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WOMEN IN AMERICAN POP MUSIC:  
CHRISTINA AGUILERA'S IMPACT ON CULTURAL NARRATIVES

by

Chin Wai (Rosie) Wong  
2022

An honors thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies

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## **Abstract**

Pop music as a mainstream medium is often more enjoyed than critically studied. Former studies and literatures point out a major issue that many American female pop music artists face. These artists are often confined in a box that reduces their full human-being attributes to a narrowed view, where their identity is portrayed in a diminishing and inaccurate way. Despite this narrowed narrative of what a woman should be, this box has become a norm that many female artists must adhere to in order to achieve mainstream success. This paper responds to this phenomenon by analyzing Christina Aguilera's music, spanning from 1999 to 2018, to understand the cultural narratives of her music in response to the findings in literature. This paper argues that Aguilera's music explores multi-dimensional aspects of life and womanhood, challenging the limited portrayal of women in the mainstream music industry. With a focus on lyrics, this paper identifies five themes and examines the cultural relevance of these themes in her music, including (1) romance and love, (2) introspection of vulnerability, (3) gratitude for support, (4) empowerment, and (5) sexual liberation. These themes are culturally relevant in a way that they challenge and reach beyond the dominant narrative of womanhood, by offering a view that captures women's multi-dimensional identities and experiences.

*Keyword:* culture, pop music, America, female artists, Christina Aguilera, womanhood

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## **Women in American Pop Music: Christina Aguilera's Music Speaks Volumes**

Born at the cross of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, I grew up listening to American pop music. Besides learning English as my second language at school, I also learned some American expressions through pop music, which I would not be able to learn from textbooks. While taking in the musical sound and American language, I was also consciously and subconsciously taking in the content of the music. It was not until recently that I started contemplating on the meanings and social implications of pop music. I began to wonder what the artists sang about, why I identified with certain artists, and why certain songs become so successful that they transcended geographical boundaries. I could not help thinking if American pop music has had such a gigantic influence on me as an individual, what effect could it have on our culture?

These inquiries can be easily omitted when people enjoy the rhythm and the beat so much that they do not ask the meaning of the song or the reason why an artist becomes famous, nor do they question the song's value or certain stardom in relation to the social context. Pop music as one of the major pop culture manufacturers has penetrated many people's lives, bringing real-life impacts. On a more surface level, pop music is a way for the general public to entertain themselves and to learn what is trendy. Pop artists often make a living out of their presence in the industry, through their looks and/or talent, by expressing themselves and by responding to the social environment. Besides the joy and expression pop music brings, it also carries multiple forms and layers of messages.

Therefore, it is a media scholar's goal to identify, analyze, and interpret these meanings to start understanding a culture. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that this research started out from the researcher's admiration for Christina Aguilera. However, this paper aims to analyze her music through a scholarly perspective and a systemic research process. The goal of this paper is

to understand the cultural narratives represented by the themes in Christina Aguilera's music and its cultural relevance in relation to womanhood. This paper encompasses a background section that provides a general overview of American pop culture and music. It is followed by a section of cultural theories and literature review that aims to pave the way for the primary research of Aguilera's lyrics through a qualitative content analysis. In the discussion section, the cultural narratives in Christina Aguilera's music are compared with the cultural narratives found in the literature review.

Current research finds that the dominant themes of Aguilera's music are (1) romance and love, (2) introspection of vulnerability, (3) gratitude for support, (4) empowerment, and (5) sexual liberation. The theme of (4) empowerment is in opposition to the dominant cultural narrative of the objectification of women which identifies women as passive, powerless, and inferior. Additionally, her lyrics deal with the other themes mentioned, focusing on the identity of females and capturing various aspects of life one would experience. This, on a cultural level, portrays women as active agents of their own life. The themes identified from her lyrics are culturally relevant, as they not only challenge the narrowed narrative that the mainstream pop music industry imposes on women, but they also expand the view of womanhood and offer alternative narratives for the audience to relate to.

