenomena, dominating the charts and capturing the hearts of millions around the world. With their catchy melodies, harmonies, and carefully crafted images, boy bands and girl groups embodied the spirit of the era, offering a blend of pop music, youthful charm, and a sense of escapism. From the synchronised moves of the Backstreet Boys and *NSYNC to the empowering anthems of Spice Girls and Destiny’s Child, these musical ensembles defined the 90s with their chart-topping hits, devoted fan bases, and larger-than-life personalities. Such groups were usually

portrayed as family-friendly characters; they were marketed towards a younger audience and portrayed an image of clean-cut, well-behaved performers. Their music and performances were generally focused on love, relationships, and having a good time. They often adhered to societal norms and presented themselves as positive role models for their fans.

The Spice Girls were one of those who completely took over the world (*Women and Popular Music* 223). Despite being British, they devoured the whole Western popular culture, as Brit-pop was on its rise at the end of the decade. Targeting mainly young girls, they sold a massive number of their albums and various merchandise and became a global sensation. Beyond their music, the Spice Girls became a cultural phenomenon, influencing as much as fashion and creating a solid connection with their dedicated fan base. They embraced a vibrant and colourful image and set trends influencing people until this day. They were pioneers of the “girl power” movement, which advocated for women’s independence, self-expression, and equality (*Women and Popular Music* 215). The Spice Girls’ music, image, and message resonated with a generation of young girls and women seeking role models and a voice representing their experiences and aspirations. By embracing a message of empowerment and encouraging girls to be confident and true to themselves, the Spice Girls became one of the symbols of a new wave of feminism in the 1990s as well.

Despite their global success, “the Spice Girls were, in fact, the running joke of that telecast, consistently derided as not musical, not artistic, and all-round not sensible” (Driscoll 174). Driscoll further mentions how the group was often a target for all sorts of jokes, including those asking: “Who even buys so much of their albums?” with the answer that those who do would rarely admit it (174). This reality suggests that even though women gained more media success, their music (or any other production) was often not taken seriously. This dogma prevails even nowadays, with every product aiming to be sold to young women being considered something lesser than what is made for men. In music, it is most obvious within boy band culture or in teenage girl singers.

One of the famous ‘90s’ anthems is none other than Spice Girls’ *Wannabe*. With its catchy melody and playful lyrics, it quickly became famous, but there is more than the commercial value of the song; Spice Girls spread a new message that gains its importance right because of its popularity.

Right in the beginning, we hear the lines “Yo, I’ll tell you what I want, what I really, really want / So tell me what you want, what you really, really want” (0:03–09), which keep on

repeating throughout the first verse. The lines set the stage for open communication and a desire to understand one another's wants and needs. It promotes the idea of open dialogue and emphasises the importance of expressing oneself.

If you want my future, forget my past / If you wanna get with me, better make it fast /
Now don't go wasting my precious time / Get your act together, we could be just fine
(0:18–35)

These lines suggest a sense of self-worth and assertiveness. The Spice Girls express that if someone wants to be a part of their lives, they should focus on the present and prove their worth quickly. It conveys a message of valuing one's time and not settling for less than one deserves. This idea gained its importance very quickly with the advent of various chat rooms and eventual social networks available on the Internet at the turn of the millennium, which made social interactions easier and quicker than ever before; people were therefore meeting many others, and there has not been enough time to properly get together with all of them, resulting in need of immediate first impressions.

If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends (gotta get with my friends) /
Make it last forever, friendship never ends / If you wanna be my lover, you have got to
give / Taking is too easy, but that's the way it is (0:44–1:00)

The chorus highlights the importance of friendship and loyalty in relationships. The Spice Girls emphasise that potential partners should also value and respect their friends, as they can play an important part in one's life as relationships, sometimes even more. It promotes the idea of mutual support and a commitment to making the relationship last.

Oh, what do you think about that? / Now you know how I feel / Say you can handle my
love, are you for real? (Are you for real?) / I won't be hasty, I'll give you a try / If you
really bug me then I'll say goodbye (1:01–18)

These lines convey a sense of self-assurance and setting boundaries. The Spice Girls assert that they will not rush into a relationship and will give the person a chance, but they will not tolerate mistreatment. It encourages healthy communication and respect, again an important message for young girls. It is crucial now more than ever to respect our own boundaries, respect one another and not let others mistreat us, both women and men.

While the group eventually went on hiatus in 2000, their impact on popular culture and the music industry is undeniable. The Spice Girls paved the way for both their audience and musical

successors, leaving a lasting legacy of empowerment, inclusivity, and memorable pop music. “The phrases surrounding the Spice brand (‘It’s a girl’s world—she who dares wins’, ‘Freedom fighters—Future is female—Spice Revolution’) tapped directly into a concept” which can be considered popular feminism (*Women and Popular Music* 216). They continue to be celebrated and remembered as one of the most influential and successful girl groups of all time.

3.6 Rap music

Rap music became a significant cultural force in the 1990s, addressing a variety of social and political issues and capturing the experiences and viewpoints of underrepresented groups. Its popularity hugely increased, resulting in various hip-hop influences throughout various genres. Watkins mentions that “between 1990 and 2000, rap’s market share more than doubled while its rival genres—rock, pop, and R&B—actually lost market share”, and their producers had to deal with their comedown (34). In the meantime, rap gained a massive influence that continues to exist to this day in popular music.

As far as the lyrics are concerned, rap music significantly contributed to themes of empowerment, social justice, and self-expression by questioning societal norms. It developed into a forum for artists to talk about racial inequality, gender dynamics, and the difficulties faced by inner-city communities.

However, it has not always been like this; in reality, rap music has faced criticism for its portrayal of women and its sexist lyrics in the past (Flynn et al. 165). Even in the 1990s, there were instances where certain rap songs and artists perpetuated misogynistic and objectifying views of women. Some rap lyrics depicted women as sexual objects, reinforced gender stereotypes, and used derogatory language (Flynn et al. 165). These portrayals were often criticised for promoting sexism and contributing to a culture of objectification and disrespect towards women. Nevertheless, in the ’90s, many rappers took a turn for the better and started advocating for those who were not heard until then.

In a genre usually dominated by men, female rappers suddenly gained a big impact on challenging gender expectations and claiming their voices. Despite the sexism that was pervasive in rap music, female artists rose to prominence with provocative and empowering lyrics that dealt with feminism, sexuality, and identity issues. One of the main aspects connected to this reality is the bold reappropriation of derogatory terms that have appeared mostly in rap music. Rappers like Lauryn Hill, Lil’ Kim, Missy Elliott, and Queen Latifah broke down several barriers and paved the way for upcoming generations of female rappers by bringing their

distinct perspectives to the genre and showcasing their lyrical growth. Their contributions to the '90s rap scene reflected the ongoing fight for gender parity and showed how influential women's voices can be in hip-hop as well.

Rap music, therefore, became a kind of platform for both male and female artists to address various actual feminist topics and the complexities of relationships thanks to its unfiltered and frequently provocative lyrics. Rappers of the '90s contributed to the larger conversation on social change by providing a forum for discussions on gender, identity, and the intersections of race and class through their lyrics.

3.6.1 Telling the Story

Thanks to its nature, rap music serves better in terms of storytelling. A prominent rapper and social activist, Tupac Shakur, had a significant impact on music and society. Tupac's lyrics frequently expressed profound respect for women and a critique of gender inequality, despite the complexity and evolution of his feminism over time, often through a story of his own. Many of his songs were narrative-driven, drawing from his own personal experiences, observations, and social commentary. Tupac used storytelling to convey powerful messages, share his perspectives on social issues, and give voice to the struggles and realities of the communities he represented. He discussed problems like domestic abuse, sexual assault, and the difficulties faced by women in underrepresented communities. Tupac's music occasionally contained misogynistic lyrics, but overall, his lyrics espoused empathy, compassion, and a desire for societal change.

Tupac honoured and celebrated women in songs like *Keep Ya Head Up* and *Dear Mama*, which emphasised their mental strength and toughness in times of difficulty. Especially in *Dear Mama* he describes his earlier life with every difficulty he had to deal with and his gratefulness for the women who raised him.

When I was young me and my mama had beef / 17 years old kicked out on the streets /
Though back at the time I never thought I'd see her face / Ain't a woman alive that could
take my mama's place (0:11–22)

The first lines of the song imply that Shakur was kicked out of the house by his very mother, with whom he had fought, suggested by the word "beef" and even though he probably hated her at that time, now he realises there is no one who could replace the woman who gave birth to him and who raised him. His respect and gratitude towards his mother is the strongest message in the song.

