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From Dreamers to Dangerous Women: A Shift from Abstinence and Hypersexuality to Sexuality with Shame in Pop Music Listened to by Tween Girls in 2006 and 2016

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From Dreamers to Dangerous Women:
A Shift from Abstinence and Hypersexuality to Sexuality with Shame
in Pop Music Listened to by Tween Girls in 2006 and 2016

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Abstract

This thesis contains a comparative study of the most popular female artists or female-fronted groups among tween girls in the years 2006 and 2016. During the tween years girls construct their identities, develop sexual beliefs, and interact with potentially influential media texts.^{1, 2, 3} Based on survey data of fifty-seven female students ages twenty to twenty-four in a mid-Atlantic university, Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus, Hilary Duff, and The Black Eyed Peas were remembered as the musical artists they most often listened to in and around the year 2006. An analysis of the music videos, lyrics, and public personas of these artists showed a dichotomy in representations of sexuality with no middle ground; while The Black Eyed Peas displayed a hypersexualized version of female sexuality that objectified women and commodified female sexuality, Montana/Cyrus and Duff expressed little to no sexuality in their music and spoke publicly about wearing purity rings and/or virginity. The 2016 survey, which asked sixty-two female students ages ten to fourteen in a mid-Atlantic suburban middle school to name their favorite musical artists right now, found that Ariana Grande, Selena Gomez, and Taylor Swift were the top three choices. Ariana Grande presents her sexuality as something that makes her a “dangerous woman” and a “bad girl.” Selena Gomez’s sexuality gets her into trouble. The sexuality displayed by Grande and Gomez often caters to the male gaze. They also claim to be unable to control their sexual desires. Despite their public statements about feminism and female empowerment and the neoliberal, third wave feminist discourse that often deems any sexual choice a woman makes an inherently feminist choice, the sexuality presented by Grande and Gomez does not fully challenge patriarchal views. Although their music is more sexualized than that of Montana/Cyrus and Duff, and less objectifying than that of The Black Eyed Peas, Grande and Gomez associate their sexuality with shame, which may be an enduring effect of the media

focus on virginity and purity discussed by the 2006 acts. Contrastively, Taylor Swift presents her sexuality as something she controls, without shame, and with a prioritization of her own sexual desires. Swift's empowered sexuality does not exist without backlash, though; I argue that the public slut-shaming that Swift experiences is a response to her more feminist sexuality, despite her music videos and lyrics being less overtly sexual than that of Grande and Gomez.

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Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Literature Review	4
A. Music Videos, Media Consumption, and the Tween Years	4
B. Evolving Definitions of Feminism	7
<i>Evolving Understandings of Collectivity Within Feminism</i>	8
<i>Evolving Representations of Sexuality Within Feminism</i>	11
C. Increased Feminist Discourse Between 2006 and 2016 and the Commodification of Feminism	15
III. Methodology	21
A. 2006 Survey	21
B. 2016 Survey	22
C. Analysis of Survey Results	22
IV. 2006 Findings	24
A. Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus	24
B. Hilary Duff	27
C. Virginity and Emotional Neoliberalism	29
D. The Black Eyed Peas	31
E. The Dichotomy in Sexual Representation	34
V. 2016 Findings	37
A. Ariana Grande	37
B. Selena Gomez	42
C. Taylor Swift	46
D. Backlash to Taylor Swift's Empowered Sexuality	51
VI. Conclusion and Future Research	54
Notes	64
Bibliography	72

I. Introduction

Last year, sitting around a lunch table with a group of young women my age, I received a text message notifying me that pop singer-songwriter Taylor Swift and her boyfriend of more than a year had broken up. I read aloud to my classmates the text message I received as well as the Tweet from Swift's ex-boyfriend confirming that the relationship had ended with "a huge amount of love and respect."⁴ I thought the news would amuse my classmates before they quickly moved on and treated it as insignificant celebrity gossip. Their reactions were much different than I had expected.

My classmates' opinions about Taylor Swift's relationship immediately followed, as if in a competition to see who could dismiss her the fastest and most derisively. I remember these women saying, "Well, that's not surprising at all," "Yeah, there's respect until she writes an album about it," "I swear she cannot hold onto a man!" and "I smell new music coming." I was caught off guard as I heard these women speak as if there were a supreme ethical code for whom and how a woman should date. As a feminist, a writer, a fan of pop music, and a woman, I wanted to explain to my classmates that their comments were rooted in the sexist ideology that says a woman should not express her sexuality on her own terms.

Later that same day, my close-knit classmates and I decided to write down clever and creative superlatives for each other as a culminating activity during the last class of the semester. Our professor chose my name out of hat. To describe me, he wrote down "sexiest." I felt a wave of nausea come over me. It was similar to the way I feel whenever a man on an empty subway car chooses to stand far closer to me than is necessary, but worse than that because this was my professor—not a stranger I could brush off or walk away from at the next stop. All of the hours I had spent throughout the semester getting to know my professor and my classmates were

diminished to a single physical adjective about the way I look from a man with a doctorate degree who was 50 years my senior and had control over my GPA.

I told my female classmates how uncomfortable the situation made me, but I do not recall any one of them agreeing that it was inappropriate for a professor to comment on a student's sexuality. My classmates believed that I should take it as a compliment; they told me it was "a nice thing to hear." Being called sexy is not a bad thing, after all.

I was perplexed by the disconnect that day between the way my peers reacted to Taylor Swift's sexuality and the way they reacted to mine. Swift, they believed, had a moral responsibility to date fewer men than she wanted to, for longer periods of time, and to stay quiet about it when she did. I, on the other hand, should embrace being deemed the "sexiest" one in any given academic setting. I began to question the thought process of my peers: Why is it that I am supposed to enjoy being considered the "sexiest" when it is determined by a man, but Taylor Swift is constantly reprimanded for (presumably) actually having sex? Why are women expected to ignite sexuality in men but not in themselves? Why is Taylor Swift so regularly slut-shamed in popular culture despite her music videos and lyrics being less explicitly sexual than the releases of many of her contemporaries? This thesis is the result of the search for answers I began that day.

Although the classmates who motivated me to question the way we perceive women's sexuality were all in their late teens and early twenties, this study will focus on girls in early adolescence. For the purposes of this study, I will refer to early adolescence as the "tween" years, meaning ages ten to fourteen. During this time in a girl's life, she constructs her identity and develops her sexual beliefs while potentially being influenced by media texts, making it a pivotal time in the formation of her own understanding of female sexuality in relation to the

music she listens to.^{5, 6, 7} My classmates and the rest of my peers were tweens in the year 2006, but much has changed in popular music and culture since the year 2006. This thesis contains a comparative study that examines the music popular among tween girls in the year 2006 as well as 2016. To complete this study, I distributed surveys to women ages twenty to twenty-four in the year 2016, who were tweens in the year 2006, asking them to name the artists they remember listening to most during their tween years. I asked girls who were tweens in the year 2016 the same. I then analyzed the sexual representation in the music videos, lyrics, and public personas of the top female artists chosen, keeping in mind the neoliberal, third wave of feminism in which both of these tween groups grew up or are growing up, as well as the increased feminist discourse in popular culture between 2006 and 2016.

II. Literature Review

A. Music Videos, Media Consumption, and the Tween Years

In 1981, MTV began airing on television sets across the United States, cementing the music video as a new mass medium that combined melody, lyrics, and images to form a cohesive representation of a song and its artist. Adolescents are the biggest consumers of music videos.⁸ Adolescence marks a transitional time period in a young person's life during which they "develop the ability to understand abstract concepts, question values, develop a more mature sense of identity and learn to establish personal relationships."⁹ Watching television and listening to music are activities that stimulate deep emotional involvement, and music videos combine these two media formats to create an even more involved activity. An exposure to mass media content can impact the behavior of individuals by shaping cultural norms.¹⁰ This is particularly true for adolescents, who watch music videos more often than any other age group.¹¹ Thus, the images and lyrics in the music presented to adolescents could potentially play a tremendous role in the maturation of young people.

Between 2005 and 2009, the U.S. pop music industry found a new audience in adolescent listeners and viewers and the "tween" music industry ultimately became a major economic and cultural force during these years.¹² This new, specific sect of the industry derived from the massive buying power of children; the demographic spends "tens of billions of dollars annually and [influences] as much as \$200 billion in family spending," despite the overall decline of sales in the rest of the music industry.¹³ Given the launch of pop music targeted at tweens and the possible cultural effects of media messages especially during the formative years, it is essential to analyze the messages presented in the music that is consumed by tweens.

Adolescence is defined in part as a period of life when sexual beliefs develop. Since the

launch of MTV in 1981, music videos have been criticized for their sexually explicit content; two-thirds of music videos played on music video channels feature “sexual portrayals and erotic content” that often relay gender stereotypes.¹⁴ The research on music videos produced in the 1980s found that women were underrepresented by a more than six to one ratio and were presented as “scantly-clad targets of men’s condescending actions.”¹⁵

In 1991, Sut Jhally, a professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, produced a video called *Dreamworlds*, which shows clips of women in music videos being sexually objectified. Jhally argued that the women in these music videos become nothing more than “legs in high heels.”¹⁶ Cameras pan “assorted images of legs, breasts, buttocks, and other body parts” as if these women’s bodies exist only to be looked at by men, and multiple women’s bodies are “quickly juxtaposed, suggesting interchangeability and lack of subjectivity.”¹⁷

Laura Mulvey discusses the use of “the male gaze” as a common technique when representing women in film:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.¹⁸

A woman viewed through the male gaze exists to fulfill male fantasies and give pleasure to men rather than herself. The male gaze, as defined by Mulvey, is utilized in various forms of visual media to show the prioritization of men and male desires over women and female pleasure. In the context of music videos, Jhally discusses the use of the male gaze and suggests that women in music videos are simply props to serve the “pornographic imagination” and that the narratives created in music videos shape social norms and cultural values regarding sexuality. Jhally

argues:

Female performers must take on the fantasy roles that the pornographic imagination dictates. They perform for the camera and the male gaze, presenting themselves invitingly. They touch themselves suggestively, undress for the watching audience, allowing the camera to pan up and down their bodies, looking at them from above as well as from below. Like all women in the dream world their bodies are fragmented and they become defined through their various body parts...[when] the pornographic imagination kicks in [she] is shown writhing on a bed in a variety of suggestive poses, getting undressed with the camera utilizing one of the usual conventions, and, of course, taking a shower.¹⁹

The actions Jhally describes women performing in music videos—caressing themselves, undressing for the camera, writhing in bed, showering—and the way that cameras capture these women—panning their bodies, fragmenting their body parts—are manifestations of Mulvey’s male gaze, which displays women in ways meant to please men. These actions and camera techniques perpetuate male hegemony over women in visual media.

Despite its assertion that women in music videos are unfairly objectified, Jhally’s *Dreamworlds* was critiqued for presenting clips from music videos without reference to the song’s melody or lyrics. Robin Roberts argues that this method of examining music videos could present incomplete or biased analyses of a three-part medium—she argues that music, images, and the combination of the two must be studied in order to properly analyze a music video’s message.²⁰ My study will examine all three elements of music videos, as recommended by Roberts, as well as lyrics.

When consuming pop music, tweens negotiate and interpret media messages as they seek and create their identities.²¹ The identities young girls solidify can be shaped by media texts.^{22, 23} In the tween years, girls begin to worship celebrities, including pop artists, as part of their everyday lives.²⁴ This thesis is based on the belief that a girl’s tween years are a pivotal time for the identification and construction of her personality and her early understandings of sexuality,

and that the music consumed during this time can potentially affect this process. Tara Chittenden found that the “pop princesses” marketed to girls are specifically influential to girls’ identity construction because of their pervasive presence in teen magazines and television shows.²⁵ Susan Douglas, in her editorial piece recognizing the massive success of the Spice Girls among the tween girl demographic, argues that tween girls’ adoration of a particular artist is an indication of how they feel about becoming women.²⁶ If we are willing to listen to what tween girls are listening to, we are better able to understand what they are trying to tell us. It is important to validate the music popular among tween girls because they are likely using pop music to negotiate and construct their identities. This is the foundational principle of my study.

It is important to note that tween girls are not passive receivers of the messages in pop music. Despite widespread panic surrounding the premature sexualization of girlhood in media, research shows that tween girls actively interpret the sexualized (and other) images presented to them in music, rather than adopt without questioning the ideologies presented.²⁷ Jackson and Vares argue, “Girls use various discursive strategies to negotiate the ‘hyper-sexualized’ femininities media make available to them.”²⁸ That being said, this study will not assume the potentially nuanced perspectives of the tween girls who participated in the survey; rather, it will present an analysis of the (sometimes conflicting) representations of female sexuality presented to tween girls through the music videos and lyrics of their favorite artists.

