

“THE MAN” BY TAYLOR SWIFT: A VISUAL AND LYRICAL CRITIQUE OF GENDER INEQUALITY

Debi Pangestuti Wijaya¹

¹English Studies Program, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran

¹E-mail: debi22002@mail.unpad.ac.id

ABSTRACT. Taylor Swift’s song and music video “The Man” explicitly highlight gender-based double standards, offering a bold critique of systemic inequality through visual and lyrical storytelling. The work presents a clear commentary on how women are perceived and treated differently from men in professional, social, and cultural settings. “The Man” by Taylor Swift offers an image through which to look at and comprehend these gaps through her lyrics and music video. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyse gender inequality issues in the lyrics and music video to “The Man.” This study looks at the lyrics and music video using a qualitative content analysis approach to find basic themes and messages about gender inequality through the story and symbolism of the song in an effort to reveal both explicit and implicit messages on gender inequality. By analysing the lyrics and music video, this study uncovers insight into current gender inequality and the double standards in modern times. Additionally, “The Man” also shows the continuous fight for gender equality and female empowerment.

Keywords: Gender inequality, Taylor Swift, Lyrics Analysis, “The Man”, Music Video

“THE MAN” KARYA TAYLOR SWIFT: KRITIK VISUAL DAN LIRIK TENTANG KETIMPANGAN GENDER

ABSTRAK. Lagu dan video musik Taylor Swift, "The Man", secara eksplisit menyoroti standar ganda berbasis gender, menawarkan kritik yang berani terhadap ketidaksetaraan sistemik melalui penceritaan visual dan lirik. Karya ini menyajikan respons yang jelas tentang bagaimana perempuan dipersepsikan dan diperlakukan berbeda dari laki-laki dalam konteks profesional, sosial, dan budaya. "The Man" karya Taylor Swift menawarkan gambaran untuk melihat dan memahami kesenjangan ini melalui lirik dan video musiknya. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi dan menganalisis isu-isu ketidaksetaraan gender dalam lirik dan video musik "The Man". Penelitian ini mengkaji lirik dan video musik tersebut menggunakan pendekatan analisis konten kualitatif untuk menemukan tema dan pesan dasar tentang ketidaksetaraan gender melalui cerita dan simbolisme lagu tersebut, dalam upaya mengungkap pesan eksplisit maupun implisit tentang ketidaksetaraan gender. Dengan menganalisis lirik dan video musik, penelitian ini mengungkap wawasan tentang ketidaksetaraan gender saat ini dan standar ganda di zaman modern. Selain itu, "The Man" juga menunjukkan perjuangan berkelanjutan untuk kesetaraan gender dan pemberdayaan perempuan.

Kata-kata Kunci: Ketidaksetaraan gender, Taylor Swift, Analisis Lirik, “The Man”, Video Musik

INTRODUCTION

On August 23, 2019, Taylor Swift released *Lover*, her seventh album (Spruch, 2019). Her personal experiences served as the inspiration for “The Man”, the fourth single from this album. Taylor Swift’s song and music video “The Man” present a powerful critique of gender inequality, particularly the double standards women face in professional and public spheres. Through its lyrical content and visual representation, the work explores how societal expectations often undermine women’s achievements while glorifying similar behaviors in men. The song functions not only as a form of personal expression but also as a commentary on the artist’s lived experiences in a male-dominated industry.

Taylor Swift, a prominent Hollywood artist, frequently addresses gender inequality in her music industry. In a 2019 Billboard Woman of the Decade Award speech, she stated that society claims women should not be allowed to coast. Swift's experiences in the industry, including feeling "bought" by her manager and "dumped" when deemed unprofitable, led her to write “The Man” to express her outrage. This study examines how Swift conveys her concerns through the song and how her music enthusiasts portray it.

“The Man” is one of Swift's most controversial songs that she has ever made (News, 2020). Swift's criticism is deeper than just skilful poetry. Swift's song “The Man”, a critique of patriarchal standards and double standards, is at the

heart of her exploration of gender inequality. The song, which was released with an eye-catching music video, is a remark on the difficulties women have when navigating male-dominated environments and professions. Swift's experiences as she negotiates the challenges of fame and wealth provide a compelling lens through which to look at more general concerns of gender inequality and societal standards.