The same drama, when things went wrong we blamed mama / I reminisce on the stress I caused, it was hell / Huggin' on my mama from a jail cell / And who'd think in elementary, hey I'd see the penitentiary / One day, runnin' from the police that's right / Mama catch me, put a whoopin' to my backside / And even as a crack fiend mama / You always was a black queen mama (0:35–1:03)

In these lines, he contemplates if his doubts concerning his mother were justified, concluding that they were not. He blamed his mother for the things that went wrong, but later he realised it was actually him who caused her much trouble and that she had every reason to be mad at him or beat him in his eyes. Despite the fact that she often mistreated him, he still appreciates her and what she did for him, even though it was not always positive. His compassion and thankfulness are further elaborated on throughout the whole song:

I finally understand for a woman it ain't easy tryin' to raise a man / You always was committed, a poor single mother on welfare / Tell me how you did it, there's no way I can pay you back / But the plan is to show you that I understand. (1:03–18)

And I can see you comin' home after work, late / Your in the kitchen tryin' to fix us a hot plate / Just workin' with the scraps you was given (2:21–30)

Shakur shows in a very raw way how the mother handled the situation of being a poor single mother with two children. This only deepens his compassion for her, and his audience can feel it almost as much as he does. Overall, the whole song tells the story of a hard childhood of Shakur's, representing a whole new social group- single mothers of colour who did not seem to have a place anywhere.

It is not only Tupac who raised his voice, although he inspired many others. This is generally what rappers brought to light with their music- the underappreciated people from various social environments and cultures telling the truth about what their lives are like and how it feels to be discriminated for various reasons. Their audience can either relate to such lyrics or realise the cruel prevailing reality and spread the message further, or even actively participate in the changing reality. They were “blurring the boundaries between male and female and between black and white,” and claimed that “for political activism to be truly successful, coalitions must be built across the lines that divide people according to race, gender, and class” (Heywood & Drake 240).

3.6.2 “Ladies First”

Ladies First, a 1990s female rap song by Queen Latifah with Monie Love, is another noteworthy example. This empowering anthem, which was released in 1989 but became well-known in the early 1990s, features the voices of two significant female MCs. The song strongly emphasises female unity, power, and the value of women’s voices in hip-hop. It promotes harmony and self-respect while challenging gender norms and honouring women’s accomplishments. The lyrics emphasise the significance of women in hip-hop culture while addressing the need for equality and recognition. The 90s feminist discourse in rap music was significantly influenced by the song *Ladies First*.

The ladies will kick it the rhyme that is wicked / Those that don’t know how to be pros get evicted / A woman can bear you break you take you / Now it’s time to rhyme can you relate to / A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream (0:30–39)

Queen Latifah sets the tone for the song in the opening by asserting the power and skill of women in the rap game. She highlights that women possess the ability to captivate and command attention through their rhymes. By mentioning that “those that don’t know how to be pros get evicted,” she challenges the notion that women are less capable than men in the rap industry. Queen Latifah presents a strong and confident image of women in hip-hop.

The MCs then elevate the value of being a woman and sisterhood in the lines “Believe me when I say being a woman is great, you see / I know all the fellas out there will agree with me / Not for being one but for being with one” (1:03–10). Similar to *Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves* by Eurythmics, the main message is unity and women fighting for other women.

The emergence of female rappers is particularly important since they are usually women of colour who have it harder than their white sisters. Once they reached a certain level of popularity, their sexualisation prevailed, mainly due to previous slavery. According to Watkins,

Given the sexual travails of black girls, their media environment becomes an especially crucial front in the struggle to enhance their sexual knowledge and health. This is why hip-hop is such a critical discourse in the lives of black girls (226).

The sexualisation of women and women of colour is an issue that needs to be addressed in all areas of society. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, the gender pay gap, and the lack of diversity in many industries are just a few examples of how this issue manifests.

Rappers bringing this discourse to the surface are crucial mainly because of various cultural differences that are sometimes not that easy to observe. Driscoll claims that the way women are treated under patriarchy is not a global experience; it is very much local and specific, which means greater efforts to cover all the issues (185). It is important for individuals and organisations to actively work towards creating more inclusive environments and opportunities for women and women of colour through different cultures.

3.7 Sexualisation prevails

Despite all the feminists' hard work, the social role of women has not changed much. In previous chapters, we discovered all the new waves and artists who contributed to changes feminists tried to make, making their music popular and, therefore, easier to spread their messages with. However, the charts were still occupied by songs that approached women rather backhandedly and continuously treated them as a vessel of men's pleasure.

For example, the lyrics of *The Bad Touch* by Bloodhound Gang (a song from 1999) contain explicit content and utilise a combination of sexual innuendos and provocative language. The song concentrates on portraying sexual desires and engaging in various acts, often using humour and absurdity to convey its message.

We call this the act of mating / But there are several other very important differences / Between human beings and animals that you should know about ... / So put your hands down my pants and I'll bet you'll feel nuts (0:02–52)

In the song's first verse, the lines immediately imply the song's theme by mentioning the "act of mating," which means sex without any doubt. The difference between humans and animals is supposed to be the pleasure, as animals mate only for the purposes of reproduction. The singer then very explicitly elaborates on those differences he meant; "I'll bet you'll feel nuts" can be interpreted two ways, as the word "nuts" refers to both testicles and being crazy about something. Therefore, either the woman can literally feel his testicles while having her hands in his pants, or she must be feeling absolutely crazy about him as she gets to his crotch.

The explicitness of his desires then continues with the lines "You want it rough, you're out of bounds / I want you smothered, want you covered," where we can only imagine what he wants his partner to be covered in, as such result can be coming from "rough" sex.

The chorus consists of two simple lines: "You and me, baby, ain't nothin' but mammals / So let's do it like they do on the Discovery Channel," referring to previous broadcasting of

Discovery Channel, which primarily aired documentaries about animals and often showed them procreating. Plus, it suggests a casual and animalistic approach to sexual encounters, using this comparison to emphasise the primal nature of human desires.

The second verse continues like so:

Hieroglyphics, let me be Pacific, I wanna be down in your South Seas ... So if I capsizes in your thighs, high tide, B-5, you sunk my battleship / Please turn me on, I'm Mr Coffee with an automatic drip / So show me yours, I'll show you mine, "Tool Time"... And then we'll do it doggy style (2:07–28)

The first line of the example plays with wordplay and humour. The word "Pacific" is used as a play on words, as it sounds like "specific." The metaphor of the South Seas can symbolise the underwear or any intimate area of the singer's partner. The other line continues the metaphoric language by comparing intimacy to navigating the ocean: "So if I capsizes in your thighs, high tide, B-5, you sunk my battleship." The speaker makes a jokey reference to the game Battleship by saying that being overwhelmed between the thighs of another person (which could mean oral sex or penetration) is similar to their battleship being sunk. The phrase "Tool Time" refers to genitalia, and the whole line encourages the partner to show herself and perform sex. Finally, "doggy style" is a sexual position, again, reacting to the animalistic theme throughout the whole song. However, it is essential to mention that the lyrics of *The Bad Touch* are intended to be rather provocative, humorous, and satirical, yet its satiric approach is still a reaction to the pervasive sexualisation in popular music's lyrics.

Later this decade, *Barbie Girl* by Aqua was released, and even nowadays, it is still one of the bestselling singles of all time. On the contrary, the work got itself into the position where its meaning and lyrics are to this day highly debated. The song refers to a Barbie doll; a product by Mattel that took the world by storm. Mattel sued MCA Records (who are responsible for the song) for violation of the label only shortly after this piece was released, claiming that Aqua turned the doll into a sex object, referring to her as a "blonde bimbo". Aqua's response to this was that the song is supposedly reacting to Barbie dolls being inappropriately sexual. (www.mtv.com).

I'm a Barbie girl / In a Barbie world / Life in plastic, it's fantastic! / You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere ... / I'm a blond bimbo girl in a fantasy world / Dress me up, make it tight, I'm your dolly / You're my doll, rock'n'roll, feel the glamour in pink

Kiss me here, touch me there, hanky panky / You can touch / You can play / If you say,
“I’m always yours” (Aqua, 0:31–1:10)

The song’s lyrics portray a woman, specifically a Barbie doll, as a sexualised object to be played with and desired by men. The first verse sets up the idea of the "Barbie world," a plastic, artificial world that is “fantastic.” The second line of the verse, “Life in plastic, it’s fantastic!” supports the idea that the woman is a plastic object to be manipulated and played with. The use of the word “undress” means the woman is being stripped of her clothing, and therefore, her credibility.

The whole song (besides its questionable particular lines) promotes treating women as literal dolls. The mentioning of „bimboes“ (=usually good-looking women with a lack of intelligence) degrades women and gives men a bad example of how they should treat women, reaching even into an area of nonconsensual behaviour towards them.

The reason why *Barbie* (not only as a song but as a whole concept in general) is so important in this is especially because of her being an unhealthy model for young girls both for providing an unnatural body standard and for expressing a wrong sense of sexuality. As quoted by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, Barbie even “takes the signs of women’s subordination—bodily preoccupations, niceness, perky personalities in many instances—and turns them into the stuff of success, fun, excitement, and glamour” (2). Whether it was Aqua’s intention or not, the song clearly depicts the major influence of post-war consumerism on this matter.

Another example of explicit and sexual lyrics can be found in the song *Pony* by Ginuwine, released in 1996. With its lines “Girl when I break you off / I promise that you won’t want to get off;” “Just once if I have the chance / The things I would do to you;” or “Send chills up and down your spine / Juices flowing down your thigh,” it suggests the power the speaker wants to have over his partner, and that he is also strongly confident about his eventual performance. It also portrays him as dominant and active; meanwhile, the partner is supposed to be submissive and passive, raising various questions about both gender stereotypes and consensual sex.

