

# Feminist expression in American country music a case study of Taylor Swift

Jingwei Li

## Abstract:

This article employs a feminist theoretical perspective and utilizes textual analysis to examine the feminist expressions within the music of American female musician Taylor Swift. Through analyzing the lyrical content of several songs imbued with typical gender themes such as “Fearless,” “Speak Now,” “Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince,” “The Man,” and “All Too Well,” this study reveals that Taylor Swift’s music explores themes of female autonomy and advocates for increased awareness of gender inequality issues. In her feminist discourse, Taylor’s songs integrate emotional nuances from personal experiences alongside critiques of societal gender oppression. Through these analyses, this study aims to uncover the expression of gender consciousness in musical compositions and elucidate the interactive relationship between musical works and feminist discourse and construction. Additionally, this research provides insights into feminist expressions within American country music through Taylor Swift’s compositions, thereby contributing significantly to the exploration of music’s influence on gender identity and women’s rights.

**Keywords:** Taylor Swift, feminism, American country music, social gender, female empowerment

## Research Question

As societal progress unfolds, the feminist movement continues to evolve, drawing widespread attention to issues such as gender inequality and women’s rights. As a cultural art form, music often reflects societal issues and regional cultures, serving as a significant medium of cultural dissemination (Considering the international transmission pathways of music from a cross-cultural perspective - Chinese Journal Website, n.d.). Country music, a genre with distinct American cultural characteristics, is emblematic in this regard. In its early stages, female figures in country music were often depicted in roles supporting domestic and community affairs, juxtaposed with male counterparts, thereby lacking autonomy (Rasmussen & Densley, 2016). However, with the advancement of the women’s liberation movement and societal shifts, women in country music began to express broader self-identities and emphasize themes of freedom and empowerment (Ellis, 2010). Contemporary feminist representations in country music emphasize female autonomy and agency, serving as personal expressions and platforms for advocating gender equality and women’s rights.

Taylor Swift stands as a prominent figure in this realm. She is a celebrated American singer-songwriter and music producer with a vast global fan base. Her works often interweave themes of personal emotions and life experienc-

es. Since the release of her debut album in 2006, she has steadfastly explored the domain of country music, prominently showcased in albums such as “Fearless” and “Speak Now.” Her thematic explorations span love, familial bonds, and career pursuits (Pang, 2024), offering profound reflections on the contemporary status of women and becoming a significant voice for reflecting and explaining women’s circumstances. Combined with personal narratives, Taylor Swift’s music strives to confront wider societal issues (Pang, 2024), including gender discrimination, domestic violence, and self-realization. Her advocacy for women’s rights and impassioned appeals underscore her sustained commitment to social equity, influencing audience perceptions and attitudes. For instance, in her song “The Man,” she imagines life from a male perspective, exposing deep-seated gender discrimination and societal double standards. Simultaneously, in “Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince,” Taylor Swift delves into the impact of societal upheaval on youth while advocating collective solidarity.

As an outstanding female artist, Taylor Swift’s influence in the music industry is undeniable. She has garnered 14 Grammy Awards (including a record-breaking four Album of the Year awards) and 52 Guinness World Records, among numerous other accolades, substantiating her enduring achievements and robust presence in country music. Therefore, by analyzing Taylor Swift’s seminal

works, we can delve deep into feminist expressions within American country music, exploring contemporary societal attitudes and perspectives on gender equality and women's interests.

Consequently, this article will employ theoretical frameworks such as social gender theory, social construction theory, and the construction of female power to examine how Swift's music shapes and propagates feminist ideals.

## Literature Review

### 1.1 Sex and Gender

Significant differences exist between males and females, from genomic composition to physical structure and physiological functions. For instance, variations in hormone levels contribute to great distinctions in vocal pitch and muscle development between males and females. In addition to physical disparities, psychologists and sociologists explore differences between the sexes in cognition, emotions, and behavioral expressions. These differences are attributed to social roles and cultural expectations rather than solely to physiological sex. Thus, gender can modify or complement human understanding of sex.

