

FIERCE FEMININITY: RESHAPING ROCK AND ALTERNATIVE MUSIC



EM VON DER RUHR

INTRODUCTION

The world of rock and roll and alternative rock music has been largely male dominated throughout its history, and has been classified by some as a “man’s” genre many times due to the amount of representation in the genre.

However, today women are re-inventing the rock and alternative scene. It is becoming more common to see not only female singers, but also female guitarists, drummers, and writers/producers in the rock scene; which is a milestone given the amount of instrumental exclusion towards females as summarized by Clawson (1998). The rise of women representation in the genre is providing more opportunities for women in music, and their instrumental presence is reconstructing the gender bias of the male-dominated genre; although not without falling prey to sexist and misogynistic hate from fans (Coleman, 2016). More female musicians, like Lauren Mayberry of the band CHVRCHES, are speaking out against sexism and breaking down the passive stereotype of women in music to reproduce the defining principles of the genre that previously have related to submissive behavior and heterosexual relationships (Vincent et al., 1987). This is impactful progress for women, given the history of misogynistic behavior in the music industry and the sexism that results.

METHODS:

In order to analyze my portfolio topic, I used the Spotify official playlist entitled “Fierce Fems” to randomly select 20 songs to analyze. All of the songs on the playlist feature at least a female lead, if not an entirely female band. I was specifically focusing on analyzing the lyrics for traits that were reflective of specific “masculine” or “feminine” traits as defined by the Bem Sex Role Theory. After analyzing the specific song that was randomly selected from the playlist, I visited the band or musicians’ official Instagram to analyze their physical expression by the traits from the same Sex Role Theory list. After analyzing these different components of the musicians gender expression, I summarized my findings and interpretation in my portfolio posts. The list of 20 songs I analyzed are as follows:

- Seize the Power by YANAKA
- The Rush by JJ Wilde
- Disappearing Girl by The Aquadolls
- Major System Error by Marmozets
- HURT by VUKOVI
- Monster by PVRIS
- Can You Feel My Heart (Mothica Version) by Mothica
- No One Listened by Starbenders
- Bad Decisions by RedHook
- Escape Route by Jordi
- Rebel by Pip Squad
- Good Girls by CHVRCHES
- HELLSLIDE by Siiiickbrain
- So Mean by Poppy
- Smile by Wolf Alice
- please put me in a medically induced coma by carolesdaughter
- Kids (Ain't All Right) by Grace Mitchell
- Black Sabbath by Soulex
- Drink by Destroy Boys
- Now Or Never by Meet Me @ The Alter

RESULTS

Overall, I found that the majority of these females are using their music, image, and influence to re-invent the female image in rock and alternative music. Among the 20 songs I analyzed, I found that many of the messages in the lyrics related to the female experience: love, relationships, even personal experiences of sexual assault. But instead of these messages following the typical traits the Sex Role Theory defines as “feminine”, such as innocent/childlike, refraining from using harsh language, gentle sensitive, warm, and yielding, these traits were framed in a powerful manner that take on the traits that are associated by the theory of being “masculine”.

I found that the messages of many of the songs explicitly used their femininity to describe their assertiveness, power, and dominance. For example, it was common for many of the females to frame their compassion for others in an empowering way that re-defines the associations of being compassionate not as soft, but as dominant given the dependency attached to the human need for compassion. Sensitivity was another recurring trait used to exemplify that sensitivity is powerful in that it gains the trust of others, and builds an army of support. Although the gender expression of the 20 artists ranged from hyper-feminine, to very masculine, something each artist had in common was proving that their sex as female doesn’t automatically mean they want to and will fulfill the submissive feminine role. Many of the lyrics addressed what was “expected” of the singers/band members as women, and how when they didn’t fit that mold, that didn’t make them any less or more feminine. Instead of relating their traits to delicacy, they carve a weapon out of their female gender expression. Several of these examples were actually demonstrated through very personal songs about sexual assault and survival. Rather than singing about the traumatic experience with a passive voice that focuses on the idea of being a “victim”, the artists sang about survival and strength. This “rise from the ashes” type of approach also attempts to break down the stigma that surrounds sexual assault and the stereotype that women will stay silent about their trauma.

Another overwhelming message I discovered many of the songs included was the power of sexuality in all forms. Commonly, the lyrics identify the dominating power of the female sex: that being female can be both affectionate, and independent. Whether it was represented in their own original songs or by paying homage to classic rock/ metal songs sung by males, these women take the concepts of riskier, edgier lyrics that have been identified as masculine, and belt out a feminine narrative that proves the traits of males can, and will, be applied to their identity and power.

DISCUSSION

Ultimately, I found that women are rising in power in the alternative rock music industry. So much of rock and roll and alternative rock has been defined from a males perspective; the producing, the writing, the performing, the success, as well as the sexism. Women are overwhelmingly fighting back calling out against the stereotypes and gender inequalities by assertively defining their boundaries within their music (Coleman, 2016). The associated traits and themes of this music genre are far and wide considered “masculine” by the Sex Role Theory because of the forceful, individualistic, and aggressive traits that are so common in rock and alternative music. But women are working their way to the top to rewrite this and gain more of a balance between the sexes in the rock industry. Although seeing a female rock singer has become more common, I think we will continue to see a rise in rock representation by seeing more female singers who take their deserved credit of writing their own music and being more than just the pretty face of the band. The bands I analyzed that had only one female member overwhelmingly stand out as the assertive and powerful face of the band, not just because of their appearance, but because of their musical talent and forceful drive. Given that many of the artists not only sang their own songs, but wrote the music and played an instrument alongside their vocals, Clawson’s (1998) analysis of seeing more female bassists and other instrumentalists will further continue to replace the dominant gender principles and legitimize female alternative rock musicians.

Of course this analysis was limited, being that the compiled list of songs didn’t exceed 20. Had there been the opportunity to do a deeper analysis that included more songs, the findings might have more variation. Had there been the opportunity to analyze the lyrics and any music videos that may exist for the list of songs, there might have been more data to back up the music video findings of Vincent et al. (1987) that revealed more traditional heterosexual relationships and objectified women that was overall, not much different from music videos of other genres.

It is important that we keep seeing women represented in alternative rock music in less submissive forms in order to break down the sexism and gender inequality in the music industry. Music is for everyone, regardless of gender, race, age, ect. Women need to keep speaking out through their musical writing about their power and abilities, their perspectives and interpretations, and most importantly their feelings, because ultimately, that is exactly what so much of music is about.