B. Evolving Definitions of Feminism

This thesis will analyze the representations of sexuality in music videos and lyrics popular among tween girls growing up ten years apart, in 2006 and 2016. Both of these years are considered (in this context) part of the current, third wave of feminism, meaning that all of the tween girls in this study consumed the music they chose on the survey during the third wave. The

third wave of feminism exists because of and in contrast to the second wave of feminism. Some of the shifts that occurred between these two eras of the feminist movement are discussed in this section.

Evolving Understandings of Collectivity Within Feminism

To analyze the media texts of this study within a context, it is essential to examine the third wave feminist world in which survey participants were tweens. One of the ways in which third wave feminism differs from its predecessor is its understanding of the relationship between politics and the self. The second wave of feminism occurred from the 1960s to 1980s and had principal slogans and philosophies including “Sisterhood is Powerful” and “The Personal is Political.” Both of these phrases communicated the collective activism and questioning of systemic gender inequities that were key elements of activism in the second wave of feminism.²⁹ Women’s personal dissatisfaction and inferiority to men were critiqued in relation to greater social structures that historically and contemporarily oppressed women, and the powerful sisterhood between women allowed for the recognition of shared experiences and inequalities they all were battling.

The third wave of feminism is generally considered to have begun in the mid-1990s and continues to the present day. In 1992, Rebecca Walker wrote an article for *Ms.* magazine titled, “Becoming the Third Wave,” in which she announced her decision to “figure out what it means to be a part of the Third Wave of feminism” and called for other young women to do the same.³⁰ Walker’s article brought attention the potential of a new women’s movement.³¹ Self-identified third wave feminists of the 1990s and early 2000s defined the goals of their new wave, noting priorities that the second wave did not incorporate.³² Journalists Amy Richards and Jennifer Baumgardner, in their 2000 book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, insisted

that racial justice, queer rights, sex-positive narratives, and the reclamation of misogynistic words are essential elements of third wave feminism.³³

Also characteristic of the third wave is an increased focus on individualism rather than the collectivism that stood as a pillar of the second wave. This shift has been widely attributed to the influence of the era's political and social changes on feminism. Many have argued that one of the most significant influences of social thought on feminism is neoliberalism, a concept that became widely accepted in the United States in the 1980s, particularly during President Reagan's administration.^{34, 35, 36} Neoliberalism encourages the individual's responsibility to self-govern, self-discipline, self-regulate, and self-enterprise on the journey to success, regardless of systemic inhibitors. Its foundation is the belief that any individual who chooses to work hard will reach economic prosperity. Neoliberalism "emphasize[s] individualism," perpetuating the meritocratic myth that a person's economic fate is always deserved and is not substantially affected by social or political policy or structural inequities in gender, race, or class.³⁷ This conservative philosophy of the 1980s manifested not only in economics but also in the public understanding and performance of feminism in subsequent decades. Likely influenced in part by the progress made by the feminists who came before them, third wave feminists have replaced the second wave's belief in collective social change with a focus on individual choice. In the third wave, it is commonly believed that women have progressed so much already that if any woman is not successful in this era, it must be her own improper decisions that led her to failure, rather than patriarchal oppression.³⁸ This belief in meritocracy differs greatly from the second wave's attempt to disrupt political, social, and cultural structures that privileged men over women.

Neoliberal feminism is visible in many different forms within the third wave. In 1984, bell hooks defined feminism as, "A movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and

oppression,” whereas in 2014, *Seventeen* magazine defined feminism as “being confident, embracing your femininity however you choose to, and just being *you*.”³⁹ The shift in feminism from a political and social movement to something as simple and individualistic as making your own choices demonstrates the way that neoliberalism in American government and ideology has infiltrated the third wave of feminism. Ultimately, in the same way that neoliberal economics dismiss the structural, class-based inhibitors that prevent individuals from being successful, neoliberal feminism dismisses the structural, gender-based inhibitors that allow men a clearer path to success than women.

Feminist and current COO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, in her 2013 best-selling book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, identified individual will and choices as the key to a woman’s success in the workplace. The “lean in” philosophy of third wave feminism that Sandberg coined blames inequality in the workplace on female employees rather than on the workplace systems designed only by and for white, straight, cisgender, economically privileged men, and therefore fails to uphold the second wave belief that the personal is political or to critique the structural inequities inhibiting women in the workplace. Sandberg presents the fight for gender equity as a personal fight, overlooking how “challenging and dismantling patriarchy is at the core of contemporary feminist struggle.”⁴⁰ The way Sandberg advises individual women to choose their way to the top rather than to work toward a system that benefits all women is typical of neoliberal feminism in the third wave. Sandberg is a billionaire and does not question structural patriarchy, which made media outlets enthusiastically willing to include her self-proclaimed “feminist manifesto” in headlines and lead stories; her popularity was ubiquitous as the book spent sixteen weeks as a *Times* bestseller. bell hooks notes, “Sandberg offers readers no understanding of what men must do to unlearn sexist thinking. At no point in *Lean In* does she

let readers know what would motivate patriarchal white males in a corporate environment to change their belief system or the structures that support gender inequality.”⁴¹ Sandberg is not questioning existing structures, simply asking to be let in, and her neoliberal rhetoric and suggested strategies work specifically for herself and other wealthy, white women who do not question male status. She is easily accepted by mainstream media perhaps because she is the ideal feminist for modern patriarchy: she is progressive without questioning hegemony.

Evolving Representations of Sexuality Within Feminism

There was a dichotomy in philosophy between feminist leaders of the second wave concerning what became known as the sex wars. Feminists struggled to determine what a nuanced and empowered manifestation of female sexuality should look like. Second wave feminists were classified as either “sex-positive” or “sex-negative,” debating whether sex work, pornography, and other forms of female public sexuality empowered women or degraded them. Sex-positive feminists believed that regarding all displays of female sexuality as degrading was yet another form of oppressing women’s sexual expression and therefore an extension of patriarchy. Sex-negative feminists warned that the same displays were an extension of men’s sexual dominance over women and of the male gaze.⁴²

The discrepancy between sex-positive and sex-negative feminists remains tangible in the third wave of feminism and in what Gail Dines calls our “pornified culture.” The rise of the Internet caused a “revolution” that made pornography more accessible, affordable, and anonymous, and some feminists, like Dines and Long argue that the same images “perpetuate myths of women’s unconditional sexual availability and object status, and thus undermine women’s rights to sexual autonomy, physical safety and economic and social equality.”^{43, 44} As the Internet has made pornography more accessible, the volume of it has increased dramatically,

thus pornographers must go to extremes to break through industry competition. Pornography itself has become a part of mainstream culture and has influenced other aspects of mainstream culture, hypersexualizing everyday representations of sex and sexuality, according to Dines.⁴⁵

She argues:

Whether the case is Britney Spears writhing around almost naked or *Cosmopolitan* magazine informing readers that porn could spice up their lives, women are increasingly being socialized in a culture that is hypersexualized...young women and girls, it seems, are increasingly celebrating their “empowering” sexual freedom by trying to look and act the part of a porn star.⁴⁶

Dines links the recent increase in pornography to the increase in hypersexualized images in mainstream media, including popular music, and warns that our “pornified” culture can affect our sexual identities.⁴⁷

Other third wave feminists consider pornography and the opportunity for women to appear in pornography to be empowering and progressive expressions of female sexuality. They argue that condemning a woman’s choice to consume and appear in pornography is yet another form of patriarchal oppression and repression of female sexuality.⁴⁸ Present within this debate is the discourse of neoliberal feminism, with feminists arguing that so long as a woman chooses to watch or participate in pornography, her choice should be considered a feminist act. Peterson and Lamb criticize the idea that individual women making sexual choices advances the feminist movement, stating, “The very act of expressing one’s sexual freedoms, because the expression of such is shaped by what is permissible and what is sexy (generally by men and marketers in this culture) may sometimes contribute to the oppression of others.”⁴⁹ For example, a female artist releasing a music video that films her entirely through the male gaze may promote her own career and commercial success, but it simultaneously upholds patriarchal standards of female beauty and sexuality for other women within that culture. The sex-positive belief that choosing

to participate in our “pornified culture” is feminist is often based on the choice rhetoric that characterizes neoliberal feminism, dismissing systemic inhibitors just as neoliberalism does within economics. Peterson also writes, “Sexual behavior that feels sexually empowering for a particular girl may function to reproduce cultural and institutional constraints on women’s sexuality more broadly.”⁵⁰ What is empowering for an individual woman is not necessarily empowering for all women or for women as a whole, and therefore we must be hesitant to reference any individual hypersexual choice as an inherently feminist choice.

Rosalind Gill argues that contemporary representations of female sexuality in media illustrate “a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification.”⁵¹ Sexual subjectification constructs (exclusively) young, slim, normatively beautiful, able-bodied, heterosexual female subjects who “actively choose to objectify themselves.”⁵² Within the neoliberal context of the third wave of feminism, so long as a woman personally chooses to be a sexual object, her sexual objectification is considered a feminist choice and an example of sexual empowerment. The former feminist view of sexual objectification as an oppressive act done to women by men has been replaced by the belief that “liberated” women are now choosing to objectify themselves, and this is believed to be a choice made by “active, confident, assertive female subjects”—ultimately, by true feminists and sexually empowered women.⁵³ A young, heterosexual woman with a specific normative body type who publicly “plays with her sexual power and is ever ‘up for it’” is regularly presented as an empowered figure of female sexuality within the third wave.⁵⁴ This figure is problematic especially because it is exclusionary. Gill later clarifies that the ideal sexual subject is white, cisgender, heterosexual, thin, young, able-bodied, and lives up to “increasingly narrow standards of female beauty and sex appeal.”⁵⁵ This cannot be a truly empowered feminine subject because this figure does not represent female pleasure but rather

pleasure for the normative male gaze. Gill argues, “Sexual subjectification, then, is a highly specific and exclusionary practice and sexual *pleasure* is actually irrelevant here; it is the power of *sexual attractiveness* that is important.”⁵⁶ Gill also warns that these representations of the “neoliberal feminine subject” may be “responses to feminism” as women find more success than ever in education and the workplace and therefore potentially threaten male hegemony.⁵⁷ Sexual subjectification, Gill argues, is a shift from “an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze,” in which the male gaze is internalized to convince women that choosing to be sexual objects is in their own best feminist interest.⁵⁸ Sexual subjectification is a subtle extension of patriarchy meant to convince women that choosing to objectify their own bodies for the sake of male pleasure and hegemony is empowering.

Gill also critiques the way third wave feminism has “fetishized” autonomy and ostracized cultural influence.⁵⁹ When girls and young women make choices, Gill argues, their choices are affected by cultural influences and are not made “in conditions of their own making.”⁶⁰ For example, when a girl chooses to wear a sexualized item of clothing, she does so within the context of a culture that promotes a normative form of sexuality to which she is adhering. Gill says that acknowledging cultural influence should not be “deemed shameful.”⁶¹ Rather, it is a realistic way of viewing our choices, lest we forget, “Like the rest of the world, even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a ‘cultural dupe’—which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, of political and cultural domination.”⁶² The neoliberal concept that anything a woman chooses for herself is inherently feminist solely because she chose it disregards the influence of a culture’s dominant ideologies—particularly patriarchal ideologies—on the woman’s (or anyone’s) decision-making process.

