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The Language of Resistance: A Feminist Reading of Taylor Swift's "The Man"

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Abstract: This study explores the gender inequality in Taylor Swift's song and music video "The Man" through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, particularly her concept of woman as the "Other" articulated in *The Second Sex*. Utilizing a qualitative and feminist approach, this research examines how Swift's lyrics and video on song entitled "The Man", critiques societal double standards, sexual objectification, and the gendered limitations imposed on women in both public and private spheres. The study analyzes specific scenes from the music video and key lyrics to illustrate how patriarchal norms continue to define and constrain female agency. By embodying a male persona, Swift challenges traditional gender norms and exposes the privileges accorded to masculinity, demonstrating how societal power structures favor men in contexts of ambition, sexuality, and recognition. The analysis reveals that Swift's artistic expression serves as both a critique and a form of resistance against patriarchal narratives that marginalize women's achievements and subjectivities. The song and video act as cultural texts that reflect and resist the ideological reproduction of gender inequality in contemporary society. This research contributes to the broader discourse on feminist cultural criticism by demonstrating how popular music can function as a medium for articulating gendered experiences and advocating for social change.

Keywords: *gender inequality; taylor swift; the man; other; second sex*

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Introduction

American music is a reflection of global and ethnic diversity that encompasses a variety of styles and genres that have evolved over time. Some of the most famous music genres that originated in America are blues, jazz, rnb, hip hop, and country. Nowadays, music can be accessed through various sources such as internet based media like YouTube, Spotify and others. The digital era has brought about major changes in the way music is produced, distributed and consumed. Streaming platforms and social media make it possible for artists to reach a wider audience.

Music is one of the most universal and profound art forms. Through its tones, lyrics and rhythms. Music can stir emotions, awaken memories and even influence the way one views the world. Music is not only a means of entertainment, but also a powerful communication medium in voicing social issues. One of the most powerful roles of music is its ability to convey social messages. From civil rights struggles to environmental campaigns, music has been a vital tool in voicing important issues and

inspiring change (Rajagukguk, 2024). In today's digital era, social messages in music are increasingly easy to access and consume through social media platforms such as Spotify and Youtube. This makes the role of musicians as representatives in voicing social change more prominent. In this context, the emergence of public figures such as Taylor Swift who combine elements of art and activism opens up new discussion about how messages of gender inequality are packaged in the form of popular music. (Lestari,& Nugroho, 2021).

However, seeing how feminist of gender inequality messages are represented in music for people to understand remains a challenge. Often, these messages are conveyed symbolically through lyrics and visual storytelling, which requires contextual interpretation in popular culture. Therefore, it is important to analyze how lyrical and visual elements are used to bridge gender-related issues and how they influence audience perceptions and attitudes towards feminism.

One example of a singer who often conveys messages about social issues is Taylor Swift. Taylor Swift's songs often explore themes of feminism and women's empowerment, her songs often provide an overview of women's experiences in society. Feminism as a system of ideas is a broad framework and study of social life and human experience that develops from a woman-centered perspective (Hidayati, 2018). Swift has emerged as one of the icons of feminism in the music industry, especially after her genre change from country to pop. This genre change has highlighted many important issues such as the double standards that many women face. In 2018, the once apolitical Swift publicly endorsed one of the Democratic candidates, demonstrating her commitment to social and political issues relevant to women.

One of Taylor Swift's most noticeable songs in the context of feminism is "The Man", which has criticized the problem of toxic masculinity and double standards that often favor men. "The Man" music video tells the life story of a man named Tyler Swift. It tells how men often dominate not only in the world of work, but also socially. In addition, society also often treats men and women differently (Yohana, et al, 2021). In the music video, Swift also shows how the same behavior is judged differently depending on gender. The song symbolizes the fight against gender discrimination and highlights the injustices experienced by women in various aspects of life.

