

# Empowered or objectified? Navigating Postfeminist Sexuality in Katy Perry's Woman's World Video Clip

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## ABSTRACT

### Keywords

Postfeminism; popular culture; woman's world; semiotics

Feminism in popular culture has developed significantly, especially in the representation of women in the entertainment industry. Third-wave Feminism or post-feminism presents an image of women who are free, independent and empowered, but still attached to the values of femininity constructed by the media. As one of the world's musicians who raised the theme of women's empowerment, Katy Perry successfully brought the concept of post-feminism by presenting the image of modern women through her music. Therefore, this research aims to find out the image of women constructed by Katy Perry through the song lyrics and video clip *Woman's World*. The research was conducted using Roland Barthes' semiotic method to reveal the signs of post-feminism in the song lyrics and video clip. The results found that Katy Perry's performance is in line with the concept of post-feminism which shows women as a figure full of freedom, independent, but sexually objectified and individualist.

## 1. Introduction

Women in the mass media have always been an interesting and endless topic of discussion. Mass media as a communication tool has a role in expressing the characteristics and position of women in the scope of society (Yulianita, 2001). The presence of mass media not only serves to present information but also becomes a mirror to display the socio-cultural reality that exists in society. The messages presented are constructed realities, which can shape stereotypes and public perceptions of an issue, including women. In addition, the reality displayed can also influence the behavior and mindset of women themselves towards lifestyle and appearance (Hijrah et al., 2023).

Popular culture as part of mass media is experiencing rapid development with the era of digitalization and globalization. Popular culture products such as movies, music, and social media play a major role in the process of distributing messages to audiences (Balqis, 2025). The character and position of women in the media have undergone many developments. Women in popular culture are no longer just shown as weak individuals without important roles, but as active individuals who have power over their own life choices. This change is influenced by celebrities who are an important part of popular culture production.

As a figure who always receives media attention, a celebrity can be a role model for their fans (Sumirna et al., 2023). Their thoughts or actions can influence public views on various social issues, including women's issues. One musician who often conveys motivational and empowering messages through her songs, especially for women, is Katy Perry. Born in Santa Barbara, California, United States, on October 25, 1984 with the real name Katheryn Elizabeth Hudson, Katy Perry is known as one of the pop singers who has successfully built a self-image through her music.

Katy Perry uses her popularity to present music that carries feminist messages about empowerment, confidence, and strength, especially for women. The messages conveyed by Katy Perry in her songs have become a symbol of strength and encouragement for many listeners, especially women. Katy Perry inspires women to be more empowered in facing various challenges,

and gives confidence that women have the power for their own lives and do not need to depend on anyone (Neisya et al., 2023). Katy Perry's performance is in line with the discourse of postfeminism, which sees that women have achieved equality and gained their rights so that the feminism movement is considered finished (McRobbie, 2004).

However, mass media not only functions as a communication tool but also as a commercial tool. The media industry as a commercial tool certainly prioritizes profit in its use. This makes the issue of feminism raised not fully focused on the movement that feminists have been fighting for, but only as a commodification and women remain media objects. The process of commodification of women is found in Katy Perry's song released in July 2024 with the title "Woman's World". In the song, Katy Perry appears as a strong woman who lives in a world inhabited only by women. This song carries the theme of empowering strong women when looking at the lyrics of the song, but there is a contradiction with what Katy Perry shows in the video clip. Therefore, researchers want to see how Katy Perry constructs the image of women in the song lyrics and video clip of Woman's World.



Figure 1. Woman's World Video Clip scene

## 2. Method

This research uses the constructivist paradigm with a qualitative research type because researchers want to explain how the media shapes and constructs the image of women through Katy Perry's song "Woman's Word" by referring to the post-feminism perspective. This research uses Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method, which is used to investigate the interpretation of signs and understand the construction of meaning in messages.

The primary data source for this research comes from the song lyrics and video clip of "Woman's World" published on YouTube. Secondary data, sourced from books, the internet, literature, and previous research on semiotics analyzing the themes of feminism and women, complement the primary sources. The researcher used Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis approach in the data analysis phase to explore deeper layers of meaning in the text.

## 3. Result and Discussion

The song depicts an empowered woman, where Katy Perry presents herself as strong and full of freedom. Through the visuals displayed in the video clip and the text presented in the song lyrics, this research will decipher the denotation, connotation, and mythical meaning behind it. The results obtained from this research are some data that displays signs regarding the image of post-feminism women that leads to the commodification of feminism according to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory.

### 1. Narratives of empowered women in Woman's World song

Woman's World is the title track from Katy Perry's sixth album, released on July 11, 2024. It is her comeback song after a five-year break from music. Katy Perry uses this song to convey a message of empowerment for women. Some verses in this song include a message of freedom for women over everything in their lives.

