

## **The portrayal of women in selected Billboard's top 100 chart songs (2015-2018): A semiotic analysis**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Music and song are vehicles of meanings, hence, depictions of women can be presented through them. This study investigates women's portrayal in selected Billboard's Year-End Chart songs through its significations which includes denotation, connotation, and myth constructed in the lyrics. Three major theoretical frameworks were used in this present study. The first theory is two orders of signification from Roland Barthes (1957) which was used to analyze the selected songs. The second theory is the bases of social power from French & Raven (1959). The third theory is resilience model from Benard (2004). The findings reveal that in connotation level women are portrayed as powerful and resilient. The findings indicate that as a powerful being, women possess certain types of powers. Meanwhile as a resilient being, women possess particular qualities of resilience. From gender stereotype perspective, the myth implies that women possess dominating agency dimension alongside communion and competence dimensions, which implies that stereotype on women is not likely to be rigid.

**Keywords:** *Barthes' two orders of signification, portrayal, powerful, resilient, women.*

## INTRODUCTION

Human communicates through two primary ways; verbally (such as speaking face-to-face, lectures, etc.) and nonverbally (i.e. images, colors, etc.) to convey what is in his/her mind. The French-Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), explains that language has the capability to provide a framework for representing other than itself, including music. Hence, music is one of ways of communication. This is also in line with what is argued by some scholars such as Sacks (2010) and Wilson, an American biologist (as cited in Mbe, 2017). Both scholars believe that human is both a musical and linguistic species. Furthermore, to the same degree as literacy and language, it is noted that music is powerful in its impact on human feeling and on the interpretation of events due to its extraordinary work in six different brain mechanisms. In terms of its social function, music is part of fundamental and primal aspects of human culture. According to Hargreaves & North (1997), music is an integral part of a culture in many societies.

A discipline that emphasizes representations is called ethnomusicology. Understanding about cultural contexts, ideology and politics, about the ways in

which language functions, about gender and sexuality, and about the identities of cultures is the advantages of studying music (Bohlman, 2005). By investigating music, one inseparable integral part of music is lyrics. Lyrics are a vehicle for songwriters to convey messages which are the expressions of what they feel or writing about reflections of social reality in society.

In an attempt to reveal the meaning contained in lyrics of songs, semiotics is one of suitable theories that is able to dissect meaning even further to ideology. This is due to the fact that semiotics in general sense is a study of sign. Language, words, color, gestures are sign (Chandler, 2007). There are many major semiotic theories and one of them is from Roland Barthes. Barthes' two orders of signification (1957) can unravel denotation, connotation, and myth of signs. Denotation level is the literal meaning of sign while connotation is subjective meaning of sign and myth is society's construction of phenomena that is considered natural, such as masculinity, femininity, etc.

In regards to Barthes' two orders of signification (1957), there have been some studies conducted in trying to investigate the portrayal and representation of women. The

first study came from Maulida (2014) which attempted to analyze the connotation meaning found in each word that appears in the lyrics from dangdut song entitled *Wedus*. This song has denotation meaning where women reject patriarchal structures that exist in the community. By this fact indeed the listeners assume that Javanese women are able to violate the inherent norms of Javanese women such as, saying fine words, being calm, upholding family values, and being polite. Thus, this is the construction of the myth. The findings illustrate the representation of patriarchal ideology, even though the lyrics may seem like it is a representation of feminism towards that ideology. Consequently, whatever rejection or rebellions delivered by women, women realize that their status or responsibility is lower than men. Another study that deals with the portrayal of women came from Yazid (2014). His study entitled *Representasi Perempuan Minangkabau dalam Lirik Lagu si Nona* found that denotation, connotation, and myth reflect the real condition of socio-cultural life of people from certain group, in this case is Minangkabau people who alleviate women's position in the community.

While those previous studies focus in analyzing one particular song, this present

paper tried to analyze some songs that were selected as the subject of the study due to their content and achievements. In regards to their content, those songs contain a depiction of women, while in regards to their achievements; the selected songs reigned majorly in the list of Billboard's Top 100 Year-End Chart. Consequently, this reflects the songs' sales, radio airplay, and streaming activity (Billboard). Therefore, those songs are immensely popular and widely listened among people.

To help analyze the data, as mentioned earlier, this paper uses the two orders of signification theory proposed by Roland Barthes (1957) considering that this study analyzes written language or text in the form of songs. Thus, Barthes' theory (1957) is required to investigate the denotation, connotation, and myth in the selected songs.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study was descriptive qualitative and interpretative as this study aims to reveal the depiction of women contained in selected songs. It was descriptive as it tries to describe and the result cannot be obtained by statistic procedure or quantitative but through explanation and descriptive technique. It was qualitative because songs or music are cultural product (Harvard.edu) thus it studies things in their natural settings, attempts to make sense of, to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, as cited in Ospina, 2004). It was interpretative because it is not only trying to cover the denotative and connotative meaning of each song but also reveals the myth lies within. Interpretive studies assume that people create and associate their own subjective and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them (Orlikowski and Baroudi, as cited in Walsham, 1995).