On February 27, 2020, Taylor Swift's hottest song music video—"The Man"—was released to the public, signalling a turning point in her career (Gore, 2020). The 4-minute, 14-second music video visual has received a lot of praise and attention since it first debuted, and it has accumulated an amazing 100 million views across many streaming services and social media platforms. Swift skillfully interweaves layers of symbolism and heartbreaking commentary within the engrossing fabric of this cinematic production, giving each scene a rich thematic depth and emotional impact. Swift is not only the creative mind behind the song but also takes on the position of director in the music video, which is a wonderful tribute to her wide-ranging abilities as she brings her artistic vision to life with incredible accuracy and vision. Swift skillfully navigates the visual terrain with her directing abilities, boldly and unapologetically breaking cultural expectations and conventional standards.

Previous studies have approached the same subject through varied lenses. For instance, Damayanti et al. (2023) employed feminist literary criticism to explore the song's lyrics, highlighting themes of female subjugation. Caroline et al. (2023) utilized a feminist stylistic approach to investigate linguistic patterns that reflect patriarchal language structures. Meanwhile, Dhipa et al. (2023) provided a semiotic analysis of the lyrics, examining gender symbolism in selected lines. However, these works tend to focus either exclusively on the lyrics or adopt surface-level textual approaches.

In contrast, this research combines visual and lyrical analysis within a single structure, providing a more in-depth and comprehensive insight into representations of gender. By analyzing the multimodal aspects of Swift's creative expression, the study contributes to filling the gap in literature that has yet to comprehensively examine the interplay between lyric, narrative structure, and symbolic visuals in "The Man".

This study examines "The Man" using qualitative content analysis, following the framework established by Gay (2006), entails the gathering, examining, and interpreting extensive narrative and visual data. The analysis focuses on both the lyrics and music video to identify representations of gender

inequality, with emphasis on implicit and explicit messages, symbolism, and structural oppositions.

METHOD

A qualitative content analysis approach will be used to gather data for this research project. Two of the main sources of data will be the lyrics and music video to Taylor Swift's song "The Man." After being precisely transcribed, the lyrics and music video will be presented for analysis. In order to acquire an understanding of a specific occurrence, qualitative research, as defined by Gay (2006), entails the gathering, examining, and interpreting extensive narrative and visual data. In order to collect the data for this study, several steps were followed, such as listening to The Man's song on Spotify, watching the music video carefully, closely reading the song's lyrics to comprehend its meaning, and using the note-taking technique to list the lyrics and symbol that best illustrate the gender inequality that the song attempts to express. Sentences and paragraphs containing the analysis will be offered in this study. This research examines the significance behind Taylor Swift's song "The Man" and how, from a feminist perspective, it depicts the discrimination against women in society about their standing among males.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Gender Inequality Representation in the Song Lyrics of "The Man"

The song's lyrics centre on how gender discrimination shows up as double standards. An analysis of Taylor Swift's song "The Man" exposes complex representations of cultural stereotypes around masculinity and femininity as well as inequality by gender. The song's lyrics criticize gender-based expectations of achievement and ambition in society, as well as double standards.

[Verse 1]

*I would be complex,
I would be cool
They'd say I played the field before I found someone
to commit to
And that would be okay
For me to do,
Every conquest I had made would make me more of a
boss to you*

In the opening line of this song, Taylor talks about dating. Taylor brought out the fact that men and women have distinct expectations of appropriate behaviour in this particular case. In this particular case, she also discussed the gender double standard,

which holds that men and women should appreciate and expect distinct sexual behaviour. Males have historically been seen as more sexually active and dominating, while women are supposed to be more submissive and submissive toward males. When it comes to sexual activity, males are more liberated than women. A man has the right to date other women before deciding that she is the only one for him. This does not, however, apply to women because they will be called numerous offensive names if they date a lot of guys. This reflects what Judith Butler (1990) terms as gender performativity, where society imposes behavioral expectations based on normative constructions of masculinity and femininity. According to Butler, gender is not a fixed identity but is continuously produced and reproduced through repeated performance of socially sanctioned roles. Swift's phrase focuses on the different judgments applied to these performances, depending on gender. When a man "plays the field", he is judged as assertive or charismatic. However, if a woman does the same, she will be labeled negatively-often with descriptions that scrutinize female sexuality and are demeaning.