Several previous studies have examined gender representation in popular music and its role in social commentary. Railton and Watson (2011) explored the politics of representation in music videos, analyzing how gender and identity are conveyed through visuals and lyrics. Similarly, Werner (2020) investigated feminist narratives in the works of Beyoncé and Taylor Swift, emphasizing music as a platform for female empowerment. While these studies provide valuable insights, they tend to focus on broader trends without investigating specific genre shifts or individual artist transformations. This research aims to fill that gap by analyzing feminist messages and gender inequality in Taylor Swift's transition from country music to pop music, emphasizing how the transition shaped representational strategies in lyrics and music videos.

This research will explore issues of gender inequality contained in song lyrics and music videos as popular culture communication media. The main focus is to analyze how messages of gender inequality are represented through text and visuals in musical works. This research also aims to understand the extent to which song lyrics and music videos can be a means to voice issues of gender inequality and women's empowerment.

Research Method

This research employs a qualitative method to analyze the representation of gender inequality in Taylor Swift's song *The Man*. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the textual and visual elements of the song and its music video. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is effective in understanding complex social phenomena, such as gender inequality, by examining the meanings, experiences, and perspectives embedded within cultural artefacts like music and videos. This approach enables the researcher to interpret how gender roles and double standards are portrayed and critiqued in Swift's work.

This research employs a feminist approach to examine how Taylor Swift's song and music video *The Man* critique gender inequality and double standards in contemporary society. Feminist criticism provides a lens through which to analyze cultural texts that reflect, reinforce, or resist patriarchal ideologies (McRobbie, 2009). By focusing on both lyrical and visual elements, the study investigates how Swift exposes the unequal treatment of women, especially in professional, social, and media contexts. The feminist approach emphasizes the significance of gender as a central category of analysis and seeks to highlight women's experiences, voices, and agency within a male-dominated culture (Tong, 2014). This perspective is especially relevant for analyzing popular culture, where gendered representations often mirror broader societal power structures (Gill, 2007).

To analyze the problem, the researcher applies Simone de Beauvoir's theory of "The Second Sex" (1949). De Beauvoir's seminal work argues that women have historically been defined in relation to men, often as the "Other," and are subjected to societal constructs that limit their autonomy and agency. She famously states, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 267), emphasizing that gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. This theory provides a critical lens for analyzing how Taylor Swift's "*The Man*" challenges traditional gender norms and highlights the societal double standards that women face. By applying de Beauvoir's framework, this study will explore how Swift's lyrics and video clip visuals deconstruct the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality.

Results & Discussion

Taylor Swift's *The Man* functions as a potent cultural critique that vividly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's foundational feminist concept of woman as "the Other." According to de Beauvoir (1949), women have historically been positioned not as autonomous subjects, but as defined in opposition to men—dependent, secondary, and subordinate. This dynamic of otherness forms the basis for systemic gender inequality, wherein male experience is normalized and female experience is marginalized. In *The Man*, Swift disrupts this paradigm by imagining herself in the role of a man, thereby exposing the privileges, freedoms, and respect that are socially granted to men but often denied to women. The song's premise is grounded in the question: how would Swift's life and career be perceived if she were male? This question alone reflects a profound interrogation of patriarchal value systems that measure success, leadership, and agency through a male lens. This introduction frames the song not only as a personal reflection but as a cultural and ideological statement questioning gendered social structures.

One of the most striking examples of gendered double standards appears in the opening, with the lyric, "I'm so sick of running as fast as I can / Wondering if I'd get there quicker if I was a man." This line encapsulates the frustration of women who must exert greater effort than their male peers to achieve similar or lesser recognition. De Beauvoir (1949) argued that patriarchal societies often demand women

to "justify their existence" through continuous struggle, while men are seen as default leaders or achievers. Swift's lyric echoes this structural inequality and gives voice to the fatigue experienced by many women in male-dominated fields. In de Beauvoir's terms, Swift is articulating the lived experience of becoming a woman within a framework that restricts her autonomy and subjects her to harsher evaluations. This analysis highlights how Swift's expression of exhaustion resonates with existential feminist critiques of women's systemic disempowerment.