The chorus contains the repetition of phrases “If you’re horny let’s do it / Ride it, my pony / My saddle’s waiting / Come and jump on it,” (1:48–2:01) perpetuating the idea of his partner “riding” him the way she would ride a horse, meaning nothing else than sex. The way his partner is portrayed contributes to the whole issue of objectification in lyrics, reducing her to a sexual object or possession. The repeated references to riding, saddles, and jumping on the speaker’s

“pony” depict women as mere instruments of pleasure, reinforcing a one-dimensional view of their worth based solely on their sexual availability and performance.

Generally, from a feminist standpoint, the lyrics of *Pony* can be seen as reinforcing gender stereotypes, promoting objectification, and presenting a narrow view of sexuality that lacks considerations of equality and consent. This view of sexuality also ignores the diversity of sexual experiences and preferences, as well as the importance of consent and communication in sexual relationships.

4 The 2000s

The social and cultural changes of the 2000s were built on the advancements and difficulties of the earlier decades. The United States underwent a distinctive mix of political and cultural change as the new millennium got underway. The feminist movements persisted during this time, and gender roles and identities were further explored. Popular culture at the time was used as a forum for expressing and subverting social mores, influencing discussions of feminism, sexuality, and female empowerment.

Politically, the 2000s started with the controversial 2000 presidential election, where George W. Bush narrowly won against Al Gore. The subsequent years were marked by significant events such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, which had profound impact on national security policies and the geopolitical happening. The United States also engaged in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, leading to ongoing debates about war, interventionism, and civil liberties as well (Scaruffi 1). Another main event was the election of Barack Obama in 2008, making him the first US black president ever, making a huge step in terms of racial equality and representation in American politics. Obama’s presidency was marked by a number of significant events, including the passage of the Affordable Care Act, the killing of Osama bin Laden, and the legalisation of same-sex marriage (see Keller).

Popular culture in the 2000s reflected these social and political dynamics. Additionally, the rise of reality television, social media influencers, and digital streaming platforms transformed the entertainment landscape, providing new opportunities for marginalised voices and diverse storytelling. Technological progress, in fact, largely manifested itself in popular culture; through various social networks, smartphones and many more inventions that influence people until today.

In summary, the 2000s were a pivotal decade pushing the boundaries of feminism, activism, and cultural expression. The decade witnessed significant political events and cultural shifts that shaped the feminist movement and popular culture landscape, paving the way for further exploration and progress in the years to come.

4.1 Feminism in the '00s

The 2000s saw the continuation and expansion of the third-wave feminist movement, which emerged in the 1990s. Third-wave feminism, as we already know, focuses on intersectionality and inclusivity, recognising that gender intersects with other social identities such as race, class, and sexuality. Activists and scholars advocated for a more inclusive feminism that addressed the experiences and challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds.

The decade witnessed a growing emphasis on body positivity and challenging conventional beauty standards as well. Influential figures like Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty and celebrities like Jennifer Lopez and Queen Latifah celebrated diverse body types and advocated for self-acceptance. The movement aimed to challenge unrealistic beauty ideals and promote a more inclusive definition of beauty, which is an idea continuing to spread even nowadays and is still being pushed through. The focus on body standards became especially important due to its effect on young girls. These girls may "feel frustrated about the divergence between their dreams for the future and the conventional sex roles implied by their emerging breasts and hips" when they hit puberty, resulting in various mental or eating disorders (Brumberg 20).

The rise of the Internet and digital media platforms provided new avenues for feminist expression and activism. Blogs, online forums, and social media platforms allowed individuals to share their stories, connect with like-minded individuals, and mobilise for change. Platforms like Facebook (created in 2004) and Twitter (2006) particularly provided space for those who wanted to be heard. "Due to its unique structure, "Twitter use may be a technological variation of consensus mobilisation"; it can be used as a "common platform for activist engagement" (qtd. in Clark 10). Plus, these social networks brought the benefit of the option of being anonymous, making it easier to speak out. This notion will be fundamental in the following decade; online feminism plays a crucial role in raising awareness about gender inequality, organising protests, and amplifying marginalised voices and is one of the strongest feminist weapons even today.

Finally, it is important to mention the significant advancements in women's political empowerment that were made in the 2000s as well. Women took on leadership positions in

several nations, with Michelle Bachelet serving as the first female president of Chile and Angela Merkel becoming Germany's first female chancellor. This symbolises the results of feminists' attempts to make women equal to men. Additionally, according to Scaruffi, the gained independence of women reached the point where they began to live alone and were still single and childless. "Single women in their thirties constituted de facto a new social class that never existed before" (Scaruffi 2).

4.2 Music in the '00s

The music scene in the 2000s was vibrant and diverse, reflecting the social and technological advancements of the time. Pop music continued to rule the charts, with performers like Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Justin Timberlake influencing the mainstream sound. Their catchy songs, well-executed production, and visually stunning performances won over fans of all ages.

Alternative rock and its many subgenres simultaneously maintained a significant presence. Bands like Linkin Park, Nickelback, and Foo Fighters were influenced by the grunge movement of the previous decade and combined elements of rock, metal, and introspective lyrics to create emotionally resonant music. Listeners looking for a raw, genuine sound that expressed their own struggles and frustrations connected with these artists.

Hip-hop and rap music maintained (and eventually even upgraded) their popularity, with artists like Eminem, Jay-Z, and 50 Cent dominating the charts. Hip-hop has seen the emergence of new subgenres in this decade, each with its own distinctive sound and local influences. Female artists such as Missy Elliott, Lil' Kim, and Nicki Minaj made significant contributions to the genre, showcasing their lyrical prowess and keeping on challenging gender norms within a traditionally male-dominated industry, just like their predecessors Queen Latifah or Salt-N-Pepa in the 90s.

The emergence of digital music and the influence of the Internet on music consumption were other developments in the 2000s. How people access and consume music has changed dramatically as a result of the rise of MP3 players and the introduction of file-sharing services. Right in 2001, "Apple introduced the online music service "iTunes", which legally sold 25 million songs during just the first year" (Scaruffi 6), followed by Spotify in 2006. This technological change had both positive and negative effects because it made a wider variety of music more accessible while also initiating discussions about piracy and the proper payment of

artists. It also brought the new possibility of buying just the songs people wanted without having to pay for the whole album (Scaruffi 6).

This technological progress was particularly beneficial for electronic music producers. Electronic music in the 2000s experienced significant growth and diversification, becoming a mainstream genre with wide-ranging subgenres and styles. The decade witnessed the rise of electronic dance music (EDM) and the emergence of influential artists, producers, and DJs. The evolution of electronic music caused various fusions of genres to make their way into mainstream pop. With the ability to sample, remix or mashup (=combine) songs, everybody could suddenly become a music producer from the comfort of their home (Brackett 586), leading to a massive wave of indie (=independent) music years after.

Another popular wave emerged from singer contests such as *Pop Idol* (*American Idol* in the US) or *X-Factor*, which gave rise to many new pop stars; nevertheless, most of them remained popular only for a while (*Popular Music: The Key Concepts* 271). The idea of these contests spread through various countries, giving the opportunity to many new artists to show themselves to the world.

4.3 Material Girls

Material Girl is a song by Madonna released in the '80s. These two words refer to a girl who appreciates the material value of things and likes to have money in general to buy stuff. However, the term remained quite alive, and many songs in the '00s questioned the value of material possession in relationships as well. The dogma prevailed from previous times when men were the ones who put bread on the table (or were generally financially responsible) for their households and families—including their wives and daughters. Financially dependent women were therefore expected to value their partners based on how much money they had.

This topic became quite popular in pop music lyrics, leaving many examples of 2000s songs that deal with it. The theme of materialism, relationships, and societal attitudes toward money are all explored for example, in the song *Gold Digger* by Kanye West (featuring Jamie Foxx) released in 2005, immediately reaching top rankings in charts (*'Gold Digger' Notches 10th Week at No. 1.*). It describes a man's interactions with a woman who is primarily drawn to him because of his wealth and financial situation. The song's lyrics express the man's frustration and doubt about the woman's motives.

The introducing lines "She take my money when I'm in need / Yeah, she's a triflin' friend indeed / Oh, she's a gold digger way over town / That digs on me" (0:05–20) suggests that the

woman exploits the narrator's vulnerability or generosity, using him for financial gain when he is in a position of needing support or assistance. The term "triflin'" suggests that she is deceitful or manipulative in her actions, particularly when it comes to money.

The chorus consists of the repetition of the lines "Now I ain't sayin' she a gold digger / But she ain't messin' with no broke niggas," (0:23–27) which are contradictory in terms of the claim whether she is in for the money or not. West doubts this at first, yet later he states that she would not date any poor man, concluding and proving his idea.