[Pre-chorus]

*I'd be a fearless leader,
I'd be an alpha type
When everyone believes ya,
what's that like?*

The term "alpha" in the second verse refers to an alpha-type guy, a man with a leader's character who is confident, forceful, and dominates over others. Taylor then claims that a man will be able to have more influence over his life and destiny in this stanza. In contrast, women are frequently forced to make decisions about jobs, taking care of the family, marriage, or furthering their education because of social pressures. As though women are limited and cannot be expected to fulfil several tasks. Women are frequently seen as unreliable and are assumed to embellish incidents when they fall victim to them. In this instance, Taylor considers the idea that women must provide a great deal of proof in order to be trusted, but males can merely be trusted based on their statements. Women are supposed to work ten times as hard, be polite and sit beautiful, all while pleasing the men in our lives and without hurting their egos. This means that no matter what women do, we will never get a break.

[Chorus]

I'm so sick of running as fast as I can

Wondering if I'd get there quicker if I was a man

Swift captures in these lines the fatigue and tiredness that women feel when trying to thrive in a society that frequently puts more barriers in their way. "Running as fast as I can" is a metaphor for the relentless work and determination that women need to have in order to accomplish their goals. The expression "if I was a man" draws attention to the widespread perception that men are naturally better at work than women are, with their contributions frequently being recognized more highly and their pathways to success less complicated. Swift implies that she would not have to overcome as many obstacles or fight as hard to succeed to the same level if she were a guy.

[Chorus]

*And I'm so sick of them coming at me again
Cause if I was a man,
then I'd be the man*

Swift shows her frustration in these lyrics at the many obstacles and comments she encounters as a prominent woman. "Them coming at me again" alludes to the ongoing criticism and scrutiny that women, especially those in positions of authority or influence, must endure. Swift claims that instead of facing scrutiny and criticism for her accomplishments if she were a guy, people would respect and applaud her.

[Pre-chorus]

*And they would toast to me, oh
let the players play
I'd be just like Leo in Saint-Tropez*

In the song's lyrics, Taylor states that a man who is a "player" will get much popularity with women. On the other side, dating women will face social shame for their actions. It is negatively correlated with men, who will be viewed as cooler based on how many dates they go on. Forgiving a young boy for his transgression or inappropriate behaviour is referred to in the saying, "Boys will be men." The song's lyrics make reference to Leonardo DiCaprio and the prestigious yearly gala that his organisation hosts in Saint Tropez. The mystery surrounding the occurrence was further enhanced by the circulating reports that DiCaprio, who is forty-six years old, may have had a love relationship with a much younger woman, allegedly in her twenties (Gemmill, 2019).

Society views this as typical behaviour for men. Society would laugh and curse a woman who committed the same act of dating a man who was significantly younger than she was. When it comes to dating someone significantly younger than them, men and women differ greatly from one another.

[Verse 2]

*They'd say I hustled, put in a work
They wouldn't shake their heads and question how
much of this I deserve*

Here, Swift draws attention to the differences in the perception and value placed on the accomplishments of men and women. "They'd say I hustled, put in the work" implies that her diligence and hard work would be accepted and applauded without hesitation if she were a guy. However, since she is a woman, they question and scrutinize the validity of her achievements. The phrase "They wouldn't shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve" highlights the widespread predisposition to minimize and cast doubt on women's accomplishments, even when it is evident that they have worked hard and had special aptitude to attain their success.

[Verse 2]

*What I was wearing, if I was rude
Could all be separated from my good ideas and
power moves.*

Swift discusses the damaging consequences of gender bias and discrimination in these lines, emphasizing how these issues frequently cause women's accomplishments to be overlooked or written off due to flimsy criteria like actions or looks. "What I was wearing, if I was rude" refers to the inclination to judge women harshly on their actions and appearance, regardless of their level of achievement in the workplace. Swift argues that neither the worth of her thoughts nor the significance of her deeds should be diminished by these outside influences. Swift analyzes the negative impacts of these discriminations and calls for a change in mindset, asking people to appreciate women for their accomplishments, intelligence, and abilities rather than reducing them to stereotypes or cursory evaluations.