Contemporary academic discourse extensively focuses on social gender, rooted in the pioneering research of French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work "The Second Sex." Beauvoir emphasizes that modern discussions on feminism often remain contentious due to deep-seated misogyny and prevalent male-centered perspectives in society. She posits that gender transcends physiological differences, contending that gender is shaped by social norms and individual expectations of masculine and feminine gender roles (De Beauvoir, S, 1949). Therefore, she underscores that traits traditionally associated with specific genders are not intrinsic but culturally imposed (De Beauvoir, S, 1949), revealing systemic disparities women face compared to men due to long-standing gender binary perspectives. Thus, achieving true independence necessitates women's complete liberation in thought and action.

### 1.2 The Social Construction of Gender

Political power, economic influence, traditional culture, and mass media are essential in building gender discourse. Traditional culture often describes gender roles and behaviors through social customs and religious beliefs, with different cultural backgrounds fostering varying gender concepts and societal expectations. Among these influences, mass media has emerged as a prominent agent in constructing gender discourse. Platforms such as television, advertising, and popular culture products spread and reinforce specific gender norms and roles. For instance,

advertisements often depict men as strong and rational, in stark contrast to portraying women as emotional and gentle (United et al.'s Fund). Famous cultural artifacts like music, literature, and films also contribute importantly to molding gender concepts through character portrayal and narrative. Characters in movies and TV shows, song lyrics, and novel protagonists collectively influence public understanding of gender identity and behavior.

Renowned sociologist and gender studies scholar Judith Lorber elaborates on these dynamics in her 2018 work "The Social Construction of Gender." Lorber posits that gender is a complex framework of social construction concepts that challenge the notion of gender as a simple biological attribute. She points out that social norms, expectations, and institutional structures actively perpetuate gender roles, identities, and inequalities within society (Judith Lorber, 2018).

### 1.3 Female Images in the Media / Construction of Female Power

Media is a crucial channel for cultural transmission, profoundly influencing and reflecting societal views and expectations regarding gender roles and women's images. In this context, music, a key component of popular culture and mass media, exerts immense influence through its lyrical content and artistic expression. Marcia J. Citron, the professor of American musicology at Rice University, extensively examines historical biases in music in her groundbreaking work published in 1993, illustrating how gender influences the recognition and inclusivity of composers in classical music. Her research underscores the systematic underrepresentation of female composers and the gender standards applied in evaluating musical works. Similarly, in the chapter "Feminism, Gender, and Popular Music" from the "Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music," scholars explore the intricate relationship between popular music and gender norms. This article not only highlights how entrenched gender roles are perpetuated through music but also scrutinizes efforts by feminist musicians and activists to challenge and subvert these norms (Stone, Alison, 2017). A notable movement is the "Riot Grrrl," a feminist punk rock movement that emerged in the early 1990s in the United States. Bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Sleater-Kinney symbolize the spirit of "Riot Grrrl," using music as a powerful tool to critique patriarchal norms and empower women, aiming to redefine traditional gender roles and advocate for female autonomy. Through these examples, music not only reflects but actively shapes cultural perceptions of gender, making it a dynamic arena for both reinforcing and resisting societal norms.

## 1.4 Patriarchy and Feminism

Patriarchal culture is a longstanding social structure that accentuates male dominance and power. Within this culture, women are often viewed as secondary and dependent on male existence, and their behaviors and traits are frequently subjected to strict limitations and norms (Zhang et al., 2008). These societal roles limit women's identity formation and negatively impact their understanding of self, others, and society. Feminist psychology, however, strives to expose and challenge these traditional cultural constraints and biases against women. According to a national Chinese core journal *Collection of Women's Studies*, mainstream Western psychology, under the influence of patriarchy, invisibilizes and marginalizes women, reflecting biases of male centrism.

## 1.5 Conclusion and Discussion

Based on the literature discussed above, gender is not merely a physiological difference but a structure shaped by social roles and cultural expectations. This perspective challenges traditional binary understandings of gender and establishes a solid theoretical foundation for studying issues such as gender inequality. Concurrently, the feminist movement continuously confronts patriarchal cultures and ideologies through its collective strength. Media, especially music, is a powerful tool for disseminating female empowerment within society.