## **Pop Culture**

From a theoretical perspective, popular culture has many definitions. Different schools of thought see popular culture in a different light. For example, some believe it is the inferior leftover culture that does not meet the standards of the high culture, yet some argue that there is no high or low culture, and that popular culture is a part of a true culture (Storey, 2018). In spite of the divergence concerning what it is, popular culture is marked by its popularity among a

majority of people, iconicity of its place and time, and omnipresence in a variety of forms, such as television, advertising, and popular music (Delaney, 2007).

Understanding popular culture allows people to understand the social context and development of a culture. The rise of popular culture is attributed to the industrialization and urbanization in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which allowed people to move into bigger cities and paved the way for greater social diversity (Delaney, 2007). Meanwhile, the rising media technologies provided this heterogeneous condition that led to mass production and, therefore, mass consumption (Delaney, 2007). This means that what is produced in popular culture is a large number of homogenous, standardized products, which are meant to be consumed by a large number of people (Storey, 2018). As media technologies developed, with its omnipresence and people's reliance on media, popular culture has been merged with media culture (Leavy & Trier-Bieniek, 2014). In other words, mass media and popular culture go hand in hand, and to understand popular culture, it is critical to understand the way mass media delivers the messages of popular culture to the people.

As a major cultural manufacturer, the United States has been the leader of global media (Herman & McChesney, 1997). With its strength and ambition, The United States did not limit its potential to geographical boundaries, but it extended its influence overseas, taking up a major part in the global media system (Herman & McChesney, 1997; McChesney, 2001). Over time, the cultural influences produced and imposed by the few major media firms in the U.S. spread throughout the world due to its "naturalness" and "inevitableness" (Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Herman & McChesney, 1997, p. 35). Granted, globalization allows local cultural artifacts to be shared on an international landscape. However, the influence and the scope of these cultural artifacts differ, as some are more far-reaching than others. In other words, globalization in

essence has the potential to push one form of cultural narrative as the dominant narrative on a global level, which can be seen as a form of “cultural imperialism” by the United States, through cultural artifacts that spread and normalize the “heavy American accent” (Herman & McChesney, 1997, p. 40). The way the ideologies are spread widely and intensely is accredited to the media system.

### **Popular and Pop Music**

One major industry that carries such sweeping influence is the music industry. Popular music as one of the main carriers of popular discourse shares the characteristics of popular culture – its popularity, iconicity, and omnipresence. More specifically, popular music is marked by its affordability, high-accessibility, ephemerality, and its commercially driven and entertaining nature (Chin, 1990; Cunningham, 2021). Popular music saturates a society with elements like images, lyrics, sounds, as well as ideologies that both reflect and shape a certain culture. Therefore, popular music is a product, as well as a constituent, of a culture.

It has been a common phenomenon that popular music and pop music are used interchangeably in daily conversations. “Pop” is abbreviated “popular,” but there is a difference between these two terms. Popular music encompasses a variety of music that is popular among people, such as R&B, hip-hop, rap, rock, and heavy metal (Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Errey, n.d.). Comparatively, pop music is “the genre of popular music that produces the most hits,” and the hits depend on the commercial popularity of the music (Errey, n.d.). This means pop music is also marked by its commercial nature, its target of the mass audience, its repeated and easy-to-remember patterns and hooks in the music that keep listeners’ attention, and its approximate two-to-five-minute length of each song (Errey, n.d.; Lamb, 2018; Wagner, 2016). One of the most important reasons that pop music is so memorable can be attributed to its repetitive patterns. As

Jean (2020) described, the simplicity and repetition of patterns, lyrics, and rhythms in pop music are designed to appeal to the nature of human brains, which explains the catchy characteristic of pop songs. In addition, pop music is recorded to be louder than other genres (Jean, 2020), which is another attribute of pop songs that aims to appeal to a wide range of audiences. Besides the sound, the content of most pop music is centered around common topics and social trends (Official.FM, n.d.), which accounts for the popularity and relatability between the music and the audience. Echoing Currans-Sheehan's (2009) claim, the popularity of cultural artifacts, such as pop music or pop stars, is a reflection of the mass's attitude and values.