[Bridge]

*What's it like to brag about drinking and dollars
And getting bitches and models
And it's all good if you're bad
And it's okay if you're mad*

*If I was out flashing my dollars
I'd be a bitch, not a baller*

In this line, Taylor states that a wealthy man will be seen as very powerful and cool if he displays his wealth and tosses it at ladies. If a guy has a good cause to be furious, then his wrath is legitimate. Of course, if women did it, it would be very different. A woman who is successful and wealthy may occasionally be denigrated by society as a bitch. Success in a woman's career should not be equated with her personal life or dating life, which are often confused. In contrast, society frequently distinguishes a man's personality from his accomplishments when it comes to males. When a woman becomes furious, society frequently makes a distinction between males and women. Women are urged to regulate their emotions and get rid of unfavourable sentiments since they are frequently perceived as overreacting or going crazy.

This disparity can be understood through Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of "popular feminism", which critiques how feminism is negotiated within the context of consumer culture and visibility politics. Banet-Weiser argues that while feminist messages have entered mainstream media, they often confront the resilience of postfeminist sensibilities that still frame female empowerment within restrictive boundaries of likeability and acceptability. Swift's lyric "I'd be a bitch, not a baller." directly addresses this paradox—highlighting how a woman who behaves with the same confidence and ambition as a man risks social disapproval rather than praise. By positioning herself hypothetically as a man, Swift exposes how societal reception is not based merely on the act (e.g., showing wealth or expressing anger), but on the gendered identity of the person performing it.

Gender Inequality Representation in the Music Video of "The Man"

Taylor Swift's "The Man" music video is a complex visual narrative full of symbolism and societal criticism. Every scenario, sometimes with a touch of sarcasm and irony, aims to draw attention to a particular angle of gender inequalities and cultural standards. Swift illustrates several common instances of double standards in our culture, such as the objectification and sexualization of women, toxic masculinity, and how our patriarchal society is the source of all of this, throughout the whole video. Here is an explanation of the significance of a few important scenes.



Figure 1. Boardroom Scene

In the Boardroom Scene from Taylor Swift's "The Man" music video, Swift plays the male lead, who is shown as the powerful one sitting at the head of a lavish boardroom table. He is surrounded by a group of male colleagues who all nod in agreement with his choices and behaviour. There are not many female characters in this scene, which emphasizes how underrepresented genders are in positions of authority. Swift's portrayal of gender inequality in employment settings, where women continue to face barriers to advancement and recognition, is powerfully satirical of the common inequality of gender that persists in corporate environments and other spheres of influence. The scene's obvious illustration of men's dominance in positions of leadership and decision-making, while women are frequently relegated to subordinate roles or excluded altogether, further underscores the systemic biases and structural barriers that perpetuate the gender gap in leadership positions. The concept of masculine domination and supremacy is further supported by the male characters' interactions and body language throughout the scenario. The nods of agreement and respect directed towards the male lead highlight the unquestioned authority and influence that men in positions of power have.

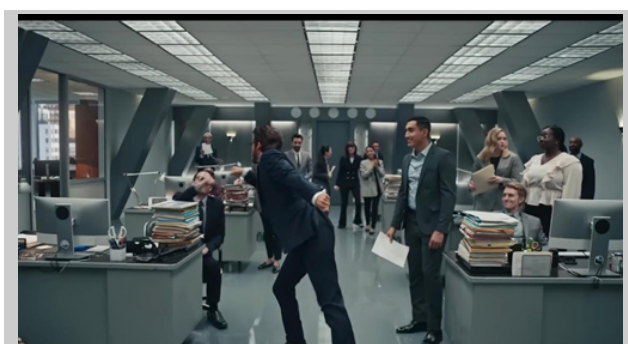


Figure 2. Fist Bump Scene

The dominance and supremacy of males are shown as well in the following scene. He walks into a room full of workers. The fact that Tyler Swift ignored the

female employee in the room and only gave his fist bumps to the male employees illustrates the difference in the treatment of men and women. This scene does a good job of illustrating how widespread gender biases and discrimination are in the workplace, where women frequently face more obstacles to recognition and success than their male colleagues. Audiences are prompted to examine their own preconceptions and stereotypes regarding gender roles and expectations in the workplace by Swift's thoughtful depiction of this relationship.