However, these studies primarily focus on Western cultural backgrounds and theoretical perspectives, neglecting in-depth research and exploration of gender dynamics in non-Western cultures and societies. Therefore, this gap restricts our understanding of global gender inequality and interpretations of various strategies to resist such inequality due to regional and cultural differences. Hence, a more inclusive approach is indispensable—one that adopts broader, interdisciplinary methods to achieve a more comprehensive understanding. In conclusion, advancing our understanding of gender requires transcending singular perspectives and integrating insights from Western and non-Western backgrounds.

## Research Method

This study primarily adopts case study and textual analysis methods. In selecting Taylor Swift as the case, the empirical material analyzed mainly consists of her music works, with interpretations drawn from her personal experiences and interview materials.

Taylor Swift is a prominent American singer-songwriter and music producer known for her unique blend of pop and country music, profound, heartfelt lyrics, accolades in the music industry, and extensive commercial success.

Born on December 13, 1989, in Reading, Pennsylvania, Swift developed a passion for music at a young age. Her family later moved to Nashville, Tennessee, the heart of country music, where she began pursuing her music career at 14, writing and recording her songs. In 2006, Swift released her debut album "Taylor Swift," which included popular songs such as "Tim McGraw" and "Teardrops on My Guitar," propelling her to fame and establishing a solid fan base. Over the years, Taylor Swift has released several successful albums, including "Fearless," "Speak Now," "Red," "1989," "Reputation," and "Lover," all achieving immense commercial success globally, topping music charts, and winning numerous music awards. Beyond her music career, Taylor Swift has actively advocated for various social and cultural issues, expressing her support for gender equality and women's rights on multiple occasions.

Through an in-depth study of this case, this research aims to assess Taylor Swift's status, influence, and contributions as a female artist in the country music field. It seeks to elucidate Swift's advocacy and expression of feminist principles, ultimately providing insights into the feminist imagery within country music and its broader societal and cultural implications.

This paper also employs textual analysis to analyze Taylor's music works and public speeches. Specific textual analysis operations include establishing a comprehensive text corpus that includes Taylor Swift's music and relevant public speeches. The specific songs analyzed are: "Fearless," "Speak Now," "Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince," "All Too Well," and "The Man." Secondly, extracting content related to key themes such as gender, rights, and freedom to reveal and interpret her meticulous portrayal of feminist themes in her works, exploring their cultural connotations and social significance. Finally, the article will synthesize the results of lyric analysis to summarize the feminist representations in Taylor Swift's music works and discuss their impact and significance on feminism and society.

"I'll be complex, I'll be cool": Manifestation of Individualistic Feminist Expression

In contemporary society, most cultures widely accept the gender binary, categorizing humans into two distinct gender identities—male and female (Vaid-Menon, A., 2020). This perspective asserts that biological differences exist between males and females, from genetic composition to physiological structures and functions. For example, hormonal variations between genders lead to different aspects of physical development, including vocal pitch, muscle development, and body shape. These physiological characteristics become integral to gender identity within a societal context, often used to identify one's own and others'

gender identities.

Moreover, psychologists and sociologists have extensively studied cognitive, emotional, and behavioral differences between males and females, finding that gender roles are often attributed to social roles and cultural expectations rather than solely the result of biological sex. Society frequently assigns different behavioral expectations and roles to males and females, influencing individual choices and social interactions. For instance, males exhibit strength, courage, and emotional restraint, whereas females are expected to be gentle, dependent, and prone to emotional fluctuations. French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal work “The Second Sex,” profoundly explores how gender is shaped by societal norms and cultural expectations (De Beauvoir, S., 1949). She argues that traits traditionally associated with specific genders are not innate but culturally imposed, emphasizing the complex and multifaceted social construction of gender (De Beauvoir, S., 1949). Judith Lorber’s groundbreaking work “The Social Construction of Gender,” published in 2018, further delves into these dynamics. Lorber convincingly refutes the simplistic notion that gender is merely a biological trait, highlighting instead how deep-seated social norms, cultural expectations, and institutional practices actively construct and perpetuate gender hierarchies, identities, and differences (Judith Lorber, 2018).