### **American Pop Music and Artists**

With its dominant role in the global media, the American entertainment industry cannot be mentioned without its pop music. American pop music has been the leader of the pop music industry, attested by the dominance of the music charts by American pop music, its ability to “transcend language barriers,” as well as the fact that genres such as hip-hop and R&B are being copied by other countries to replicate success (Hennessy, 2014). This is, no doubt, attributed to America's ongoing innovation in sounds and genres, more affordable and accessible music media, and the development of Music Television (MTV) in the 1980s, which mainly promoted American artists (Hennessey, 2014).

In addition to music styles, American pop artists are so widely recognized that they became decade-defining figures. In 1980s, Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Whitney Houston dominated the popular music industry (Myers, 2016). And in the 1990s, the surge of teen pop brought pop bands such as Spice Girls and Backstreet Boys, as well as individual artists like Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, whose influence continued in the following decade (Joubert, 2020; Myers, 2016; University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2010).

At the turn from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the dominating genres included rap, hip-hop, R&B, and electronic sound (Christenson et al., 2019; Myers, 2016). The popular themes in this period were concerned with romantic relationships, straight-forward sexual references, joyous activities like dancing and partying, luxurious lifestyles, and substance use such as drugs and alcohol (Christenson et al., 2019). What was also prominent was the disrespect for female artists, such as misogynistic and hateful white rap represented by Eminem and Limp Bizket (Miller, 2008). That period was a hard time for female artists, but overtime, the industry saw more powerful presence from many influential female artists.

### **Cultural Studies Theories**

This paper aims to examine the cultural narratives in American female pop music artists' work by applying cultural studies approaches. Cultural studies are “a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice” that renders knowledge of relations in society (Barker, 2011, p. 5). Multiple theories allow scholars to investigate certain cultural artifacts through multiple angles. One can understand cultural texts in a more holistic way by combining these theoretical perspectives. The following paragraphs discuss the idea of power through the theories of Marxism and hegemony and provide guidance on the analysis of media texts through structuralism and semiotics. These theoretical perspectives are used to help understand pop music stardom and female pop artists' music respectively in the later part of the paper.

#### **Power and Meaning**

Marxism as a major cultural studies theory can be used to analyze the production of meaning in media texts. In the core of Marxism stands the power difference between the dominant group and the subordinate group (Barker, 2011; Muravchik, 2002; Wayne, 2003b). Not

only does the dominant group own the products produced by the subordinate group, the laborers, but they also possess the laborers, the means of production. Therefore, what the people from the subordinate group do defines who they are. This relation can be seen in the same light as the commodification of the laborers. Commodification is “the process ... by which objects, qualities and signs are turned into commodities” to be purchased or consumed (Barker, 2011, p. 12). Due to “the human propensity to internalize the institutional norms and expectations which structure our action” (as cited in Wayne, 2003a, p. 28), the subordinate group often follows the dominant narrative set by the dominant group. This has led to the concept of cultural industry, in which cultures are produced like industrial factory items through the process of commodification, mass-production, and standardization (Durham & Kellner, 2009; Wayne, 2003a).

In addition to Marxism, social power cannot be discussed without Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Hegemony is “the moral and intellectual lead of the dominant classes” (as cited in Wayne, 2003b, p178) that is willingly accepted by the subordinate classes (Storey, 2019). What is accepted is ideology, a body of ideas that is upheld by a group of people, that is carried through some form of manifestation and has social implications and impacts on real-life practices (Storey, 2019). Though different schools of thoughts define the term ideology in different lights, this general, compressed definition should describe the main ideas of ideology. In this light, power is partly yielded by the dominant class through concessions for the subordinate classes to willingly submit their consent to the ideology, and at the same time fulfills the dominant group’s capitalist interests (Wayne, 2003b).

Understanding the relationship between power and meaning through Marxism and hegemony theory provides a theoretical framework to analyze relevant literature. Accordingly, the commodified and standardized dominant cultural narrative and the participatory

manipulation, also known as partipulation, are used as references to analyze the way women are represented in the American pop music industry.

## **Language and Meaning**

Structuralism is another major cultural theory that offers a set of guidance in understanding the meaning in media texts. Based on the structuralist main concept, language shapes people's social reality, and one can understand language through a series of structures (Storey, 2019). Language itself has a structure, and it is the structure that allows meanings to be generated (Storey, 2019). The structure involves aspects that can create different meanings, such as the selection of words and the relationship between words, which play a key role in the meaning-generating process (Storey, 2019; Wayne, 2003b).

