

Change-Maker, Home-Maker, or Booty-Shaker?

An Analysis of Meghan Trainor and Her Contributions to Mass Media Content

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Following closely in the footsteps of such iconic pop singers as Madonna, Adele, and Beyoncé, Meghan Trainor has emerged as a celebrity music sensation and an icon of American popular culture at just twenty-three years old. With her chart-topping song releases, including “Dear Future Husband”, “Walkashame”, and “All About that Bass”, it appears that Trainor is openly defying the stereotypical representations of women that often permeate mediums of mass media. In the lyrics of her songs and the content of her music videos, she strongly advocates for women to embrace their sexuality, along with her promotion of self-love and acceptance of all body types. Trainor’s media content also encourages women to openly reject the unwanted advances of men. Meghan Trainor, therefore, has been depicted by numerous news and media outlets as a progressive celebrity, who represents a positive and inspirational role model for consumers of her music media content, specifically pre-adolescent and adolescent girls. Other media critics and scholars, however, have expressed their concern regarding the influence of Meghan Trainor and her media campaign upon these consumers, suggesting instead that these attempts at promoting empowerment are further reinforcing the sexualization of women and contributing to the post-feminist “Girl Power” discourse and ideal. Certain psychological concepts, theories, and phenomena, including Leon Festinger’s theory of social comparison and Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory, can be integrated into the analysis of the effects of exposure to music media and depictions of celebrity culture upon consumers in order to provide a further explanation for the societal fascination with celebrity culture and the tendency to model celebrity behaviors to some degree. This integration of social psychological theories into the

scholarly research and gendered discourse of the effects of exposure to music media and celebrity culture can be directly applied in analyzing the level of influence of Meghan Trainor's media campaign, her songs lyrics, and the content of her music videos, along with the lasting impressions of her music media content upon consumers. As a result of this interdisciplinary approach to analyzing her span of influence as a celebrity role model upon the behaviors of consumers, and the nature of her song lyrics and the content of her music videos, it was determined that Meghan Trainor and her music media content serve to reinforce, and further contribute to the sexualization and stereotypical representations of women, gender roles, and gender performance while adhering to a heteronormative framework, rather than providing empowerment and defying these limiting ideals that permeate mass media and are reflected by society.

In analyzing Meghan Trainor's influence upon consumer behavior, along with her music media content, it is first important to introduce several empirically-supported social psychological phenomena, in order to provide further explanation for the societal fascination with celebrities, and the tendency to, either consciously or subconsciously, consider them as role models for physical appearances, behaviors, and self-perceptions. Leon Festinger's theory of social comparison is one such hypothesis that offers an explanation for the human propensity for self-evaluation, and can therefore be applied to this discourse of celebrities, including Meghan Trainor, as models for behavior, subject to societal influence and imitation. Festinger's hypothesis, originally introduced in his article, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes", which was published in the *Human Relations* journal in 1954, proposes that the tendency for humans to evaluate their own opinions and abilities is an instinctual and innate drive, and that this process of self-evaluation is universally achieved through the comparison of one's own

opinions and abilities to those of others. When these means of social comparison are unavailable, evaluations of opinions and abilities lack a sense of stability, and are subject to a degree of fluctuation. The implications of this social comparison theory suggest that humans instinctually rely on self-evaluation processes for stability in their perceptions of their opinions and abilities, and therefore, must identify social models of reference in order to successfully achieve this process of self-comparison and evaluation. According to Festinger (1954), there is a direct relationship between the importance of a specific social comparison group and “pressure toward uniformity” in relation to the opinions and abilities of the group, in which an increase in the former implies a positive causal relationship with the latter. A similar effect can be observed in the correlation between the strength of the pressure toward uniformity and the strength of the attraction to the group. Humans then demonstrate the tendency to strive to reduce discrepancies and inconsistencies that exist between their opinions and abilities, and those of the social comparison groups that they find notably important and attractive (Festinger, 1954). Consumers, therefore, must perceive celebrities, as they are depicted in the media, as an important and attractive social comparison group by which they are able to evaluate their own opinions and abilities. This self-comparison and evaluation then serves as the basis for the construction and development of individual self-perceptions and self-concepts. Similarly, Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory (Holstrom, 2004) suggests that observational learning may be critical in contributing to providing an explanation for consumers’ tendency to imitate the style and behaviors of celebrities portrayed in media content, based on the principles of modeling, which encompass the identification of and engagement with a desirable role model, and consequent imitation of their thoughts, values, and behaviors.