Beyond gender’s direct impact on individuals’ gender cognition, political power, economic influence, traditional cultures, and mass media play significant roles in shaping gender discourse. Among these influences, mass media has emerged as a crucial agent in constructing gender norms. Characters in films and TV shows, song lyrics, and novel protagonists collectively shape public perceptions of gender identity and behavior, profoundly influencing and reflecting societal expectations of gender roles and female images. In this context, music, as a critical component of popular culture and mass media, has a profound impact through its lyrical content and artistic expression.

Taylor Swift’s music is a vivid example of how gender roles and expectations are shaped and expressed under the influence of mass media. When discussing Taylor Swift, she is an immensely successful pop music artist and a prominent global figure. Born on December 13, 1989, in Reading, Pennsylvania, Swift developed a passion

for music at a young age. She began pursuing her music career at 14, writing and recording her songs. In 2006, Swift released her self-titled debut album “Taylor Swift,” introducing the world to hits like “Tim McGraw” and “Teardrops on My Guitar.” Taylor’s albums consistently topped the charts, earning her numerous honors, including Grammy and Billboard Music Awards. Beyond musical achievements, Swift has used her platform to advocate for significant social and cultural issues, notably becoming an outspoken supporter of gender equality and women’s rights.

A pivotal moment in Taylor’s career occurred at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs), where she won Best Female Video for “You Belong with Me.” However, her acceptance speech was interrupted by Kanye West, who took the microphone to insist that Beyoncé should have won instead. This incident highlighted Taylor Swift’s vulnerability and underscored the importance of bravery and resilience, themes that later shaped her music and public persona.

Indeed, Taylor’s songwriting has consistently explored themes of personal and emotional struggles, often interweaving feminist perspectives into her lyrics. Her early songs delved into themes of love and heartbreak, later expanding to broader societal issues. Themes of victimhood have been prevalent in Taylor Swift’s songs, evolving subtly over time with her maturity. What sets her apart is her tendency not to blame herself for emotional failures but rather to attribute them primarily to male behavior. Issues such as insincerity, infidelity, lack of empathy, and suppression of female autonomy in interpersonal relationships are depicted as consequences of male actions. Criticisms of male behavior became Taylor’s starting point for reflecting on gender dynamics—why women often bear the emotional brunt despite their unwavering commitment, while men frequently err. Despite her successes, Taylor faced media scrutiny and criticism for portraying herself as a victim rather than a resilient artist willing to express her experiences openly. This image sparked discussions in the music industry and society at large about misogyny and the hostility women often encounter when honestly recounting emotional traumas, prompting Taylor to speak openly about the challenges women face in the public eye and advocate on their behalf.

**Table 1-1 Extraction of key lyrics of “Fearless”**

“And I don’t know why but with you I’d dance in a storm in my best dress, fearless”
“I’d never gone with the wind, just let it flow”
“In a storm in my best dress, fearless”

**Table 1-2 Extraction of key lyrics of “Speak Now”**

“And I’m not the kind of girl who should be rudely barging in on a white veil occasion”
“But you are not the kind of boy who should be marrying the wrong girl”

**Table 1-3 Extraction of key lyrics of “Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince”**

“Running through rose thorns, I saw the scoreboard And ran for my life”
“They whisper in the hallway, ‘She’s a bad, bad girl’”
“It’s you and me, there’s nothing like this Miss Americana and The Heartbreak Prince”

**Table 1-4 Extraction of key lyrics of “All Too Well”**

“You call me up again tonight, but this time I’m telling you, I’m telling you we are never ever getting back together.”
“Time won’t fly, it’s like I’m paralyzed by it, I’d like to be my old self again, but I’m still trying to find it.”
“And you call me up again just to break me like a promise, so casually cruel in the name of being honest.”

**Table 1-5 Extraction of key lyrics of “The Man”**

“I would be complex, I would be cool”
“I’d be a fearless leader”
“Wondering if I’d get there quicker if I was a man”

Through intricate and meaningful symbolism, we explored freedom, rights, and feminist ideals in Taylor Swift’s five representative works.

