

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE NEGOTIATION OF FEMININITY THROUGH SATIRE AND HYPER-FEMININE AESTHETICS IN SABRINA CARPENTER'S MANCHILD

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ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of postfeminist media has transformed the representation of femininity in contemporary popular culture, where hyper-feminine aesthetics are increasingly combined with themes of empowerment and female autonomy. Sabrina Carpenter's *Manchild* music video presents this contradiction by juxtaposing highly feminine appearances with satirical lyrics and the reversal of traditional gender roles. This study aims to examine how hyper-feminine aesthetics and satire negotiate femininity within the music video. Employing a qualitative approach, the research applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyse denotative, connotative, and myth meanings across thirteen selected scenes. Taking viewpoints from Andrew Goodwin's music video theory combined with Brad Osborn's contemporary perspectives on music videos and Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, supports the interpretation of audio-visual relationships and gender portrayal. The findings reveal that the music video deconstructs conventional myths of female fragility and male authority by portraying femininity as compatible with competence, independence, and agency. However, these representations simultaneously remain embedded within the commercial aesthetics and beauty standards characteristic of postfeminist media culture. The study concludes that *Manchild* negotiates rather than completely rejects traditional femininity, illustrating how contemporary music videos function as contested spaces where empowerment and commodification coexist.

Keywords: femininity; hyper-femininity; postfeminism; semiotics; music video; Sabrina Carpenter

ABSTRAK

Meningkatnya popularitas media postfeminis telah mengubah representasi femininitas dalam budaya populer kontemporer, di mana estetika hiper-feminin semakin banyak digabungkan dengan tema-tema pemberdayaan dan otonomi perempuan. Video musik *Manchild* karya Sabrina Carpenter menghadirkan kontradiksi ini dengan menyandingkan penampilan yang sangat feminin dengan lirik satir dan pembalikan peran gender tradisional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji bagaimana estetika hiper-feminin dan satir menegosiasikan femininitas dalam video musik tersebut. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan teori semiotika Roland Barthes untuk menganalisis makna denotatif, konotatif, dan mitos pada adegan terpilih. Mengambil sudut pandang dari teori video musik Andrew Goodwin dikombinasikan dengan perspektif kontemporer Brad Osborn tentang video musik dan konsep tatapan laki-laki (male gaze) Laura Mulvey, mendukung interpretasi hubungan audio-visual dan penggambaran gender. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa video musik ini mendekonstruksi mitos konvensional tentang kerapuhan perempuan dan otoritas laki-laki dengan menggambarkan femininitas sebagai sesuatu yang sejalan dengan kompetensi, kemandirian, dan agensi. Namun, representasi ini secara bersamaan tetap tertanam dalam estetika komersial dan standar kecantikan yang menjadi ciri khas budaya media postfeminis. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa *Manchild* lebih kepada menegosiasikan daripada sepenuhnya menolak femininitas tradisional, mengilustrasikan bagaimana video musik kontemporer berfungsi sebagai ruang kontestasi di mana pemberdayaan dan komodifikasi hidup berdampingan.

Kata Kunci: femininitas; hiper-femininitas; postfeminisme; semiotika; video musik; Sabrina Carpenter

INTRODUCTION

Portrayals of women in the media have always been changing, however feminist scholars argue it still

maintains patriarchal values. In earlier media, representation of women was in a strict configuration of passive "damsels in distress" waiting for male rescue or manipulative femme fatales who used their

beauty to target men. These portrayals reinforced gender hierarchies by identifying women with communal traits, which contrasted with men that were identified by competence and agency. As the modernization of media continued, the restriction shifted towards the commodification of the female body, where sexualization and objectification became pervasive.

The emergence of third-wave feminism marked a crucial shift by reframing feminism as dynamic and intersectional. Rather than rejecting femininity entirely, it emphasized agency and women's ability to interact with feminism on their own terms. Pop culture became a platform for social changes, and music emerged as a key site where gender, power, and identity are negotiated. In recent years, more pop icons, including Sabrina Carpenter, have incorporated themes of female agency into their musical narratives.

Carpenter's music video "Manchild" stands out for its representation of romantic frustrations through humor and exaggeration. It juxtaposes highly feminine appearances with satirical lyrics. However, this operates within mainstream media platforms where visibility, branding, and commodification are focal points. This study aims to understand how femininity is negotiated through satire and hyper-feminine aesthetics in Sabrina Carpenter's music video and lyrics of Manchild.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs an integration of theories. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory functions as the primary analytical framework to examine denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings. Andrew Goodwin's music video theory explains the relationship between lyrics and visuals, supplemented by Brad Osborn's contemporary perspectives.

To interpret gender representations, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity explains how femininity is constructed through repeated performances rather than inherent traits. Rosalind Gill's concept of postfeminist media culture is used to examine the coexistence of empowerment and commodification. Additionally, Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory provides a lens to understand how traditional stereotypes and patriarchal representations of women are visually reinforced and challenged.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research applies a descriptive qualitative approach. Textual analysis was employed to examine the music video and song lyrics as a multimedia text where meanings are created through audio and visual elements. The study utilizes purposive sampling, selecting twelve scenes from the music video "Manchild" based on the prominence of hyper-feminine visual aesthetics, satirical lyrics, or visual actions that challenge conventional gender roles.

Data analysis was conducted using Semiotic Theory by Roland Barthes, dividing the analysis into three levels of signification: denotative (literal meaning), connotative (implied/cultural meaning), and myth (culturally constructed belief systems).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show a continuous subversion of gender stereotypes and cultural expectations. Mainstream media has profoundly portrayed women as damsels in distress; however, "Manchild" uses hyper-feminine aesthetics combined with aggressive actions (such as physical confrontation and heavy domestic work) to deconstruct female fragility.

The music video deliberately deconstructs the male protector myth. In scenes where Sabrina and a male character face endangered situations (such as being held at gunpoint), the male character flees or fails to defend himself. Sabrina is positioned as the active agent who takes control of the situation. By pairing a highly feminine appearance with physical competence—such as playing pool with a shotgun or chopping wood in a pink fur coat—the visual subverts traditional masculine signifiers of strength and reconstructs femininity as a symbol of power.

Furthermore, the narrative dismantles male competence by portraying men as "manchildren." Male characters are depicted operating absurdly modified vehicles, such as a motorcycle attached to a shopping cart or a rolling sofa, stripping them of traditional patriarchal authority. They are also shown failing at basic daily tasks, reinforcing the lyrical message that they are dependent and incompetent.

Female agency and narrative control are firmly established. Sabrina's direct gaze into the camera operates as a "knowing wink," distancing her from passive victimhood and reclaiming narrative authority. Her deliberate defiance of social taboos and expressions of disgust regarding unwanted male

attention reject the cultural expectation of female compliance.

However, these subversions reflect the ambivalence of postfeminist media culture. While the video aggressively promotes female agency, it delivers these narratives through commercial conventions that reinforce female beauty standards. Empowerment is presented through a highly stylized, glamorous, and sexually desirable appearance, illustrating the paradox where feminist resistance and market commodification coexist.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Sabrina Carpenter's "Manchild" music video does not reject conventional femininity, but rather uses it to reconstruct meanings of independence, competence, and criticism towards patriarchal gender expectations. By repeatedly relocating dependency from women to men, the narrative constructs new myths of female autonomy

and control. Nevertheless, these messages continue to be delivered through the logic of conventional popular media, adhering to dominant beauty standards. Ultimately, the music video illustrates postfeminist media culture, where female empowerment and commercial commodification function as mutually compatible forces within contemporary pop music.

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