Throughout the song, West uses storytelling and vivid imagery to convey his message. He describes scenarios where the woman manipulates and takes advantage of men for their money, portraying her as opportunistic. This is portrayed, for example, in the lines

She got one of yo' kids, got you for 18 years / I know somebody payin' child support for one of his kids / His baby momma car and crib is bigger than he is / You will see him on TV any given Sunday / Win the Super Bowl and drive off in a Hyundai (1:48–2:00)

where a certain man he knows pays child support to a woman who left him, yet she uses the money for her own good. Meanwhile, he drives a cheaper car even though he won the Super Bowl; all pointing to the fact she took away a lot from his bank account. West eventually gets even deeper with the lines "You go out to eat, he can't pay, y'all can't leave / There's dishes in the back, he gotta roll up his sleeves," (2:53–58) portraying a scenario where the man gets so poor he must wash the dishes at a restaurant because he could not afford to pay for the food; that is how much the woman ruined him financially.

The ultimate resolution comes in the final verse of the song:

He got that ambition, baby, look at his eyes / This week he moppin' floors, next week it's the fries / So, stick by his side / I know there's dudes ballin', and yeah, that's nice / And they gone keep callin' and tryin' / But you stay right girl / And when he get on, he'll leave yo' ass for a white girl (3:03–19)

West concludes his already contradictive story with advice for the women to stay by their men even though they are not rich as they might make it one day, and then it will pay off; or not really. He ends the verse with a twist—once the man is successful in his life, he will leave his black woman for the white one. This may be a reference to the so-called "trophy wife," which is a harmful stereotype in which the rich, successful man gets an objectively beautiful woman to keep as his trophy or as a symbol of his wealth. However, this stereotype harms women and

reinforces the idea that success and beauty are the only things that matter in a relationship. It also perpetuates the notion that white women are somehow superior to black women, which is a dangerous and false belief.

Overall, *Gold Digger* serves as a social commentary on materialism, relationships, race, and the impact of financial status on personal connections. It critiques individuals who prioritise material gain in relationships and raises questions about authenticity, love, and the societal pressures surrounding wealth. Ultimately, it cannot be concerned entirely antifeminist as even though he describes this woman negatively, he discusses the values in relationships important for both men and women.

A certain kind of response, yet not literal, was provided by Nelly Furtado with her song *Maneater*, released in 2006. The song itself is a reference to *Maneater*, a same-titled song made by Hall & Oates back in 1982. From the title itself, it is obvious Furtado presents herself as a powerful woman, being able to make any man get her what she wants, which is visible from the chorus' lyrics:

Maneater, make you work hard / Make you spend hard, make you want all of her love /
She's a maneater, make you buy cars / Make you cut cards, make you fall real hard in
love / She's a maneater, make you work hard / Make you spend hard, make you want
all of her love / She's a maneater, make you buy cars / Make you cut cards, wish you
never ever met her at all (2:12–40)

These words further emphasise the protagonist's manipulative nature. The repetition of “make you (work, spend, buy,...)” suggests that she exerts control over others and expects material and emotional benefits from her relationships. Specifically, the mention of buying cars and cutting cards suggests financial manipulation and exploiting her partners, similar to the women West describes in *Gold Digger*.

And when she walks, she walks with passion / When she talks, she talks like she can
handle it / When she asks for something, boy, she means it / Even if you never ever see
it (2:40–55)

The song continues with the highlight of Furtado's assertiveness and self-assuredness. She presents herself as someone who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to ask for it, which can be a positive message. Nevertheless, the lyrics imply that she may be demanding and unapologetic about her desires, even if they aren't immediately visible to others, which is not

the best way to convey this message. It is important to ask for what we want but still take others' feelings into account to create a respectful and healthy environment, particularly in relationships.

The outro is basically only the repetition of the line “You wish you never ever met her at all,” (3:35–38) which implies that the maneater has such a profound effect on everyone she meets that they eventually regret ever running into her. It proposes that she is a powerful force which is capable of causing turmoil and heartbreak in her relationships. The line predicts what may happen when you get involved with someone who is manipulative and self-serving like this.

In conclusion, *Maneater* depicts the kind of woman *Gold Digger* was concerned about. Furtado approaches this topic with a lot of self-assurance, making the world know she is a powerful and dangerous woman who can potentially destroy men's both emotions and bank accounts. The power of women tends to be heard more during this decade, and it can be very empowering in terms of feminism. However, it is important to be cautious when approaching it so we do not get the wrong idea. Additionally, the cautionary message from Furtado serves as a reminder to be mindful of the people we let into our lives and always to prioritise our own well-being. It highlights the importance of recognising toxic behaviour and avoiding those who may cause harm eventually.

The view on this topic differs throughout various genres and artists. Kanye West represents the rap genre, which—as we have already learned—serves the purpose of story-telling, visualising real events and reflecting their effects. At the same time, Furtado, as a mainstream pop star, spreads her message intending to shock and create a reaction to sell her music. Empowering is important, but it is still necessary to maintain borders, so it becomes something other than the means of exploitation Furtado describes.

4.4 Women pop stars

The 2000s gave plenty of space for new pop stars, and many of them were female. These women took the music industry by storm with their unique voices, captivating performances, and empowering lyrics. From Britney Spears to Beyoncé, these pop stars dominated the charts and became cultural icons. Some, like Lady Gaga and Katy Perry, pushed boundaries with their fashion choices and creative music videos. Others, like Adele and Taylor Swift, showcased their songwriting skills and emotional depth through their music. These women entertained audiences and inspired them with messages of self-love, confidence, and resilience. They used their platforms to advocate for social justice issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and mental health

awareness. As the decade progressed, female pop stars continued to evolve and innovate, paving the way for future generations of artists to come.

Even though it may seem like a good thing to see how women are progressively way more represented in pop music, there are still several debates surrounding it, and they are still connected to sex. For instance, “Lady Gaga, Britney Spears, and Christina Aguilera” provide the example of establishing celebrity “brands that use sex appeal to catch the attention of the public” (Lieb 30) and are “carefully crafted by the music industry, as they represent the vitality of popular music throughout its capitalist potential” (Daros 381). The commercialisation of female pop stars and objectifying their image are still major issues in the music industry. Some argue that the music industry often promotes a hypersexualised image of female artists, focusing more on their physical appearance than their musical talent (Glantz 15). This can raise concerns about the objectification and commodification of women in the entertainment industry.

In fact, Lieb mentions the whole concept of taking pop stars as brands rather than individual artists. The phenomena of these idols largely spread in this decade, and female popular music stars are becoming “objectified productised brands,” (Lieb 32) because, in the end, the pop industry’s aim is still to commerce and sell (see Leppert et al.). These stars are marketed in such a way the potential of commerce is spreading widely, from music to as far as fashion, fragrances, makeup or even reality shows (Lieb 50). The result of this is that the audience wants to be like their idols, buying their products and mindlessly following their words. This gives space to artists to focus on the messages they want to spread, or on a more negative note; it gives the same space to their executives and labels, which can lead to another exploitation and demeaning of their female wards. Additionally, the culture of idols gave rise to the so-called “fandoms,” a united network of fans which will have their space later in time.

4.4.2 “It’s Britney, Bitch”

This iconic line marked Britney Spears’ comeback in 2007 after a series of personal struggles. Her rise to fame in the late 90s and early 2000s marked a new era in pop music, where young female artists were marketed as innocent and sexy at the same time. This image was perpetuated by the media and record labels, leading to an unrealistic standard of beauty and behaviour for young girls. The pressure to conform to this image led to many mental health issues for Spears and other female artists like her. This behaviour only added more pressure on these already vulnerable young women, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation and abuse.

The importance of mentioning Spears in this thesis is indisputable. Unfortunately for her, she represents the worst music industry approach to women can offer. Beginning her career in the 90s as a teenager and entering the '00s with enormous fame, this decade *belonged* to Spears. With her innocent face but “spicy” lyrics combined with her iconic schoolgirl look, a space for fetishisation was created to a certain extent; needless to say, she was still a minor by that time. Furthermore, to keep her position at the very top of the charts, “Spears had to deny knowledge of her sexuality; she also had to deny that she knew her performance evoked sexual desire” (Musial 78). She was displayed like a mannequin and forced to keep her youthfulness. As Daros explains, “the teen idol is shaped” in a specific way “so that she/he never sounds or seems autonomous ... her/his way of speaking and acting must always remain childish” (381).

The objectification of Spears lies not only in her looks (and therefore music videos and performances) but also in lyrics producers wrote for her. One fine example, the lyrics of *I'm a Slave 4 U*, suggest a woman's willingness to submit to a man's desires and be the vessel of his pleasure.

I know I may come off quiet, may come off shy / But I feel like talking feel like dancing
when I see this guy / What's practical? What's logical? What the hell, who cares? / All
I know is I'm so happy when you're dancing there (0:44–1:00)

The fact that Spears' image was initially based on her young age is shown in the first line of the example, supported by various other references, such as “I know I may be young / But I've got feelings too,” (0:03–0:08) or “All you people look at me like I'm a little girl.” (0:18–21) The sexualisation of such a young girl can damage her mentally and get normalised in public if popularised, leading to a harmful societal trend. The media plays a significant role in perpetuating this issue, with young girls being objectified and sexualised in music videos, advertisements, and even children's clothing, resulting in preteen and teen girls from the audience trying to fit some kind of standard.

The chorus goes: “I'm a slave for you / I cannot hold it; I cannot control it / I'm a slave for you / I won't deny it; I'm not tryin' to hide it,” (1:00–19) implying her obsession for a certain man in a rather submissive way. The concept of being a “slave” in a sexual or romantic context can be seen as promoting unequal power dynamics and reinforcing unhealthy relationship dynamics.