### Data Collection

The data of this study were five songs from 2015 to 2018 Billboard 100 year-end top charts. The songs are sung by female singers and written by the singers themselves. The

songs were selected by implementing purposive sampling method. It is a method to represent a population. Borrowing from Tongco (2007) purposive sampling lies on the choice of the researcher to select data based on the purposes of the study. It is tied to the researcher's objective (Palys, 2008). Since this study's objective is to unravel women's portrayal, the songs must be selected based on four requirements. First, the songs must contain a description of women. Second, the songs must be featured in Billboard's year-end charts. Third, the songs must be sung and written by the singers themselves. Fourth, the songs must be produced within three years period (2015-2018) before 2019. Below is the list of selected songs with each song's further details.

#### *God is a Woman by Ariana Grande (2018)*

Grande is an American singer, actress, songwriter, as well as an activist who actively advocates on LGBTQ rights and Black Lives Matter, mental health awareness, and gender equality. Grande has been named Billboard's 2018 Woman of the Year and was honored at the Billboard Women in Music on Dec. 6. 2018. This song scored at number 62 on Billboard Year-End Charts also appeared on a few other Year

End Charts such as Pop Songs, Dance Club Songs, Radio Songs, and Canadian Hot 100. It scored the biggest streaming week ever for a pop album by a female artist on its release.

*Bodak Yellow (Money Moves) by Cardi B (2017)*

She is a famous American social media personality, songwriter, singer and former stripper of Trinidadian/Dominican descent. This multi-faceted lady created history in September 2017 by becoming the first female rapper to top the Billboard Hot 100 in 19 years with her debut hit with this song. Beyond music, she is actively advocating from her social media accounts on social justice issues and body positivity. This song ruled at number 24 on 2017 Billboard Year-End Charts and 54 on 2018 Billboard Year-End Charts of Top 100 Hot Songs as well as appeared on a few other Year End Charts, which are Rap Streaming Songs, R&B/Hip-Hop Streaming Songs, Streaming Songs, Hot Rap Songs, and R&B/Hip-Hop Airplay Songs.

*Scars to Your Beautiful by Alessia Cara (2017)*

Cara is a popular Canadian singer of Italian descent; her music revolves around

Rhythm & Blue Pop with Jazz strong undertones. "Rule Breaker" award was given to this singer-songwriter at 2016 Women in Music event. Cara will receive the designation, which celebrates a boundary-pushing female music star whose approach defies the conventional, on December 9. This song hit a new peak of No. 15 on the Hot 100 and at number 30 on Billboard's Year End Top 100 Charts and other Year End Charts. With the "Rule Breaker" award, Cara joins a star-studded list of 2016 Women in Music honorees, headlined by "Woman of the Year" recipients.

*Most Girls by Hailee Steinfeld (2017)*

Steinfeld is an American actress, model and singer. Steinfeld is set to host and perform at the annual Billboard Women in Music Awards, honoring the standout female stars and executives of 2016. Steinfeld joined Woman of the Year in New York. The song peaked at number 54 in August and remained on the chart for 16 weeks, and ruled at number 62 on Australian ARIA (Australian Recording Industry Association) Year-End Charts. The critic opinion of the song coming from Jonathan Currinn of Outlet Mag and Mike Wass of Idolator claimed that it was relatable and inspiring.

*All about That Bass* by Meghan Trainor (2015)

She is an American singer, songwriter and record producer, who wrote, recorded, performed and produced three independently released albums before she turned 18. Trainor's music is known for its retro style aesthetics. Most of her works revolve around subjects such as modern womanhood, body image, and empowerment. Trainor was honored with the Chart Topper award at the 2016 Billboard Women in Music Awards. Trainor is one of several 2016 Women in Music honorees, headlined by other "Woman of the Year" recipients. This song ruled at number 28 on Billboard's Year-End Hot 100 Charts with other list of appearance on Year-End Charts such as Streaming Songs, Adult Contemporary Songs, Digital Song Sales, Canadian Hot 100, and Twitter Top Tracks.

### **Data analysis**

In order to obtain in the ways in which women are portrayed, the process of data analysis in this study was performed in a few steps, namely selection, analysis, and interpretation. The elaborations of each step are presented below.

### **Selection**

After all songs are selected from the list of Top 100 Year-End Charts on Billboard from 2015 to 2018, the signifiers in the lyrics of each song were determined. The signifiers were chosen based on the expressions or signifiers that are likely to indicate the portrayal of women. Because the data are songs, some lyrics may occur more than once. Therefore, one particular signifier will be shown once thus this study will not display repeating signifiers.

### **Analysis**

After all signifiers of each song were determined, the signifiers were analyzed through Barthes' two orders of signification (1957) which was determining the denotation, connotation and myth. The elaborations of each step are presented below:

**Determining the denotation.** This first step deals with denotative meaning of signs (first order of signification). The signifiers are interpreted based on their literal meaning. Sometimes the word needs to be defined from dictionaries. In this case, the study will use Cambridge online dictionary, Merriam Webster online dictionary, and Urban dictionary. Different sources of dictionaries are used depending on the words. For

instance, the utilization of urban dictionary is needed to define another more cultural and referential meaning to pop culture. A sign then can be produced from the signifier and signified.