The principle in making sense of language is Saussure's linguistic model of the signifier, the signified, and the sign. The signifier is a medium that can be identified through human senses, such as a word, an image, or a sound; the signified is the meaning of the word or the concept that the signifier indicates (Storey, 2019; Wayne, 2003b). By combining the signifier and the signified, a sign is formed, which represents the real thing – the referent (Storey, 2019; Wayne, 2003b). The sense-making process is said to be “purely conventional” (as cited in Wayne, 2003b, p.157), meaning that the connection between the signifier and the signified is a construct that allows people to make sense of knowledge and meaning through “shared cultural codes” (Storey, 2019, p. 121; Wayne, 2003b).

This model is furthered by scholar Roland Barthes, who proposed the polysemic nature of signs, meaning that a sign can have multiple meanings and can be interpreted in different ways (Storey, 2019). In Barthes' *Mythologies*, he created a series of structures of language, using “denotation” of signs to stand for their primary significance, and “connotation” for their

secondary significance (Storey, 2019; Wayne, 2003b). He noted that the connotation of signs lies in the process of consumption through the “existing cultural repertoire” (Storey, 2019, p. 121), which sheds light on the cultural context of knowledge. Therefore, media texts can produce different meanings depending on different people’s interpretations according to their different backgrounds.

Referencing the social context and relations is involved in Barthes’ semiotics and the post-structuralist theory; however, social context is absent in Saussure’s structuralist view, as it focuses only on the language itself (Wayne, 2003b), and therefore denies the fluidity of meanings. Regardless of their differences, this paper appreciates the thorough analytical structure in Saussure’s structuralism and aims to utilize Barthes’ two-fold structure of significance to analyze music lyrics while considering their social context. This helps produce a more holistic understanding of contemporary media texts.

### **Literature Review**

Media advancement not only allows for the proliferation of the quantity of texts but also the forms of texts. In addition to words and images, what can also be studied as sources of meanings are pop stars. Kooijman (2013) conducted an in-depth content analysis on the song “We Are the World” and extrapolated the embedded American ideologies of democracy, consumerism, and universalism (Kooijman, 2013). Kooijman’s (2013) analysis not only focused on the lyrics, the production process, and the social practice of the song, but it also emphasized the significant role the stars played in this song. The message of “We Are the World” was meant to be consumed across borders, and therefore with the star power such as Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen, the stars became a global medium that delivered and amplified these cultural values as the universal truth with an American core. As stars can be analyzed as texts in relation

to their work, this also applies to female pop stars, who are seen as commodities that are branded, sold, and consumed (Barker, 2011; Lieb, 2019). They are living carriers of ideologies, or cultural narratives, to establish current cultural norms and desires.

One way pop artists manage to establish certain cultural narratives is through their images. Even though music is originally created for the ears, with the rise of MTV in the 1980s, music now is also consumed with eyes, in which the images of female artists become significantly crucial to their success in the industry (Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Miller, 2008). One pervasive theme in women's representation in pop music is the sexualization of women. And one major key to their career success is their sexualized images (Caputi, 2014; Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Jhally, 1995; Jhally, 2007; Miller, 2008; Sullivan & McHugh, 2009). Sut Jhally, a media scholar and professor of communications at the University of Massachusetts, pointed out that female sexualization is not inherently wrong or negative, but the point is to probe what is shown, or consumed, and what is not (Jhally, 1990; Jhally, 2007; Sullivan & McHugh, 2009).

Since images become a dominating cultural narrative, in which appearances matter more than substances, the star's imagery power has greatly displaced their talent (Caputi, 2014; Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Jhally, 1990). Sut Jhally devotes much of his research on advertisement and argues that imaged-based advertisements are efficient and powerful in telling people what they should look for in life, and advertisements are designed to provide a solution to fulfill people's values and desires through an act of purchase or consumption (Jhally, 1990). In his documentaries *Dreamworlds 1* (Jhally, 1995) and *Dreamworlds 2* (Jhally, 2007), pop music videos are seen as an equivalence of image-based advertisements that sell stories filled with ideologies, and these ideologies aim to perpetuate the culture with one monopolizing form of cultural narrative. This monopolizing cultural narrative normalizes female sexualized images.