Another alarming aspect is Spears' presentation in the music video for the song—in the video, Spears and a group of dancers are depicted in revealing outfits, dancing provocatively and

touching themselves suggestively. The use of close-up shots of Spears' body parts, such as her midriff, legs, and backside, again serves the purpose of Spears being "sold" and consumed by the male audience, dangerously bordering with pornography, after all, like many other female musicians at her time (Glantz 10,11,17). The combination of suggestive choreography, revealing outfits, and explicit lyrics can be perceived as promoting a hypersexualised image and potentially reinforcing harmful stereotypes or objectification of women.

This image of Spears (mainly her youth and desperate need for a lover) was incorporated into many of her earlier tracks, including the lines "My loneliness is killing me / I must confess / I still believe / When I'm not with you I lose my mind" (0:59–1:13) from *Baby One More Time*, "'Cause to lose all my senses / That is just so typically me" from *Oops!...I Did It Again*, (1:18–32) or "Baby, can't you see I'm calling? / A guy like you should wear a warning / It's dangerous, I'm falling" (0:14–24) from *Toxic*.

As soon as her career began, "she was the subject of photographs, interviews, tabloid exposés, coffeehouse chats, and the like" (Silverblatt 129). There were several factors in Britney's downfall, and the media hunt was one of them. "Americans cannot get enough Spears news, particularly when it focuses on her meltdowns, brushes with the law, hospitalisations, or battles with the paparazzi" (Batchelor 126). Eventually, the brand of Spears' became more her life than her music, with media following her everywhere, disturbing her privacy and debating everything she did even in her personal life, leading to her severe breakdowns and eventual conservatorship (Daros 386). Britney's life eventually caught the attention of various people over the Internet and began a movement called "Free Britney" that aimed to get her out of the conservatorship later at the end of the 2010s (Daros 388).

The fall of Spears and the trap of her father's conservatorship is important to mention as we must not forget that even these days there is still no evidence Spears is truly free from her father and her management and that she is not the only one who suffered under the hand of it. Preventing the exploitation of young female artists can help other generations to create and perform independently.

4.5 Sex sells, again

In the context of the 2000s and the representation of female pop stars, the phrase "sex sells" resurfaced as a prominent theme. It refers to the marketing and promotion of music and artists using sexuality and sex appeal to attract attention and generate sales. This concept suggests that

the music industry often focuses more on the physical attractiveness and sexual image of female artists rather than their musical talent or artistic expression.

Except for the infamous case of Britney Spears, many other female musicians used their sexuality to gain popularity, such as Christina Aguilera. “By 2002, Aguilera had taken her brand super-trashy—most famously with the song and video titled *Dirrty*—and the brand nearly imploded” (Lieb 28).

The song starts right away with the exclamations of “Uh, dirrty (dirrty) / Filthy (filthy...) / Nasty / Christina, you nasty (yeah) / Too dirrty to clean my act up / If you ain’t dirty / You ain’t here to party,” (0:02–18) which introduce the theme of the song and reduce it to its purely sexual context. The suggestive language continues throughout the whole song, being the most explicit in the lines “Ooh, sweat dripping over my body / Dancing, gettin’ just a little naughty / Wanna get dirty / It’s about time for my arrival” (1:32–1:40).

Another example of a sexually appealing female artist is the previously mentioned Nelly Furtado. Except for her empowering song *Maneater*, sexual connotations can be found in her other song called *Promiscuous*, with a bigger focus on satisfying the male gaze, presented by such lines as “You looking for a girl that’ll treat you right,” (0:11–13) “Promiscuous boy, I’m callin’ ya name / But you’re drivin’ me crazy the way you’re makin’ me wait” (3:00–08) or “Promiscuous boy, you already know / That I’m all yours, what you waiting for?” (0:46–54)

The consequences of such promotion of sexuality in popular music can, of course, vary. Nonetheless, according to research conducted by Aubrey, Hooper & Mbure on male college students, “exposure to sexually objectifying music videos” profoundly influences their “adversarial sexual beliefs, acceptance of interpersonal violence,” and at an alarming level causes “disbelief in the legitimacy of sexual harassment” (374). These findings prove the contribution of this culture to a larger issue feminists try to dismiss.

However, there is a line from Furtado that goes: “You expect me to just let you hit it? But will you still respect me if you get it?” (0:20–24) which, on the contrary, shows some doubts in terms of this relationship. She is afraid she will lose the respect in her partner’s eyes if she easily lets him sleep with her, which is another social stigma concerning women and their sexuality. The experienced value of virginity and female “purity” has persisted for centuries in many cultures, supporting the notion that a woman’s value is based on her sexual background (*Women and Popular Music* 76) (Hamad 70). This false notion not only perpetuates gender inequality but also puts enormous pressure on women to live up to social norms.

This approach raises concerns about the objectification and commodification of women in the entertainment industry. It perpetuates the idea that female artists' value lies primarily in their physical appearance and sexuality rather than their artistic abilities or the messages they convey through their music. This can lead to the exploitation and demeaning of female artists, as their image and identity are often controlled and shaped by industry executives and labels.

4.5. Lollipop

Objectification and sexualisation prevailed in male artists' lyrics as well. Research focusing on the songs from the turn of the '00s decade proved that the major amount of this approach to women lies within R&B, hip-hop and rap music (Flynn et al. 169), and it was these genres that were profoundly incorporated into musical mainstream on the verge of millennium throughout various collaborations of artists and fusions of genres (Watkins & Craig 34).

One of the explicitly sexual and iconic songs from this decade is, without a doubt, *Candy Shop* by 50 Cent and Olivia, with the shop being a metaphor for his bedroom. 50 Cent in the spirit of euphemising sexual acts by talking about candy, he mentions a lollipop several times, referring to his penis. As shown in the lines "I'll take you to the candy shop / I'll let you lick the lollipop / Go 'head, girl, don't you stop / Keep goin' until you hit the spot, woah" (0:13–23), he encourages a girl to perform oral sex on him. The words "I'll let you lick" suggest that the act is something the girl is supposed to be desiring to do, and he gives her permission—supporting the message that either successful men are more worthy of such partnership than others or again promoting power imbalance between men and women.

He then continues to describe his desires:

Get on top, then get to bounce around like a low rider / I'm a seasoned vet when it come to this shit / After you work up a sweat, you could play with the stick / I'm tryin' to explain, baby, the best way I can / I'll melt in your mouth, girl, not in your hand, ha-ha (1:00–14)

What he is describing here is that he wants his girl to be on top while having sex and after that to have his "stick" played with, again, referring to his penis. The last line of the example is his way of asking for oral sex instead of stimulation by hand. These sexual longings of his can be also interpreted as commands, which again strengthens the idea of the song promoting power imbalance in a relationship. Yet, in the end, sex indeed sells. *Candy Shop* remained number 1 in various charts, and in *Billboard's Hot 100*, it kept its first place for several weeks (*'Candy Shop' Spends 6th Sweet Week at No. 1.*).

50 Cent was not the only one who used the word lollipop as a reference to his phallus. Lil Wayne, for example, called his whole song *Lollipop* and keeps on using this imagery, reflected in such lines as “I said, “He’s so sweet, make her wanna lick the wrapper” / So I let her lick the rapper” (0:14–21), or “Shawty wanna lick, lick, lick, lick, lick me like a lollipop / I said, shawty wanna lick, lick, lick, lick, lick me like a lollipop” (0:21–32). Or, later in 2014, Justin Bieber borrowed the metaphor as well in a similarly titled song *Lolly*: “She say she love my lolly / She wanna make it pop (aye) / She say she love my lolly / She wanna kiss the top” (0:01–07). An important note is that all of the mentioned artists use the phrasing of “she wanna,” which, as previously mentioned, symbolises their penises as something girls are supposed to yearn for.

Moreover, the lollipop is associated with the character of Dolores from the novel *Lolita* (1955) written by Nabokov. “Humbert buys Lolita a lollipop only once in the novel,” but it was the movie adaptation by Kubrick in 1962, “and the iconic poster of Sue Lyon seductively licking a red lollipop,” which caused our association of “this candy so strongly with the character” (Bertram & Leving 67). The culture surrounding *Lolita* encourages paedophilia and fetishisation of young girls through its suggestive use of lollipops or school uniforms that emphasise the young age of the girls wearing them, which brings us all the way back to the stylisation of Britney Spears earlier in her career. Such influence is not only harmful in terms of the already-mentioned fetishisation; it also supports the self-sexualisation of young girls, making them vulnerable to sexual predators or evolving into mental issues.

Even though some progress is visible, women in men’s lyrics are still sometimes the victims of objectification or are judged solely based on their looks. As always, this cannot be applied generally, and there were songs that praised women, yet the presence of hip-hop and rap in this decade influences lyrics and charts.

5 The 2010s

As people were still getting used to the new millennium, the new decade hit with other great changes in their perception of our world; the global environment was rapidly changing as the world entered this new decade. The decade of 2010 saw a number of significant events that reshaped society again and impacted many areas of human life, from various political crises and debates to technological advancements.