Furthermore, this scene in the music video depicts how gender inequality occurs in society. On (0:32–0:45), Taylor Swift transforms into a male character, Tyler Swift. This transformation is emblematic of Simone de Beauvoir's concept that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Swift reverses this by embodying a man, highlighting how identity and gender are socially constructed. Through makeup and costume, she demonstrates that masculinity—like femininity—is a performance shaped by cultural codes. De Beauvoir emphasizes that woman has historically been the "Other"; Swift challenges this by assuming the male role and showcasing how societal privileges shift dramatically with perceived gender. The scene on the subway train shows Tyler smoking and spreading his legs in a relaxed posture while fellow passengers appear unfazed. This behavior, unchallenged by bystanders, contrasts sharply with societal expectations of women to be modest and accommodating in public. According to de Beauvoir, women are held to restrictive behavioral standards, whereas men are granted freedom and indulgence. The normalization of Tyler's intrusive posture exemplifies how male dominance is internalized and enforced socially, reinforcing the idea that men are the default human experience while women are the deviation.

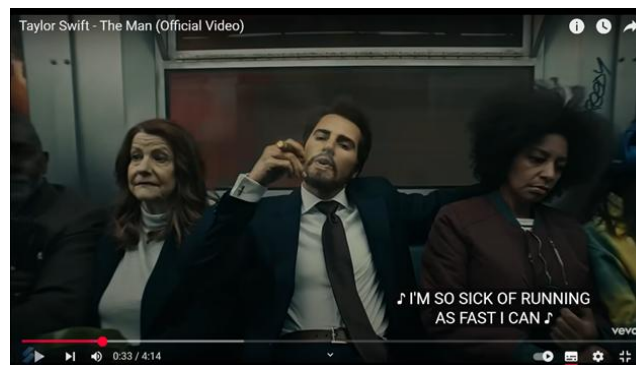


Image 1. The Man Music Video (0:33)

Moreover, Swift also touches on sexual double standards in the lyric: "They'd say I played the field before I found someone to commit to / And that would be okay for me to do." This mirrors de Beauvoir's analysis of the sexual division between men and women, where male sexual freedom is accepted and even encouraged, while female sexuality is policed and stigmatized. De Beauvoir (1949) argues that patriarchy casts women into roles of virtue or deviance, leaving little room for sexual agency. Swift's lyric challenges this binary by imagining how her personal choices would be interpreted differently if she were male—suggesting that gender inequality permeates not only public achievement but also private autonomy. This section illustrates how societal expectations about morality are deeply gendered, and how Swift uses her platform to question these unequal moral codes.

The lyric "Every conquest I had made / Would make me more of a boss to you" highlights the gendered perception of ambition and achievement. According to de Beauvoir (1949), women are often denied recognition as individuals who define their own success; instead, they are evaluated in relation to male-defined standards. Swift points out while male accomplishments enhance their status and authority, female accomplishments are often downplayed or scrutinized. This aligns with de Beauvoir's

critique of how patriarchal societies limit women's ability to transcend social roles and achieve subjectivity. The lyric reinforces the idea that women must negotiate their success within a social environment that withholds full acknowledgment of their agency.

The lyrics of *They wouldn't shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve / What I was wearing / If I was rude* articulates the gendered scrutiny women endure—a phenomenon extensively explored in Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist text, *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir theorizes that women are socially constructed as the "Other," a category inherently subordinate to the male subject, who is presumed to represent the universal human. This lyric highlights the persistent societal impulse to undermine women's accomplishments by attributing them to extraneous, superficial factors rather than merit. The interrogative clause, "how much of this I deserve," encapsulates the patriarchal tendency to question female legitimacy in spheres of success and authority—reflecting de Beauvoir's argument that women are rarely acknowledged as autonomous subjects with intrinsic worth. The reference to "what I was wearing" exemplifies the objectification of women, whose appearances are disproportionately emphasized and politicized, reinforcing their immanence rather than allowing transcendence. Furthermore, "if I was rude" invokes the gendered double standard surrounding female assertiveness; behaviors perceived as strong or decisive in men are often coded as disrespectful or abrasive in women.