This natural inclination to compare one's opinions and abilities to those of celebrities, imitate their styles and behaviors, and develop a corresponding self-identity has heightened societal concern regarding exposure to and consumption of media content. The majority of this concern is aimed at focusing upon the potential effects of sexualized media content on pre-adolescent and adolescent girls, according to the claims presented in the written works of Coy (2009) and Jackson and Goddard (2015). In her article, Coy (2009) argues that the sexualization of popular culture is contributing to the narrowing of girls' achievements, aspirations, and "space for action". Space for action, as introduced and defined by this author, is a concept often used by feminist scholars to examine and determine the ways in which women's ability to act independently and autonomously is constrained by the shaping of behavior through "social norms, expectations, and experiences" (Coy, 2009). This concept of "space for action", thus, also supports the author's claim that sexualized images of women depicted in the media give the impression that girls have unlimited opportunities and possibilities, while actually providing limited acceptable constraints of femininity and womanhood. The term "girl power" is also introduced and defined within this article, a concept encompassing the idea that embracing femininity and focusing on physical appearance can provide women with a sense of empowerment, which only serves to further exemplify the influence of sexualized media content on the narrowing of the constructs of femininity and self-identity amongst women of all ages. Jackson and Goddard (2015) contribute to this discourse of "Girl Power" employing a post-feminist perspective, arguing that this emerging generation of girls is not vulnerable or sexualized, as portrayed in the media, but rather, are empowered and encouraged to explore their unlimited potential for achievement. This encouragement and empowerment demonstrated within this "girl-powered popular culture" has its limitations, however, as it obtained through the

consumption of clothing, makeup, and accessories that imply sexuality, and allow them to be considered desirable within the constructs of a heterosexual framework, thus adhering to the heteronormative agenda and achieving one of the “obligatory requirements of femininity” (Jackson and Goddard, 2015). In outlining these arguments, it is both relevant and important to the present scholarly discourse of sexualized media content and its potential implications for consumer thoughts and behaviors, to highlight the discrepancies observed in societal expectations for adolescent girls, as made evident in the claims presented by Jackson and Goddard (2015). Adolescent girls are simultaneously perceived as naïve, susceptible to imitating role models, including those regularly depicted in the media, and a consumer group whose sexual innocence must be preserved and protected from sexualized media content, while also expected to develop and maintain a sense of self-awareness of the boundaries distinguishing between media content that is appropriate and inappropriate for their age and maturity. The post-feminist ideation of Girl Power, as it is reinforced and proliferated by the hyper-sexualized and hyper-feminized media content that has permeated outlets of popular culture, now poses a heavy burden for these adolescent female consumers. Freedom and desirability are impossible standards for the adolescent girls to measure up to, and feelings of empowerment, along with the enjoyment of recreationally consuming mediums of popular culture and mass media, are consequently accompanied by sexualization.

Other media scholars aiming to address this issue, including Tsaliki (2015), however, disagree with this perception of feigned empowerment and heightened concern regarding exposure to and consumption of sexualized media content by children and adolescents, instead adopting a more positive and hopeful perspective to analyzing this increasingly prevalent societal phenomenon in popular culture, regarding the availability of sexual information in popular

culture and mediums of mass media. Tsaliki (2015) refers to this societal clamor, including the scholarly arguments that provide this ideation with further support and reinforcement, as a “moral panic”, and advocates strongly against the widely-popularized belief that consumption of and exposure to more sexualized media content facilitates and reinforces the subordination and vulnerability of young adolescent girls. She suggests instead that the consumption of entertainment media and representations of popular culture can serve as a sort of sexual education for children and adolescents. Rather than viewing adolescent exposure to and mediums of popular culture as destructive and detrimental to the sanctity of childhood, Tsaliki implores scholars and societal consumers to re-evaluate this issue from a new perspective, and consider it instead in terms of providing adolescents with knowledge and information that is rarely, if ever, discussed in common core sexual education courses. Examining popular culture media content employing this approach allows for the identification and recognition of positive and hopeful implications of exposure to and consumption of sexualized media content by children and adolescents, which may facilitate age-appropriate socioemotional and developmental learning and growth. In order to most objectively evaluate this media content, in terms of its benefits or detriments to this population of adolescent consumers, however, these positive implications must be carefully and considerately weighed against the potential negative outcomes.