The 2010s, particularly in the US, brought some significant political events that profoundly influenced not only their own nation but the whole world. The major change brought by the election of Obama in 2008 continued as the American nation chose to reelect him in the

following decade. Obama's reelection made him the first Democratic president since Franklin D. Roosevelt (elected in 1933) to win a second term with a majority of the popular vote (Ross & Sliger 14). It also solidified his place in history as the first African American president to be reelected.

Another turning point was the 2016 elections which ended up being a fight between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. These elections marked a significant emergence of social media incorporated into campaigns, a large portion of populism (see Oliver & Rahn) and polarising the two-winged American society even more than before (Battaglia et al. 160). Trump, even though very controversial, won the elections and became another US president, causing various citizen uprisings. The 2010s were also notable for ongoing discussions and debates centred on social issues like racial justice, climate change, and gender equality. Increasingly popular movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter brought attention to societal injustices and demanded change.

The development of social media and technological advances were other features of the decade of 2010. The rapidly emerging popularity of websites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram changed how people connect, communicate, and consume information. The explosive growth of smartphones and mobile applications further transformed the online environment by enabling instant information access and influencing new forms of social interaction.

In summary, the 2010s were a decade marked by major occurrences, advances in technology, and cultural shifts. This time set the stage for new discussions, difficulties, and opportunities that still influence our world today, from political movements to communications advancements.

5.1 Feminism in the '10s

Feminism experienced significant momentum and continued to be a prominent social and cultural force even in this decade, if not more visible than ever before. The '10s witnessed a renewed wave of feminism, often referred to as the fourth wave, characterised by activism, intersectionality, and, most importantly—digital connectivity (Looft 894). It is especially the connectivity that gave rise to various digital movements, making it easier to spread the message.

The Internet and its social platforms provide adequate space for “disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, ... and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge” (Baer 18). The fact that feminists got such space is crucial for further social development. In combination with today's consumption of information thanks to our

smartphones, there is a really high chance that people meet at least a single piece of information that is related to this topic. Furthermore, due to the large and easily accessible community, people can learn from one another, promoting the initial intersectional idea that everyone experiences things differently (qtd. in Baer 18). Such experiences shared in digital space help to create a more respectful environment; all this could mean a bigger chance for an actual change for society as a whole.

Feminism enters its renaissance. “Once invisible, often overwhelmingly maligned, feminism is now staged as “cool” in mainstream media” (Jackson 33). Many young girls are pulled into the world of female liberation, being able to see the issues from the “beginning” and fight them when encountered. This newfound popularity of feminism has led to a wave of activism and advocacy for women’s rights. Women are speaking out against the gender pay gap, sexual harassment, and the lack of representation in positions of power. The #MeToo movement has brought attention to the pervasive issue of sexual assault and harassment in the workplace and beyond, and the Black Lives Matter movement advocated for racially discriminated, mainly in terms of police brutality. As a result, feminist activism has become more inclusive and diverse. However, there is still much work to be done in achieving gender equality. Women continue to face discrimination and violence around the world, and it is important for all individuals to continue advocating for change. The renaissance of feminism has sparked a new era of progress towards a respectful and inclusive society for all genders.

As mentioned by hooks, modern feminism does not have exact borders, there are no distinct aims and no definition (*Feminism is for Everybody* 6). That is why it is so hard to promote it recently. One thing that united women, though, is the election of Donald Trump. A day after his inauguration, over 2 million women worldwide stepped into the streets in response to Trump’s misogynistic comments and his approach to reproductive rights (Brewer & Dundes 49). Women were not the only ones who disapprove of such a man gaining such power. Ever since the year 2016, there have been a number of songs that reflected the artist’s stands on this matter, such as *FDT (Fuck Donald Trump)* by YG or *Campaign Speech* by Eminem.

This leads to the fact that the ‘10s suddenly show a notable increase in celebrities publicly identifying as feminists and using their platforms to advocate for gender equality. Prominent figures like Beyoncé or Emma Watson embraced feminist ideologies and spoke out about issues such as wage inequality, representation, and sexual assault (see Taylor). Their visibility and influence helped bring feminist discourse into mainstream conversations as well as the Internet.

5.2 Music in the '10s

The music of the 2010s is symbolic of its diverse range of genres and styles, reflecting the rapid evolution of technology, the influence of digital platforms, and the shifting cultural landscape. This decade witnessed significant advancements in music production, distribution, and consumption, leading to new opportunities for artistic expression and audience participation.

One prominent trend in 2010s music was the rise of electronic dance music (EDM) and its mainstream crossover success. EDM artists such as Calvin Harris, Avicii, and David Guetta dominated the charts with their infectious beats and collaborations with famous singers. The genre's energetic and uplifting sound became a staple of clubs, festivals, and radio airwaves worldwide, attracting a global audience.

Hip-hop and rap music still kept their significance. With artists like Kendrick Lamar, Drake, and Kanye West pushing boundaries and redefining the sound and lyrical content of hip-hop, the genre maintained its major popularity and gained new cultural significance. The arrival of trap music, which is distinguished by fast beats, catchy melodies, and frequently reflective lyrics, had a big impact on the music industry as well.

Pop music remained a dominant force in the 2010s, with artists like Taylor Swift, Ariana Grande, and Katy Perry achieving massive success. Pop songs in this decade often incorporated elements of electronic music, hip-hop, and R&B, creating a fusion of styles. Catchy hooks, anthemic choruses, and polished production defined many of the popular hits during this time.

Additionally, indie and alternative music entered the mainstream in the 2010s. Numerous fans praised artists like Tame Impala and Arctic Monkeys for their distinctive sounds and introspective lyrics. This signalled a change in public tastes away from the heavily commercialised pop music of the previous decade, favouring more diverse and genuine musical experiences.

During this time, the music industry was significantly shaped by social media and streaming services. Platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube made music more discoverable and accessible, expanding the audiences for artists and opening up fresh opportunities for independent musicians to succeed. Social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter made direct connections between artists and fans possible, fostering a sense of engagement and community.

In terms of lyrical themes, the 2010s saw a greater emphasis on personal introspection, mental health, and social commentary. Artists used their music as a platform to address issues such as self-identity, relationships, political unrest, and social justice. The 2010s saw a greater emphasis on social commentary, mental health, and introspection as lyrical themes. In order to address issues such as self-identity, relationships, political unrest, and social justice, artists used their music as a platform. The music of this decade often reflected a more socially conscious and introspective approach, resonating with audiences who sought music that reflected their experiences and perspectives.

5.3 Female Rappers and Their Sexuality

Throughout the last two decades, the impact of rap music has been crucial for the development of popular music. The '90s gave rise to several influential female rappers, and many new ones decided to continue in their legacy. The end of the '00s saw a massive emergence of various collaborations among all artists; no matter the genre they produced, and these collaborations were quite popular in the '10s. Probably the most crucial character in terms of such collaborations and female rap is Nicki Minaj. By the time the new decade started, “Minaj had collaborated with David Guetta, Drake, Diddy, Eminem, Usher, Kanye West, Ludacris, Robin Thicke, Britney Spears and Ke\$ha,” all of that happening only a year after releasing her “major label debut” *Pink Friday* in 2011 (Lieb 53).

Even more interesting about Minaj’s career is her approach to her sexuality. Both White and hooks agree on the over-sexualisation of black women in the past, mostly because of slavery (White 612) (*Ain’t I A Woman* 86). Minaj initially did not captivate the masses with her rap talent; it was her big buttocks that became the centre of attention (White 616). This is further embodied in many of her lyrics, such as in “Oh my gosh, look at her butt” (*Anaconda* 1:19–22), Wobbledy wobble, wo-wo-wobble, wobbin’ / Ass so fat, all these bitches’ pussies is throbbin’ / ... Somebody point me to the best ass eater (*Dance (A\$\$)*, remix 1:24–35), or “Look at y’all lookin’ ass niggas / Stop lookin’ at my ass ass niggas” (*Lookin Ass* 0:35–38).

Yet her buttocks are not her only focus on this matter. Minaj provided several controversial lyrical pieces, completely turning over the experienced knowledge of rap music’s lyrics. In her song *Looking Ass*, she explicitly speaks out to males and demeans them, which can be seen in the lines:

Look at y’all, can’t get a job / So you plottin’ how to rob ass niggas / I ain’t gotta check for y’all / But if I’m a check for y’all, I’m a need a check from y’all niggas / I don’t

want sex, give a fuck about your ex / I don't even want a text from y'all niggas / I'm rapin' you niggas / Look at this pic, look at what the fuck I gave to you niggas / Ain't feelin' these niggas (0:48–1:04)

This controversial piece made many of Minaj's fans upset, mainly because she mentioned raping. From the context of the lyrics, she does not mean it literally, as she could not care less about sex with other men as long as they are powerful and wealthy. Not to mention other men rappers mentioning rape in the same way without facing any backlash, such as West in the collaborative track *Forever* from 2009: "Y'all seen my story, my glory / I had raped the game young, you can call it statutory" (2:18–24). He refers to "raping" the rap game, meaning he was successful at it at a young age.