These lines expose the internalized surveillance and moral policing that women face—key mechanisms in what de Beauvoir identifies as the cultural reproduction of female otherness. By juxtaposing this treatment with the hypothetical absence of critique afforded to men, Swift lays bare the structural asymmetry that de Beauvoir theorized, wherein femininity is continually monitored, judged, and diminished by a masculinist cultural gaze. The video clip at the yacht party scene also strengthens the analysis, on (1:15), Tyler is surrounded by bikini-clad women who are silent, passive, and objectified. This visualization critiques how patriarchal society commodifies women, reducing them to visual pleasure and denying them subjectivity. De Beauvoir contends that patriarchy casts women into roles of immanence—confined to being objects—while men occupy transcendence, engaging in action and creativity. The women in this scene are props to elevate Tyler's power, echoing de Beauvoir's idea that women exist not for themselves, but for male validation.

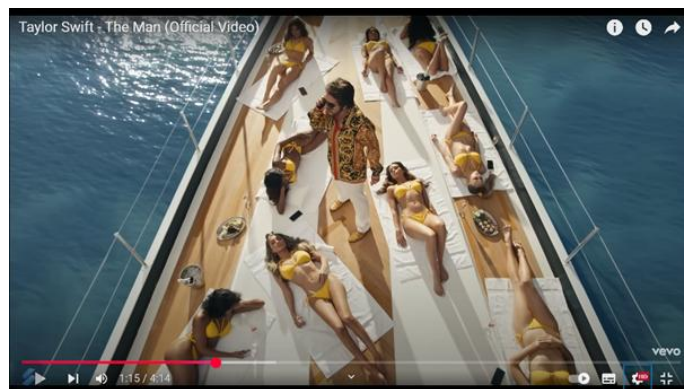


Image 2. The Man Music Video (1:15)

In "And they would toast to me, oh, let the players play / I'd be just like Leo in Saint-Tropez", Swift critiques the celebratory attitude society extends to male hedonism and celebrity culture. This again underscores de Beauvoir's claim that men are free to construct their identities in ways that women are not. The invocation of a male celebrity's lifestyle reinforces the disparity between male freedom and female restraint. Under de Beauvoir's framework, this illustrates how women are denied the same

cultural latitude to define their identities and lives according to personal desire. The lyric becomes a commentary on the unequal cultural narratives available to men and women, reinforcing the feminist critique of gendered identity formation.

The recurring motif of imagined male privilege in Swift's lyrics serves as a form of counter-discourse to de Beauvoir's claim that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949, p. 267). In embodying "the man," Swift temporarily adopts the role of the subject, exposing how the privileges of male subjectivity are structurally and culturally constructed—not natural. This aligns with de Beauvoir's existentialist argument that gender is a result of social conditioning and that women must actively resist these roles to assert their full humanity. By adopting a male persona, Swift reveals how easily power shifts with gendered perception, thereby underscoring the performativity and inequality embedded in gender roles.



Image 3. The Man Music Video (1:32)

The music video further amplifies this message by portraying Swift as a man, "Tyler Swift," who experiences the privileges and societal approval that come with being male. This visual representation underscores de Beauvoir's idea that gender is a performative construct, shaped by societal expectations rather than inherent traits. The video critiques the way society rewards male behavior—such as assertiveness and ambition—while penalizing women for the same actions. For example, when "Taylor" behaves arrogantly or aggressively, he is celebrated, whereas a woman exhibiting the same behavior would likely be criticized. This duality reflects de Beauvoir's observation that "man is defined as a human being and woman as a female" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 15), suggesting that women are often reduced to their gender rather than being seen as fully autonomous individuals. The visual medium thus enhances the feminist critique by juxtaposing gendered expectations through symbolic performance and irony.

