

Sexual Double Standards in “Misery Business”: How Social Power Aids in Reproducing and Challenging Gender Inequality

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the different ways that the song “Misery Business” perpetuates the sexual double standard in modern society in order to show the societal impact that comes from the choice to stop playing it live. A critical discourse analysis is used to explore the social power that musicians like Hayley Williams have that often reproduces female inequality; it also analyzes the positive effects on society when artists like Williams recognize their part in this system and choose to shift direction. Lines in the song like “once a whore you’re nothing more” are used to analyze how women police each other’s sexuality; forms of internalized oppression like slut-shaming can have a detrimental role on perceptions of female sexual behavior. Additionally, rejecting these damaging ideologies by choosing to stop playing “Misery Business” live in concert directly challenges the dominant discourse. Analysis of the feminist role in progression toward a single sexual double standard is used to help understand Williams’s role in both creating and rejecting the song.

On September 7, 2018, the band Paramore announced their decision to stop playing the song “Misery Business” live. After years of scrutiny and self-reflection, Hayley Williams recognized the detrimental role that slut-shaming plays in society, and chose to right the wrongs presented in the song. Over the past decade, “Misery Business” has become a staple in the pop punk genre, despite the negative message it portrays: the decision to stop playing it shows a tremendous amount of growth and recognition both by the members of Paramore, and by the rest of society. While it is important to recognize how stigmatizing women for their sexual behavior can be damaging, it is also crucial to look at what is being done to move away from this problem and what created this problem in the first place. While little to no scholarly research exists about the song “Misery Business” itself, there are a multitude of scholarly articles about feminism, traditional gender roles, the sexual double standard, slut-shaming, and popular media’s role in perpetuating these ideologies. The point of this paper is not to patronize Williams or other artists for perpetuating the gender double standard, but rather to understand how that mistake affects society, and how this discourse can be challenged. Popular media such as the song “Misery Business” are a result of the institutionalized discourse in society that maintains male dominance. This paper argues that slut-shaming prominent in the song “Misery Business” reproduces gender inequality through internalized oppression; therefore, the choice to stop playing the song live has far more societal impact and shows progression toward a single sexual standard for men and women. Thus, the following essay addresses three research questions: (1) Is slut-shaming prominent in media? (2) How does the social power of celebrities influence the thoughts and actions of their audience? (3) How can western society move past this stigmatization of women?

Literature Review

Feminism. It is important to recognize that the term feminism has multiple meanings, each based on the particular purpose it is trying to reach (Quinn and Radtke, 2006). Aronson (2003) recognized the multitude of ways to define feminism, and also recognizes that feminist identification can be reliant on individual perspectives of the term (i.e. thinking that feminism is anti-male). Commonly, the phrase “I’m not a feminist, but…” is used to ward off potential criticism, despite having an inherently feminist claim: this is due to perceptions on what feminism means (Quinn and Radtke, 2006). Many people display feminist values but are unwilling to identify as feminists (Aronson, 2003). Those who “endorse liberal feminist beliefs but reject the feminist label” are considered egalitarians, and those who entirely reject the feminist label and values are considered non-feminists (Zucker, 2004).

For the purpose of this research, the definition of feminism being used is “the doctrine of advocating social, political, and all other rights of women equal to those of men” (Feminism, n.d). This definition implies that in order for one to be feminist, they must openly advocate for feminist ideals. This definition is also extremely simplistic because this paper does not rely on a specific definition to make its argument: everyone will view feminism in their own way based on their social experiences, regardless of what this paper chooses to define it as.

When looking at feminism, it is also important to look at the term scholars call postfeminism. The term postfeminism refers to young women who experience the direct benefits from the women’s movement (like access to education and the workforce), but do not fight for political change (Aronson, 2003). Even though widespread egalitarianism or postfeminism appears to be present, without the active pursuit of gender equality, the egalitarian or postfeminist status quo works against feminist objectives by remaining complacent (Quinn and Radtke, 2006). Quinn and Radtke (2006) explain that there is an “implied lack of consistency between people’s identity and their attitudes, beliefs, and actions when they embrace feminist values while rejecting feminism and a feminist identity” (p. 187). It is important to make these distinctions about feminism because they play an essential role in how women choose to identify themselves when it comes to gender roles (Crawford and Popp, 2003).