C. Increased Feminist Discourse Between 2006 and 2016 and the Commodification of Feminism

Between the years 2006 and 2016, as well as (and in spite of) the development of our “pornified culture” that Dines identifies, there was an increase in feminist discourse in popular culture. In her 2016 book, *We Were Feminists Once*, Andi Zeisler explores what she calls “marketplace feminism,” that is, “A mainstream, celebrity, consumer embrace of feminism that positions it as a cool, fun, accessible identity that anyone can adopt.” She warns that this modern form of mainstream feminism is “decontextualized,” “depoliticized,” and “probably feminism’s most popular iteration ever.”⁶³ Zeisler describes how in recent years “feminist” has become a positive label to adopt as celebrities, politicians (including female anti-choice candidates), products, and media publications began to incorporate feminism into their brands—or, more accurately, they mentioned feminism to varying degrees, sometimes supporting this feminist discourse with action toward gender equity, but oftentimes not. In August 2014 at the MTV Video Music Awards, pop superstar Beyoncé performed a medley of songs from her self-titled video album in front of a lit-up sign reading “FEMINIST.” A month later, actress Emma Watson, of *Harry Potter* fame, gave a speech to the United Nations launching a campaign called “HeForShe,” which asks men to become advocates for gender equality. In the fall of 2015, pop singer Katy Perry described her perfume as “royal, rebellious, and feminist.”^A Also during the early and mid-2010s, some brands including Chanel, Verizon, Always, and Pantene seized opportunities to market their companies and products (including nail polish, underwear, and energy drinks) as “feminist,” since the word had shed its former negative connotations and become trendy instead.⁶⁴ Zeisler describes this trend succinctly, saying that recently, “Feminism

^A I do argue that a celebrity calling herself a feminist is vastly different than a celebrity calling her perfume feminist because a celebrity is a human being with the power to work toward structural change and a perfume is not.

got cool.”⁶⁵

This commodification of feminism described by Zeisler is possible only within the neoliberal third wave belief that feminism is about individual women’s choices rather than collective, counter-hegemonic change. A feminist movement that considers “choice” to be the ultimate symbol of a woman’s liberation invites a market in which corporations can sell products that a woman can “choose” to buy on her journey to empowerment. As Lamb and Peterson state, “The term empowerment has been overused and co-opted by marketers who then suggest that empowerment can be achieved through consumerism.”⁶⁶ Rosalind Gill argues, “Notions of choice and ‘pleasing one’s self’ are central to the commercial discourse of feminine empowerment, as products are sold to women as tools to reach true confidence and self esteem, which, according to marketplace feminism, must lead to empowerment.”⁶⁷ A woman’s individual choice to consume certain products then is considered a feminist act, though it does not actually create structural, feminist change for women; it simply allows the individual woman to feel that she is choosing her way to liberation.

Also contributing to (and perhaps, in some ways, occurring because of) increased feminist discourse in this time period was increased feminist activism. This activism was seen in organizations preparing girls for careers in STEM fields and online campaigns against the hypersexualization of girls in media, as well as more nuanced and complex conversations in the United States about topics including the campus sexual assault epidemic, the importance of hiring and retaining diverse employees, and the effects of representation in media.⁶⁸ In August of 2016, President Barack Obama wrote an article for *Glamour* magazine in which he called himself a feminist and discussed his hope that the United States would become a more gender equal nation.⁶⁹ During his two terms in office (2009-2017) President Obama attempted to

implement feminist policies in the United States, including launching the “It’s On Us” campaign against campus sexual assault, supporting equal pay for equal work through legislation such as the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, establishing the White House Council on Women and Girls, and appointing women leaders to his Cabinet and White House staff as well as two female Supreme Court justices.^{70, 71} The increased feminist discourse in the ten years of which this study consists is not entirely perpetuated by marketers, as activism outside of product branding has occurred during this time period. Both social and political changes in the years between 2006 and 2016 brought feminism into mainstream dialogue.

Within the context of this specific study, none of the top three survey choices from 2006 identified as feminists during that era while all three of the top female survey choices from 2016 have spoken publicly about being feminists and/or their goals of empowering women. Ariana Grande has called herself a feminist and described the reasons she believes in feminism. She stated, “We deserve to be equal, everyone deserves to be equal, it’s just—it’s a never ending fight... There’s so much work to do for women still... It’s not about being above men, it’s about being equal to men.”⁷² In an interview with Power 106 radio station in Los Angeles in the fall of 2015, Grande critiqued the DJs interviewing her when they asked sexist questions. They began with, “If you could use [only] makeup or your phone one last time, which one would you pick?” She responded quickly, “Is this what you think girls have trouble choosing between?” and continued to critique sexist comments made throughout the interview.⁷³

In June of 2015, Ariana Grande posted on Twitter a piece she wrote in which she criticized her being referred to as a man’s ex-girlfriend rather than as an individual. She wrote, “Women are mostly referred to as a man’s past, present or future PROPERTY/POSSESSION. I... do not. belong. to. anyone. but myself. and neither do you.”⁷⁴ She goes on to mention the

“female activists” in her family, references Gloria Steinem, and critiques sexual double standards between men and women. Grande is particularly vocal about the “double standard” for men and women surrounding “showing skin / expressing sexuality.”⁷⁵ In May of 2016 she told *Billboard* magazine:

If you’re going to rave about how sexy a male artist looks with his shirt off and a woman decides to get in her panties or show her boobies for a photo shoot, she needs to be treated with the same awe and admiration. I will say it until I’m an old-ass lady with my tits out at Whole Foods. I’ll be in the produce aisle, naked at 95, with a sensible ponytail, one strand of hair left on my head and a Chanel bow.⁷⁶

Grande stated, “If I’m speaking about something that I’m passionate about, I’m willing to take the brunt for fighting for what I believe in and my fellow women are definitely something that I will always be one of the first to speak up about.”⁷⁷ Exchanges such as these, in addition to comments she has made about body image and other female celebrities, earned Grande the title of “Feminist Hero” according to E! News.⁷⁸

Another top survey choice, Selena Gomez, has commented on the double standards she experiences in the music industry as well, insisting, “If I did half the things guys did, I wouldn’t have a Pantene deal. There’s a certain standard women are held to because...I don’t know. So many women nowadays are so loud about it. We need to cause a bit of uproar, because I’ve seen it. I’ve experienced it. It’s absurd.”⁷⁹ Gomez told *Billboard* magazine that “with regard to her Mexican-American heritage, she says, ‘It’s great to have a voice’ in such a ‘male-driven’ culture.”⁸⁰ Gomez also responded to Ariana Grande’s post on Twitter about women being referred to in relation to their male partners, thanking her for “telling them you don’t belong to nobody but you.”⁸¹

In 2016, Gomez spoke in a video for Sheryl Sandberg’s #LeanInTogether campaign about women supporting each other.⁸² When she accepted the 2016 American Music Award for

Favorite Pop/Rock Female Artist, Gomez gave a speech in which she told fans, "If you are broken, you do not have to stay broken," and said "I don't want to see your bodies on Instagram. I want to see what's in here [taps chest]...I'm not trying to get validation, nor do I need it anymore." *Cosmopolitan* magazine called the speech "empowering."⁸³

In promotional interviews for her album *1989*, Taylor Swift spoke regularly about her newfound embrace of feminism, stating, "Misogyny is ingrained in people from the time they are born. So to me, feminism is probably the most important movement that you could embrace, because it's just basically another word for equality."⁸⁴ Years earlier Swift had renounced the label of feminist, but in 2014 she clarified, "When asked early on about feminism in my career, I think I was probably fifteen the first time I was asked about it, and so I would just say, 'I don't talk about politics, I don't really understand that stuff yet, so I guess I'm just gonna say I'm not.' And I wish that when I was younger I would've known that it's simply hoping for gender equality."⁸⁵ Swift has written and co-written all of her albums, and in some of her songs, she includes minute details and first names that sometimes provide listeners with enough information to theorize about whom she wrote the song. Swift spoke in interviews in 2014 about the double standard she experiences as a female writer, citing the criticism she receives for writing autobiographical songs which, she says, does not happen to male songwriters: "If a guy shares his experience in writing, he's brave, if a woman shares her experience in writing, she's over-sharing, and she's over-emotional, or she might be crazy, or [people say,] 'Watch out, she'll write a song about you!'...That joke is so old and it's coming from a place of such sexism."⁸⁶ During interviews promoting her most recent album, Swift spoke regularly about being a feminist, the sexist double standards she experiences in the music industry, and her decision to stop dating and instead focus on her friendships with women who make her think, "God, I want

to be around her.”⁸⁷

While it is easy to assume these artists’ discussions of feminism, sexism, and empowerment are simply marketing tactics rather than principles they truly believe in, I will not succumb to dismissing their words outright. I do not find it difficult to believe that women in the public eye can truly take a feminist stance or have these reactions to growing up in a patriarchal culture.

III. Methodology

A. 2006 Survey

To determine the most popular artists among tween girls in the year 2006, I created an anonymous survey. The survey was distributed electronically to fifty-seven women currently ages twenty to twenty-four, most of whom were attending a university in the mid-Atlantic United States. These women, who were twenty to twenty-four in the spring of 2016, were tweens ten years ago, in the period being studied. For the purposes of this thesis, tween is defined as ages ten to fourteen. The artists presented as options on the given survey were either active artists on Walt Disney or Hollywood Records in 2006 with a target demographic of young people, or appeared on the tracklist of a Kidz Bop album from 2006 or 2007. Kidz Bop is a brand that releases albums of children covering popular songs. Tyler Bickford explains, “Kidz Bop became a major market force in its own right, when in 2005 and 2006 its albums cracked the Top 10 in the all-around *Billboard* album sales charts...Kidz Bop describes its target age group as ‘kids who have outgrown Elmo but are not quite ready for Eminem.’”⁸⁸ I used Kidz Bop, Walt Disney Records, and Hollywood Records simply as guidelines to provide survey participants with a reminder of the artists they may have listened to ten years ago. I felt it was important to give choices in order to provide a landscape of a time period they may not have remembered perfectly clearly. Participants were not aware of how the options were selected because that was not relevant to their completion of the survey. The survey listed thirty-two artists as possible choices plus a write-in option. Survey takers were asked to choose three to four of the artists they remember listening to most in and around the year 2006. The top three female or female-fronted choices, respectively, were Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus (the former was a stage persona of Cyrus), The Black Eyed Peas, and Hilary Duff.

B. 2016 Survey

The survey for 2016 was also anonymous. It was given to a group of sixty-two female students in my hometown of Riverhead, New York, during classes at Riverhead Middle School, which I attended from 2007 to 2009. The girls who took the survey were between the ages of ten and fourteen on January 4th, 2017. I received both parental consent and child assent from all survey participants. The survey asked, “Who are your favorite musical artists right now? Please list three to four in no particular order,” with blank lines to write in their answers. I did not feel it was necessary to provide a list of choices for current favorite artists; in fact, I worried doing so would influence their choices. The top three female or female-fronted choices were Ariana Grande, Selena Gomez, and Taylor Swift.

C. Analysis of Survey Results

I am analyzing only the music videos and lyrics of the top female artists and female-fronted groups according to the survey. My decision to analyze only female-led groups is not an assertion that feminism does not require or accept activism or change from men. Rather, I want to account for the existing discrepancy between the amount of feminist discourse by male versus female pop stars. One of my goals in this analysis was to examine specifically how recent feminist rhetoric in popular culture may have influenced the music tween girls are consuming, and the male pop stars listened to by the tweens who participated in this survey have not directly contributed to this increase in feminist rhetoric.^B After determining the top survey choices, I analyzed the sexual representation in the music videos and lyrics of some of the most popular

^B This became clear to me when a top survey choice turned out to be The Chainsmokers, a male duo who told *Billboard* that they started their music careers because “even before success, pussy was number one,” and have listed on their website the length of their “penises combined...tip to tip.”⁸⁹ It felt gratuitous and cheap to critique a band that has not influenced increased feminist discourse in popular culture and it would be a waste of time for both writer and reader to include such an obvious criticism of their hegemonic masculinity.

radio singles released by these artists in and around the years 2006 and 2016, keeping in mind the increase in feminist discourse, as described by Zeisler, that occurred during this ten-year gap.

IV. 2006 Findings

The top three female artists or female-fronted bands chosen by survey participants who were tweens in 2006 were Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus, Hilary Duff, and The Black Eyed Peas. Two of these acts, Montana/Cyrus and Duff, had almost no overt references to sexuality in their music videos and lyrics and sang about the importance of making the right choices to avoid unhappiness. The Black Eyed Peas, however, often released hypersexualized music videos and lyrics and commodified female bodies. This created a dichotomy in sexual representation that lacked a middle-ground representation of women who enjoy their sexual desires but do not act as objects for male pleasure.

A. Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus

Years before singer Miley Cyrus adopted the hypersexualized stage persona for which she is now widely recognized, her public persona was (literally) G-rated. In March of 2006, Disney Channel premiered a new sitcom called *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011). The show depicted a character named Miley Stewart, an average girl navigating high school and her teenage years in Malibu, California. The character, played by Miley Cyrus, was living a double life that allowed her to be a famous pop singer named Hannah Montana without any of her classmates knowing. By wearing a blonde wig and expensive clothes while living her life as Hannah Montana, Miley Stewart is able to live a regular life under the radar, and ultimately experience the “best of both worlds,” as the theme song explains. The show excelled in the Disney Channel lineup, and led to concert tours, merchandise, feature length films, and, most pertinently, music careers for both Hannah Montana, the character, and Miley Cyrus, the brunette underneath the blonde wig. In 2006, Hannah Montana’s career was thriving, and Miley Cyrus had barely begun her individual career. Nearly half of all survey participants chose

Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus among the artists they listened to most.