**Determining the connotation.** The second step deals with connotative of signs (second order of signification). It investigates connotative meaning of signs. It is generated by the denotative sign and the new signified. The linguistic signs are identified based on the context to reveal the depiction, as stated by Fiske (2002). Since the nature of connotative meaning is subjective, references are required to discover connotative meanings from the signs. Thus the meanings of signifiers are determined through the connection of the signifiers to particular phenomenon in society.

**Determining the myth.** It signifies myths from signs. Myth can be revealed from the combination of two orders of signification. Myth can be seen by analyzing what people believe through the natural and historical aspects. Similar to connotative meaning, references are required to reveal myth because it is more abstract and interpretative.

## **Interpretation**

Interpretation is drawn from the findings of denotative sign (first level of signification) and connotative sign (second level of signification) which then generate myth. By associating textual evidences and cultural phenomenon, these significations have the capability to reveal how women are portrayed in the selected songs.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

**Table 4.1**

*Types of power and portrayal of women found in selected songs*

No	Name of Song	Types of Power	Portrayal of Women (Denotation, Connotation, and Myth)
1	<i>God is A Woman</i> by Ariana Grande (2018)	Women possess reward power and coercive power as the embodiment of female sexual assertiveness in regards to their sexual relationship.	Women are portrayed as having self-awareness and mindfulness (Autonomy) in regards of exercising their freedom of choice.
2	<i>Bodak Yellow</i> by Cardi B (2017)	Women possess referent power in terms of being a social icon and legitimate power is exercised through women's executive leadership at work.	Women are depicted as resourceful (Problem Solving) in terms of financial independence and they possess other autonomous traits such as positive identity in terms of being a social icon, self-efficacy and mastery shown by competence dimension in women, as well as self-awareness and mindfulness.



3	<i>Scars to Your Beautiful</i> by Alessia Cara (2017)	-	Women are portrayed as socially competence, autonomous, and purposeful. They are socially competence as they display empathy and caring attributes as well as compassion, altruism, and forgiveness. These traits are shown in their attempt to fight destructive beauty standards. Meanwhile, women are autonomous as they display positive identity quality upon self-acceptance. Lastly, women are demonstrating hope and optimism as they exercise dispositional optimism towards beauty.
4	<i>Most Girls</i> by Hailee Steinfeld (2017)	-	Women are portrayed as autonomous as they display adaptive distancing resistance toward reconstructing ‘most girls’ stereotype that undermines women. In addition, they also promote freedom of choice for women
5	<i>All about that Bass</i>	-	Women are depicted as autonomous because they show

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by Meghan Trainor  
(2015)

positive identity quality in promoting self-acceptance and self-love and adaptive distancing resistance trait is shown through opposing destructive beauty standards set for women.

To sum up, women in selected songs are portrayed as powerful and resilient. Women are depicted as powerful as they exercised four different types of power out of five forms of power which were proposed by French & Raven (1959). The forms of power exercised by women include Reward Power, Coercive Power, Referent Power, and Legitimate Power. Whereas women are depicted as resilient as they embodied eight resilient traits in three various resilient dimensions out of four resilient dimensions proposed by Benard (2004). Those eight resilient qualities demonstrated by women in this present study are Empathy and Caring, Compassion, Altruism and Forgiveness (Social Competence), Resourcefulness (Problem Solving), Positive Identity, Self-Efficacy and Mastery, Adaptive Distancing Resistance, Self-Awareness

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and Mindfulness (Autonomy), Optimism and Hope (Sense of Purpose).

Meanwhile, the textual evidence of women's depiction as powerful is further elaborated in the followings.

### **Women Possess Reward Power**

Reward Power in this study was only found in Ariana Grande's *God is A Woman*. *God is A Woman* is a song that equalizes God and woman in a metaphorical way in context of sexual relations thus men will believe that women are God after that experience. During the release of the song, many considered it as a blasphemy and heresy due to the fact that the song explicitly state that God is gendered. However, throughout history, gendered God has not always been controversial. For instance, St. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109, talked of 'Christ, my mother', and in her 14th century Revelations of Divine Love, Julian of

Norwich, a medieval mystic, says: 'Just as God is our father, so God is also our mother'. In recent year, which is 2015, the notion of God as a woman in relation to religious language was contested by the campaign of female bishops within Church of England for expansive language and imagery about God (Guardian, 2018). In popular culture, the epitome of this notion also has been illustrated through movies, books, and paintings. In denotative level, the song demonstrates an interaction between a woman and a man where the woman might bless him if the man confesses. As illustrated by the signifiers of the song lyrics from Verse 2 line 6 and 7, 'And boy, if you confess, you might get blessed' and 'See if you deserve what comes next'. In its connotation level, it can be seen that this dynamic is much like a dynamic of God and men where women are positioned as God, where the resemblance quality is the power to reward. According to French & Raven (1959), reward power is about rewarding others' for their action. When they accomplished desired action, some reward will be given to them. In religions, God will reward those who do good deeds for heaven and vice-versa. In these lyrics, the

signifiers confess acts as the desired action and the signifiers blessed and deserve act as the reward of the action confess. Hence, women are positioned as powerful and superior as she could 'bless' men and therefore position men as more inferior.