Nicki Minaj is not the only female rapper who turned the male gaze to her profit. Sklavounakis describes the approach to such concepts as Minaj and other female rappers "twisting them so as to reclaim their confidence with their frequent use of nudity and sexually-charged imagery in their videos" (14). Another fine example of a Minaj-like rapper is Cardi B.

Cardi B, known for her bold and unapologetic style, has also used sexually-charged imagery and lyrics to assert her confidence and challenge societal norms. In her breakout hit "Bodak Yellow," she raps about her sexual prowess and financial success, asserting her dominance in the rap game, similar to Minaj. This can be visible especially in the lines

where she mentions both her "big ass" and her desire for a rich partner, precisely like Minaj did in "Lookin Ass."

On top of that, female rappers reappropriated various previously derogatory terms (Galinsky et al. 2020), mainly the word "bitch" (Koponen 17). Koponen further describes the connection between reappropriation and social relations among those who were the initial targets of these derogatory terms; it can "construct a group identity" through shared experience and "promote solidarity" (16). One of the pioneers on this matter is Missy Elliott, who began to reclaim the word "bitch" at the turn of the millennium (Koponen 17). Her use of "bitch" in her lyrics demonstrates her ownership and confidence in her craft. She turns it into a badge of honour, showcasing her unique style and talent. Minaj then continued and even called one of her songs *Boss Ass Bitch*.

It is essential to point out that while Cardi B and Nicki Minaj have used sexual imagery and lyrics to challenge societal norms, their work extends beyond just provocative material. Both

artists have released tracks that address a range of topics beyond sexuality. Their main message, however, lies in extreme confidence and empowerment, which can help many other girls (especially girls of colour) learn to love themselves and know their worth. However, despite women being this explicitly sexual, it could result in the same scenarios as in men's sexual lyrics; this influence can still cause over-sexualisation and eventual struggles with self-acceptance.

5.4 Body positivity

The idea of body positivity significantly gained traction in the 2010s as society embraced a more inclusive and accepting attitude toward various body types and increasingly challenged traditional beauty standards. Popular music was just one of the media that reflected this cultural shift. Musicians have played a crucial role in promoting body positivity because they have used their platforms to question societal norms, celebrate individuality, and promote self-acceptance.

One notable artist who championed body positivity is Lizzo. With her infectious energy, powerful vocals, and unapologetic attitude, Lizzo emerged as a prominent figure in promoting self-love and body acceptance. Through her music and lyrics, she celebrates bodies of all shapes and sizes, encouraging listeners to embrace their uniqueness and find confidence in their own skin. She herself is a mix of severally oppressed groups of people—black, female and fat, or as Pesqueria well claimed: “Her identities intersect, making her mere existence an act of rebellion” (3). She is constantly facing backlash from people, for example, for promoting “unhealthy body standards,” just because she is famous, therefore always in the “public eye,” but also overweight, so that is where the idea of promotion comes from (Pesqueria 3).

Nevertheless, Lizzo, as already mentioned, grasped her unapologetic personae and “punched” her haters into their faces with her publicity, as by many people, she is considered beautiful and—more importantly—incredibly talented. One of the songs she represents her positive approach to her appearance the most is *Good As Hell* from 2019, with such lines as “I do my hair toss / Check my nails / Baby how you feelin’? / Feeling good as hell ... In there, swimwear, going to the pool shit” (0:06–20), which even further incorporates the positivity with the notion of many girls being scared to show their bodies in swimwear, yet she encourages it.

What she had done with *Good As Hell* is also the massive support for all of those who are not confident in their skin with lines like:

You know you a star, you can touch the sky / I know that it's hard but you have to try /
If you need advice, let me simplify / If he don't love you anymore / Just walk your fine
ass out the door (0:22–40)

Here, she gets almost to a personal level with her audience, supported by the phrases “I know it's hard” or “If you need advice.” She also promotes self-worth and eases broken hearts with the last two lines of the example. She continues to provide this kind of support:

Got to take a deep breath, time to focus on you / All the big fights, long nights that you
been through / I got a bottle of Tequila I been saving for you / Boss up and change your
life / You can have it all, no sacrifice / I know he did you wrong, we can make it right /
So go and let it all hang out tonight (0:58–1:16)

This kind of body positivity incorporated in music is crucial for young listeners who are prone to be deeply influenced by music. A recent study showed that “participants who saw the body-positive video had more positive implicit body esteem than those who saw the body-objectifying music videos” (Coyne et al. 6).

Nevertheless, despite her success, Lizzo herself recently could not handle the wave of hate and locked her Twitter account where she was constantly under attack for being fat (see Valdez), which can be considered hypocritical from her. This escape from social media, however, sparked a conversation about fat-shaming (and the fat-shaming of women specifically) on Twitter (see Fajita), therefore it can still be considered a contribution to the feminist discourse.

In addition to Lizzo, other artists in various genres also contributed to the body positivity movement in popular music. Artists like Meghan Trainor, Alessia Cara, and Demi Lovato used their platforms to challenge societal beauty standards and promote messages of self-acceptance. We cannot omit the major 2010s hit *All About That Bass* by Trainor, which was one of the milestones of body positivity in lyrics, with its iconic lines “Yeah, it's pretty clear, I ain't no size two / But I can shake it, shake it, like I'm supposed to do” (0:16–23), and “Every inch of you is perfect from the bottom to the top” (0:41–44).

All About That Base can, however, be grasped from a different angle, where its lyrics can be considered borderline skinny-shaming, which is as harmful as fat-shaming. This is supported by the following lines:

Yeah, my mama she told me don't worry about your size / She says, boys like a little more booty to hold at night / And no I won't be no stick-figure, silicone Barbie doll / So, if that's what's you're into / Then go ahead and move along (0:44–1:12)

I'm bringing booty back / Go ahead and tell them skinny bitches that / No, I'm just playing I know y'all think you're fat (1:28–37)

Even though probably well-meant, these lines can be interpreted in a way that is harmful to those who face skinny-shaming, with phrases like “stick-figure” or “silicone Barbie doll,” which are often used to demean skinny people (and more likely—girls). When attempting to create a body-positive environment, it is necessary to consider the inclusivity of all types of bodies (whether fat, skinny, black, disabled,...) and not discriminate against others at the expense of defending one body type. Not to mention she sends her message backwards with the choice of words: “Boys like a little more booty to hold at night.” These words again promote the idea that a woman's value is determined only by her looks a sex appeal.

The movement of body positivity is often misinterpreted as the propagation of obesity (as seen at Lizzo), but it is not only fat bodies that are included in this movement. The main purpose of it should be the creation of a society that does not judge people based solely on their looks and supports harmful prejudices. The other mission is definitely the promotion of self-acceptance and self-love, resulting in happier individuals—and therefore—a happy society.

5.5 Beyoncé

The influence and impact of Beyoncé in the realm of popular music cannot be overstated. One of the most prominent and influential artists of our time, rose from the R&B trio Destiny's Child. Throughout her career, she has consistently used her platform to address social and cultural issues, challenging conventional norms and promoting empowerment.

Nevertheless, Beyoncé's feminism has been a subject of discussion and debate among scholars, activists, and fans. While many view her as a strong advocate for women's empowerment and a symbol of feminist ideals, others have raised questions and criticisms about certain aspects of her feminism, for example for being too commercial, so there is no way of knowing the authenticity of her feminist beliefs (similar to Madonna), or that she is not able to

meaningfully impact the lives of women disadvantaged by the same economic, racial, and sexual systems that have rewarded the pop star with class-based, colour, and able-bodied heterosexual privileges (Trier-Bieniek 11,21).

Despite these claims, Beyoncé actively participates in activism and speaks out publicly, not only in her lyrics. She also has her own foundation *BeyGood*, through which she finances various charities (Hanston et al. 31). Moreover, she uses her performances as a platform for her activism (Hanston et al. 32–33), so her contribution to the feminist agenda is irrefutable.

In her song *Pretty Hurts* she also discusses body positivity, with such lines as: Mama said, “you’re a pretty girl” / What’s in your head, it doesn’t matter / Brush your hair, fix your teeth / What you wear is all that matters (0:35–50) and “Blonder hair, flat chest / TV says, “bigger is better” / South beach, sugar-free / Vogue says, “thinner is better” (1:38–53) that warn about harmful stereotypes concerning women’s looks and unachievable beauty standards. She is even calling out Vogue explicitly for forcing beauty standards on women.

Another noteworthy song is *Run The World (Girls)*, which became what is almost a feminist anthem. The song contains empowering lyrics with affirmative repetition of the line “Who run the world? Girls.” And the following lines:

This goes out to all the women getting it in, you on your grind / To all the men that / respect what I do, please accept my shine / Boy, you know you love it / How we smart enough to make these millions / Strong enough to bear the children (children) / Then get back to business

She pays her respects to those who respect her and confirms her self-assurance and elevates women’s intelligence and motherhood, which are all healthy examples of feminism incorporated in lyrics.

5.6 Did men progress?

Based on the previous findings, we learned that men (with several exceptions) tended to objectify women in their lyrics; has this notion changed with the massive spread of feminism? As always, there are a few examples from both sides of the coin. In the ‘10s’ charts, there were a number of songs that still did not shed the best light on women, for example, the controversial piece *Blurred Lines* by Robin Thicke with Pharell Williams featuring. “In fact, the song and accompanying video seem to embody all of the problematic popular-culture representations of women that feminists have long railed against” (Phillips 58).