*It's a woman's world,  
 And you're lucky to be living in it  
 Sexy, confident, So intelligent  
 She is heaven-sent, So soft, so strong*

In these lyrics, Katy Perry emphasizes the world that women currently have and portrays women as strong, empowered, and free individuals. In the phrase *Sexy, confident, So intelligent*, Katy Perry reveals how physical attractiveness, confidence, and intelligence are essential parts that women must have. This is in line with the construction of the image of women often raised in popular culture and mass media. Then, the phrase *She is heaven-sent, so soft, so strong*, describes women as a very special figure because they are considered to have come down from “heaven.” Women are also considered gentle individuals who are strong by masculine characteristics. So, women are ultimately still required to be perfect by having a soft but strong character.

*She's a flower, she's a thorn  
 Superhuman, number one She's a  
 sister, she's a mother  
 Open your eyes, just look around and you'll discover,  
 you know*

The phrase *She's a flower, she's a thorn* reveals that women can be flowers, but they can also be thorns. Katy Perry describes women as beautiful but still have the strength to protect themselves. The next phrase *Superhuman, number one* women are described as extraordinary and powerful beings. This creates an idealized image of women where women are portrayed as being able to do everything perfectly as a hero. Then, the next phrase *She's a sister, she's a mother* provides an overview of the role of women in society and the label of a woman in the family. This section as a whole conveys that women have a big role and contribution in society.

Although the song tries to portray a free and empowered woman, Katy Perry's feminist values are merely a form of commodification. The song *Woman's World* adopts the issue of women's empowerment, but what is presented does not fully voice the value of feminism. The empowerment message displayed in Katy Perry's video clip is only aesthetic because she mostly displays her body as the focus of the performance. Katy Perry's performance is relevant to the discourse of post-feminism, where the concept of feminism undergoes a shift in definition where the objectification of women's bodies is seen as a form of subjectification because it is considered a form of freedom given to women in making decisions for themselves. (McRobbie, 2008). Post-feminism was born as a critique of the second-wave feminism movement, which was considered only to represent white middle-class women and ignored the voices of all women from other ethnic groups and classes (Brooks, 1998). Post-feminism is widely used by the media or popular culture, where women are framed as individuals who are free to make choices in their lives. However, Godfey (1993) as cited in Aini (2019) sees that the feminist movement used by the media is just a marketing strategy to sell a product with women as its selling point.

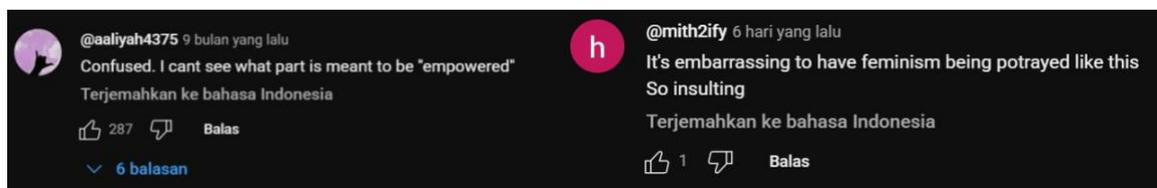


Figure 2. Audience comments in *Woman's World* Video Clip on YouTube



Figure 3. Katy Perry's Instagram account posts and audience comments

The ideal body with revealing clothes is still Katy Perry's principal value in constructing women's power in the media. This phenomenon shows how the value of feminism raised by Katy Perry becomes a mere commercial interest. The post-feminism ideology that Katy Perry shows is how she celebrates her victory as an empowered woman by expressing her body's sexuality. (Negra & Yvonne, 2007). However, this is not the true value of feminism because women are not just about their bodies. Katy Perry's performance shows how women are still trapped in patriarchal standards that consider women's empowerment only through physical attractiveness.

## 2. Commodification of feminism in empowered women

The position and characteristics of women today have undergone many developments. This is in line with the perspective of post-feminism, that women no longer demand equality rights and begin to focus on achieving individual freedom (McRobbie, 2004). Post-feminism is widely used in popular culture, where women are framed as individuals who are free to make choices in their lives. Movies, advertisements, music, as well as social media, promote images of women who are independent and empowered, but still bound to the social constructions that have been given to women. (Gill, 2007)



Figure 4. Woman's World Video Clip Scene

In the video clip above, the denotation meaning is Katy Perry sitting on a long iron with another woman with a clear blue sky behind her. Despite being at a height, they do not show any fear. Instead, their appearance seems strong with confident body poses and expressions.

They wear clothes that resemble construction workers, while Katy Perry wears a costume like “Rosie the Riveter,” a fictional character who became a cultural icon representing American women who worked in factories and shipyards in World War II.



Figure 5. Poster by J. Howard Miller attributed to “Rosie the Riveter” in 1942  
 (Source: <https://www.nps.gov/rori/learn/historyculture/who-was-rosie-the-riveter.htm>)

The connotation meaning found from this clip is that women today already have power by being in a high position. Their position is also equal even though they come from different races or social classes. The confident facial expressions and body gestures prove that women no longer have any fear in making their life choices. The “Rosie the Riveter” costume worn by Katy Perry also symbolizes women's independence and strength. Katy Perry also stands out by posing while showing muscles, creating a strong impression.