### **Women Possess Coercive Power**

Coercive power is depicted through Ariana Grande's *God is A Woman*. As mentioned previously, women are God-wise, therefore, another quality that women have is coercive power. It is presented by the signifiers contained in verse 2 line 1 and 2, 'I tell you all the things you should know' and 'So baby, take my hands, save your soul'. In its denotative level, the woman tells the man what he should know and if he wants to save his soul, he should reach for her hands. In connotative level, women possess this coercive power in their sexual relations. While in myth level, this is the embodiment of female sexual assertiveness, where women are capable of telling her partner what they desire. Sexual assertiveness is an inter-individual difference in the perceived general ability to control one's level of physical intimacy with others (Morokoff, Quina, & Harlow,

as cited in Lammers & Stoker, 2017). It helps facilitate one's ability to the pursuit of romantic goals such as making them more vocal in communicating of what they desire and avoid submissive role as presented in the first signifier, 'I tell you all the things you should know'. This assertiveness in women may be an antithesis of traditional gender roles where it includes expectations for men to initiate sexual activity and for women to respond to men's attempts to initiate sexual behavior (Morokoff, 1990; Muehlenhard & McCoy, as cited in Morokoff, Quina, Harlow, Whitmire, Grimley, Gibson, & Burkholder, 1997). In this assertiveness, women apply coercive power. As the name suggest, coercive power demands compliance and the strength of this power lies on the negative valence and force (French & Raven, 1959). As mentioned earlier, as women depicted having some qualities of God, God is able to punish those who commit misconduct for Hell or sins. In this song, one will be punished if the man fails to do what the woman wished. The signifiers such as tell and take serve as command for what the man should do. While save and soul is the consequence of complying with the command.

### **Women Possess Referent Power**

Referent power is presented in *Bodak Yellow* by Cardi B. It is a power that works through admiration towards someone and this power occurs when one seeks for the same identity and association to the other they admire (French & Raven, 1959). Referent power often does not show its direct effect yet others can be unconsciously influenced to do the same thing as what one they admire does. Women are pictured as having this power through the signifier contained in verse 1 line 8, 'They see pictures, they say, "Goals," bitch, I'm who they tryna be'. In its denotative level, other women wanted to be this woman when they saw her pictures. The word 'Goals' as defined by Urban Dictionary as when someone posts a picture that is very attractive or something that they aspire to, such as relationship. In its connotative level, this implies that the woman has referent power because she influences others to be more like her or in other words, the others show 'oneness' or desire to be associated with her. The association and the effort of oneness are shown by the signifiers 'I'm who they tryna be' and 'Goals'.

### **Women Possess Legitimate Power**

Cardi B's *Bodak Yellow* proves that women also exercise legitimate power. Legitimate power as elaborated in chapter II comes from many bases and one of them is appointed position of authority established by social norms or hierarchy in some organizations. In this case the power exercised by women here is formal social structure as demonstrated by the signifier contained in the chorus line 8, 'I'm a boss, you a worker, bitch, I make bloody moves'. In its denotation level, this signifies that while others are workers the woman is a boss thus she has the power where her business go. In connotation level, the signifier signifies that women can have a position of authority at work as represented by the word 'boss'. This reflects that many women start to enter executive leadership positions at work. According to a study conducted in USA by Adams, Gupta, Haughton, & Leeth (2007), although women have not yet reached top ranks of leadership in considerably big scale, however, the percentage of women who hold management occupation started to increase from 24% in 1980 to 42% in 2001. A boss possesses an ability to administer obligation and responsibility. The expression 'I make bloody moves'

signified that she has the capability to administer plans or where everything needs to be going as shown by the word 'moves' as defined by Urban Online Dictionary.

### **Women as Resilient Beings**

In addition to women as powerful beings, this study also reveals that women in all five songs are portrayed as resilient beings. This is as proposed by a model of Personal Strengths: What Resilience Looks Like by Benard (2004) that measurement of personal resilience can be seen through personal strengths contained in four resilience manifestation categories. They are social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose. Thus, a resilient individual must possess certain traits that are included in the four categories. In this study, the portrayal of women as resilient beings can be seen through the eight traits of resilience which are Empathy and Caring, Compassion, Altruism and Forgiveness (Social Competence), Resourcefulness (Problem Solving), Positive Identity, Self-Efficacy and Mastery, Adaptive Distancing Resistance, Self-Awareness and Mindfulness (Autonomy), Optimism and Hope (Sense of Purpose). The

following section is a discussion on each trait of resilience possessed by women signified in the song lyrics.