This present discourse encompassing scholarly research and careful evaluation of consumer exposure to sexualized media content, which highlights both the potential benefits and detriments of such popular culture consumption, along with the fundamental principles of several prominent social psychological theories regarding the human tendencies towards self-evaluation and social comparison provide an empirically-supported foundation for an analysis of Meghan

Trainor, an up-and-coming American pop music sensation, and her music media content. With the debut of her internationally chart-topping single, “All About That Bass” in 2014, Trainor entered the American music scene, and almost instantaneously became revered as a public advocate for body positivity, self-love and acceptance, and female empowerment. In 2015, Meghan Trainor partnered with FullBeauty Brands, a clothing retailer and distributor specifically tailored to women sizes twelve to forty-four, in order to launch a collaborative campaign designed to make female consumers of their products feel more confident and empowered. This campaign, aptly titled #OwnYourCurves, reportedly embodied Trainor’s personal body positivity and female empowerment agenda, and proudly advertised their slogan, “Be a change-maker. Be a money maker. Be a booty shaker. Be a full beauty.” (Ford, 2015).

Betz and Ramsey (2017) address the effects of media messages promoting specific body ideals in reporting the results of two corresponding studies in their article, the results of which indicated that the female participants perceived media messages promoting thin body types least favorably and most negatively, when compared to media messages promoting athletic and curvy body types, and control messages that focused on emphasizing the acceptance of all body ideals. Within the context of this study, media messages that promoted the acceptance of all body types were correlated with lower levels of reported self-objectification than those that conveyed or promoted a specific body ideal. In contrast to the claims presented by Betz and Ramsey, however, are the results of a meta-analysis on the effects of the media on body image conducted by Holmstrom (2004). The results of this meta-analysis revealed that while representations of thin body types in the media could be considered the cultural and societal norm, these depictions did not consistently evoke negative self-perceptions or social comparisons from female participants. The author offers an explanation for this, suggesting that the media is so saturated

with depictions of thin body types, that women have gradually become habituated to these images. Images of overweight body types in the media, however, increased the reported levels of body satisfaction amongst participants. In promoting a curvy body ideal, then, in her song, “All About That Bass”, as indicated by several lyrical phrases, along with her collaboration with FullBeauty’s #OwnYourCurves campaign, it must be considered whether Meghan Trainor is contributing to and reinforcing this self-objectification, or increasing feelings of body satisfaction and self-acceptance amongst consumers of her music media. Similarly, in analyzing the lyrics of two of her other chart-topping songs, “Walkashame” and “Dear Future Husband”, along with their corresponding music videos, the potential implications for the body positivity and female empowerment movement can be determined, along with the possible contributions to the sexualized media content that proliferates mediums of music media, and could prove detrimental to the self-perceptions and body satisfaction of consumers, especially those who are children and adolescents. These music media texts can also be examined in the context of providing contributions to and reinforcement for the stereotypical depictions of gender roles and gender performance within the boundaries of a heteronormative framework, from which many producers of mass media and popular culture content are hesitant to deviate too far or too obviously.

In first examining the lyrics of “All About That Bass” from the critical lense of the media scholar, one reading of this particular text suggest a empowering message of body positivity, self-acceptance, and self-love, especially for women seeking to embrace their curvy body ideals. For example, within the lyrics of this song, Meghan Trainor sings “Every inch of you is perfect from the bottom to the top”, clearly encouraging female consumers to love and embrace their bodies and physical appearance. In “All About That Bass”, Trainor also rejects the use of