Gender Roles and Double Standards. Traditionally in western culture, different rules or standards have guided sexual behavior in women: these rules have stigmatized women for exhibiting sexual behavior out of wedlock and rewarded men for the same behavior (Crawford and Popp, 2003). Cultural views of sexual behavior as a sinful or shameful act can often create feelings of guilt for people who engage in sexual intercourse outside of the narrow constraints that the society deems as acceptable (Petersen and Hyde, 2011).

In the United States, the general gender and sexual roles include male dominance and female submission (Sanchez, Phelan, Moss-Racusin, Good, 2012). These gender roles tend to influence sexual behavior: For women, having sex for the first time is often seen as something that just happens to them, and men see their first sexual endeavor as more of a triumph or social rite of passage (Sanchez et al., 2012). Men are often more likely to agree to casual sex than women because of this sexual double standard (Baranowski, 2015). According to Sanchez et al. (2012), “men and women have automatic associations between sexuality and power that reinforce their gender stereotypic behavior in sexual contexts” (p. 168). Evidence supports that female sexual submission

prevents sexual autonomy; this can be damaging to females because this role inherently diminishes their control and power (Sanchez et al., 2012).

Despite the commonality of traditional gender roles, women are beginning to reject them (Sanchez et al., 2012). According to research by Laina Bay-Cheng and Alyssa Zucker (2007), women with feminist mindsets tend to be erotophilic and less likely to accept traditional gender roles during intercourse: in contrast, non-feminists tend to be more involved in the traditional gender roles and perceive casual sex as more taboo. Many factors play into this. Along with changing sexual attitudes, terminology has changed as well (Crawford and Popp, 2003). Date, dating partner, and virgin are all terms that have substantially changed over time in how people perceive them: terms like “dating” are often seen by young people as outdated, and more modern terms like “hooking up” or “seeing someone” have replaced them (Crawford and Popp, 2003, p. 19). Hooking up can be defined as “a sexual encounter between two people who are brief acquaintances or strangers, usually lasting only one night without the expectation of developing a relationship” (Paul and Hayes, 2002, p. 640). The term hooking up is much more casual than the term dating, which implies that society is becoming more accepting of casual sex for both men and women. This change in terminology reflects how perceptions of traditional gender roles in sexual behavior have changed and how there is movement toward one single standard for male and female sexual behavior.

Despite liberalized sexual attitudes, research done on college students suggests that the sexual double standard remains in western culture (Allison and Risman, 2013). More stigma and harsher standards surrounding casual sex exist for heterosexual women than they do for men; however, this contrast in sexual attitudes is changing, and progressing toward one sexual standard (Allison and Risman, 2013). More women in the workforce and improving health resources to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases play a role in shifting to a more equal view of sexual behavior, but society still is not in a place where women are entirely without stigma for having casual sex (Crawford and Popp, 2003).

Slut-Shaming. Due to the nature of the sexual double standard, sexually liberalized women are likely subject to slut-shaming (Baranowski, 2015). Slut-shaming can be defined as publicly shaming or chastising girls and women for their sexual activity (Keller, 2015). The word slut has many definitions, one of which is “a sexually promiscuous woman who behaves or dresses in an overtly sexual way” (Slut, n.d). This term is generally used in a derogatory or offensive manner. Despite the shaming of women for sexual activity, oftentimes the slut stigma is completely disconnected from legitimate sexual behavior: rather it is based on perceptions of a woman’s sexual behavior (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2014).

Recent feminist movements have served as a way to eradicate slut-shaming as an acceptable behavior. The 2011 SlutWalk demonstrations served as a direct response to the pervasiveness of rape culture (Keller, 2015). Popular logic surrounding rape culture often says that if a woman wears a revealing outfit then they, therefore, are “asking” to be raped: women have been told that they can avoid being raped by not dressing like “sluts” (Keller, 2015, p. 91). Public demonstrations serve as a way for women to make it clear that this is not the case. Demonstrations like the SlutWalk served as a way for girls and women to “reclaim the word ‘slut’ as a source of power and agency” rather than a demeaning and derogatory term (Keller, 2015, p. 93).

Women policing other women’s behaviors through slut-shaming often is viewed as internalized oppression because it is applying “disadvantageous sexual double standards established

by men” (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2014, p. 135). Oppression is defined as “when one group had more access to power and privilege than another group, and when that power and privilege is used to maintain the status quo”: therefore, internalized oppression is when an oppressed group utilizes the practices of its oppressor against itself (David, 2013, p. 27). It is important to recognize that internalized oppression, like slut-shaming, is the result of continuous domination of one group over another (David, 2013).