Hannah Montana's music videos were primarily live performances of songs; truncated versions of these videos played throughout episodes of *Hannah Montana*. In "Nobody's Perfect," Montana walks onstage singing a predictable but effective *never give up* motto. She has no exposed skin other than her face and hands and hardly dances; she walks briskly around the stage, along with two female backup dancers, and moves her arms along to the song's lyrics. After the bridge of the song, Montana stops singing to speak her inspiring message to the audience. Exhausted and panting, she yells, "Next time you feel like it's just one of those days when you just can't seem to win—if things don't go the way you guys plan, figure something else out. Don't stay down. Come on, everybody! Try again!" It's unclear if the exhaustion in her voice during this advice is a result of her less-than-provocative hip shaking, her frustration at imperfect days, or the pressure of being a fifteen-year-old product of the Disney Channel. When she continues singing, the vivacity of her voice instantly returns. The song is a clear attempt to relate to the audience and break down the boundary between celebrity and regular girl. This is an ongoing theme of the sitcom as well. As Montana struts, two male dancers playing paparazzi stand below her and pretend to take pictures of her, to prove that she's "gotta work it" when things don't go her way despite her mega stardom. This attempt to relate to average fans simultaneously reminds the audience that she is not one of them—after all, she's still a celebrity. She explains to her audience that even Hannah Montana has to work, as the song says, "again and again 'til [she gets] it right."

A more mellow but equally motivational track, "Make Some Noise" again places Montana as a life coach to her fans. She preaches, "There's nothing wrong with just being yourself. That's more than enough. So come on and raise your voice. Speak your mind and make

some noise.” Much like in “Nobody’s Perfect,” Montana sings a list of morals suited only for children and tweens. In “Life’s What You Make It,” Montana claims that “life is hard or it’s a party,” but ultimately, “the choice is up to you.” The fifteen-year-old superstar sings to a massive crowd, “Things are looking up anytime you want. All you gotta do is realize that it’s under your control.” The same ideal of choosing to be happy and have fun on command permeates into Montana’s pop-rock track on which she collaborated with the popular boy band the Jonas Brothers. “We Got The Party” is a children’s party anthem; during an episode of *Hannah Montana*, she and the three Jonas Brothers play the song at an impromptu concert at the local beach, surrounded by a small group of friends and fans. The Jonas Brothers dance and play guitar as Montana sings, “Life is for dreamers and I’m a believer that nothing can stand in our way.” Throughout her repertoire, Hannah Montana is determined to prove she is a “dreamer” and a “believer.” In an ironic attempt to relate to her audience, she preaches a neoliberal message from an extremely high social and economic standing.

Montana insists that there are “no limitations on imagination” when dreaming about her potential success in the song “Who Said.” In the chorus of this song she asks, “Who said, who said I can’t be Superman? I say, I say that I know I can. Who said, who said I won’t be president? I say, I say, you ain’t seen nothing yet.” The reason she says she is able to achieve a level of success as high as becoming Superman or president is her ability to make good choices. She says it’s essential to “[stay] right on track, ‘cause you control the game.” But she is not the only one who is able to achieve all of this; she insists, “Every girl has her choice to lead their own parade. I do it my way.”

Montana’s lyrics in these singles do not delve into sorrow or disappointment because, as she sings, she is in control of her happiness and success. It’s something she—and therefore her

listeners—are able to “control” if they realize that dreaming, believing, making the right decisions, and being true to yourself is a path to happiness. Montana stands empowered from her elevated social status and insists that her choices led her to the happiness she feels. Many of her lyrics read like a how-to manual, insisting that listeners can be as happy as her if they only make the right individual choices. Montana’s lyrics, while understandably elementary because of their target demographic of young children and tweens, do reflect the neoliberal choice discourse that is commonplace in third wave feminism.

B. Hilary Duff

Similar to Miley Cyrus, actress and singer Hilary Duff became a household name after receiving a lead role in her own Disney Channel show, *Lizzie McGuire*, in 2001. Her album *Most Wanted* was released in 2005 and peaked at Number 1 on the *Billboard* 200 chart.⁹⁰ Duff’s hit song “So Yesterday” was a track on *Most Wanted*. In the music video for the song, Duff rips in half a picture in which she poses with a boy who audiences can assume is her ex-boyfriend. She is then shown watching this ex-boyfriend from afar through binoculars as he changes into a wetsuit at the beach before going surfing. When he walks away, she runs over and takes his clothes. She then proceeds to walk around town and take Polaroid pictures of several strangers, mostly men, wearing her ex’s t-shirt, which reads “Everything is bigger in Texas!” As she takes a picture of the first unknown man in the shirt, she sings, “Haven’t you heard that I’m gonna be okay,” showing—through stealing her ex’s clothes and taking pictures of other men wearing them—that she is moving on from her past relationship. At the end of the video, Duff mails a box to her ex with the t-shirt in it. In the package she includes a picture of herself wearing a shirt that reads, “You’re So Yesterday.” Upon recognizing her, the man rolls his eyes and appears to be more annoyed than hurt.

“So Yesterday” chronicles a breakup but still manages to be an uplifting song. Although the breakup was detrimental enough to cause Duff to steal her ex’s clothes, the lyrics and sound of the song are cheery. In the bridge of the song, Duff sings, “If you’re over me, I’m over you,” an ideal but ultimately inaccurate message that she is able to opt out of her emotions. Duff implies she is able to avoid lingering feelings of hurt and pain because dwelling on them would be uncool, or, as she sings, “so yesterday.”

The same idea of personal agency expressed in Duff’s breakup song can be heard in her 2005 release “Fly.” The ballad is a motivational speech set to melody. She provides statements just elusive enough to be universal and therefore commercial (“Trust yourself and don’t give up. You know you’re better than anyone else”), set to a music video made up of clips from her tour and performances. Much like Montana, eighteen-year-old Duff tells her fans to “forget about the reasons why you can’t in life and start to try,” from a significantly elevated social and economic position while still trying to connect and relate to an audience of average young girls.

Both Montana and Duff avoid references to overt sexuality or sexual relationships in their lyrics and music videos from this time period. Almost none of the singles on either Montana’s self-titled 2006 album or Duff’s album *Most Wanted* are about relationships. When Duff does mention romance in “So Yesterday,” she is already happily getting over a relationship that has ended. Montana’s style of dress is extremely conservative and only the most necessary amount of skin shows in her performance outfits. She mostly wears pants and long sleeves and does not dance in any way that could reasonably be construed as provocative. Duff wears more casual and common street clothes, including jeans and tank tops, and darker eye makeup than Montana does. Neither artist overtly mentions sexual relationships or desire.

C. Virginitly and Emotional Neoliberalism

Both Duff and Cyrus spoke publicly about their virginitly in and around 2006. During this time, many young celebrities were asked in interviews about abstinence or voluntarily spoke about their choices to abstain from sex until marriage. In the music videos and lyrics of Montana and Duff, sexuality was virtually nonexistent, but an insistence that they had the ultimate control over their emotions and therefore their success was pervasive. Choosing to avoid sexuality in their music and choosing to be happy and successful were elements of these artists' public personas.

In 2008, Miley Cyrus spoke about her promise to abstain from sex until marriage. Proudly adorning her purity ring and her Christianity, she stated, "I like to think of myself as the girl that no one can get."⁹¹ In 2006, Hilary Duff was also quoted calling her virginitly "something she liked about herself," and stated, "When [people] talk about [sex], it doesn't sound special, like you would imagine it to be."⁹² Virginitly was a regularly mentioned topic among many young celebrities in the early 2000s, and the videos and lyrics of the teenage stars from the 2006 survey correlate with this trend. Possible reasons why the number of young stars donning purity rings rose during these years include an increase in abstinence-only sex education in schools under the Bush administration, a possible reaction to the "oversexed, Lewinsky drama of the Clinton era," and a branding strategy allowing stars to act in a provocative way (because sex sells) while avoiding any conservative criticism of their sexuality so long as they spoke openly about their virginitly.⁹³ Within American society, there was also a post-9/11 returned prioritization of "stability and domesticity," which in some aspects "envisioned a re-centering of traditional gender roles."⁹⁴ Many famous peers of Cyrus and Duff, including the Jonas Brothers, Demi Lovato, Julianne Hough, and Jordin Sparks, also spoke openly about their pledge to

abstain during this time period.⁹⁵ At the 2008 MTV Video Music Awards, host Russell Brand poked fun at the Jonas Brothers' promise rings. Singer Jordin Sparks came to their defense, saying, "I just have one thing to say about promise rings. It's not bad to wear a promise ring 'cause not everybody, guy or girl, wants to be a slut."⁹⁶

The two artists who preached virginity also cemented their careers with overtly inspiring radio singles. Sadness is not validated by Montana and Duff as it is only glossed over in lyrics as something that can be easily controlled by "dreamers" who make the right choices. Montana sings, "Life's what you make it so let's make it rock," and even in Duff's breakup song, "So Yesterday," themes of triumph and well-being thrive. Duff and Montana present their audiences with encouraging clichés over and over again, effectively overlooking the complex range of emotions that humans, specifically adolescents, experience. In 2014, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 2.8 million adolescents in the United States ages twelve to seventeen had at least one major depressive episode in the past year. Adolescent depression is attributed in part to the stress of maturing, the increase and influence of sex hormones, and independence conflicts with parents and other authority figures.⁹⁷ Yet the lyrics of the top two artists who pledge to abstain do not discuss the potentially inescapable feelings of sorrow that affect adolescents. Instead, sadness is presented as a fleeting feeling that can be avoided if you make the choice to "make [life] rock" and "start to try" (by Montana and Duff, respectively). Their lyrics and videos present a sort of emotional neoliberalism—an option to escape deep sadness by having the right attitude and making the right choices.

The emotional neoliberalism abundant in the music of Montana and Duff is in accordance with what Barbara Ehrenreich calls the "positive thinking" ideology of the United States. Americans are considered "a positive people," according to Ehrenreich's research, despite

evidence that positive thinking cannot control the fate of our nation. Ehrenreich argues that although Americans account for two-thirds of the global market for antidepressants and rank twenty-third in more than one hundred studies of self-reported happiness worldwide, positive thinking is a “quintessentially American activity.”⁹⁸ While Montana and Duff explicitly encourage tweens to choose to be positive and happy and to quickly dismiss feelings of sadness, their emotional neoliberalism upholds a greater American ideology about the power of positive thinking. Both Montana and Duff sang about the importance of making the right choices in order to be happy and successful, and Miley Cyrus also spoke about choosing to abstain from sex until marriage. In both situations, the idea of making the “right” choices is emphasized, establishing a link between happiness and virginity.

D. The Black Eyed Peas

While the social constructs of purity and virginity were elements of the artistic personas of Montana/Cyrus and Duff, as well as other popular artists of the time who spoke about choosing to abstain, this was not true for the act receiving the second highest number of votes in this survey. The Black Eyed Peas were a Grammy Award-winning hip-hop trio with female lead singer Fergie who released a series of hits in 2006 and the surrounding years.

In late 2005, the Black Eye Peas’ hit single “Don’t Lie” peaked at Number 14 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart.⁹⁹ The song appeared on the *Kidz Bop 9* album released in February of 2006. In the lyrics, the male singers admit that they consistently lie and cheat on their girlfriends, singing, “I give her all my attention and diamonds and pearls...still I lie to my girl, I do.” Fergie, the female lead singer of the band, sings the chorus, repeatedly telling the men to stop lying to their girlfriends.

In the music video for “Don’t Lie,” which is set on a beach, all the male band members

are fully clothed as they confess their indiscretions. Fergie then struts into the scene wearing very short shorts and what appears to be a bathing suit top. The other female characters in the video are dressed similarly. In one scene, a male band member rides a bicycle past a group of women who are dressed for the beach. He stares at the women and waves—it becomes clear that he is catcalling them, and the women do not reciprocate his advance. These fully clothed men stare at women showing far more skin and far less interest in a possible sexual encounter than the men. As these men repent for cheating on their girlfriends, they stare at the new women who walk down the street in front of them.