Photoshop technology by magazines, along with the “size two” and “stick-figure”, Barbie-doll body type that has evolved as the American standard for beauty and the ideal woman. This same song, however, has also been criticized for contributing to and reinforcing body dissatisfaction amongst female consumers by promoting a specific body ideal and discriminating against another, as discussed by Emily Wershba (2015). Trainor refers to women with thinner body types as “skinny bitches”, and thus, completely contradicts her central message of accepting and empowering women of all body ideals. In the official music video for this song, Meghan Trainor does appear to promote aspects of her intersectional approach to female empowerment and body positivity, dancing in a group of four other “curvy” women, three of whom are black. There is also a male dancer featured in this music video, Internet sensation Sione Kelepi, or Maraschino, whose inclusion serves to defy stereotypes of race and gender performance. This music media content is problematic, however, from multiple perspectives, including those that may highlight the role of the thin woman who seems to be wearing a dress made of plastic wrap, and appears periodically throughout the course of the three-minute music video. As suggested by body language and nonverbal cues, the curvy women depicted in this music video treat this token thin woman with disdain, interacting with her in an almost scornful and condescending manner. One could infer, based on the context clues provided by the corresponding song lyrics, that this woman is intended to represent the “skinny bitches” embodying the plastic, Photoshopped, Barbie-doll body ideal that Meghan Trainor openly opposes. By actively promoting and avidly depicting curvy body ideals, partially to the effect of appearing demeaning to those with thin body structures through the lyrics of this song, and the content portrayed in the corresponding music video, Meghan Trainor is not truly embodying the acceptance of all body types and empowerment of all women, regardless of their body ideals, as her persona agenda and

collaborative campaign suggests. Rather, she is empowering and promoting women who meet a specific body ideal, thus continuing to contribute to the feelings of body dissatisfaction and self-objectification experienced by consumers of popular culture, including her music media content.

Along with this potential contribution to consumer self-objectification, and body-dissatisfaction, Meghan Trainor's music media content can also be read as a text that provides a sexualized portrayal of women, one in which they aspire to be desirable to men within the scope of the male gaze, and thus adhering to the boundaries of a heteronormative framework, as dictated by societal norms and proliferated by mass media. Returning to the previous analysis of "All About That Bass", while some of the lyrics could be interpreted as progressive and empowering, others, including the lines "I got that boom boom that all the boys chase, all the right junk in all the right places" and "She says boys, they like a little more booty to hold at night", which insinuate that while women should not hold themselves to the unrealistic and virtually unattainable standards of beauty constructed by society, they are still expected to appear and act in a manner that men consider sexually desirable. Approaching these lyrics from an alternate perspective, however, one could also consider this song an anthem encouraging women to openly and freely embrace their sexuality, without feeling the need for suppression or concealment in order to align with the stereotyped perception of women as pure and innocent beings.

A similar observation can be made in the careful examination of the lyrics of "Walkashame", another of Meghan Trainor's most popularly-known songs, which encompasses a familiar, yet highly controversial societal phenomenon. The concept of the "walk of shame" sparks a degree of controversy in itself, as it a phrase with a rather negative connotation, typically only applied to women, describing the act of leaving a man's residence early in the morning after

a random, drunken sexual encounter with a stranger. This assumption that a “walk of shame” occurs after a random sexual encounter between a man and a woman strongly adheres to the clearly-defined principles and structure of the heteronormative framework discussed in the previous analysis of “All About That Bass”. In the lyrics of this song, however, Trainor embraces her “sexy hair”, referring to her bedhead, and walking home at seven o’clock in the morning with her “heels in her hand” and her “pants on inside out”. “Don’t act like you haven’t been there”, she sings, claiming that “everyone knows it’s the walkashame”. Perhaps Meghan Trainor intended for this song to encourage women to embrace their sexuality, as well as refute the double-standard surrounding the unaffiliated sexual encounters men and women engage in, however, by insinuating that drunken sexual encounters with strangers and subsequent “walks of shame” are not only socially acceptable, but are experienced by nearly all adult women at some point in their lives, she is providing a questionable model of behavior for her consumers, especially those who are children and adolescents. Based on the theoretical perspectives of Bandura and Festinger, child and adolescent consumers who view Meghan Trainor as a role model and means of social comparison, may be inclined to imitate or model the sexual behavior described in this particular medium of music, which condones random sexual encounters with strangers. While encouraging women to own and embrace their sexuality, this song reinforces and further contributes to the double-standard surrounding these random “hookups” that men and women encounter, by continuing to use the phrase “walkashame”, which suggests that females should feel a sense of shame or embarrassment after experiencing a drunken, unaffiliated sexual encounter with a stranger, whereas these interactions are typical, and almost societally expected, of men.