Female use of slut-shaming emphasizes the double standard mentioned earlier in the paper: women would rather oppress one another than be stigmatized themselves (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2014). Women tend to recognize the problematic nature and inaccuracy when they themselves are being slut-shamed, yet they will deflect sexual stigma onto other women who they see as more fitting targets (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2014). Women often stigmatize and slut-shame other women for participating in behavior that they disagree with because they perceive themselves to be of higher class; therefore, creating a hierarchical standard of women being either good or bad (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2014). They also demean other women because they perceive them to be sluts or non-virtuous because of frequent sexual activity, yet also speak poorly of different women for being virgins (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2014). Research shows that women do not participate in casual sex as willingly as men do because that type of behavior is stigmatized by society and seen as inappropriate (Baranowski, 2015). Participation from women in casual sex could create negative consequences like the slut-shaming (Baranowski, 2015).

Sexual Stereotypes In Media. People choose to conform to gender stereotypes and social norms like slut-shaming because of western media’s portrayal of men and women (Sanchez et al., 2012). Mainstream media like television and music often portray male sexual dominance: This dynamic carries over into real life and the workforce where men feel the need to act dominant and assertive in order to succeed, and women are often looked down upon for attempting to do the same thing (Sanchez et al., 2012). Bay-Cheng and Zucker (2007) explain that “the personal and social dimensions of sexuality are strongly influenced by the surrounding context, including social norms”. If the social context and surrounding media emphasize that the norm is to participate in submissive sex, then this will impact the way people view any deviating sexual behavior (Bay-Cheng and Zucker, 2007).

The portrayal of women in music and other media can create a social script for adolescents that often contains misogynistic attitudes (Gunter, 2014). Music can help adolescents develop a social identity, which can reinforce how they view sexuality (Gunter, 2014). The type of media that adolescents are exposed to can have an influence on their sexual attitudes and perspective of gender stereotypes, e.g. “men as sexually driven and tough, and women as sex objects” (Ter Bogt, Engels, Bogers, and Kloosterman, 2010, p. 844). Adolescents often turn to peers and media when determining sexual and romantic roles (Ter Bogt et al., 2010). When role models or media figures that adolescents are exposed to are attractive and have high status, social learning is far more likely take place; therefore, adolescents often act in a similar way to the figures they look up to because these role models appear to gain some sort of benefit from their actions (Ter Bogt et al., 2010).

This information regarding the social learning adolescents take place in, as well as the consistency of slut-shaming in western culture, elicits the need to investigate the ways that popular media enhances the sexual double standard. Considering the role of music in creating social identity, it can be argued that songs containing negative messages about female sexuality could potentially be

damaging to young women. The role of slut-shaming as a form of internalized oppression also serves to be a detriment to the progress toward one sexual standard.

Methodology

The paper will analyze the role of “Misery Business” in internalized oppression of women through slut-shaming, and Hayley Williams's feminist role in aiding the eradication of the sexual double standard; therefore, as a part of this discussion, it is imperative to recognize Williams's conscious choice to stop playing “Misery Business” live. A critical discourse analysis is used to explore the ways in which the song conditions the double standard, and how the knowledge of this problem plays into the decision to stop playing it; therefore, aiding in the move toward one single cohesive sexual standard. In dissecting the detrimental role that slut-shaming in media plays, it is evident how discourse such as this reproduces the inequality of women. By focusing on Hayley Williams social power and control over discourse, it is apparent that inequality can result from unintentional power abuse. Dominance can be reproduced in a way that seems natural or socially acceptable because of the norms that society puts in place, which is why there initially did not seem to be a problem with the lyrics to “Misery Business” when the song was released in 2007. The gender inequality reproduced by popular media does not imply that the artist is non-feminist, but rather exemplifies the institutionalized problem within western society that pushes people to conform to the sexual double standard. Williams ability to see the flaws in her song shows societal progression toward equality in terms of how society views sexual behavior. This recent decision challenges gender inequality, whereas the initial release of the song reproduced it. This is primarily due to feminist ideology and acknowledgment of the discourse.