The Black Eyed Peas' single "My Humps" was also released in 2005. The song tells the story of women who use their breasts and butts as tools to lure in men who will buy them expensive clothing and accessories. The song begins with a male singer asking Fergie what she is going to "do with all that junk...inside [her] trunk." She responds by saying she plans to use her body to get him "love drunk." He also asks what she will do with "all that ass inside [her] jeans," and she says she will "make [him] scream." In these lyrics, Fergie treats her body as a tool for male sexual pleasure. All the women in the video thrust and caress their own bodies as the camera zooms in closely on their "humps." For the men, the camera focuses on their faces or zooms out to capture their entire bodies (they are dressed in suits). The representation of the women in this video is consistent with Jhally's suggestion about women in music videos appealing to the "pornographic imagination," or the male gaze, as female bodies are fragmented and the women touch themselves suggestively.

The women in "My Humps" say they are adorned in "ice, Dolce and Gabbana," True Religion jeans, and Louis Vuitton products purchased for them by the men who are allowed to look at their "lovely lady lumps." The women in this music video do not have personalities

beyond their sexual and material desires. They use their bodies to win over rich men and successfully obtain some of the most expensive luxury items available, but they are not interested in committing to relationships with these men (“You ain’t my man boy, I’m just tryna dance, boy”). These women use their bodies as currency in exchange for goods and the men in the video are willing to spend “all [their] money” for a chance to look at the women’s bodies.

Zaslow discusses the conflicting messages expressed in pop music videos and the commodification of female sexuality within “girl power media culture,” which is an interpretation of feminism that has used “a neoliberal language of choice” when discussing representations of sexuality and sexual empowerment since the mid-1990s.¹⁰⁰ She argues:

As a commodified social movement, girl power media culture takes the third-wave [feminist] desire for power through sexuality and combines it with the capitalist “sex sells” imperative to produce a discourse in which sexuality equals power over men, as well as large revenues for sex-positive performers and those who profit from their public display of sexuality.¹⁰¹

The sexuality expressed by Fergie in The Black Eyed Peas’ music videos and lyrics demonstrates this intersection of sexuality and capitalism. Female sexuality becomes an income source not only for the band and the music industry members who benefit from the success of the Black Eyes Peas, but also, more literally, for the women characters in the “My Humps” video who receive goods in exchange for their sexuality. In the third wave of feminism, “desire, self-determination, and sexual agency” are considered essential to female sexuality.¹⁰² The demonstration of these elements, however, often fails to acknowledge the underlying capitalist motives. The women in the “My Humps” video claim to be objectifying themselves willingly in exchange for material goods, representing the “neoliberal feminine subject” Gill describes, who makes hypersexualized choices as a sign of liberation.¹⁰³ However, it is important to note Lamb and Peterson’s argument that an individual woman making a completely autonomous choice (if

such a thing exists within a society) does not necessarily lead to the empowerment of any other women.¹⁰⁴

E. The Dichotomy in Sexual Representation

The three artists receiving the highest numbers of votes in the given survey demonstrate a dichotomy in sexual representation. Two of the top choices, Montana and Duff, sing about the importance of good decisions and attitudes and only briefly touch on specific stories or emotions in their lyrics. Duff does not sing about sexuality and takes a relatively conservative stance when asked in interviews about sexuality. During this time period, Miley Cyrus makes it clear that abstaining from pre-marital sex is the right choice; a purity ring is worn on her left hand as a promise to parents and to God, and her virginity is incorporated into her brand and public persona. The Black Eyed Peas offer a hypersexualized alternative to the conservative ideologies promoted by Duff and Montana/Cyrus.

In her 2009 book, *The Purity Myth*, Jessica Valenti deconstructs the American concept of virginity, specifically female virginity, and its effect on women. She first clarifies that there is no medical definition of virginity. Any attempted definition varies constantly and is completely subjective and ultimately indefinite.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, in the year 2006, more than 1,400 “purity balls” were held. These federally funded events are “promlike” and provide a public forum for young girls to promise their fathers that they will abstain from sex until marriage.¹⁰⁶ Ironically, Valenti found that students who take virginity pledges are more likely to have oral and anal sex.¹⁰⁷ Valenti warns that the concept of virginity is inherently misogynistic; she argues it is a way to equate a woman’s worth as a human being with her choice to be sexually active or not. She says, “Whether it’s delivered through a virginity pledge or by a barely dressed tween pop singer writhing across the television screen, the message is the same: A woman’s worth lies in

her ability—or her refusal—to be sexual.”¹⁰⁸ For Montana/Cyrus and Duff, as well as other popular acts of the time who were not in the top three survey choices, including Jordin Sparks and the Jonas Brothers, virginity was presented to fans as an element of their character and personality.

Valenti notes that women who claim to abstain are considered “ethical role models.”¹⁰⁹ They earn this praise by remaining passive—passivity and therefore subservience in women has been historically encouraged as an element of patriarchy.¹¹⁰ It is not philanthropy, or integrity, or generosity, or talent, or intelligence, or any other active decision, skill, or sacrifice that makes these female celebrities role models; instead, a lack of action makes them laudable in the public eye. Purity and virginity become positive character traits and identity-makers. Valenti summarizes the effects that public claims of purity have on young women:

A combination of forces—our media- and society-driven virginity fetish, an increase in abstinence-only education, and the strategic political rollback of women’s rights among the primary culprits—has created a juggernaut of unrealistic sexual expectations for young women. Unable to live up to the ideal of purity that’s forced upon them in one aspect of their lives, many young women are choosing the hypersexualized alternative that’s offered to them everywhere else as the easier—and more attractive—option.¹¹¹

The “hypersexualized alternative” that Valenti references is explicit in the music of The Black Eyed Peas. Their lyrics and music videos often utilize the male gaze, which does not provide a comprehensive representation of female sexuality, and their representation of sexuality contrasts entirely with Montana’s and Duff’s.

Women participating in this survey who were tweens in the year 2006 most remembered artists who presented two key categories of sexuality: happy virgin or sexual object. There was no average alternative, no balanced option. There is a dichotomy between these two categories and nothing is left in between. As Bickford argues, “There does not seem to be any middle ground available to young woman artists between ‘godliness’ and the ‘good girl gone bad.’”¹¹² In

the world of pop music for these tween girls in 2006, character was defined by sexual activity and happiness was always a choice to be made.

V. 2016 Findings

The top three female artists chosen by tween survey participants in 2016 were Ariana Grande, Selena Gomez, and Taylor Swift.^C All three of these artists have spoken publicly about being feminists and/or their goals of empowering women. Ariana Grande and Selena Gomez released overtly sexualized music videos and lyrics in and around the year 2016. While their public personas present them as sexually empowered young women, their music videos and lyrics suggest that their sexual desires degrade their character, are uncontrollable by them, and lead to trouble. Their sexuality is also shown through the male gaze that Mulvey described, and within the “pornographic imagination” that Jhally argues can be found in many mainstream music videos. Taylor Swift presents her sexuality without catering to the male gaze, without shame, and without claiming to have lost control. In this way, she is counter-hegemonic. Swift’s sexuality receives pervasive public backlash potentially because it is displayed in a more feminist way in her music videos and lyrics.

A. Ariana Grande

Ariana Grande released her album titled, *Dangerous Woman*, on May 20, 2016, and it peaked at Number 2 on the *Billboard* 200 chart.¹¹³ The album cover is a black and white photo of Grande from her bare shoulders up, with her hand, wrapped in black lace, gently touching her chest and shoulder. Her hair is long and her face is made up. Grande, who is now twenty-three years old, looks directly at the camera. She is wearing shiny, black rabbit ears that wrap around her eyes and stand high above her head. They are a facsimile of Playboy Bunny ears. The ears constitute an alter ego of sorts. Grande says, “Whenever I doubt myself or question choices I know in my gut are right—because other people are telling me other things—I’m like, ‘What

^C At the time of this writing, the three people with the most followers on Instagram are Selena Gomez, Ariana Grande, and Taylor Swift, respectively.

would that bad bitch Super Bunny do?’ She helps me call the shots.”¹¹⁴ Grande does not affiliate the ears with Playboy; instead, she decontextualizes the notorious sex symbol and references it as a guiding force as she navigates difficult decisions.

When asked by *Billboard* magazine why she named her album *Dangerous Woman*, Grande stated, “I want to be empowering my fans....To me, a dangerous woman is someone who’s not afraid to take a stand, be herself and to be honest.”¹¹⁵ *Billboard* called Grande’s song “Dangerous Woman” a “sultry R&B track with a self-empowerment message and an arena-annihilating hook.”¹¹⁶ Although some noticeable lyrics proclaim Grande’s power as a sexual woman and her public persona is that of a sexually empowered young woman, there is a recurring underlying conflict on the album’s tracks in which Grande is portrayed as experiencing guilt and shame for being sexually active and claims to be unable to control her own sexual desires.

The music video for the album’s lead single, also titled “Dangerous Woman,” does not show a man. Instead, Ariana Grande lounges alone in black lace lingerie as the camera pans her body and face and she caresses herself. She alternates between looking longingly into the camera and thrusting her long, loose curls back as her eyes close and her face looks upward. The scenes that focus on her movement, body parts (including direct shots of her butt), and lingerie, which essentially make up the entire music video, are characteristic of the male gaze that Mulvey defined and Jhally described. Despite the lack of a male character in the music video, the camera acts as the universal subject consuming Grande’s body as an object to be looked at. Not including a male lead also leaves room for a viewer to insert himself into the fantasy of the video.

The music video for Ariana Grande’s single “Side To Side” takes place in a luxurious

gym, filled with thin women in spandex workout clothes. Grande also wears makeup, jewelry, and high heels. The exercises performed by the women in the video sync to the beat of the song, as do their dance moves and writhing during a scene in the gym showers. There are many camera angles that pan over the bodies of these women as they exercise, shower, and dance. The main performance stage of the video shows Grande cycling at the front of a group of women. As their bodies shift side to side on the bicycles and Grande fans herself with her hand, their movements represent the way Grande's sexual partner has her "walking." She sings, "I've been here all night, I've been here all day, and boy, got me walkin' side to side," telling listeners the effect on her saunter that sex with her partner has caused. Or, as rapper Nicki Minaj says in her feature in the song, these women "ride dick bicycle."

An examination of the lyrics of both "Dangerous Woman" and "Side To Side" shows Grande's contradictory feelings about her sexuality. "Dangerous Woman" begins with a proclamation of Grande's sexual agency. She sings, "Don't need permission, made my decision to test my limits," referring to her choice to have a sexual relationship with a "boy." In the first verse of the song, Grande boasts her sexual freedom, saying that her decision to be with a man is "[her] business," that she is "taking control of this kind of moment," "locked and loaded, completely focused," and her "mind is open." But the less conspicuous theme of the song, despite those lyrics that spell out Grande's sexual agency, is that once she makes these self-governing sexual decisions, she will be a "dangerous woman." She warns that "somethin' 'bout" this "boy" makes her "feel like a dangerous woman" and "want to do things that [she] shouldn't." Grande is condemning her own sexuality by referring to her desire as something she "shouldn't" feel because it makes her "dangerous." The guilt surrounding Grande's sexuality is also evident in the lyrics of her song "Side To Side." She says, "Tonight I'm making deals with

the devil and I know it's gonna get me in trouble," demonizing the sexual choices that seem pleasurable and positive in the song's music video, and worrying that her sexual desires will lead to punishment. In another one of her singles, titled "Let Me Love You," Grande says "goodbye to the good girl," again reinforcing her belief that loving a certain man will make her "bad." Slut-shaming is a modern term that acts as an extension of the sexual double standard between men and women. Slut-shaming, "the act of attacking a woman's character based upon her perceived or real sexual activity," is rooted in the sexual double standard that claims women who are sexually active or desirous are less moral or respectable than those who are not.¹¹⁷ In these lyrics, Grande is slut-shaming herself. She suggests that actively taking control of her sexuality makes her "dangerous," and she says that sexual women are "bad girls." Grande also clarifies that there are consequences for her sexual activity when she sings, "I know it's gonna get me in trouble." Still she insists, "All girls wanna be like that, bad girls underneath like that," leaving no room for diversity in sexual desires. In her song "Bad Decisions," in which she describes the "bad" sexual autonomy she is experiencing, Grande asks her partner, "Ain't you ever seen a princess be a bad bitch?" Here she again implies that her sexuality makes her a "bad bitch" rather than the "princess" she is when she is not acting on her sexual desires.