Literature and previous studies were examined, and five major patterns of cultural narratives were identified to understand the way women and female artists are represented in media. The patterns discussed in the following paragraphs include I. Objectification through the Male Gaze, II. Commodification of Sexual and Youthful Image, III. Transformation of Sexuality, IV. Beyond Sexuality, and V. Diverse Identities of Female Artists.

### **I. Objectification through the Male Gaze**

One major cultural narrative embedded in the American pop music industry is the objectification of women through the male gaze. What is shown is the sexualization of women through the male perspective that objectifies women. Objectification is defined as the process in which “people are viewed as objects existing solely for the pleasure of the viewer, rather than as agents capable of action” (Palczewski et al., 2018). In music, objectification is marked by the idea that women are reduced to mere body parts – such as breasts, hips, and legs – to be viewed panoramically and in great details, that women’s bodies are objects that arouse men’s sexual interests, and that women’s existence is to solely please men in a sexual way (Jhally, 1995; Jhally, 2007; Sullivan & McHugh, 2009). Moreover, because women are severely objectified, they are deprived of subjectivity, and thus become dehumanized, soulless, empty on the inside, and desperate for men’s attention that gives women life (Jhally, 1995; Jhally, 2007; Sullivan & McHugh, 2009).

Women are not only objectified by males but also by themselves. This self-objectification is a result of people “[internalizing] the objectifier’s view of their body and ‘[participating] in their own objectification’” (as cited in Palczewski et al., 2018). This resonates with Gramsci’s theory of hegemony which posits that people consent to the dominant narrative. In the case of pop music, women not only see themselves as sexual objects in the same way the dominant male

viewers do, but they also internalize that being sexual objects is their only value, submitting themselves to the way their male counterparts see them. Such objectification and passiveness became the dominant cultural narrative of women in pop music, who are treated and act as objects, which resonates with the Marxist idea of the way laborers are defined by their labor, and, therefore, do not exist outside of their labor. This understanding paved the way for the commodification of women.

## **II. Commodification of Sexual and Youthful Images**

Commodification is another dominant cultural narrative of female artists. It is the next level of objectification, meaning that female artists become products to be consumed by others, especially their images. Pop music, like pop culture in general, is a commercially driven industry that sells products to the masses to gain profit (Chin, 1990). What is sold is women's identity as sexual objects and their inability to live without men. These selling points become what define them in the market. In other words, women need to feed into these narratives in order to survive in the industry. Therefore, this commodifying cultural narrative posits that female artists' sexual images are more valued than their musical achievement. Many female artists recognize that their sexual images are the staples in their musical career if they want to become successful.

Therefore, they willingly participate in this dominant narrative by selling their sexual images to fulfill, what Sut Jhally (2007) called, the "pornographic imagination" of men, which aligns with the idea of participation in which women participate in their own manipulation.

Not only do many female artists feed into this narrowed narrative of what it takes to be a popular female artist, but they also need to manage their image. Image management is not an easy task. Especially in the case of sexual images, it is extremely difficult to reverse a female star's bad girl image back to a good girl image, and if the star image is not strategically managed,

the bad girl image can lead to an end of their music career (Lieb, 2019). Therefore, once a female artist claims their sexual image, there is not much lenient mobility in their image management. Rather, the path of their star image is likely to become even narrower.

In addition to sexual images, the idea of female's youth is commodified. Unlike male artists like Bruce Springsteen and the Rolling Stone who are still popular in their sixties, female artists are more commercially valued for their youthful images (Caputi, 2014; Currans-Sheehan, 2009). Lieb called the career of female pop artists "high-risk investments" (as cited in Caputi, 2014, p. 439), because the dominant narrative posits their career around their youthful images accompanied by invigorated looks and in-shape bodies, which is closely related to their highly sexualized images. Combining the idea of sexuality and youth, artists like Mariah Carey, Christina Aguilera, Jessica Simpson, and Miley Cyrus participated in a series of displays throughout their career – a transformation from their initially innocent images to their highly sexualized ones (Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Jhally, 2007; McClary & Warwick, 2019).