Critical Discourse Analysis. Critical discourse analysts use models or artifacts to connect individual actions to society by interpreting their contribution to dominant discourse (Van Dijk, 1993). By examining these artifacts, critical discourse analysts can address how power abuse and discourse produces, reproduces, or challenges inequality (Van Dijk, 1993). A major component of critical discourse analysis is the explanation and critique of how dominant discourse influences knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies (Van Dijk, 1993). The ideology of power and dominance is generally sustained and reproduced by media (Van Dijk, 1993). Popular media and the people who produce it have social power, which creates “conditions of control over the minds of people, that is, the management of social representations” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 257). Additionally, by studying an artifact such as a piece of media, the analyst can see “how specific discourse structures determine specific mental processes, or facilitate the formation of specific social representations” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 259). Critical discourse analysis is also inherently feminist because it is inherently political. The aim of critical discourse analysis is “change through political understanding” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 252). Dominant discourse such as perceptions of women in media reproduces gender inequality: this discourse can be better understood through critical discourse analysis. Examining this discourse on both a detailed (micro) and broad (macro) level allows the analyst to understand the enactment of power as a form of dominance (Van Dijk, 1993).

Research Bias. Due to the political nature of critical discourse analysis, recognizing one's own biases is crucial. It is essential to note that the researcher is a white, heterosexual female in her early 20s and can only make her argument from this perspective. Additionally, due to critical discourse analysis' inherently activist and feminist role, it is also necessary to note that the researcher considers herself to be a feminist. The researcher maintains a critical view of slut-shaming and the sexual double standard because of her direct experience as a woman in western culture. The researcher has been exposed to the policing of female sexuality throughout her life, which gives her first-hand knowledge on how this behavior can be damaging to young women. This paper is based on how media and its creators have a large influence on perceptions of female sexuality, so it is essential for this research to come from a female's perspective.

Discussion

Slut-Shaming's Role in The Sexual Double Standard. In order to understand how the decision to stop playing "Misery Business" affects society, it is necessary to examine why the song is problematic in the first place, and how it emphasizes the dominant discourse. The song "Misery Business" includes overt slut-shaming. Since more stigma surrounds female sexual behavior than male sexual behavior, the use of slut-shaming in "Misery Business" emphasizes this stigmatization of women (Allison and Risman, 2013). Lines like "once a whore you're nothing more" serve as a way for Hayley Williams to degrade another woman based on her own perspective of that woman's behavior (Williams and Farro, 2007). Women policing each other's behavior through slut-shaming is seen as a form of internal oppression (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2014). Van Dijk (1993) says that when looking at how discourse reproduces inequality, the "social representations in the minds of social actors" needs to be examined (p. 251). As a female, Williams openly applies the sexual double standard by referring to another woman as a "whore," and creates a negative social representation of women (Williams and Farro, 2007).

Williams sings about how "she's got it out for me", but never mentions any actual proof that the woman in the song is promiscuous; however, it is insinuated that there is rivalry between the two over a man, and that the subject of the song is displaying some sort of behavior that is seen by Williams as deviant (Williams and Farro, 2007). Ultimately, Williams wins the competition between the two, and openly brags about it: "I never meant to brag, but I've gotten what I wanted now" (Williams and Farro, 2007). Williams also brags about stealing "it all away," and how if the other woman could do the same, then she would (Williams and Farro, 2007). Ultimately, the two women are exhibiting similar behavior in trying to win over a guy, but Williams chooses to slut-shame the other woman as a way to show dominance. Van Dijk comments on hierarchical power, saying that, "some members of dominant groups and organizations have a special role in planning, decision-making and control over the relations and processes of the enactment of power" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 225). When women slut-shame each other, they create a dominant group to show that they are better in some way, shape, or form than the others.

Williams uses slut-shaming to diminish another woman's innocence as a way to show that the subject of the song is somehow lesser than Williams because of her actions. The song implies that if a woman is a "whore" then she, therefore, no longer has a sense of innocence or purity (Williams and Farro, 2007). The use of this term is meant as an insult, which highlights the double standard that men should be rewarded for sexual behavior and women should be reprimanded for

sexual behavior (Crawford and Popp, 2003). The lyric “looking as innocent as possible to get to who they want,” insinuates that women need to be “innocent,” pure, or virginal in order to be attractive or to find a partner (Williams and Farro, 2007). This statement suggests that women should not participate in casual sex because it will make them less innocent, and indicates that women should comply with traditional gender roles. The use of slut-shaming can be potentially damaging to young women because it concedes to the ideas of the sexual double standard; therefore, inherently diminishing female power.