In "Dangerous Woman," Grande repeatedly sings, "There's somethin' 'bout you," citing her partner as the reason she has this dangerous sexuality, which allows her to avoid taking responsibility for the "dangerous" choices that she was so proud to make in the first verse of the song. The man in "Side To Side" also has "a bad reputation," but that "doesn't matter," Grande says, because "you give me temptation." In another song, "Into You," Grande also sings, "I can't wait no more, I'm on the edge with no control." In "Bad Decisions," Grande sings, "Boy, you make me make bad decisions." Grande's sexual passivity and lack of control expressed in these

lines exemplifies what Deborah Tolman calls the “cover story” of “it just happened.” Tolman found that when girls discuss their sexual desires, they often say that sexual intercourse “just happened” in an attempt to comply with “systematic pressure not to feel, know, or act on their sexual desire.”¹¹⁸ In her song lyrics, Grande presents herself as out of control of her sexuality when certain men are too tempting for her to resist. In this way, she relinquishes sexual agency and attributes her sexuality to her partner. Reallocating the agency in a sexual relationship to a male partner is a predictable way to remove herself from the guilt that she clearly associates with her sexuality. This upholds what Valenti calls “the ethics of passivity;” when Grande blames her sexual choices on the charm of her partner, she negates the agency that she mentions in other lyrics and becomes as passive as patriarchy’s “ideal woman,” whose sexuality is acceptable because it is presented through a male gaze, is determined by men, and leads to shame and consequences.¹¹⁹

In section II-C, I discussed Grande’s response to criticism of her public sexuality. In response to someone calling her a “whore” in a Facebook comment on a photo from the “Dangerous Woman” music video set, Grande commented:

When will people stop being offended by women showing skin / expressing sexuality? men take their shirts off / express their sexuality on stage, in videos, on instagram, anywhere they want to... all. the. time. the double standard is so boring and exhausting. with all due respect, i think it's time you get your head out of your ass. ♡ woman [sic] can love their bodies too!! ♡

In this exchange, Grande equates “showing skin” with “sexuality,” and therefore equates looking sexy with being sexual. Regarding this inaccurate but commonly communicated parallel, Zaslow says, “The message is that sexuality is not a personal experience, not something one cultivates internally, and not something one might seek to honor and celebrate inwardly. Rather, female sexuality becomes conflated with male pleasure, not female pleasure.”¹²⁰ Equating sexuality (a

personal state) with sexiness (a public display determined by normative standards) makes a woman's sex appeal to others the indication of healthy sexuality, rather than how she feels about her own sexuality. Though Grande's critique of the gender double standard is valid and worth examining, her belief that providing a display of sexiness to the public is the same as being sexual or a sexually empowered woman is ultimately inaccurate, but consistent with the display of sexuality in her music videos and lyrics.

Ariana Grande has made female sexual empowerment an important part of her artistic persona, and in her music videos, Grande appears to be willingly hypersexual. According to her lyrics, however, she does not act on her sexual desires without shame and guilt. She becomes "dangerous," "bad," and has "no control" when she makes her pseudo-empowered decisions to be sexual. Grande's version of sexual empowerment leads to a demonization of her natural desires, a degradation of her character, a risk of negative consequences, and a relinquishing of sexual control to her male partner.

B. Selena Gomez

Selena Gomez's album *Revival* was released on October 9th, 2015 and peaked at Number 1 on the *Billboard* 200 chart.¹²¹ The cover artwork of *Revival* is a black and white photo of Gomez naked, with her legs strategically crossed to cover her pelvic area. In the photo, her arms and long hair mostly cover her breasts. In the initial lines of the album's first track, now-twenty-four-year-old Gomez says and sings, "I dive into the future... The chains around me are finally breaking. I've been under self-restoration. I've become my own salvation." She is explaining here that the album will be about her newfound liberation and self-reliance. In an interview about the album's lead single, Gomez says she feels like "a sexy young woman," but further analysis proves that as she takes this self-proclaimed "step into womanhood," her lyrics and music videos

present her sexuality as a tool to please men, a source of trouble, and something over which she has little control.¹²²

“Good For You,” the lead single from Gomez’s *Revival*, has a music video similar to Ariana Grande’s “Dangerous Woman.” In it, Gomez lounges around a house in various outfits, including ripped jeans and a t-shirt, a flowing silk robe, a long white t-shirt without pants, partially visible lingerie with a loose wrap over her, and a formal silk gown. The scenes move quickly, showing glimpses of Gomez’s body but never lingering on any shot for more than a few seconds. She moves her body slowly throughout the video’s many settings—Gomez is shown sitting on a couch, taking a the shower, on a stool shortly after getting out of the shower, kneeling on the ground to look down into the camera, lying on a wooden floor, and more. She stares directly into the camera for much of the video and caresses herself at times. Her actions are consistent with the actions Jhally cited as typical of the male gaze in music videos.

Gomez described the message of the “Good For You” music video, stating, “It’s about how I feel. Yes, it’s sexual and captivating, but that’s what makes a woman. We have that over guys. I love looking at women. I’d rather look at a woman than a guy.”¹²³ Gomez’s belief that being “sexual and captivating” is “what makes a woman,” and her referring to sexuality as an advantage that women have “over guys” is an example of Gill’s theory of sexual subjectification. Gomez views choosing to be “sexual and captivating” in media as a privilege reserved for women. Sexual subjectification constructs a neoliberal, third wave feminist subject who believes that sexual objectification is a route to both power over men and sexual empowerment. Gomez’s presentation of her sexuality in the “Good For You” music video and her dialogue surrounding it paint her as an example of the “neoliberal feminine subject” Gill describes.¹²⁴

In a radio interview, DJ Ryan Seacrest asked Gomez how her family feels about her more overtly sexual song lyrics that read, “You say I give it to you hard, so bad, so bad.” She responded, “There is nothing wrong with a woman being comfortable, confident...I love feeling like I’m in love.”¹²⁵ Despite Gomez’s insistence that “Good For You” is about her sexuality and not her partner’s, most of the song’s lyrics are about her desire to look good solely for someone else. She sings, “I just wanna look good for you, good for you, uh huh,” “Gonna wear that dress you like, skin-tight,” “Let me show you how proud I am to be yours, leave this dress a mess on the floor,” and even promises to “syncopate my skin to how you’re breathing.” The sexuality expressed in her lyrics revolves around the man to whom she is singing. Gomez told Seacrest in the same interview, “[I] want to look good for someone, but at the same time, there is no guy in my video.”¹²⁶ In her analysis of her solitude, Gomez fails to account for the presence of the male gaze, which influences her music video in much the same way it did Grande’s for “Dangerous Woman.” This is a male vision of Gomez’s sexuality presented to viewers—and perhaps Gomez herself—as an indication of a woman’s sexual desires, but this woman’s only desire is to please her male partner, and exists within what Jhally calls “the pornographic imagination.”

It should also be noted that released to radio was an alternate version of “Good For You” which featured a verse by rapper A\$AP Rocky. In it, Rocky acts as the man Gomez wants to “look good for.” He tells Gomez he “ain’t trying to fuck your image” or “business up,” which is reminiscent of the shameful sexuality in much of Ariana Grande’s music. He also asks Gomez, “You look good, girl, you know you did good, don’t you? You look good, girl, bet it feel good, don’t it,” giving her the approval that a truly sexually empowered woman likely would not seek. Rocky appears in the remix’s music video as well, in which his silhouette overlays some of the scenes where Gomez was originally alone. He raps, fully clothed, in the forefront of his scenes

while the clips of Gomez being sexually aroused play behind him. He is, quite literally, talking over Gomez's "confident" sexuality. His scenes, of course, are not shot through the male gaze, and his entrance into the video is accompanied by an explosion of fire coming out of a car. I argue that Rocky's presence and lyrics negates any remaining legitimacy in Gomez's claim that this video is about a woman's sexuality without the influence of a man.

In the music video for her single "Hands To Myself," Gomez plays the part of an obsessed fan stalking a famous actor. She breaks into the man's home, takes a bath in his tub, lies in his bed, wears his clothes, and sits on his couch watching movies he stars in. Again, Gomez caresses her own body in many scenes, and for much of the video she wears only a bra, underwear, high heels, and sometimes something to partially cover her body. In the end of the video, Gomez's character is arrested for stalking the actor.

In the lyrics of "Hands To Myself," Gomez sings, "The doctors say you're no good," warning that her sexual desire for the man she wants to "breathe...in every single day" could lead to negative consequences. It is safe to assume that "Hands To Myself" was not actually written about Gomez stalking a man and getting arrested for it, but the sexual desires of the character Gomez plays in the video lead to tangible trouble. In this metaphorical display, Gomez's sexuality is still demonized like Grande's is. She also mentions being out of control of her sexuality, singing, "I'm trying, trying, trying" but "[I] can't keep my hands to myself no matter how hard I'm trying to," because the man is irresistible to her, like "metaphorical gin and

juice.” Gomez, much like Grande, expresses in her lyrics that her sexuality has negative consequences and cannot or should not be controlled by her.^D

Selena Gomez, when asked about her decision to release “Good For You” as the first single off her album, said, “I have become more comfortable with my sexuality, and who I am, and my body, and I feel really proud of that.”¹²⁷ The conversation surrounding Gomez’s singles constructs a confident and comfortable woman who is not afraid to display her sexuality in her music videos, but an analysis of her album’s lyrics and music videos shows that the woman constructed in this dialogue is sexually empowered only within a male fantasy, her sexuality gets her in trouble, and she cannot control it herself.

C. Taylor Swift

Taylor Swift’s most recent album, titled *1989*, was released on October 27, 2014. The album debuted at Number 1 on the *Billboard* 200 chart and marked the largest debut for an album since 2002, selling 1.287 million copies in its first week.¹²⁸ The cover art of *1989* is a Polaroid photo of Swift, who is now twenty-seven years old, from her nose to her waist, wearing a loose, long-sleeve, crewneck sweatshirt with seagulls printed on it. Swift’s hair is mostly pulled back, with a few loose strands framing her face, and she wears bright red lipstick. She named the album *1989* after the year she was born. Swift says she was inspired by 1980s pop music and culture because, “It was apparently a time of just limitless potential and the idea that you can do what you want, be who you want, wear what you want, love who you want, and you

^D The music video for the single “Kill ‘Em With Kindness” shows Gomez sitting for a photo shoot and running in slow motion down a hallway wearing a silky gown with cameras flashing consistently. Even her song about being kind to people has a very literal portrayal of some sort of gaze; while the lyrics are about kindness (“Put down the weapons you fight with, kill ‘em with kindness”), the video highlights her appearance.

get to decide where your life is going.”¹²⁹ Swift says these ideals are what guided her in the two years she spent writing and producing *1989*.

Through her many discussions of feminism in interviews surrounding the release of *1989*, Swift made it clear that empowering women was one of her goals for this album. Adriane Brown, in her examination of “Swift’s positioning as an ‘authentic’ American girl subject,” states, “In contrast to artists...who explicitly foreground sexuality both visually and lyrically, Taylor Swift represents a nostalgic longing for a piece of Americana in which women’s sexual desires were kept under wraps.”¹³⁰ While the lyrics on Swift’s early albums contained little to no references to sexuality (in this case, I consider sexuality to be distinct from romance), her two most recent albums had more overtly sexual lyrics,^E though still dramatically less so than Ariana Grande’s or Selena Gomez’s. In a 2014 interview, Swift stated, “I’ve always made music so that I could feel camaraderie with my fans, not in a way that was trying to cater to any male fantasy.”¹³¹ Swift’s claim that her music is for her fans and not for “any male fantasy” is consistent with the singles on *1989*, which present her as a woman who is proud to be in control of her own sexuality.

The music video for the song “Bad Blood” is an extremely literal manifestation of Swift’s empowerment dialogue. The video features sixteen of Swift’s famous female friends, including Selena Gomez, Lena Dunham, Hayley Williams, Mariska Hargitay, Zendaya, and Cindy Crawford, all playing different characters.¹³² The names of their characters include Cut-Throat, Slay-Z, Destructa X, Mother Chucker, Headmistress, and more. The song features rapper

^E In Swift’s career, lyrics such as these were indications of more explicit sexuality: “Nights when you made me your own,” from “All Too Well” (2012)
“I’ll do anything you say if you say it with your hands,” from “Treacherous” (2012)
“His hands are in my hair, his clothes are in my room,” from “Wildest Dreams” (2014)
“Tangled up with you all night,” from “Wildest Dreams” (2014)

Kendrick Lamar, who, along with Swift, narrates the music video's storyline, as a character named Arsyn (played by Selena Gomez) betrays her friendship with character Catastrophe (played by Swift). The characters then train together as part of Catastrophe's team of women in preparation for a battle against Arsyn and her team.