### **Women Possess Empathy and Caring Attributes**

Empathy is the ability to know what another feels and understand another's perspective, which is the hallmark of resilience (Werner, 1992). It helps facilitate compassion and caring for others. These attributes can be found in *Scars to Your Beautiful* by Alessia Cara. It is shown from the signifiers in verse 2 line 6 and 7, 'She don't see her perfect, she don't understand she's worth it' and 'Or that beauty goes deeper than the surface'. In its denotative level, the woman feel that outer appearance is all that matters and does not see herself as perfect or worthy. The signifiers signified that women feel empathetic because they recognize what the other women feel; that is they do not feel that they are beautiful because they are not perfect, worthy, and the thought that beauty is all about outer appearance. Whilst social media is part of human culture today, people become more aware of their self-image and women are largely targeted. That is why many women do not feel worthy because they feel they are not

attractive because mass media often portray attractive people as more desirable, credible, and inspirational (Solomon, Ashmore, & Longo as cited in Yan & Bissell, 2014). The myth revealed destructive beauty standard. Studies on the effects of exposure to appearance-oriented content have consistently shown that it is damaging (Yan & Bissell, 2014). Thus, the song displayed empathy and caring for some women who are struggling with their self-worth, image, and self-esteem to love themselves. In its connotative level, the song seems to advocate women about self-acceptance and the danger of destructive beauty standard. *Scars to Your Beautiful* is a song about self-acceptance and self-love for who we are. Therefore empathy and caring lines are heavily contained in the song.

### **Women Possess Compassion, Altruism, and Forgiveness Attributes**

Women are portrayed as compassionate in *Scars to Your Beautiful* by Alessia Cara. It is demonstrated by the signifiers in verse 2 line 8 and 9, 'So to all the girls that's hurting, Let me be your mirror' and 'Help you see a little bit clearer the light that shines within'. In its denotative level, the song denotes that

the woman in the song will be the mirror for hurting girls to show them that beauty comes within. While in connotative level, it connotes compassion. Compassion is the desire and will to care for and to help alleviate another's suffering (Peterson & Seligman, 2003), in addition, compassion is composed of five elements: recognizing suffering, understanding the universality of human suffering, feeling for the person suffering, tolerating uncomfortable feelings, and motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering (Strauss, Taylor, Gu, Kuyken, Baer, Jones & Cavanagh, 2016). When one is compassionate, it leads him/her to recognize altruism and forgiveness. Similar to compassion, altruism is empathy in action (Batson, 2002) and forgiveness is the ability to forgive self or others (Benard, 2004). The first signifier 'So to all the girls that's hurting' signified altruism also the first elements of compassion; how women recognize and feel for other women's suffering. Destructive paths filled with low self-esteem, body image dissatisfaction, anorexia, bulimia, and depression are the effects on girls and young women in particular in order to attain their ideal image similar to mediated images showing exceptionally

thin and attractive female models presented in magazines, televisions, etc. (Harrison & Cantor, Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, as cited in Yan & Bissel, 2014). As mentioned before, this song is about self-acceptance thus this suffering refers to oppressive beauty standard that is directed towards especially young women. Finally, the second signifiers 'Let me be your mirror, Help you see a little bit clearer the light that shines within' signified last element of compassion which is alleviating other's suffering. It signified women's aid to project and directed that beauty is found within (inner beauty).

As women were depicted as powerful have been presented above, the followings are the textual evidence of women which are portrayed as resilient.

### **Women Possess Resourcefulness Attribute**

Women as resourceful beings are displayed in *Bodak Yellow* by Cardi B. According to Zauszniewski, Lai, and Tithiphontumrong (2006), there are two types of resourcefulness which are personal resourcefulness and social resourcefulness. The former is defined as the ability to maintain independence in

daily tasks despite potentially adverse situations. This concept is adopted from Rosenbaum in 1990. In other hand, social resourcefulness, as they also adopt from another scholar named Nadler from 1990, is defined as the ability to seek help from others when unable to function independently. It is concluded that personal resourcefulness involves the use of self-help strategies for coping with adversity or challenge, while social resourcefulness involves help-seeking from formal or informal sources. In this present study, women are exercising their personal resourcefulness is shown from the signifier contained in the chorus line 5 in *Bodak Yellow* song, 'I don't dance now, I make money moves'. In its denotative level, it denotes that to make a living, the woman in the song did not dance anymore, but she makes money. In its connotative meaning, it signified resourcefulness, which to solve the challenging situation to the better where it is demonstrated by how she was making money by being a dancer to making much more money by being her own boss as mentioned in prior finding about power. It shows the way women maintain financial independency thus it is a self-help strategy in trying to cope with challenging

situation. 'I don't dance now' signified working women, women who have jobs that involve dancing, or being dancers. It may imply that the wage they receive does not meet their expectation. Instead of getting stuck with the current job, women can turn their situation around to the better, which is to change their job in order to be more financially independent as signified through 'I make money moves'.