Thicke depicted a situation in which he sounds almost like he wants to sexually offend someone: “I hate these blurred lines / I know you want it / I know you want it / I know you want it” (1:07–15). The repetition of the phrase only emphasises the non-consensual connotation.

The song continues with questionable lines, such as: “You the hottest bitch in this place / I feel so lucky / You wanna hug me / What rhymes with hug me?” (1:29–37) The question „What rhymes with hug me“ suggests the word “fuck”, which is another of his sexual comments. Nevertheless, not only the lyrics are problematic, the whole music video just reflects some of the points mentioned. The women in the clip are there to be stared at while scantily clad or completely undressed. Emily Ratajkowski, who has the main role in the video, claims that she “was only used as a mannequin“ and even alleged Thicke groped and assaulted her during the filming (www.latimes.com).

Many critics and feminists claim that Thicke promoted rape culture (see Phillips) (Horeck, 1106). This culture is incredibly harmful and gender stereotypes related to it (such as power imbalance between genders or various stereotypes concerning victims of sexual assaults and victim shaming) need to be deconstructed once and for all.

On the contrary, there are male artists whose work is promoting feminist ideas and who are distancing from any negative representation of women. In 2012, Macklemore & Ryan Lewis released the song *Same Love*, which supports the LGBTQ+ movement and advocates for gay rights. The song starts right away with the lines “When I was in the 3rd grade / I thought that I was gay / Cause I could draw, my uncle was / And I kept my room straight” (0:54–1:00), indicating there are some sorts of stereotypes tied to homosexuality (such as the ability to draw well) which are harmful to both LGBTQ+ and cis-hetero people, as they promote certain standards people are supposed to fit in, leading to identity crises.

A pre-conceived idea of what it all meant / For those who like the same sex had the characteristics / The right-wing conservatives think it’s a decision / And you can be cured with some treatment and religion / Man-made, rewiring of a predisposition / Playing God / Ahh nah, here we go / America the brave / Still fears what we don't know / And God loves all His children / Is somehow forgotten / But we paraphrase a book written / 35 hundred years ago / I don't know (1:15–41)

As the first verse continues, Macklemore elaborates on what role U.S. politics and conservative culture play in the view on homosexual people. He refers to conversion therapies that are supposed to “cure” homosexuality, he also claims that sexuality is not a choice and argues against people who support their homophobia with the Bible, a book that should not be relevant in today’s society in the eyes of Macklemore.

His powerful message continues with the lines: “Call each other faggots / Behind the keys of a message board / A word rooted in hate” (2:30–35), referring to cyber-bullying, and “It's human rights for everybody / There is no difference” (2:47–50) or “No freedom 'til we're equal” (3:10–11), promoting the demand for equality without exceptions, without discrimination. The lines “Plagued by pain in their heart / A world so hateful / Someone would rather die / Than be who they are” (3:57–4:03) refer to suicides caused by identity crises or bullying based on someone’s sexuality, which is another great issue connected to the LGBTQ+ community. His main message is, though, that all love is the same, no matter the participants and that society should already accept this love, as shown in the lines “Underneath it's all the same love / About time that we raised up” (4:17–20).

The song is a strong statement in favour of LGBTQ+ people, highlighting their right to love and be loved without facing prejudice. It promotes equality and acceptance while addressing and combating homophobia. The goal of it is to increase listeners' capacity for empathy and understanding. It fosters empathy and compassion by encouraging reflection and a deeper comprehension of the experiences and struggles faced by LGBTQ+ people. *Same Love* had a significant cultural impact, reaching a broad audience, including mainstream radio. It became an anthem for the LGBTQ+ community and their allies, helping to raise awareness, initiate conversations, and contribute to the evolving social and political landscape regarding LGBTQ+ rights, which is important even nowadays, as the community still has not reached the appropriate acceptance in several cultures.

So to answer the question, there is no doubt that the approach to women and feminist issues drastically increased its positivity, yet the fight is still not over. Even in the 2010s (and the first three years of 2020s), it is possible to encounter songs that promote objectification or sexualisation of women. On a more positive note, though, the progress is visible and more and more musicians tend to make music that is unbiased on this topic or even supportive of the matter of feminist issues.

As time goes on, the representation of women changes for the better, but the work is not done. It is important to acknowledge the fact that there are numerous cultures in the world that still oppress women and the LGBTQ+ community and that the Western patriarchal system influences men as well (see *The Will to Change*). Until such cultures and their dogmas are not deconstructed, society will not unite.

Conclusion

The analysis of popular music from the 1980s to the late 2010s has shed light on the ways in which music reflects and responds to societal changes. From the empowerment anthems of the 1980s feminist movement to the introspective and angsty grunge music of the 1990s, and the body positivity and LGBTQ+ affirming songs of the 2010s, popular music has indeed mirrored the evolving social landscape.

Furthermore, the examination of specific artists and their lyrics has revealed the complexities of representation and the advocacy for identity and self-expression in popular music. Madonna precociously captivated her audience with bold statements regarding sexuality not only with her lyrics but also through exceptional performances. Alanis Morissette spoke out loud about relationships and threw shade on the male-dominated music industry while Spice Girls used their global platform to unite girls. Beyoncé emerged as a figure advocating for both gender and racial issues during her career. Female rappers such as Queen Latifah or Nicki Minaj also escaped the chains of the initially masculine genre and reclaimed demeaning words, turning them into the symbols of their empowerment.

The 1980s showed the first signs of a feminist bubble that was about to burst—with women-empowering anthems, female artists strengthened their voices and got to be finally heard. On the other hand, women were constantly facing sexism and misogyny, often manifested in music written by men. What even prolonged this issue was the coming of music videos and their visual sexualisation. A woman was usually judged based on her looks and according to some of the mentioned lyrics, she should only serve the purpose of performing sexual activities. Plus, the social construct of a “nuclear family” resulted in the “Valium epidemic,” which caused many mothers to use antidepressants as an escape from their unfulfilled lives, left not unaddressed.

As the new decade unfolded, a huge influence of grunge music permeated mainstream music, giving rise not only to Alanis Morissette but also to the riot grrrls, whose culture was based on political and gender commentaries. On the other side, rap and hip-hop music made their way to the mainstream as well, supporting the emergence of such celebrities as Tupac Shakur, who painted realistic pictures of acute racial problems in his verses. Distancing from the lyrical mainstream, he also expressed his appreciation and respect for women in a few of his songs.

The new millennium meant crucial changes in the socio-political structures of Western culture. The advent of the Internet laid the foundations for numerous digital movements, social platforms and also streaming services, which made the distribution of music so much easier.

The world was getting faster and feminists gained a major space for spreading their messages. Popular culture saw the rise of several female pop stars, including Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears, whose career resulted in an unfortunate series of events. These celebrities were marketed as brands and their management used their visuals and sex appeal to make as much money as possible. In the meantime, hip-hop, R&B and rap got deeply rooted in the mainstream, creating variations of genre fusions and collaborations among popular artists. While many of these songs were harmless, some of them showed that sexualisation and objectification are still not entirely gone from the lyrics of popular songs. Rappers like 50 Cent or Lil Wayne used their music to promote their own sexual desires, often portraying a power imbalance between them and the women they want to have sex with, while artists like Kanye West and Nelly Furtado raise questions about material possession and its value in relationships.

The last decade meant an absolute boom in social media, even further supporting the movement to spread there. This gave rise to a number of movements that focus on different topics—from gender identity to body positivity. Body positivity is another milestone of the feminist agenda. It supports the idea that all bodies are beautiful and fights negative prejudices regarding weight, race or disabilities. Lizzo and Megan Trainor both grasped this idea in their own ways, but their effect can be questionable in some ways. Trainor’s approach to body positivity borderlines with yet another sexualisation of women, plus, she herself is not one to be considered objectively “ugly,” so some may argue Trainor is being hypocritical. Lizzo, on the other hand, tries her best to promote healthy ways to accept one’s body and receives a notable amount of hate on social media because she does not fit the standards of objective beauty. This only proves the need for such a movement, because such behaviour creates a hostile environment, resulting in mental health issues, eating disorders or worse.

Women are definitely doing better in today’s society; whether it is men’s approach or the strength of marginalised voices—feminism assured they are getting closer to a society where everyone is equal, no matter the gender, race, or sexuality. The feminist movement will continue to make progress if it keeps its pace.

It is evident that popular music serves as more than just entertainment; it reflects the aspirations, struggles, and cultural values of society. By analyzing the lyrics, themes, and messages conveyed in popular music, we gain valuable insights into the social, political, and cultural climate of different eras; plus, we are able to recognise harmful patterns and fight them immediately.

As we move forward, it is important to continue examining popular music as a mirror of society, recognizing its power to both reflect and shape our collective consciousness. By engaging critically with popular music, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of our culture, prevailing norms, and contribute to meaningful discussions about social change and progress.

In conclusion, popular music is not merely a soundtrack to our lives; it is a reflection of our shared experiences, beliefs, and aspirations, serving as a powerful and influential force in shaping society.

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