By viewing sexual behavior as shameful, lyrics in the song attempt to make its subject feel guilty because she, presumably, is engaging in behavior that is seen as socially unacceptable (Petersen and Hyde, 2011). Traditionally, women in western culture are seen as submissive and men are seen as powerful; this dynamic creates the sexual double standard that men are rewarded for engaging in sexual behaviors, while this same behavior is seen as taboo, or distasteful for women (Sanchez et al., 2012). Williams admits in an interview that she was “using words that didn’t belong in the conversation” (De Freitas and Williams, 2017). As mentioned by Armstrong and Hamilton (2014), slut-shaming is often based on how people perceive a woman’s behaviors as sexual, and not based on legitimate knowledge of her sexual activity. This dynamic takes away any sense of truth behind the word slut and diminishes its definition because of the vast amount of women who have been slut-shamed when they are not definitively sluts (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2014).

Hayley Williams's Influence. The way musicians frame women in their songs can create a social script for adolescents that reinforces the way they view sexuality in terms of gender roles and sexual stereotypes (Gunter, 2014). As one of the few female vocalists in the pop punk genre, and arguably the most successful in terms of listeners and fan base, Hayley Williams has a large amount of influence. The song “Misery Business” alone has over 183 million listens on Spotify, making it Paramore’s most played song (Spotify, 2018). Williams’s music serves as a platform for her to make a statement, whether that statement is intentional or not. Even though the intentions of the song “Misery Business” might not have been to oppress women, the use of slut-shaming in the lyrics does reinforce the stigmatization of women for their sexual activity.

Demoting women through media can be potentially damaging to young women because people like Williams are displaying dominance through social power. Van Dijk explains that dominance is “the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality” (Van Dijk, 1993, p.250). Due to her role as a famous musician, Williams is considered an elite, which inherently gives her social power. She reproduces gender inequality and the sexual double standard through slut-shaming in an extremely popular song. Media that promotes the social norm of submissive females and a sexual double standard also strongly influences its consumers’ perceptions of sexuality in a way that mirrors these norms (Bay-Cheng and Zucker, 2007). Due to her level of social control, Williams has the ability to manage social representations (Van Dijk, 1993). Adolescents who see Williams as a role model and listen to the song might experience a level of social learning about how to view women who exhibit sexual behavior (Ter Bogt et al., 2010). These adolescents might then use this as a social script to perpetuate the cycle of the sexual double standard and female oppression because the song chastises a woman for her sexual behavior. Ultimately, this perpetuates a cycle of female inequality.

Van Dijk (1993) explains that inequality is the result of power abuse; however, it is crucial to note that Williams was not intentionally trying to abuse her social power when writing the lyrics to “Misery Business.” Williams admits in a blogpost that the song was written from a “narrow-minded perspective” and that it was not intended to be a “big philosophical statement about anything” (2015). Williams did not intend to perpetuate the sexual double standard through slut-shaming, and she explains that the song was “a page in my diary about a singular moment I experienced as a high schooler” (2015). Williams was simply ignorant to the problems that slut-shaming poses on society. She was caught in the cycle of social oppression of women, and after self-reflection was she able to realize this.

Although lyrics in the song “Misery Business” promote the sexual double standard, Williams has far more social power in 2018 than she did in 2007: This is why the decision to stop playing the song live likely has far more impact on society than the song’s initial release. “Misery Business” has become a staple in the pop punk genre, so the choice to stop playing is extremely influential; Williams is taking a stand against slut-shaming by choosing to stop playing Paramore’s most popular song live, despite the potential financial risk she might take for this decision. By using her social power, Williams is playing a role in redefining the way derogatory terms like slut or whore are looked at. The choice to no longer play “Misery Business” live displays the progression toward one single sexual standard for both men and women; therefore, displaying Williams's personal growth and the growth of society. A decision like this one challenges inequality through her access to knowledge of the discourse (Van Dijk, 1993).

Feminism and Oppression. The use of slut-shaming can be deemed non-feminist because it takes away from female equality when it comes to sexual standards; however, this does not mean that Williams is therefore, anti-feminist or non-feminist (Feminism, n.d). At the point the song was released, Williams likely would have been considered a postfeminist by scholars because she experienced benefits from the women’s movement, like the ability to be considered a serious female musician, but did not advocate for political change (Aronson, 2003). In 2018, Williams would be considered a feminist by scholars because of her choice to stop playing “Misery Business” live; this choice shows active involvement in advocating for social equality between men and women when it comes to standards on sexual behavior. In a blog post, Williams explains that she is “a proud feminist” but “not a perfect one” (2015). Williams's feminist identification and positive association with the term feminism drastically impacts the actions that she takes.