### **Women Possess Positive Identity Attributes**

Positive Identity can be found in three songs in this study. They are largely contained multiple times in *Scars to Your Beautiful* by Alessia Cara, *All about That Bass* by Meghan Trainor, and *Bodak Yellow* by Cardi B. Positive identity is positive self-evaluation or self-esteem (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992). Women embody positive identity in *Scars to Your Beautiful* through positive self-esteem. It is revealed through the signifiers enclosed in almost the entire chorus from line 2 until 4, 'You should know you're beautiful just the way you are', 'And you don't have to change a thing', 'The world could change its heart', and 'No scars to your beautiful, we're stars



and we're beautiful'. In their denotative level, they denote that women are beautiful the way they are thus there is no need to alter their appearance or hurt themselves in order to confront beauty standard so that the world would see the value of natural beauty. In the connotative level, they signified positive identity by showing positive self-evaluation demonstrated by the woman in dealing with this adversity.

*All about That Bass* is a song about self-love and self-acceptance of 'thickness', in other words, for curvy women to love their body. This song can be part of body positivity as the ultimate goal of the body positivity movement is to address unrealistic ideals about beauty, promote self-acceptance, and build self-esteem through improving one's self-image and learning to love oneself to the fullest (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Positive identity is demonstrated through the signifier in verse 1 line 8, 'Cause every inch of you is perfect from the bottom to the top'. In its denotative level, it denotes that women are perfect from head to toe. It connotes positive identity. It signified that every woman's body is

perfect regardless of their varied sizes and types.

A great confidence in one's own personal self-worth is demonstrated in *Bodak Yellow*. The signifier enclosed in verse 1 line 14, 'I'm the hottest in the street, know you prolly heard of me', in its denotation level, it denotes that the woman is a very hot woman and everyone is likely to know her. In connotative level, it signified positive self-evaluation as represented by the word 'hottest' and the signifier 'you prolly heard of me' signified great confidence in own's personal worth.

### **Women Possess Adaptive Distancing Resistance Attributes**

This attribute is shown in *All about That Bass* by Meghan Trainor and *Most Girls* by Hailee Steinfeld. Adaptive distancing involves emotionally detaching oneself from parental, school, or community dysfunction, realizing that one is not the cause of and cannot control the dysfunction, realizing that one is not the cause of and cannot control the dysfunction of others and that one's own future will be different (Beardslee, 1997; Beardslee & Podorefsky, 1988; Chess, 1989; Rubin, 1996, as cited in Benard,

2004). Resistance is one form of adaptive distancing. The refusal to accept negative messages about one's self, one's gender, or one's culture or race serves as a powerful protector of autonomy (Benard, 2004). The resistance attribute in *All about That Bass* is highlighted through the expressions in verse 1 line 5 and 6, 'I see the magazines working that Photoshop' and 'We know that shit ain't real, come on now, make it stop'. The song presents its contradiction to vicious imagery of beauty for women. Women are indoctrinated that to be beautiful they must have slim and slender body, thus alienating those who are curvy. To serve this image, mainstream media alters model's body through technology manipulation to create highly slim and slender women and it can be seen from the signifier 'I see the magazines working that Photoshop'. Many people begin to acknowledge and think that this imagery is unrealistic and needed to be stopped because it encourages women of false and unhealthy beauty as this is revealed through the signifiers 'We know that shit ain't real, come on now, make it stop'.

The next song is *Most Girls* by Hailee Steinfeld. In its denotative level, it

denotes that *Most Girls* regardless of how different women are, they are smart, strong, beautiful, unstoppable, and hardworking. Hence, being like 'most girls' are desirable. In its connotative level, it connotes resistance against 'most girls' stereotype because this is a song about contradicting 'most girls' stereotype. This stereotype has existed widely in mainstream media such as movies and novels for youth. The expression 'you are not like most girls' is often associated with praising a girl for having masculine-like traits and less 'girly' or feminine traits. The 'guy's attributes' are unemotional, jokey, reticent, and take a liking in sports, gaming, and action movies. In contrast, 'most girls' qualities are emotional, talkative, and take a liking in chick flicks. Thus, being feminine is lame and unattractive while being masculine is rewarded and attractive. This idea even goes to the mind of women. Hence, many women try hard to have these traits but they tend to degrade other women who are in the opposite spectrum from them. Therefore, resistance is embodied in this song since it tries to counter this stereotype by stressing that most girls are all strong, powerful, smart, and

unstoppable regardless of their choices to live their lives.

Another resistance attribute in *Most Girls* is conveyed through the signifiers in pre-chorus line 2 and 3, 'But it's okay if you wanna change the body that you came in' and 'Cause you look greatest when you feel like a damn queen'. In denotation level, it denotes that women are allowed to alter their bodies because what matters is when they are comfortable in their own skin. This song connotes resistance as antithesis of plastic surgery practice which is condemned by some people in society. In addition, this song states that it is acceptable, confronting those who condemn plastic surgery for not embracing their natural beauty. The signifiers above signified that the primary element of beauty is confidence and altering one's body is just one way to achieve that confidence level.