Furthermore, numerous scenes in the music video in Taylor Swift's "The Man" articulate critiques that align with de Beauvoir's theory. The brief yet powerful parenting scene at 2:08 in Taylor Swift's "The Man" music video serves as a satirical critique of the gendered valuation of domestic labor, offering a visual articulation of Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "woman is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 15). In the video, the male character Tyler receives enthusiastic applause merely for holding his child—a basic caregiving act routinely performed by women with little to no recognition. This performative praise embodies the societal inclination to celebrate men for participating in caregiving tasks considered exceptional when undertaken by them, but obligatory and invisible when performed by women. De Beauvoir contends that domestic responsibilities are naturalized as inherently feminine, thus rendering them socially invisible and economically undervalued. This naturalization results in what she describes as the "immanence" of women, confining them to roles of repetitive maintenance rather than creative agency. The video's ironic overpraise for Tyler's minimal involvement underscores the asymmetrical standards applied to men and

women, illustrating how patriarchal culture grants men the ability to "transcend"—to choose caregiving and be exalted for it—while women are trapped in a gendered labor structure where such tasks are presumed and unremarkable. Swift's critique aligns with de Beauvoir's broader argument that patriarchy not only defines the female role but also perpetuates inequality by positioning women as functional supports in male narratives, rather than subjects in their own right.



Image 4. The Man Music Video (2:08)

Another moment of significance occurs during the awards scene (2:19), where Tyler, Swift's male persona, exudes exaggerated confidence as he parades through a room filled with admiration, basking in applause and celebrating his success with champagne and bravado. This spectacle critiques how public displays of male confidence are not only accepted but encouraged. According to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, male identity is constructed as the default subject—autonomous, assertive, and self-validating—while women are socially positioned as the "Other," whose achievements are often framed as derivative or exceptional rather than earned. In this context, Tyler's unchecked ego is not only tolerated but rewarded, while similar behavior in women would likely provoke criticism, accusations of arrogance, or demands for humility. Swift's visual representation serves to expose the social conditioning that aligns masculinity with leadership and pride, while delegitimizing women who assert the same traits.



Image 5. The Man Music Video (2:21)

Moreover, the choreography and mise-en-scène of the awards moment underscore deeper feminist critiques. Tyler's celebration is marked by over-the-top gestures—throwing champagne, reveling in loud praise—that visually symbolize cultural entitlement and excess, which de Beauvoir identifies as privileges granted by a patriarchal system that elevates male agency. This excessive glorification reflects how success, in male terms, is celebrated as a natural extension of individual genius, whereas female success often comes with caveats: how she achieved it, how she presents herself, and whether she conforms to prescribed standards of femininity. By emphasizing this disparity, Swift

reinforces de Beauvoir's argument that women are denied subjectivity, constantly defined and confined by male-dominated cultural narratives. Through satire and performance, the scene calls for a critical reevaluation of how gender norms shape public perception, particularly in spaces where authority and recognition are at stake.



Image 6. The Man Music Video (2:54)

Another example is at 2:54, which shows a wedding scene between a young woman and an old man. The woman in this scene looks much younger in age, just smiling and has no active role in the narrative. She merely plays the role of the beautiful bride, while the vision remains fixed on the man. This scene satirizes patriarchal social norms that assume men remain attractive, powerful, and worthy of having younger partners. Meanwhile, women face much stricter age restrictions both in daily life and in modern culture. This concept reflects objectification where women are judged based on their appearance and age, for example in society there is a narrative that an old man is someone who is mature, stable, and successful, while an old woman is someone who is unattractive, and has outlived her usefulness. Based on Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir emphasizes how women are socially constructed as “the other” in their relationship with men. Women are not positioned as free individuals, but as objects in the male narrative “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 283). Where Beauvoir argues that being a woman is not only about biological conditions, but also how social and cultural constructions shape how women should behave. Women in the scene are not seen in their full identity, but rather as symbols of male achievement within the patriarchal framework, namely being beautiful, young and accompanying a successful man.

