

Contemporary Female Pop Singers' Empowerment of Female Self-Consciousness

Peilin Liao^{1,a,*}

¹Shenzhen Foreign Languages School, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China

a. 13620987166@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: In modern-day society, women are progressively exerting their influence and authority in diverse domains, such as the dynamic realm of the music industry. This transformation indicates a noteworthy progression in the role and impact of women as they persist in defying and adjusting to the traditionally male-dominated landscape of music. This paper comprehensively explores the impact of pop music culture on women's self-awareness from a feminist perspective. The purpose is to analyze the intricate relationship between pop music and women's self-perception in contemporary society. In the first section how women are portrayed in the music industry is discussed, analyzing how they construct and present their public personas. This scrutiny reveals the intricate network of societal expectations and stereotypes that can hinder female musicians, providing valuable insight into the obstacles they face in forming their identities. The following section explores the empowering possibilities that lie within feminist pop music by analyzing how the creative works of these artists go beyond mere entertainment, actively promoting strong and positive self-awareness among women. Their lyrical content, music videos, and live performances challenge traditional norms and encourage self-empowerment. The final section of this essay examines the complex landscape of obstacles and criticisms encountered by feminist pop music culture, recognizing the unavoidable discussions and disagreements that arise in this constantly evolving field. Through a comprehensive exploration of these three elements, this research seeks to reveal the intricate connection between pop music culture and women's self-awareness, emphasizing its potential to bring about transformation in the ongoing quest for gender equality and empowerment.

Keywords: pop music, female, self-awareness

1. Introduction

Pop music culture exerts a pervasive and transformative influence over individuals in contemporary society. Its infectious melodies and relatable lyrics transcend geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, creating a universal medium that facilitates the sharing and understanding of emotions, stories, and experiences. The genre has played a significant role in shaping individual identities and broader cultural narratives over the years, capturing the collective imagination and leaving an indelible impact.

Within the vast scope of pop music's influence, one of the most fascinating and dynamic areas of study concerns its significant impact on women's self-identity, a phenomenon that takes on unique

dimensions when viewed through the lens of feminism. Pop music, with its diverse range of voices, perspectives, and artistic forms, provides a platform through which women have depicted their experiences, struggles, and triumphs. These musical narratives, across generations, have provided a sonic reflection for women to contemplate their individual lives and identities, resulting in resonance and strengthening.

This paper explores the complex relationship between pop music culture and women's self-perception in modern society. While avoiding subjectivity, using clear and concise language, and adhering to a conventional academic structure, the aim is to analyze how pop music, as a cultural force, has impacted the evolving dynamics of societal expectations, gender roles, and feminist discourse.

Covering a broad and diverse array of subjects, including the influential icons, catalytic anthems, and penetrating critiques that have molded people's comprehension of this multifaceted relationship, this comprehensive analysis aims to shed light on the transformative potential of pop music culture for women's empowerment, recognizing that pop music is not only the soundtrack of our lives, but also a catalyst for introspection, empowerment, and the ongoing pursuit of gender equality. paper will be part of the journals therefore we ask that authors follow the guidelines explained in this example, in order to achieve the highest quality possible.

2. Women's Image in the History of Music

2.1. Women's Image in Music Before the Early 20th Century

The portrayal of women within the music industry has historically been distorted, as succinctly noted by George Upton in his work *Women in the Music Industry* that due to women's physiological tendencies, "Not only are women too emotional and lacking in stamina to write music, but a woman's mind simply cannot grasp the scientific logic of music making," in 1880 [1].

While the gender barrier started to break down in the latter half of the 19th century, it is important to acknowledge the historical prevalence of deeply entrenched gender biases within Western music. This phenomenon has its origins in ancient Rome, where women were prohibited from participating in musical instrument performances. Similar prohibitions, categorizing music as a secular pursuit unsuitable for women, were enforced by early Christian church institutions. In the centuries that followed, from the Renaissance through the Baroque and into the Classicism and Romanticism eras, some restrictions on women in music were loosened. Yet, the male-dominated music business has shown an obvious bias toward male composers and has often marginalized the contributions of female composers, performers, and their works. This forced many female composers to use pen names or initials to hide their gender [2].

It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that jazz and bluesy music became popular, and female musicians produced, composed, and performed live, shaping the early landscape of popular music. Prominent figures such as Bessie Smith, known as the "Queen of the Blues," Sister Rosetta Tharpe, often referred to as the "Mother of Rock," and the collective talents of Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Sarah Vaughan, affectionately known as the "Three Jazz Women," serve as prime examples of this transformative period. During a time of severe racial and gender inequality, African-American female musicians utilized music as a tool to combat injustice, frequently exploring subjects such as poverty, racial tensions, and women's liberation in their lyrics.