Firstly, as shown by Table 1-1, “Fearless” embodies Swift’s courage and resilience in adversity. The lyric “*In a storm in my best dress, fearless*” showcases Taylor’s unwavering fearlessness and inner self amidst challenges, embracing the extreme weather’s wonder instead of fear. This lyric emphasizes the importance of young women maintaining personal agency in adversity, emphasizing women’s autonomy in social structures.

In “Speak Now”, Swift delves deep into themes of perseverance and personal identity. She navigates the complexities of being perceived as attractive, challenging societal norms and expectations. This narrative tension highlights her opposition to external definitions, marking her journey towards self-realization and liberation resonating with feminist pursuits of female autonomy and rights. As shown by Table 1-2, the lyric “*And I’m not the kind of girl who should be rudely barging in on a white veil occasion*” portrays Taylor’s brave and independent image, distinguishing herself from women who sacrifice everything for love.

Furthermore, “Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince” examines the influence of gender roles and power. As

shown by Table 1-3, Swift criticizes the notion of “boys will be boys”, suggesting that the traditional roles of Miss and Prince should interchange without being confined to rigid gender images. This viewpoint underscores her advocacy for personal autonomy and equality, echoing feminist efforts to eliminate gender inequality and social bias.

Additionally, “All Too Well” evokes deep reflections on freedom and rights through its poignant narrative. Swift’s lyric “*You call me up again tonight, but this time I’m telling you, I’m telling you we are never getting back together*”, as shown by Table 1-4, explores personal growth and self-discovery themes, depicting one’s inner strength and pursuit of self in complex relationships. This exploration underscores the importance and necessity of empowering oneself, reflecting a feminist emphasis on individual development for women.

Lastly, as shown by Table 1-5, the lyrics of “The Man” provide a distinctive viewpoint on women’s roles and positions within society. In this song, Taylor Swift contrasts the experiences of men and women in similar situations, using the perspective of male privilege to scrutinize gender inequality and societal biases. She highlights how societal perceptions and treatment vary based on gender identity, noting that as a man, she would be perceived as a “fearless leader” and an “alpha type”. This underscores

the gender discrimination prevalent in cultural and patriarchal contexts.

Particularly, patriarchal culture, a longstanding societal structure, emphasizes male dominance and power and imposes restrictions and norms on women's personalities and behaviors. Traditionally, women are expected to assume responsibilities for caregiving within the family and children and to exhibit qualities such as kindness, gentleness, and nurturing. Conversely, behaviors characterized by strength and autonomy are viewed conservatively (Zhang & Du, 2008). These societal roles constrain women's identity and negatively impact their perception of self, others, and society.

In "The Man," Swift exposes society's double standards towards men and women, highlighting gender inequality issues and discriminatory practices stemming from entrenched patriarchal cultures in modern society.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, Taylor Swift's music transcends mere entertainment by profoundly exploring themes of freedom, rights, and gender. It offers unique insights into individual agency, gender dynamics, and the complexities of gender roles within societal expectations. Her works are not just cultural expressions but significant contributions to the positioning of contemporary female roles and societal expectations.

Nevertheless, despite Taylor Swift's profound impact on music and public perception, this study faces several limitations. Firstly, existing references and research predominantly focus on Western cultural and theoretical backgrounds, neglecting in-depth studies on gender dynamics in non-Western cultures and societies. This limitation restricts a comprehensive understanding of global gender inequality issues and exploration and analysis of various strategies to resist gender inequality across different regions and cultural backgrounds. Secondly, although this paper analyzed several representative feminist-themed songs by Taylor Swift, the selection was limited in quantity. Therefore, the analysis of lyrical content is insufficient to cover her diverse body of work, leading to insufficient generalization and scope in the conclusions of this study.

Therefore, despite Taylor Swift's undeniable influence in Western culture, there is a need for a broader examination of how her music shapes and influences feminist discourse globally. Also, for a more comprehensive analysis and extraction of examples, further exploration is needed into her broader music catalog and how these works are

understood and accepted in different social and cultural contexts.

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