Toward the end of the video (3:20–3:50), the fourth wall is broken when the director—portrayed by Taylor Swift herself—interjects to give Tyler (also Swift in disguise) notes on his performance, saying, “Can you be sexier, maybe more likable this time?” This moment is profoundly self-reflexive and loaded with feminist critique. By assuming both the role of the male performer and the female director, Swift stages a meta-commentary on the entertainment industry's gendered dynamics, where women—both in front of and behind the camera—are expected to prioritize male gaze-oriented traits such as sex appeal and pleasantness. Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the “Other” resonates deeply here; the woman, according to de Beauvoir, is not permitted to exist for herself, but must instead become what men desire her to be. In this scene, the critique is literalized: the female creator becomes the mouthpiece for patriarchal expectations, ironically reinforcing how deeply entrenched these demands are—even among women.

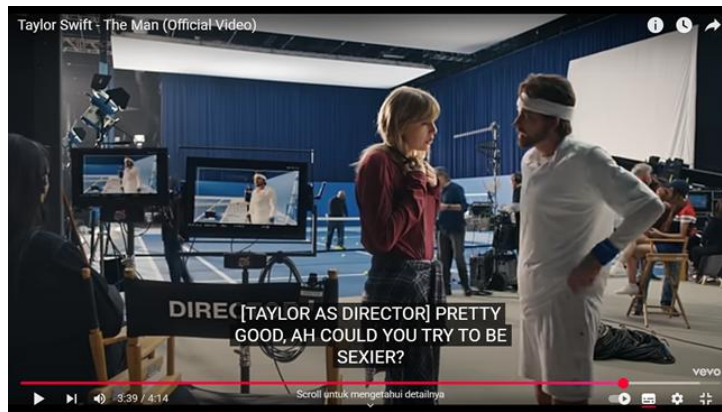


Image 7. The Man Music Video (3:39)

The directive to “be sexier, more likable” operates as a symbolic re-enactment of the constraints imposed on female performers across media industries. While male actors and artists are typically valued for their skill, authority, or charisma, women are often required to conform to aesthetic and behavioural norms that prioritize male comfort and approval. De Beauvoir asserts that this persistent conditioning strips women of authentic subjectivity, locking them into roles defined not by their own essence but by what is culturally demanded of them. This subtle but potent moment in the video reveals how gendered power structures infiltrate the creative process, reducing women’s artistic contributions to their affect and appearance. Furthermore, by directing this comment at herself in male disguise, Swift underscores the absurdity and injustice of these double standards. It is a performative deconstruction of the patriarchal gaze that governs even the supposed objectivity of professional critique—ultimately exposing how the pressures to conform are not only external but also internalized, policed, and reproduced within the very systems that women attempt to navigate and challenge.

By using music (lyrics and visuals) as mediums for social commentary, Swift not only critiques the existing power structures but also empowers women to question and resist the societal constraints imposed upon them. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender inequality by illustrating how popular culture can be a powerful tool for social change, echoing de Beauvoir's call for women to transcend their status as the "Other" and assert their rightful place as equals in society. The analysis affirms that feminist messages embedded in mainstream music can serve both as critique and inspiration, contributing meaningfully to the feminist movement in the realm of cultural production.

Conclusion

This study aims to analyze gender inequality in the lyrics and music video of Taylor Swift “The Man” using Simone de Beauvoir's theoretical approach. From the analysis, it can be seen that Taylor consistently highlights the gender inequality that exists in society, and Taylor also highlights how women live in a patriarchal society, especially through the symbolization of gender roles and also the narrative of male domination over women. Through de Beauvoir's approach, Taylor Swift can be seen not only as a creative subject, but also as an agent who represents women to reject the position of “The Other” placed in the social structure. The lyrics and visuals displayed in her music videos show an attempt to fight stereotypes about women by presenting a fairer and more equal story. This research also confirms that through her work Taylor Swift can be said to be one of the popular figures who voiced criticism and opposition to gender inequality and opened a space for discussion about feminism in popular culture.

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