At the same time, on another continent in China, female musicians were also making strides and establishing themselves in the modern music scene. As iconic representatives of early popular music in China, these women emerged as prominent singers among the "Seven Great Singers".

Despite their immense fame and contributions, remarkable female musicians in both the Eastern and Western hemispheres continue to struggle to achieve an equal footing in society. On one hand,

they have endured long-standing compensation disparities and faced the pervasive threat of sexual harassment and assault within the industry. However, females are often relegated to the role of mere "decorations" by society, unfairly labeled as decadent, frivolous, and promiscuous.

With the outbreak of World War II in the late 1930s and early 1940s, gender roles began to shift. As men went off to fight, women took on various social roles, including in the music industry, where there was a severe shortage of musicians. Due to this labor shortage, experienced musicians were forced to recruit women into their bands. These women expanded beyond their traditional roles as vocalists and played vital roles in every aspect of the music industry. Mary Howard, one of the earliest female recording engineers, Viola Smith, an accomplished drummer, and June Hutton, a renowned big band conductor, are just a few noteworthy examples. Together, they formed the widely popular women's group, the Sweethearts [3].

2.2. Women's Image in Music after World War II

After the war ended, however, men's return to civilian life brought a resurgence of conservative ideologies aimed at suppressing women's recent empowerment. There was an underlying desire to see women returning to their conventional tasks as homemakers and mothers.

Nevertheless, the achievements of women musicians during the war catalyzed some women to recognize that they were not just subordinates to men, but that they were entitled to the same rights as men. However, the road to the achievement of equality between men and women proved to be a long and arduous one, fraught with many obstacles.

Three decades after the culmination of World War II, the musical landscape was firmly entrenched in the domain of rock. Characterized by intensity, speed, and aggression, this musical genre was marked by traits primarily associated with masculinity. In particular, during its formative years in the late 1950s and early 1960s, rock music was shaped and driven primarily by middle-class Caucasian males who controlled both its capital and its aesthetics. British author Ruth Padel, writing in her book *I'm a Man: Sex, Gods, and Rock 'n' Roll*, described rock as male music [4].

While some female artists have achieved success in the classic rock genre, the portrayal of women in rock music has often been one of subordination as juvenile consumers, as exemplified by the wild and unrestrained fans of Elvis Presley and the Beatles. Additionally, women have been objectified as sexual objects. Women in the early era of rock music faced great challenges in escaping the male gaze as they were persistently linked to themes of "sexuality" in media, lyrics, and among musicians and fans alike. The few female musicians who gained social recognition often received backhanded complimentary remarks such as "You are just like a man."

2.3. The Effect of the Second Wave of Feminism in Music

It wasn't until 1963, with the publication of Betty Friedan's seminal work *"The Feminine Mystique,"* that the second wave of feminism began to take root. It was during this transformative period that a group of female musicians, who became more aware of gender issues, began to emerge from the shadows of adversity. One of them was 17-year-old Lesley Gore, who wrote the seminal song *"You Don't Own Me."* It ignited a new awareness of gender among many young women and became the second best-selling album after the Beatles, catalyzing the second wave of feminism.

As a result, a multitude of musicians actively promoted women's rights, including notable icons like Aretha Franklin, Janis Joplin, Joni Mitchell, and Joan Baez. These artists moved away from adhering to a male-dominated aesthetic and directed their attention toward advocating for women's issues and goals. Amongst them, Helen Reddy's *'I Am Woman'* anthem stands out as a significant representation of this movement and is often revered as the "feminist anthem."

This enduring phenomenon has persisted since the 1980s and 1990s and presently flourishes with artists such as Madonna, Britney Spears, and Taylor Swift. There has been a steady rise in female musicians who have achieved superstar status in the music industry. Using the power of music as a medium, they continue to advocate for women's rights and try to influence a world where gender stereotypes persist [5].

Undoubtedly, the Me Too movement has gained significant momentum over the past decade and has received considerable attention. However, it has not brought about substantial transformations within the realm of women's music, unlike the feminist movement of half a century ago. Analysis of statistical data indicates a lack of meaningful and enduring progress in enhancing the influence of women in the music industry over the past decade.