### **III. Transformation of Sexuality**

The sexual transformation of female pop artists is identified as a form of cultural narratives. It can be analyzed based on different degrees, including "the good girl," "the temptress," and "the whore," which represents "a life cycle" many female pop artists go through (Lieb, 2019). Some artists started their music career when they were young, and their images often reflect "the good girl" label which emphasizes the notion of virginity and socially expected femininity (Lieb, 2019). As "the good girl" label represents a phase for female artists who have not entered adulthood, this label can be temporary. For example, Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears started their music career in the Micky Mouse Club as teen pop stars in the late 1990s (Lieb, 2019). In spite of the good girl label that draws attention away from womanhood, they are

sexualized in another way through, in Levande's words (2008, p. 308), "kiddie porn." Britney Spears, for example, built her career on her innocent teenage image while appearing in a catsuit in "Oops!... I Did It Again" and in a school uniform in "...Baby One More Time." It is the notion of virginity that alludes to the possible imagination of breaking such purity, the interpretation of seduction, and thus the root of sexualization (Levande, 2008).

The temporary good girl mold may persist, as it is a blurred line between the implied and blatant sexualization that excites the public. However, it is not uncommon that female pop music artists break their own mold by furthering their sexual appeal in their careers. Lieb (2019) identified different degrees of sexual display of female pop music artists, including "the temptress" and "the whore." "The temptress" is suggestive, of a lesser degree of sexual appeal, often marked by females' revealing clothing and provocative posture on media platforms (Lieb, 2019). "The whore" is signified by the selling of overt sexual appeal that does not shy away from social judgment (Lieb, 2019). By taking further the idea of "the temptress" and "the whore," women are often objectified and are portrayed as passive and materialistic, whose performance reinforces the patriarchal ideology that normalizes the dominance of men and the submissiveness of women (Cooper, 1999; Miller, 2008; Moody, 2011; Viljoen, 2014). The phenomenon of negative portrayal of women was common in rap music, and was pushed to an extreme in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, led by misogynist white rap by singers such as Limp Bizket and Eminem (Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Miller, 2008). That is also the time when female pop stars such as Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera came into the public's view with their transformation from teenage to adulthood (McClary, 2000).

#### **IV. Beyond Sexuality**

Cultural narratives that go beyond sexuality are identified. Despite the narrowed way in which women are portrayed in mainstream pop music, female artists express their definition as a woman and a human being, while breaking the homogenous form of what women are. Many female artists demonstrate they are more than a sexual image, defying the objectification of women perpetuated by the dominant narrative. Granted, despite expressing powerful ideas in their music, female pop artists rarely escape from the “pornographic imagination” but continue to sell their sexual images through their music, which Jhally (2007) called a “strange paradox.” But in this case, the women’s sexuality is used as a mechanism to establish and reinforce their power. They take on a dominant and powerful role in expressing themselves, showing that they can take ownership of their identity and yield power over men.

Pop music as a powerful medium transforms the way people express and share ideas, and therefore many pop artists incorporate empowering messages in their music. Artists such as Ani DiFranco, Lupe Fiasco, Beyonce, Silvia Droste, Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Alicia Keys employ their talent in music to establish and amplify empowering messages to their audience (Araüna et al., 2017; Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Trier-Bieniek & Pullum, 2014; Viljoen, 2014). Madonna, as one of the most inspirational figures in the music industry, paved the way for the following generations in empowering women through stardom. In her music and image, even though the traditional presentation of femininity exists, Madonna blatantly fights against the stereotypical submissive image of women and advocates for female empowerment (Viljoen, 2014). In the music video “Living for Love,” Madonna presented herself as a matador, taking over the male-dominated role and dominating men dressed as bulls (Araüna et al., 2017). In “Material Girl,” Madonna showed that a female with feminine traits can control her own life without men

(Viljoen, 2014). Similar to Madonna, Lady Gaga challenges traditional gender representations by displaying gender fluidity in her music (Amakoh, 2020; Viljoen, 2014).