### **Women Possess Self-Efficacy and Mastery**

Women possess self-efficacy and mastery in *Bodak Yellow* by Cardi B. Self-efficacy is one's belief about one's capabilities to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance

attainments (Bandura, 1994). Both traits have been proven to borne out as a critical determinant of life success in handful of resilience studies. Mastery is feeling competent or experiencing the sense of doing something well and this is the most effective means of developing a sense of efficacy and help people recognize their resilience. These traits are presented through the signifiers in verse 1 line 6, 'Dropped two mixtapes in six months, what bitch working as hard as me?'. The song denotes that she successfully produces two mixtapes in six months and she wonders which other artist work as hard as her. The song clearly connotes self-efficacy and mastery. Mixtape is referred as a compilation of songs recorded (as onto a cassette tape or a CD) from various sources (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary). Different from album, mixtape is a single-artist project and it does not go through a standard record label or distribution (Vice, 2013). Producing two mixtapes in the span of six months is an achievement. She also mentioned the words 'working hard' to represent her great sense of self-efficacy. Thus, she feels a sense of efficacy mastery in her by doing something successfully.

## **Women Possess Self-Awareness and Mindfulness Attributes**

Image of women depicted as mindful and self-aware can be found in Ariana Grande's *God is A Woman* and Cardi B's *Bodak Yellow*.

In Ariana Grande's song mindfulness can be seen from the signifiers contained in pre-chorus line 1 and 2, 'And I can be all the things you told me not to be', and 'When you try to come for me, I keep on flourishing'. In denotative level, it denotes that the woman can be anything she likes even other may be against it, and when people disagree with her, she would solely focus on how to thrive. In its connotative level, the expression signified mindfulness. In this song women are told by others to act certain way or being in a certain way and when it is not achieved, people have the tendency to 'go against' them which is shown by another signifier 'come for'. However, despite all this contradicting reaction, they keep on growing and thriving as demonstrated by the signifier flourish, which signifies self-awareness and mindfulness. Self-awareness and mindfulness are highly related to each other. According to Goleman (1995) it is a

non-judgemental and nonreactive attention to inner states. Kabat-Zinn (1994), an author on mindfulness practice also argues that it is a systematic and practical way to be in touch with inner being by self-observation, self-inquiry, and mindful action. Mindfulness involves acceptance, reflection to one's surroundings and taking appropriate action and this serves adaptational system which many thinkers think that this is the core of resilience. Thus the expressions signified how women act mindfully by taking appropriate action to this situation; which is to be focus to keep on growing and not caught up in emotions.

Similar to the song above, In *Bodak Yellow*, self-awareness and mindfulness are delivered by not caught up in emotions as the appropriate action. It is depicted through several signifiers in verse 1 line 5 and 7 such as 'Honestly, don't give a fuck 'bout who in front of me, and I don't bother with these hoes, don't let these hoes bother me'. In its denotative level, it denotes that the woman does not care with people who bother her and she will ensure that people do not bother her. In its connotative level, it connotes mindfulness as the signifiers 'don't give a

fuck and do not let these hoes bother me' signified 'relaxation response' as Benson (1996) put it. The woman in the song seems to accept, trust, and let go.

## **Women Possess Optimism and Hope**

### **Attributes**

Bailis & Chipperfield (2012) explained that optimism is the extent to which individuals expect desired outcomes to happen in the future, and expect undesired outcomes not to happen. These attribute are shown in *Scars to Your Beautiful* by Alessia Cara. Women are portrayed as optimistic and hopeful. Optimism has most often been conceived as a character trait or strength, which people possess in varying degrees. They can soothe people's worries and doubts in a difficult situation, and encourage continued striving toward goals. Like optimism, hope is a positive feeling and motivational state, but one that intrinsically involves beliefs about the self and one's own actions as they relate to the attainment of desired outcomes. Optimism and hope reflect a positive motivational stance and expectations. They both linked to positive belief and emotion. The signifier that displays these attributes is contained in the chorus line 1, 'But there's

a hope that's waiting for you in the dark'. In its denotative level, it signified that hope is still present even though it looks nonexistent. While in its connotative level, it signified optimism. Research has shown direct connections between hope and optimism as well as resilience strengths of social competence, problem-solving, self-efficacy, and with academic achievement. A research from Werner and Smith (as cited in Benard, 2004) found that the central component in coping with problems in adulthood is hopefulness thus challenges and odds can be surmounted. In this case, the odd is about self-image, self-love, and self-esteem against cruel beauty standard.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

The selected five songs from Billboard's Top 100 Charts (2015-2018) portray women as powerful and resilient. Although it is limited in number, the finding of this study is likely to be sufficient enough to reflect some part of reality how women are portrayed in popular music today. This finding also indirectly challenges traditional claims that stereotypes of women are not likely to be fixed or rigid. There are three dimensions contained in gender

stereotype, namely communion, competence, and agency (Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann, Sczesny, 2019). Communion is stereotypical domain of female while competence and agency are stereotypical domains of men (Ellemers, 2018).

The findings of this study reveal that agency is the dominating stereotypical domain possessed by women, which is supposed to be men's stereotypical domain while women still maintain communion domain. This is in line with the study conducted recently in 2019 by American psychologists, Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann, Sczesny of their cross-temporal meta-analysis on the change of gender stereotypes at seven decades range time. Their study revealed that women increased a sense of communion and competence over time. However, in contrast, this present study revealed that agency is the most significant dimension shown by women different from the mentioned study where the findings showed no change in agency.