On the surface level it may appear that lyrics in the song “Misery Business” are a problem rooted from Williams initial postfeminist mindset; however, when looking at western society as a whole, it is clear that the real problem is that songs like this one are the product of a culture that continuously oppresses women. Van Dijk explains that critical discourse analysis “does not always imply a clear picture of villains and victims” (1993, p. 255). This is a significant distinction, because if western culture continues to demonize women like Williams, then the broader problem will never truly be fixed. Williams and other artists should not be demonized for their ignorance, instead, it should be explained why their actions are problematic. Van Dijk explains that “dominance may be enacted and reproduced by subtle, routine, and everyday forms of text and talk that appear ‘natural’ and quite ‘acceptable’” (1993, p. 254). This is exactly the case in “Misery Business.” Since different forms of slut-shaming had been prominent in popular media, and the conversation about such forms of oppression were not as openly talked about at the time, artists like Williams fell into this

social norm because it seemed acceptable. In 2018, where people are far more vocal and open about this discourse, it is much easier to see that slut-shaming is a problem; this is presumably because of factors like social media, or personal blogging because these platforms offer the ability to spread messages quickly (Keller, 2015). Society, therefore, is progressing toward one single standard for sexual behavior because of people like Williams's and their ability to see the issues that things like slut-shaming presents. Recognizing the institutional problem in society that continues to reproduce inequality is a huge step toward eradicating the sexual double standard.

Acknowledgment and Growth. Despite the overt slut-shaming in the song, it is important to recognize that “Misery Business” was released in 2007, over eleven years ago. Societal views on the sexual standard have changed over time, and people (especially young adults) are beginning to be less accepting of the sexual double standard (Allison and Risman, 2013). Another major note is that Hayley Williams was also 17 years old when she wrote the song: this is a key factor when looking at not only William’s personal growth, but also societal growth. The conversation surrounding things like slut-shaming is becoming more prominent. The culture in 2018 versus the culture in 2007 is ultimately more accepting of female sexual behavior, and this is likely due to feminist ideology.

The song “Misery Business” was written on the album *Riot!*, which was all about rebellion and teenage angst (De Freitas and Williams, 2017). Williams explains that “we were just kids when *Riot!* came out. In fact, we were just kids for a long time after that” (De Freitas and Williams, 2017). The capacity to grasp how ignorance played into the creation of songs like “Misery Business” displays how, as a society, people often are influenced by their understanding of discourse. Van Dijk (1993) explains that “control of knowledge shapes our interpretation of the world, as well as our discourse and actions” (p.258). Williams's understanding of the sexual double standard and slut-shaming shapes the way she chooses to interpret this discourse now versus when she was ignorant to the subject:

I believe I was supposed to have written those backwards words and I was supposed to learn something from them... years later. It’s made me more compassionate toward other women, who maybe have social anxieties... and toward younger girls who are at this very moment learning to cope and to relate and to connect. We’re all just trying our damndest. It’s a lot easier when we have support and community with each other. Vulnerability helps lay the foundation for all that. (De Freitas and Williams, 2017)

Williams not only acknowledges the problem, but also acknowledges the importance of creating a community and culture where problems such as this are openly talked about. She recognizes the impact that demeaning lyrics can have on younger girls because they are trying to navigate through different aspects of life. Williams also acknowledges the importance of compassion and vulnerability, because without these things, people have no motivation to create positive change.

Williams's personal growth reflects how taking the time to understand the discourse in society can create a positive impact. Williams states that her new mission is essentially to “exemplify what it means to grow up, get information, and become any shade of ‘woke’” (De Freitas and Williams, 2017). Showing others that humans do make mistakes, but they can be learned from in a way that creates a positive effect, displays an immense amount of growth. Her recognition of societal flaws is apparent in the choice to stop playing “Misery Business” live in concert. In a sense, Williams, and the other members of Paramore, have come full circle; the real rebellion, or *riot*, was not the release of the album *Riot!*, but rather was the choice to stop playing “Misery Business” live.

The group, especially Williams, have a new knowledge about the discourse that surrounds female sexual behavior, and have chosen to quite literally rebel or riot against it by rejecting the song that seemed so definitive of their album *Riot!*. The rejection of such an influential song in their musical career displays complete awareness of the discourse that it emphasizes.