3. Participants in Feminist Action to Empower Women's Self-awareness

3.1. An Autonomous Female Music Space Brings Feminist Motivations for Action

Recognizing the challenges of integrating female music into the mainstream, some feminists believed it was important to create an autonomous space where women could create and distribute their music. In 1973, five feminists established Olivia Records, the first record company fully owned and operated by women. One of the founders of Olivia Records articulated a vision to have every aspect of music production led by women – including musicians, producers, and engineers – create a secure and empowering environment. Olivia Records adopted a unique corporate structure in response to this ethos. The founders strongly supported collective decision-making and implemented a non-hierarchical system, with the ultimate objective of empowering women to achieve economic independence in a supportive setting. Olivia Records' initial venture proved to be a resounding success. Its early releases, particularly Cris Williamson's "The Changer and the Changed," received widespread acclaim and collectively sold millions of copies.

This early success motivated Olivia Records to pursue a path of growth. Yet, hindered by a lack of commercial expertise and an idealistic business model, the company faced significant operational obstacles and ultimately declared bankruptcy over a decade later. Nevertheless, Olivia Records remains an enduring and influential presence in the women's music movement. It serves as evidence of its contribution to female musicians' opportunities and its significant impact on shaping the ideologies and convictions of an entire generation.

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3.2. Pop Music Culture Fuels the Feminist Movement

Following recent cultural movements, there have been significant shifts in traditional religious and cultural gender norms. As a result, more and more young individuals are asserting their identities and engaging in social activism. In the field of music, the punk movement presented an immediate expression of this transformative spirit. The movement adopted an ethos asserting that anyone who picks up an instrument can make music if they genuinely express themselves without being restricted. Additionally, punk music took up a fearless mission to deconstruct widespread stereotypes, propelled by its rejection of romanticism and heterosexual power [6].

Patti Smith is a preeminent female musician who has exerted a profound influence within the music industry. Her seminal debut album, "Horses," was released in 1975 and boldly addressed pressing issues faced by women in society, including domestic violence, gender roles, and women's rights. Throughout the following decades, Smith continued to channel her aspirations through her music and poetry, inspiring countless female musicians. Patti Smith's disheveled long hair, loose white shirt, and casual tie have become iconic symbols within music history.

It is worth noting that Patti Smith has never identified herself as a feminist. For her, gender may be an irrelevant concept as she refused to conform to societal expectations based on her gender. This disregard for gender roles allows her to freely express herself through her work. Nonetheless, her music and persona have brought about a substantial impact on the development of feminist music. Through her musical and cultural contributions, Smith has actively dismantled traditional gender dichotomies, making a lasting impression on gender representation.

The 1960s and 1970s marked a short but significant epoch of avant-garde in human history after which a practical shift took place. During this later era, people expressed their demands and criticized injustices through direct and pragmatic actions.

In the 1980s, the legendary pop star Madonna emerged onto the music scene. Madonna wore a unique outfit comprised of a conical bra and fishnet stockings, which accentuated her figure and rejected any efforts to conceal her gender characteristics. She intended to use her feminine appearance to mock the double standards commonly present in male-dominated hierarchies.

3.3. Music and Business Combine to Popularize Feminism

Madonna's persona represented one of the first examples of feminist music adopting a popular, commercial image. As a result, Madonna has faced significant controversy and endured malicious attacks throughout her career. In response to criticism, she addressed comments made by the famous feminist writer Camille Paglia during an awards ceremony a few years ago by stating, "I'm a different kind of feminist. I'm a bad feminist."

In 1991, K Records, an independent record label, organized the International Pop Underground Convention in Olympia, which was a punk music festival. The event's opening night showcased only women's bands, which led to the festival's alternative name, "Love Rock Revolution Girl Style Now." Famous bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Kicking Giant, and Heaven to Betsy all performed on stage. In 1991, Kathleen Hanna, the lead singer of Bikini Kill, founded "Riot Grrrl" magazine. This movement, named after the magazine, took off in the rock industry, spreading across the United States and eventually reaching Europe and South America. The phenomenon became a significant component of the Third Wave Feminism movement, catalyzing female influence in rock music culture [7].

4. The Challenges of Feminist Pop Music Culture

International Women's Day has been celebrated for a century, but achieving gender equality and rights remains a challenge in every country. Fifty years ago, humanity accomplished the incredible task of landing on the moon. In the past decade, we have made groundbreaking discoveries about the origins of our species and captured the first images of black holes. Legal restrictions currently prevent 2.7 billion women from accessing the same career opportunities as men, while one-third of women still suffer gender-based violence. To address these persistent inequalities, the music industry - and society as a whole - is calling for greater tolerance and transformative change.

4.1. Undervaluation of Women in the Music Industry

Based on empirical data, there is still a striking gender gap in today's music industry. In a comprehensive 2021 study carried out by the University of Southern California, the researchers examined 900 high-profile singles, as well as Grammy Award nominations from the preceding nine years, which findings highlight the ongoing issue of undervaluation of women in the music industry. According to the report spanning from 2012 to 2020, the Top 100 singles chart showed that most female musicians (30%) maintained traditional solo singer roles, while a smaller percentage participated in duets (7.1%) or acted as band members (7.3%). Within the dataset of 900 songs, the male-to-female musician gender ratio was 3.6:1, with women accounting for just 22% representation. The percentage dropped to 20% when focusing solely on the year 2020, marking a nearly 2 percentage point decrease below average [8].