In terms of the first dimension, communion, this study found that there are some songs in which women demonstrated these qualities such as

compassionate in *Scars to Your Beautiful* by Alessia Cara as she projects her affection through recognition of others' women suffering due to high beauty standard set for them and eventually it leads in their low self-esteem. Communion involves selflessness, concerned with others and desire to be at one with others (Eagly & Steffen, 1984) as communion is demonstrated by ability to handle people well, polite and well-mannered, unselfish, romantic, honest, affectionate, emotional, patient, sensitive, compassionate, and outgoing.

In regards to the second dimension that is competence, this study demonstrated that women are shown to be smart, intelligent, level-headed, creative, and have a sense of mastery which are the attributes of competence as it is shown by the ability to create or invent new things, willing to accept new ideas, thoroughness in handling details, creative, common sense, intelligent, level-headed, logical, organized, smart, innovative, and having a sense of mastery. *Most Girls* by Hailee Steinfeld indicated smart and intelligent qualities expressed by 'Most girls are smart and strong and beautiful'. Creative is represented by resourcefulness as it is

the ability to solve problems creatively or resource utilization (Benard, 2004). This attribute contains in *Bodak Yellow* by Cardi B as she makes a way to achieve financial freedom depicted by ‘..I make money moves’. The other trait found in this study is level-headed embodied through self- awareness and mindfulness which are found in Ariana Grande’s *God is A Woman* and Cardi B’s *Bodak Yellow*. Level-headed is calm and able to deal easily with difficult situations defined as (Online Cambridge Dictionary). The two songs indicated that women remain calm as sensible action in response to demanding expected behavior contained in Ariana Grande’s song and not to be bothered by others contained in Cardi B’s song. A sense of mastery is also depicted in *Bodak Yellow* by Cardi B through self-efficacy and mastery. Mastery is illustrated by how she is capable of generating works in short amount of time as the song puts it ‘Dropped two mixtapes in six months,..’.

The third dimension is agency. Agency is the most prevailing dimension shown by women in this study as women are demonstrated to be able to make decisions, courageous, demanding, ambitious, confident, independent, proud,

strong, decisive, and hardworking. Agency referred to self-assertion, self-expansion, and mastery (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Agency is manifested by the ability to make decisions, courageous, calm in emergencies, aggressive, ambitious, confident, critical, demanding, independent, possessive, proud, selfish, strong, decisive, hardworking, and stubborn.

Women are courageous and strong are enacted in *Most Girls* by Hailee Steinfeld and *Scars to Your Beautiful* by Alessia Cara. In the first song, it is shown in the explicit expression that women are strong contained in the lyrics. While in the latter, strength is embodied by portrayal of women as optimistic and hopeful. Optimism is viewed as a character trait or strength. While confidence is represented by the positive identity women possess found in *Scars to Your Beautiful* by Alessia Cara, *All about That Bass* by Meghan Trainor, and *Bodak Yellow* by Cardi B. This confidence trait is displayed by self-acceptance and self-worth. Whereas ambitious and hardworking qualities are found in *Bodak Yellow* by Cardi B illustrated by how she is capable of producing certain artwork in short amount of time. Independence is denoted

through *Bodak Yellow* by Cardi B where women possess legitimate power demonstrated by the signifiers that she is a boss in denotative way. Demanding quality is argued through reward power and coercive power in *God is A Woman* where women have the ability to demand for desired actions from other parties. The last trait is decisiveness or the ability to make decisions is delivered by adaptive distancing as indicated in *All about That Bass* by Meghan Trainor and *Most Girls* by Hailee Steinfeld. This is decisive quality because it involves having the power of deciding. In the first song, the power of deciding lies on women's ability to speak up to stop falsely beauty image and in the latter, women have the ability to encourage any lifestyle they pleased regardless of others' thoughts or judgements.

## CONCLUSION

This study examines the way in which women are portrayed in selected five songs in Billboard's Top 100 Chart (2015-2018). From the findings, it is discovered that women in the selected songs are portrayed as powerful and resilient beings. In these songs, women are depicted as powerful due to their ability in changing others' belief,

attitude, and behavior. There are four types of power found in two songs, which are, Reward Power, Coercive Power, Referent Power, and Legitimate Power. Meanwhile, the depiction of women as resilient beings are illustrated through eight characteristics contained in resilience manifestations. The manifestations are categorized as social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose. Moreover, in all selected songs, women are demonstrated as having resilient attributes such as Empathy and Caring, Compassion, Altruism and Forgiveness (Social Competence), Resourcefulness (Problem Solving), Positive Identity, Self-Efficacy and Mastery, Adaptive Distancing Resistance, Self-Awareness and Mindfulness (Autonomy), Optimism and Hope (Sense of Purpose).

The findings imply that the selected songs demonstrate that women still possess communion dimension but agency and competence dimensions are dominating; dimensions known more expected of men rather than women. Agency and competence dimension are shown through problem solving and autonomy traits as well as forms of power. Therefore, from the findings it can be drawn a conclusion that gender



stereotype on women is not completely

rigid.

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