The theme of further contributing to and reinforcing stereotypes of gender performance, along with presenting a version of female sexuality based on heteronormative ideals, also appears in yet another of Meghan Trainor's Top 40 hit singles, "Dear Future Husband". From a perspective of scholarly analysis, the lyrics of this song are problematic throughout, within the scope of Trainor's personal female empowerment agenda. Not only is this tune presented from a view of heteronormativity, indicated by the lyrics "dear future husband", it also exemplifies and proliferates stereotypic depictions of gender roles and gender performance within the context of traditional marriage. For example, the lyrics indicate that if her husband "treats her right", which includes taking her on dates, buying her flowers and a ring, and letting her get her way, she will, in turn, "reward" him by "being the perfect wife", which includes buying groceries and performing sexual favors. The lyrics of this song clearly place women in the stereotypical role of the "housewife" and "homemaker", and men in the traditional role of the "breadwinner", and indicate that women serve as objects of sexual gratifications for their male partners. The content of the music video further illustrates these themes, depicting Trainor sprawled out on the kitchen floor, scrubbing it with soap and water, while donning what would be considered a sexually enticing ensemble. In a corresponding study conducted in 2010, Kistler, Rodgers, Power, Austin, and Hill intended to determine the nature of the relationship between the music media consumption of early adolescents and their self-concepts, suggest that consumption of and involvement with music media and music media characters, such as Meghan Trainor, may be used as a means for the modeling of romantic relationship expectations. These stereotyped and sexualized depictions of gender roles and gender performances within the context of sexual and romantic relationships in music media and popular culture content, then, have potential implications for the perceptions of relationship expectations and dynamics amongst child and

adolescent consumers. This, along with the promotion of a specific, curvy body ideal to the effect of discriminating against women with thinner body types, demonstrate evidence of incongruences between Meghan Trainor's personal agenda and the content of her music media, thus serving to partially invalidate her reputation as a beacon of body positivity and female empowerment amongst the stereotyped depictions that permeate American popular culture.

In consolidating and synthesizing this partial analysis of Meghan Trainor's contributions to mass media and popular culture, including her song lyrics, music videos, and collaborative campaign with FullBeauty Brands, into the previously-established scholarly discourse on the potential effects of exposure to sexualized and stereotyped portrayals of gender roles and gender performance, it was determined that Meghan Trainor and her music media content serve to reinforce and further contribute to these mainstreamed depictions, rather than providing empowerment, encouraging body positivity, and defying the limiting ideals constructed by society and proliferated by mass media, as her self-professed personal agenda suggests. In addition to these reinforcements and contributions to stereotypes and sexualization, which oppose nearly every pinnacle of the moral foundation on which she stands, there are stark inconsistencies that can be observed between specific mediums of her music media content. For example, in "Walkashame", Trainor admits that "he called me his babe, asked me to stay, how could I turn him away?", regarding a stranger inviting her to come home with him, and thus initiating a random, drunken sexual encounter, while in "NO", she passionately emphasizes a woman's right to openly refuse the unwanted advances of men. Following a similar pattern, in "Walkashame", she promotes embracing female sexuality and sexual freedom, while in "Title" and "Dear Future Husband", she professes her desire for and actively seeks out the structure of a traditional, heteronormative relationship, complete with a series of stereotyped ideations of

gender roles and gender performance. In order for her personal agenda to be more effective and hold greater truth and validity with consumers, Meghan Trainor might consider attempting to establish a sense of consistency between her music media content and personal agenda of body positivity and female empowerment. The controversies and criticisms surrounding her music media content can be at least partially attributed to these notable discrepancies. Not only does Meghan Trainor's music media content proliferate sexualized and stereotyped depictions of body-image, gender roles, and gender performance, it is inconsistent with her personal agenda of body positivity and female empowerment, along with her collaborative campaign with FullBeauty Brands. The effects of these discrepancies upon consumers, especially those who are children or adolescents, have yet to be investigated or determined, but the sexualized and stereotyped depictions may have detrimental effects upon the body-satisfaction, self-concepts, and perceptions of romantic relationship dynamics and expectations of this specific consumer demographic, based on careful consideration of past literature and the present scholarly discourse. The content of this argument is not intended to dissuade or deter individuals from consuming Meghan Trainor's music media content, but instead, aims to heighten overall awareness of the potential implications from a perspective of objective scholarly analysis, and thus, contribute to a generation of more critical and informed consumers.

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