Figure 3. Train Scene

The topic of the following conversation is Tyler Swift, who is seated on the train in the most unethical way that takes up other people's seats, along with other men. Furthermore, he portrays unethical behaviour by flicking and letting the ash from his cigar fall onto the lap of the woman seated next to him, as well as by smoking recklessly and not giving a damn about other people. Because he is a male and people think that this is what men do naturally, despite the fact that sitting behaviour is immoral, no one in society seems to care. Tyler demonstrates the kind of behaviour that is associated with guys. On the other hand, a woman would probably face criticism from others if she chose to sit in a public place with her legs spread.



Figure 4. Newspaper Scene

Nevertheless, Tyler pulls up the newspaper in the same train scene, and the headline reads, "What Man Won the Year in the Celebrity Dating?" In this situation, society and the media do not usually criticise a man for his actions when he dates women on a regular basis, switches relationships frequently, or has a large number of ex-girlfriends. Men get appreciation rather than criticism, even if they receive recognition for it through awards events. Men do not feel bad about womanizing for a single second. The headline, "It's men against boys, no ladies around," further highlights the masculine dominance when the newspaper is flipped over. This implies that the men who are occupying practically all field locations are stronger than the women.

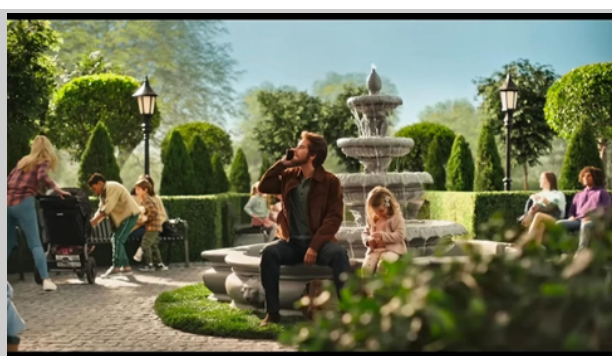


Figure 5. Park Scene



Figure 6. World's Greatest Dad Scene

In a particular instance, Tyler is in the park with his daughter, and although she is playing and obviously bored, he is either focused on his phone or staring at the young ladies that pass by. However, after doing nothing more than taking his kid to the park, he ends up being celebrated as the greatest father ever. It is remarkable to observe how a man like Tyler can receive recognition for doing such a basic role as a parent, but everyone around him perceives him as the ideal gentleman in his family. He is praised not just for his financial success but also for making time for his daughter. If the roles were reversed, society would simply assert that caring for one's kid was appropriate conduct and that,

in the case of a single mother, earning the family's living was her obligation. This just serves to highlight the disparate treatment of men and women in parenting by society.



Figure 7. Nightclub Scene

This clip shows Tyler Swift having a great time in the nightlife, surrounded by a crowd of adoring ladies, and participating in carefree activities that seem to be uncontrolled. The place shows an air of reckless festivity, pounding music, and flashing lights, creating a hedonistic and extravagant mood. The scenario would initially seem to represent a standard nightclub scene, with people mingling and having a good time. However, when we look more closely, we may see that there are underlying inequalities of power and gendered expectations at play in these processes. As he moves confidently around the packed dance floor and engages with the women nearby, Tyler portrays traits of power and entitlement. The ladies in the scene, however, are presented as passive objects of desire, appearing to be focused on the male protagonist with all of their love and attention. Men are frequently encouraged to express their authority and pursue sexual conquests, while women are expected to submit to male approaches and conform to established gender roles. This portrayal mirrors wider societal conventions and expectations regarding gender and sexuality.



Figure 8. Director Scene

At last, Swift makes an appearance as the director of the film in the last scene; she asks the man, “Try to be sexier and more likeable this time.” Once more, she makes a subtle dig at the objectification of women and the sexist treatment of them in the realm of entertainment. Sexism towards women in the workplace occurs very often and the role-switching allows viewers to see what would happen if the positions were switched. Swift then praises a female actress, again building a commentary that men are constantly complimented while women receive unfair criticism.