Gender disparity extends to the domain of lyric and songwriting, with only 12% of the top 100 singles in 2020 credited to female songwriters, resulting in a gender ratio of 7:1. Expanding scrutiny to encompass a comprehensive nine-year period, 57% of songs lacked female songwriters in any capacity. That figure rose to 65% in 2020[9].

When it comes to the music industry's behind-the-scenes positions, the gender imbalance becomes even more pronounced. Women held only 2% of production positions in the 2020 Billboard Top 100 singles. The gender disparity is similarly evident in the Grammy Awards, where only 28% of major award nominees in 2021 were female, the highest percentage of female nominations. The gender disparity is similarly evident in the Grammy Awards, where only 28% of major award nominees in 2021 were female, the highest percentage of female nominations [9].

4.2. Criticisms of Commercialization and Superficiality

Interestingly, the unequal gender ratio also extends to the financial upper echelons of the music industry. Among the 4,060 music executives surveyed, females held only 35% of top management positions.

Moreover, in the current era of algorithmic curation, there is a substantial risk of unintentionally directing music consumption towards predominantly male musicians. In 2021, the University of Pompeu Fabra and the University of Utrecht jointly conducted an extensive survey that sheds light on this matter. Researchers examined content recommendations presented to 330,000 streaming platform users and found that only 25% of the content being promoted by these platforms was created or performed by female artists. The researchers detailed their findings in their report, highlighting that when examining the recommendation algorithms used by popular music software, it was apparent that users frequently had to wait until the seventh or eighth song to come across music crafted or performed by female artists.

In a parallel study, journalist Liz Pelly spent a month analyzing Spotify's recommendation lists. During this period, 64.5% of the recommended tracks were performed or sung by male artists, while only 20% came from female musicians, as revealed by her investigation. She expressed the opinion that "these recommendation lists overtly perpetuate the marginalization of non-male artists." [10]

4.3. The Role of the Industry in Shaping Empowerment Narratives

Tune Core, a top digital music firm, conducted a study that surveyed 401 female musicians. Shockingly, 64% of the participants still attribute the main obstacles they encounter to problems related to sexual harassment and the objectification of women.

Additionally, those interviewed have brought attention to another significant challenge: age discrimination. The music industry values youth more highly for female musicians than for their male

counterparts. This preference reflects the industry's emphasis on youthful energy while also suggesting that women must achieve success before starting a family, thus complicating their careers.

The status of women in the music industry has not undergone a significant transformation. Female artists still face significant discrepancies in terms of recognition and accolades compared to their male counterparts and are regularly confronted with heightened challenges. In the current and foreseeable landscape, it is evident that women who aspire to have their voices resonate on a global scale must be ready to take on greater costs and summon more courage than men.

5. Conclusion

In the competitive and ever-changing world of the mainstream pop music industry, many women face the challenge of navigating their careers without adequate guidance due to the lack of female mentors and senior figures. Unfortunately, the fleeting nature of artists' careers often leads to women being overshadowed before they can establish the necessary influence to advocate for change. Thus, instances of female practitioners supporting each other within the music industry remain infrequent, and opportunities for exchanging experiences are noticeably limited.

The Me Too movement made headlines in October 2017, sparking critical discussions and heated debates concerning the widespread issues of sexual harassment and abuse that persist across different fields, such as politics, academia, and culture. One of the notable achievements of the Me Too movement is its ability to prompt industries to address these issues directly and take action to correct them. Hollywood, in particular, introduced academic standards to oversee the behavior of industry professionals. Similarly, the music industry has initiated a similar transformation.

Women In Music, a non-profit organization established by accomplished female professionals within the music industry, is committed to advancing equitable opportunities in areas encompassing education, career advancement, promotion, and various facets of the industry. Members of the organization cover a wide range of roles, including record executives, artist representatives, songwriters, musicians, legal experts, recording engineers, visual designers, public relations specialists, studio owners, songwriter copyright agents, and sales professionals, among others. To help create a supportive and equitable industry environment, the organization has published a comprehensive guide to empower female professionals to effectively address and respond to incidents of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace.

Contemporary American artists within the music industry play a central role in shaping female self-awareness and social viewpoints. Their commitment to feminism and activism, authenticity, and challenge to beauty standards have enduring effects, promoting female self-discovery and challenging established social norms.

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