Acknowledging the issue with the song “Misery Business” and choosing to stop playing it live says a lot about Williams's growth as a musician and a feminist; thus, it parallels growth on a cultural level in terms of how the sexual double standard is viewed. Williams's personal recognition of the song's flaws is a crucial part of the growth process. When talking about the song in an interview, Williams explains that, “I was feeding into a lie that I'd bought into, just like so many other teenagers – and many adults – before me” (De Freitas and Williams, 2017). The “lie” that Williams is referring to is the sexual double standard that says it is okay to demonize women for sexual behavior (De Freitas and Williams, 2017). This is a part of the cycle of oppression of women that normalizes the demonization of women for sexual behavior, and Williams's recognition aids in moving toward breaking this cycle. Women in western society are often subject to so much scrutiny in media that it has become the norm. Displaying how this concept plays a role in such a popular song like “Misery Business” by the conscious choice to stop playing it makes a statement on how this norm is unacceptable.

Williams grew up in both Mississippi and Tennessee surrounded by her male family members' aggressive political beliefs (Dodson and Williams, 2018). Williams explains that “I wasn't even really old enough to know what they were talking about, but I knew it felt hostile” (Dodson and Williams, 2018). Negative male attitudes that emphasize the inequality of women are a factor in creating internalized oppression of women through slut-shaming (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2014). Like so many other women in western society, Williams experienced firsthand how negativity can create an unsettling energy, even when the topic might not revolve around female sexuality. It is key to recognize then, that it is not Williams's fault for writing the song, it is the fault of society for normalizing the slut-shaming of women.

Williams does take personal accountability for unintentionally putting this message into mainstream media, which is a huge step in the process of mending the problem, but she also wrote the song into a society where this is the norm. Due to her social power as a famous musician, this is a necessary step; Williams needed to identify her role in this problem in order to exemplify how internalized oppression works. By taking on the ideology of the dominant group when writing the song “Misery Business,” Williams unintentionally aided in the dominant discourse; however, by identifying how this is problematic, and choosing to stop playing the song, Williams challenges this discourse.

Concluding Thoughts

With a song as popular as “Misery Business,” many people will enjoy it without realizing that there is anything wrong with its lyrics: This is because the problem is not that artists like Hayley Williams are intentionally trying to emphasize the discourse on the sexual double standard, but rather that the song was written into a society where slut-shaming and traditional gender roles are the norm. Van Dijk explains that “power and dominance are usually organized and institutionalized” (1993, p. 255). Display of power and dominance through media are the result of societal ideologies that allow the acceptance of slut-shaming and sexual double standards. People in western society for

many years have been conditioned to this type of media that displays unintentionally toxic messages about female sexual behavior; therefore, “Misery Business” is not the problem, it is a result of the problem. Artists often create music that is a result of the dominant discourse in western culture. When writing the song, Williams fed into the discourse and social structure that maintains female inequality; however by choosing to stop playing “Misery Business” live, her and the band Paramore challenged the faulty system that continues to oppress women.

Slut-shaming in media perpetuates the sexual double standard and displays abuse of social power by media creators. Although this is a prominent problem in western media, as displayed by songs like “Misery Business,” society is progressing and moving away from such damaging ideologies. The purpose of this paper is not to criticize Williams for using slut-shaming in a song, but to recognize her for understanding of the song’s flaws and challenging the dominant discourse. Using her social power for social good displays her growth and understanding on the topic, which is likely the result of a more understanding society when it comes to female sexual behaviors.

If all artists/media creators were able to show the same level of vulnerability, and were able to grow from their mistakes, then the social script for adolescents would be far less damaging. People with influence need to recognize the power they have and how this power, if misused, can reproduce inequality. Williams explains that “I don’t think that any of us [as artists] are exempt from the weight that has been put on us, the responsibility that has been put on us to help push us forward and create healthy change” (Dodson and Williams, 2018). As media producers, and as human beings in general, people have a social responsibility to consciously understand societal discourse. Media creators need to focus on creating positive images of females in their work in order to move away from the gender double standard when it comes to sexual behavior. Additionally, scholars need to continue to have the conversation about how different media and different behaviors reproduce gender inequality in order to aid in the identification and eradication of these problems. Actions of social figures, like Hayley Williams in the choice to stop playing “Misery Business,” serve as a learning point for everyone on how identification of a problem is the first step to solving it.

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