Early in the music video, after Swift is hurt by the betrayal, the camera pans her body as she lies on a table in a laboratory. She wears tight, high-waisted shorts and a bandeau with straps, leaving much of her skin exposed, as her body is scanned by a machine. It seems the machine is meant to find what part of her body needs to be repaired before her next battle. During this scene, Lamar raps the song's first verse. The shot is not overtly sexual and instead acts as part of the plotline of the video, despite Swift's minimal clothing. There is only one scene in the music video where Swift and Lamar are shown together. In their joint scene, Swift wears a revealing outfit compared to Lamar's fully clothed body, but her body and clothing are only partially visible as she sits in the driver's seat of a car and slowly twirls her hair while Lamar raps from the passenger's seat.

The women in the video use traditionally feminine items as weapons in battle. Foundation gets blown into eyes, a compact mirror shoots blades and sparks, a purse turns into a nunchuck, they wear bras with spikes, throw a knife through a teddy bear, and have blades in their high heels. Many of the women's outfits are revealing, but not all. The women in the video are physically powerful both in spite of and because of their hyper-feminine attire and products. The "Bad Blood" music video is not a particularly nuanced demonstration of feminist beliefs, but it is a very deliberate demonstration of empowered women that is consistent with the discourse Swift used when promoting her album.

The lyrics of “Bad Blood” correlate with its music video as Swift describes a falling out with a friend. She sings, “Now we got problems and I don't think we can solve them. You made a really deep cut and, baby, now we got bad blood.” There is no resolution in the lyrics of the song; Swift does not dismiss her pain or tell listeners the importance of moving on. She and Lamar sing, “Band-aids don't fix bullet holes. You say sorry just for show. If you live like that, you live with ghosts. You forgive, you forget but you never let it go.” The song grants its protagonist the space to be thoroughly angry and hurt and does not provide a pep talk. It lacks the emotional neoliberalism that the music released by Montana and Duff in 2006 contained.

The music video for Swift’s single titled “Style” is a collection of artistic shots of Swift and her male love interest. Swift and the man are shown both together and individually while in a forest, standing on a beach, driving down a highway, and in other settings. There is an overt display of sexuality in the music video in a very dim scene where the man removes his shirt and their bodies touch. They caress each other on the back, arms, chest, and neck. The moments when Swift looks longingly into the camera or moves slowly in front of it are in keeping with the aesthetic of the music video, and there are comparable scenes of the man doing the same. The video expresses sexual innuendo but does not sexually objectify. A subtle scene in the beginning of the video shows Swift gripping a necklace with a charm of a silver paper airplane hanging on it, which is a reference also made in the lyrics of her song “Out Of The Woods.”^F There is no linear plotline in the music video, and its symbolic and artistic nature, full of small details like the paper airplane necklace, ultimately leaves the meaning of the video open to interpretation.

^F In “Out Of The Woods,” Swift refers to herself and her partner as “two paper airplanes flying.” The music video of “Out Of The Woods” does not have a male love interest and shows Swift battling various scenes in nature on her journey to rediscover herself. The last scene of the video reads, “She lost him but she found herself and somehow that was everything.” The video is symbolic and may be interpreted as a representation of Swift’s battle with the media’s sexist characterization of her, which is discussed further in section D.

The lyrics of “Style” tell the story of a potentially reckless but still appealing relationship. Swift says the relationship “could end in burning flames,” but she decides to pursue it despite the risk, because she and this man “never go out of style.” In the second verse of the song, Swift and her partner have a conversation about the nature of their relationship. When “the lights are off [and] he’s taking off his coat,” Swift says to him, “I heard that you’ve been out and about with some other girl.” He tells her, “What you heard is true but I can’t stop thinking ‘bout you.” She concurs, saying, “I’ve been there too a few times,” and they decide to continue their relationship anyway. These lyrics are sung during the scene in the music video when their bodies are touching in the dark, confirming their decision to pursue their sexual desires honestly, knowingly, and without shame.

“Style” has the same theme of sexy, forbidden love that Ariana Grande’s “Dangerous Woman” and Selena Gomez’s “Hands To Myself” have, but Swift’s choice to pursue her forbidden love does not make her a “bad girl,” “dangerous woman,” or “on the edge with no control,” and her sexual desires do not get her into trouble, like Grande and Gomez claim. In “Style,” Swift knowingly makes a choice that has ended poorly in the past and likely will again. She sings, “I should just tell you to leave ‘cause I know exactly where it leads, but I watch us go ‘round and ‘round each time.” This choice, however, does not tarnish her integrity or turn her into “a dangerous woman.” She is not corrupted by her choice to have an inadvisable sexual relationship. In the chorus, Swift mentions that she has “good girl faith,” and at no point, as the story and song progress, does her sexuality cause her to lose her “good girl” essence. In the bridge of the song, Swift repeats the line, “Just take me home,” providing an example of her consent to continue a sexual relationship that may be reckless or dangerous. Swift’s single “Wildest Dreams” is also a story of forbidden love, but again, Swift worries about the heartbreak

she may experience when her relationship ends, not about a negative effect on her integrity (she sings, “This is gonna take me down...but this is getting good now”).

Taylor Swift’s music videos from *1989* construct Swift as a woman who is sexual on her own terms and not within a male fantasy. Her music is consistent with the feminist rhetoric she used in the album’s promotional interviews. In her lyrics, she does not demonize her sexuality in the way that Ariana Grande and Selena Gomez do, nor does she consider herself less pure after following her sexual desires. Swift takes responsibility for her sexual desires and does not implement Tolman’s passive “cover story” of “it just happened.”¹³³ The theme of forbidden sexuality that sells so well for Grande and Gomez exists within the singles of *1989*, but Swift is sexually empowered enough to discuss the theme without confining her sexuality to the male gaze, being ashamed of her sexual desires, or relinquishing her autonomy by saying she cannot control her sexuality.

D. Backlash to Taylor Swift’s Empowered Sexuality

Swift’s sexual empowerment, however, does not come without consequence. Her reputation in popular culture says she is a woman who dates too many men, too often, for too little time, then capitalizes on these relationships by writing hit songs about them. Swift has called herself “a national lightning rod for slut-shaming,” and said, “Watching my dating life has become a bit of a national pastime.”^{134, 135} A 2014 article in *The Guardian* states:

Taylor Swift has been called a prodigy, a feminist’s nightmare, and—most annoyingly and most often—boy-crazy. People are so obsessed with Swift’s supposedly too-active dating life that there’s an entire wiki dedicated to her ex-boyfriends. Timelines of her relationships have been published by *Billboard*, *Business Insider*, and *Glamour Magazine*. Any song that Swift releases immediately sparks speculation about which famous ex is featured therein—her creative output always somehow ends up tied to a list of men.¹³⁶

In 2013, teen clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch released a t-shirt that read, “# more

boyfriends than t.s.," referencing Swift's reputation.^{137, 138} While Grande and Gomez inevitably experience criticism of their sexuality in media, as all women in a patriarchy always do, their relationships are not criticized as much as Swift's are, and these criticisms do not consume nearly their entire public reputations like Swift's do. Swift's song "Blank Space" is about the woman described in the media's construction of Swift. In the music video for "Blank Space," Swift plays the personification of her own reputation: a woman who is "a nightmare and I'm clingy and I'm awful and I throw fits and tantrums and there's drama... [I'm an] emotionally fragile and just unpredictable mess."¹³⁹ Swift does not apologize for her dating life or her writing process, and instead attempts to reclaim the public narrative around her through the "Blank Space" music video and lyrics. She continues to write about the men with whom she has relationships just as she has since she released her first album at age sixteen, and in a knowing response to her reputation, she sings, "I've got a blank space, baby, and I'll write your name."

I argue that there is a link between Swift's sexuality being autonomous and it being publicly criticized. The sexuality in Swift's lyrics and music videos does not cater to the male gaze, is not accompanied by shame, and describes Swift as a woman who is in control of her sexual desires. The lyrics by Ariana Grande and Selena Gomez presented in this study express their sexuality as something shameful and dangerous, their music videos perpetuate traditional male fantasies, and the artists claim to be unable to control their sexual desires. Grande and Gomez—while they certainly do experience sexism within the industry and criticisms of their sexuality, as they both have commented on—do not express a sexuality that challenges patriarchy to the extent that Swift does. They also are not regarded publicly as clingy, fragile, unpredictable serial daters, as Swift is. Their sexuality, unlike Swift's, largely goes without widespread criticism in popular culture, likely because they are not as counter-hegemonic. Their

feminism, in regard to sexuality, does not question patriarchal standards of female passivity and purity, because they blame their sexual desires on men and express shame about the active sexual decisions they make. Grande and Gomez are perceived publicly as women who make individual choices about their sexuality, and in doing so, their work *must* be empowering for all women. This logic, while typical of third wave, neoliberal feminism, is not true, as demonstrated earlier in part by Lamb, Peterson, Gill, and Zeisler, as well as my analyses.^{140, 141, 142, 143, 144}

Still, Swift's femininity and sexuality fit into a mostly normative frame. She can check off a list of normative beauty standards and sources of privilege (heterosexual, wealthy, white, tall, slim, blond-haired and blue-eyed, to name a few). While the ways that Swift upholds societal norms certainly affects her ability to display her sexuality in the way that she chooses to and the public perception this display, it does not necessarily negate from the counter-hegemonic sexuality expressed in her music videos and lyrics.^G

In her music videos and lyrics, Swift presents her sexuality as something she controls, in relation to her pleasure and not men's, and she does not consider it something shameful that makes her "dangerous" or "bad" or gets her in trouble. Grande and Gomez have a progressive sexuality compared to the traditional goal of repressing women's sexuality, but it is not truly disrupting patriarchy (and therefore not truly feminist) because it serves men and upholds existing male hegemony. I argue that because Swift's sexuality is overwhelmingly autonomous and focused on her own desires, her sexuality is publicly scrutinized.

^G Many have dubbed Swift a "white feminist" who works to uplift women with the same or similar privileges as her rather than all women. This critique is valid and worth analyzing, especially because of a scene in Swift's music video for the song "Shake It Off," in which Swift is shown staring in awe at the bodies of women of color as they dance. This critique is not discussed at length in this study because it does not directly relate to Swift's representation of her own sexuality. The song "Shake It Off" is not about sexuality or a relationship; it is about Swift's decision to disregard arbitrary media scrutiny, similar to the message of her song "Blank Space."

VI. Conclusion and Future Research

Early analyses of music videos critiqued the hypersexualization and objectification of women in music videos.¹⁴⁵ Similar to Mulvey's claim that the male gaze is utilized in film to present women for the sake of male pleasure, Sut Jhally argued that female artists are "trapped in the pornographic gaze" of music videos.^{146, 147} Within the pornographic (male) gaze, Jhally argues, "Women have to present themselves as primarily sexual beings" and "must take on the fantasy roles that the pornographic imagination dictates."¹⁴⁸ Though research in the early days of 1980s MTV found that women in music videos were overtly objectified by men, this monolithic understanding of female objectification was questioned in the mid-1990s, with the beginning of third wave feminism and its associated "girl power media culture," as described by Zaslow and later Zeisler.^{149, 150, 151}

In the third wave of feminism, Gill argues, a woman's individual, autonomous choices are "fetishized" on the path to being a feminist.¹⁵² As discussed earlier, the prioritization of individual choice over collective action is typical of third wave, neoliberal feminism, which developed after the neoliberal policies of the United States government in the 1980s influenced dominant American ideologies.^{153, 154, 155} While the second wave of feminism was marked by the belief that "Sisterhood is Powerful" and saw disrupting patriarchy through collective change as the central goal of feminism, the third wave emphasizes the power of individual women to choose their way to success, gender equality, and ultimately to a (post)feminist life.¹⁵⁶

While feminists have long debated the best way to represent female sexuality in media, Gail Dines argues that our current culture has been "pornified" by the increased accessibility and popularity of pornography in recent years. Dines believes this has led to a hypersexualized

popular culture that has “hijacked our sexuality.”¹⁵⁷ Feminists who support the right of women to consume and appear in pornography believe that so long as a woman actively makes the choice to do so, her choice is inherently feminist. The discrepancy between these two sides of the sex-positive vs. sex-negative feminist debate is rooted in the neoliberal emphasis on individual choices, despite women making these choices within a historically patriarchal culture, and without regard for the systemic inhibitors that may influence a woman’s choice to appear in or consume pornography or any other element of our hypersexualized culture.