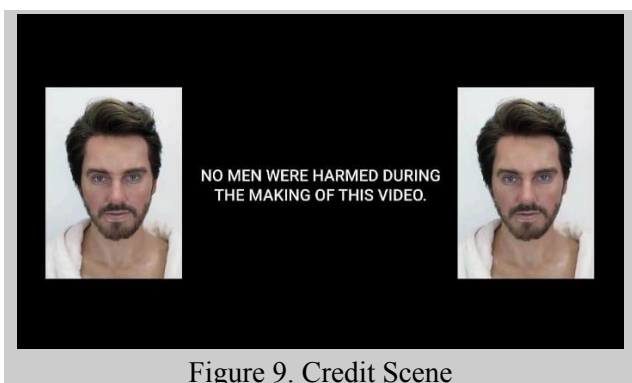


Figure 9. Credit Scene

The final scene of “The Man” music video features a split image of Swift's male alter ego, “Tyler Swift,” and a cheeky disclaimer that reads: “No men were harmed during the making of this video.” While humorous on the surface, this statement delivers a pointed critique of gendered reactions to female empowerment and feminist discourse in popular media.

This closing moment can be interpreted through the lens of Sarah Banet-Weiser’s (2018) concept of popular feminism, which explores how feminist messages in mainstream media are both commodified and contested. The disclaimer functions as a preemptive response to potential backlash—anticipating that Swift’s satirical portrayal of masculinity might be deemed “offensive” or “excessive” in contrast to the normalized misogyny often found in media. Here, Swift underscores how women are frequently expected to justify or soften their feminist expression to maintain public approval. Banet-Weiser argues that in the context of popular feminism, visibility does not guarantee liberation, as feminist figures are often required to appear palatable, humorous, or non-threatening to avoid being dismissed or attacked. The phrase “No men were harmed...” strategically plays into this framework, using irony to emphasize that calling out patriarchal norms is not equivalent to harming men—yet such critiques are often received

defensively. By embodying a hyper-masculine persona and then stepping out of it to reclaim authorship as a female director, Swift reveals the constructed nature of gender performance and the gendered asymmetry in public reception.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that, in spite of advances in social awareness and campaigning, gender inequality still exists in the modern world. Despite progress achieved in the direction of gender equality, differences still exist in several areas, such as the workplace and education. Women's fight for freedom and equality continues to be hindered by the widespread effects of discrimination based on gender.

Through her song “The Man,” Taylor Swift exposes the evident double standards that women in society have to deal with while also expressing her frustration with a male-dominated industry. The song's accompanying music video is a potent visual companion that digs deeply into gender roles and cultural stereotypes. Every scene in the video offers an honest representation of the difficulties and injustices that women face in a variety of situations, from the boardroom to the tennis court, from the nightclub to the media spotlight.

There were various scenes to consider, but overall, the message conveyed is that Taylor Swift's dissatisfaction with the injustices she still encounters in the modern world is reflected in the music video, particularly in the way she views her place in the music business. Her fictional Tyler serves as a representation of how males may always be more appreciated than women and can be better at everything, including career, parenting, love relationships, and even having fun at parties. However, as the sequence comes to a conclusion, Taylor Swift—who also happened to be the music video's director—continues to face criticism that she has the strength to govern the globe.

Swift's “The Man” lyrical and visual elements aim to highlight the systematic biases and injustices that still exist in society rather than demonise males. Swift hopes to increase awareness of gender inequality and encourage action for good change by bringing these concerns to light. In the end, the song acts as an appeal for action for gender equality, urging listeners to face and remove the obstacles preventing the development of a more just society.

In the end “The Man” is essentially a call to action, a song that emphasizes the significance of pursuing gender equality in all spheres of life. Additionally, asking people to reconsider their deeply

held discrimination and adopt a more equal and inclusive perspective on appreciating and honoring the accomplishments of all people, regardless of gender. Swift's message gives people hope and empowerment as we continue to struggle with the complexity of gender roles and cultural standards. By doing this, she promotes a more fair and just society for women worldwide in addition to reaffirming her personal value. It motivates people to fight toward a day when gender equality is a reality rather than simply a pipe dream.

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