The myth conveyed from the clip is that all women can now feel equality without exception. All women, regardless of skin color and social class, are in the same position. Their expressions and gestures show that women also have the power that has only been constructed in men. "Rosie the Riveter" is a form of women's presence in public roles, proving the value of women as strong individuals.

Over time, the development of female characters constructed by the media created women with strong, tough, courageous masculine characters who do not give up easily. The topic of masculinity is closely related to gender. Gender is a concept that describes the behavior, characteristics, and roles of men and women that are shaped by culture, tradition, or social environment (Hasanah & Ratnaningtyas, 2022). In a patriarchal society, masculinity is synonymous with constructions that describe male characters as strong, dominant, and influential individuals. Meanwhile, women are described with the term feminine, synonymous with meekness, motherhood, and submissiveness.



Figure 6. Woman's World Video Clip scene

In the video clip above, the denotation is Katy Perry and four other women standing with their backs to the camera. They stand in front of a row of identical urinals used by men. Their clothes give the impression of a construction or rough work profession, with tight denim shorts, boots, and tops that show the back.

The meaning of the connotation in this clip is that masculine women act like men by using a urinal and look like construction workers who rely on physical strength. Nevertheless, the clothes they wear are very minimal with seductive body gestures, thus exposing their curves and giving a sensual impression.

The myth conveyed from this clip is that women are considered empowered if they emphasize the masculine side that resembles men. In other words, the patriarchal structure persists even though women are shown as strong and empowered. In addition, empowered women are shown in revealing clothes and seductive gestures, which means that even though women have gained equality, their bodies are still the main visual object in the media.

### 3. Individualization of empowered women

One of the narratives that also marks the shift in the meaning of feminism from a collective movement to personal interests is the individualization of women in the post-feminist discourse. Angela McRobbie (2004) states that the feminist struggle has ended because women have achieved equal rights. The media then presents feminism as an individual need, namely how women empower themselves through their lifestyle, self-expression, and life decisions. (Gill, 2007). This understanding creates a paradox because feminism is not an individual choice but a common issue that needs to be fought for together.

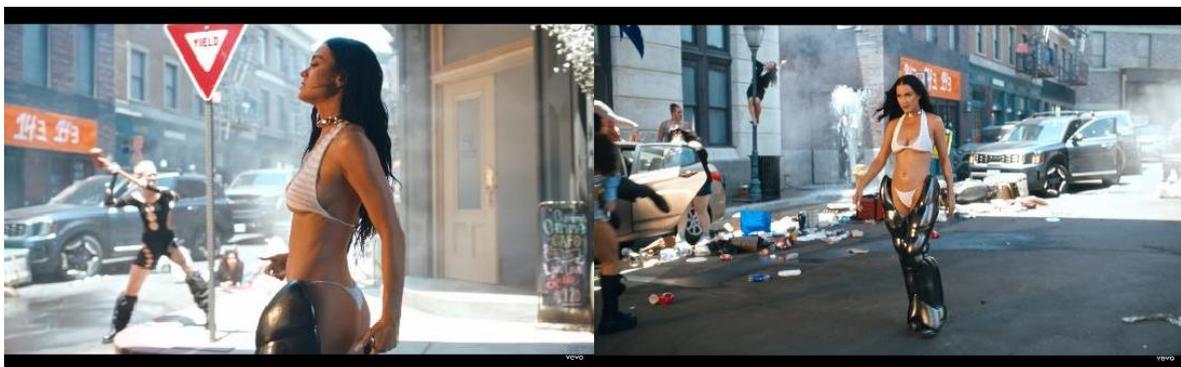


Figure 7. Potongan adegan Video Klip Woman's World

In the clip above, the denotation is that Katy Perry appears in a white bikini and metal leg armor that is very sturdy, covering her legs. She walks the streets of the city with toughness and confidence. The town is in chaos, with trash strewn about, abandoned cars, and women who look angry, panicked, and out of control. However, Katy Perry seemed unable to see the chaos, she didn't care and continued to walk away from the city.

The meaning of this clip is that Katy Perry is portrayed as a tough and calm woman who is facing a chaotic situation. The metal costume used by Katy Perry symbolizes that a woman's strength comes from herself. Her indifference to the city's situation shows how she can overcome problems alone without the help of others.

The myth conveyed from this clip is that Katy Perry brings the discourse of post-feminism in her performance. Women no longer need a collective struggle to achieve empowerment, because it is fully determined by the decisions, efforts, and achievements of each individual. Women today have full responsibility for their lives (Gill, 2007)..

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis that has been done, the researcher sees that the image of women presented by Katy Perry in the song "Woman's World" shows women in the perspective of post-feminism as strong, empowered, and free individuals. Women have gained equality and have the right to determine their own lives. However, the issue of feminism raised by Katy Perry is only used for commercial needs through her appeal or image because Katy Perry still makes her body the main object in her appearance. The freedom given to women is only a pseudo-freedom because the media still frames women in patriarchal standards. In addition, it is found that the image of empowered women today is more focused on individual interests than shared interests.

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