The media landscape in which my study takes place is one that highlights individual choice in representations of “empowered” female sexuality. Overwhelmingly, the women in the music videos I analyzed were not directly objectified by men in the way that was criticized in the early days of MTV. Instead, evident in the music videos from 2016 is what Gill identified as, “A shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification.”¹⁵⁸ In a media landscape where women are sexually subjectified rather than sexually objectified, they adopt a “self-policing narcissistic gaze” rather than adhere to the traditional “external male judging gaze.”¹⁵⁹ The crux of sexual subjectification, however, is that a woman still exists within a male fantasy and for the sake of male pleasure, but now, likely because of the neoliberal, third wave emphasis on choice, she considers her own objectification to be empowering or feminist because it is a patriarchal standard to which she voluntarily chooses to adhere. Ariana Grande and Selena Gomez perform sexual subjectification as they simultaneously adopt the characteristics of the pornographic imagination described by Jhally (they caress themselves, shower, and writhe suggestively as the camera pans their bodies and films their body parts as fragmented and interchangeable), and promote their music videos as indications of their empowered female sexuality because they are independently choosing to perform these acts in their videos. They do not account for the cultural

and structural influences on their decision-making processes; this disregard is a flaw of neoliberalism. The Black Eyed Peas, starring lead female singer Fergie, represent female sexuality and bodies as tools for men's sexual pleasure and for power over men, which is perhaps not as objectifying as the representation of women in early 1980s music videos, but still presents women's sexuality as existing for male sexual pleasure rather than female sexual pleasure.

Hannah Montana and Hilary Duff present few or no references to sexuality in their music videos and lyrics. They do, however, still rely on the discourse of choice that is typical of neoliberal, third wave feminism. Miley Cyrus and her peers spoke publicly in and around 2006 about their pledges to abstain from sex. A major theme of their songs was the importance of positive thinking and making the "right" choices to reach success and happiness. Without acknowledging their major sources of privilege, Montana and Duff sing to their audiences about the importance of having a good attitude and a strong work ethic. This emphasis on good choices and virginity—and the implied association of these two things—uphold what Jessica Valenti calls "the purity myth," which is the ideology that virginity is definable, that it is something that can be "lost," and that a woman's character is affected by her having lost or saved it.¹⁶⁰

The purity myth creates shame surrounding women's sexual desires and activity as women who abstain are considered "ethical role models" because they are "passive."¹⁶¹ The glorifying of virginity surrounding the top survey choices in 2006 may have influenced the lyrics of the top survey choices in 2016. Though Ariana Grande and Selena Gomez express sexuality in their music videos far more openly than Montana and Duff did in 2006, their lyrics describe the negative feelings that come with their sexual desires. Grande says that her male partner "makes [her] feel like a dangerous woman," and that she is a "bad girl underneath" who must say

“goodbye to the good girl” because of the sexual desires she “shouldn’t” act upon. She compares her autonomous sexual decisions to “making deals with the devil” and says these decisions will “get [her] in trouble.” It is clear that Grande struggles to proudly claim her sexual desires without shame, and therefore she blames her uncontrollable sexuality to her male partner. She says it’s “somethin’ ‘bout [him]” that makes her feel so sexual, and that she “can’t wait no more” and is “on the edge with no control.” Selena Gomez warns that being sexually active will “fuck her image” or “business up,” displays her sexual desire as something that gets her into metaphorical trouble, and also blames her male partner for her desires when she cites him as the reason she “can’t keep [her] hands to herself no matter how hard [she’s] trying to.”

I believe there is a logical progression visible here that occurred during the ten-year gap in this study. The purity myth that was widely propagated in 2006 could not simply disappear by 2016, despite the increased feminist discourse and the pornified culture that developed during this era. Grande and Gomez are arguably more willing to incorporate sexuality into their music videos than Montana and Duff were, but the shame surrounding active female sexuality that characterized the virginity discussions of 2006 pop music still exists within the lyrics of Grande’s and Gomez’s releases as they face negative consequences for their sexual desires, and become “bad” and “dangerous” women because they act on their sexuality.^H Perhaps to cope with the guilt surrounding their sexuality, Grande and Gomez claim to be unable to control their sexuality and hand over the agency in their sexual relationships to the men about whom they are singing.

Despite their public personas as women who are sexually empowered and confident, Grande and Gomez imply in their lyrics that they are not truly empowered, and instead feel

^H Early in her career, around the year 2008, Selena Gomez also wore a purity ring, which she says she got when she was thirteen years old. She later spoke publicly about her decision to stop wearing it.¹⁶²

guilty and worried about the moral implications of their natural sexual desires. In their music videos, their sexuality is presented exclusively through the male gaze and within what Jhally calls the “pornographic imagination.” They are able to claim to be empowered sexual women because of Gill’s theory of sexual subjectification that says “active, confident, assertive female subjects” are always publicly sexual and “up for it”—but only for male pleasure, not their own. Grande and Gomez “actively choose to objectify themselves,” and according to a neoliberal feminist viewpoint, so long as they have willingly made this choice, regardless of the cultural and economic factors that may be influencing their decisions, their choices can be considered feminist.¹⁶³

The representations of sexuality in 2006 created a dichotomy between the happy, successful virgin and the hypersexualized female object who uses her body as a commodity. This left little in between for an average alternative. In 2016, two of the three top survey artists were overtly sexual, but their sexuality is presented as a tool for male pleasure that is only aroused by irresistible men. Their sexuality is also presented as something dangerous that will lead to negative consequences and a degradation of their integrity. The only artist in this study who presented her sexuality as something she was in control of, as something that existed for her own female pleasure, and as something that did not affect her character or detract from her from being a good, moral person was Taylor Swift. In her lyrics, Swift makes autonomous decisions that she admits may not be responsible in regard to her getting hurt or disappointed, but she chooses to act on her sexual desires anyway simply because she wants to. She does not apologize for her decisions, they are not clouded with shame, and she does not blame her male partners for her sexual desires. Her music videos do not present her through a male gaze and her actions generally do not appeal to the pornographic imagination. In this way, her sexuality is counter-

hegemonic. She disrupts patriarchy by claiming her sexuality as something that exists for her pleasure, not her male partner's or the audience's.

Unfortunately, Swift is the only artist in these six survey choices who presented an arguably feminist perspective of sexuality in her music videos and lyrics. This is not enough, especially because of the mostly normative and privileged position Swift holds. Her sexuality is still relatively traditional, as she references it only modestly. She has only ever displayed heterosexual relationships in her music videos, and only between white men and white women, like herself. She is also normatively attractive, standing thin and tall at nearly 6 feet with blond hair and blue eyes. A further study could examine the ways these different elements of her privilege and personality affect her public persona in media and how these elements attract and deter different demographics. Although her representation of female sexuality questions hegemonic masculinity more so than that of Grande or Gomez, and certainly more than Montana, Duff, or The Black Eyed Peas, Swift makes music within her overwhelmingly privileged and normative frame, which leaves little representation of various forms of sexuality. It is not enough to have Swift as the sole representation of a feminist sexuality in pop music among tweens; she can represent only her own experience of female sexuality, particularly because she writes her own lyrics, and more diversity in popular artists is needed to provide tween girls with more representations. Still, Swift's sexuality is more counter-hegemonic than her contemporaries', which I argue leads to the public backlash in media she receives. She is widely (negatively) considered a serial dater, and whom she dates, the length of her relationships, and the autobiographical songs she writes about them are scrutinized as she is slut-shamed regularly in popular culture.

A future study could include the way survey participants interpret the media messages presented to them, and I do not claim to know exactly how these tween girls are interpreting the music they consume. I do see, however, through this analysis of mainstream media, that Ariana Grande and Selena Gomez are widely presented as examples of women who are sexually empowered, while Swift is slut-shamed in popular culture. What could this potentially communicate to tween girls in 2016 about what a feminist vision of sexuality looks like? Tween girls in 2016 likely see Swift, who expresses one feminist version of sexuality, receiving backlash in media for her sexual desires and actions, rather than the artists who appeal to the male gaze and apologize—in their own lyrics—for their sexual desires. This could potentially lead tween girls to believe that empowered female sexuality revolves around male pleasure. If they do believe the media message that Swift is a “slut” but Grande and Gomez are empowered, they may come to equate looking sexy in public with feeling sexually confident on a personal level. They may believe that any choice made by a woman is an inherently feminist one, regardless of the patriarchal culture that influences those decisions, and by extension, they may think that a woman can buy products that make her more feminist rather than take action to create feminist change in their communities. They may believe that only young, slim, normatively beautiful, heterosexual women can be sexually empowered. They may experience shame about their sexual desires and feel guilty about the active sexual decisions they make, and view passivity in relationships as the ideal for women. They may fear that all sexuality leads to trouble and makes them bad, dangerous, or less ethical human beings. They may perceive female sexual pleasure as something that revolves around pleasing men, not themselves. Finally, they may hesitate to write creatively and openly about their own sexuality, experiences, emotions, and

relationships because when Taylor Swift does so, her words are criticized and considered too problematic to go without backlash.

The sexuality represented in tween girl's pop music in 2016 is not necessarily progress from that of 2006; rather, it is a predictable extension of it. While in 2006 women in pop music were represented as either moral virgins or sexual objects, the (commodified) feminist discourse between the years 2006 and 2016 established a neoliberal understanding of feminism that is about individuals making choices that do not disrupt patriarchy and instead make women believe they are buying products and presenting their sexuality in a feminist way rather than creating structural, feminist change. This is a feminism that makes sure to benefit men and marketers primarily. The sexuality presented as empowering in 2016 is also saturated with shame, which could be an extension of the purity myth that was so pertinent in 2006 pop music. I argue that Swift's feminism leads to her criticism—because Swift is counter-hegemonic to an extent that Grande and Gomez are not, she is publicly criticized more than they are. This is a logical reaction from a sexist culture; this is the same reason Sheryl Sandberg's individual, billionaire version of feminism was happily lauded in media—because it does not truly disrupt hegemonic masculinity. Swift's feminist version of sexuality does not cater to men in the way that Grande's does or Gomez's does, and I propose that this is the reason for her notorious reputation in media.

Again I think back to last year, in the spring of 2016, and the way I felt when I witnessed how my peers reacted to Taylor Swift's sexuality and then to my own. Their reactions to the gossip confirming that Taylor Swift had broken up with her boyfriend proved that perhaps they, too, believed the public narrative surrounding Swift's sexuality. They believed she dated too much and too often, and that she was disrespectful to the men she dated because she wrote songs about the way she felt while she was with and without them.

I am not placing blame on my classmates. These women are my age, go to my university, come from the same area as me, and are growing up in the same incredible, progressive, artistic era that I am. I am one of them in every way. I have had to remind myself that my classmates' reactions were consistent with the vision of female sexuality that is presented to all of us in popular culture. The slut-shaming of Taylor Swift that I witnessed at that lunch table is a reflection of the culture my peers and I have been forced to navigate since we were tween girls ourselves—twens who had to construct our identities and understand what it means to be sexy and sexual within a neoliberal, third wave feminist world that upholds sexual subjectification and individual choices as indications of female sexual empowerment. I see it as a world in which we are expected to pursue higher education but a male professor highlighting our appearance rather than our intellect or personality is considered a compliment. A world in which we are encouraged to make great art and embrace our creativity but not rock the boat. We must be progressive but not problematic. We must display the choices we make in order to call ourselves feminists but be aware that disrupting structural sexism will lead to backlash. We must appear sexy through the male gaze but feel guilty about acting upon our sexual desires. We must be overtly sexual but know that our sexuality makes us “dangerous” women and can lead to “trouble.” We must use our sexuality to please men but not to please ourselves. Taylor Swift must not make autonomous sexual decisions and I must learn how to take a compliment when a male professor calls me sexy.

Because pop music can influence our understanding of empowered female sexuality, we need to embrace a feminist vision of sexuality in media. Girls deserve to see truly empowered representations of sexuality and deserve to live in a world where they can feel sexual without feeling guilty. We need to stop equating sexy with sexual, stop implying that passivity is the

ideal for women, stop citing choice as an excuse for female sexual objectification, and stop accepting the male gaze as an empowering view of women in music videos. Our influential mainstream media can help develop the genuinely empowered female sexuality that should already be commonplace in this third wave of feminism. This progress, I argue, can begin with the tween years.

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