Female pop artists are looked up to as inspirations because of their powerful image. These stars, with their confidence and power, become role models for consumers, especially among young people, to emulate in their daily lives, such as by dressing and acting like these stars (Collie & Irwin, 2013). Additionally, these stars and their work become a symbol of female empowerment that drives social and cultural change. This recognition and following support by fans paves the way for diva worship in society (Lister, 2001). These stars become deified, as they carry messages that fans identify with and represent the dreams their fans project on them (Lister, 2001). Since the root of divafication of female pop artists lies in female empowerment, Lister (2001) argued that the phenomenon of divafication will thrive if the movement of female empowerment persists. Therefore, the practice of divafication exemplifies the power female pop music artists have in the industry.

To understand female stars in the pop music industry, one needs to face the fact that their images are highly sexualized, not only by other people in the industry and media in general, but also by the stars themselves. Even though the top female pop artists go through the stage of “the good girl” before becoming “the temptress” and/or “the whore,” their good girl label implies the potential of being inherently impure. Although many female artists do not escape their sexual images, they can turn the narrative from a passive stereotype to a more active stance. Despite the overcasting sexualization of female pop artists, one needs to realize that not all of them build their music career based on these rigid molds, nor do they need to be publicly sexy to survive in the industry. Artists like Alicia Keys, Evanescence, and Norah Jones are primarily known for their musical talent rather than their sexy image (Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Levande, 2008). Even

those who were known for their “temptress” or “whore” label are able to break the mold by establishing a new definition for themselves.

## **V. Diverse Identities of Female Artists**

The cultural narrative of female artists’ diverse identities is identified. Female pop stars’ public image becomes their brand, and therefore, their image shapes who they are in the public arena. Granted, many female pop stars are known more for their consumable image than their work, but female pop artists are also evaluated based on their talent across areas. Several types of modern female pop music stars were identified by Lister (2001), the first of which are the innovators.

The innovators refer to stars who are primarily known for their strategy of innovating themselves to stay relevant in the modern entertainment industry, such as Madonna, Courtney Love, and Tori Amos (Lister, 2001). Madonna is known for her strategy of re-inventing herself. As a living example of the age-defiant warrior, she does so by relying a majority part of her career on her display of sexual power and by flaunting her invigorated looks and in-shape body (Caputi, 2014; McClary & Warwick, 2019). Madonna seizes the chance to stay relevant with her youthful and sexualized images to gain profit by catering to this demand in the market (hooks, 1997). Another strategy Madonna uses for self-reinvention is taking on different social roles outside of the music industry, such as becoming a wife and a mother, moving to Europe, and writing books (Caputi, 2014).

Paralleled to the innovators are the “prima divas” and the “Liliths.” Prima divas are primarily known for their vocal talents, such as Whitney Houston, Tina Turner, Mariah Carey, and Celine Dion (Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Lister, 2001). Exemplified by Silvia Droste’s rendition of *Black Coffee*, music artists can give new meanings to a piece of music with their voice

(Viljoen, 2014). The Liliths refer to versatile female artists with the ability of singing and songwriting among other musical skills, such as Patti Smith and Alicia Keys, who create their own identity apart from what the mainstream dictates what female artists are supposed to be (Currans-Sheehan, 2009; Lister, 2001). Alicia Keys, for example, as a writer and producer, incorporates feminist messages and tackles social and political issues in her music, rather than selling and re-selling the unitary narrative of women's sexuality (Currans-Sheehan, 2009).

These three categories – the innovators, the prima divas, and the Liliths – are not mutually exclusive, as some artists are able to present themselves in a way that incorporates their diverse talents to remain prominent throughout a lengthy period of time. The point being made is that women in the music industry are owning their power to create their own stories through their work. One of these women is American pop artist Christina Aguilera.

### **The Multidimension of Christina Aguilera**

Among the 2000's pop sensational figures in American pop music industry is singer-songwriter Christina Aguilera, a five-time Grammy winner, who is widely known for her big voice and self-expression through music (Biography, n.d.; Grammy, n.d.; Powell, 2012). Known as the "prima diva," the "Lilith," and the "innovator," she has been active in the public sphere for more than two decades. Throughout her career, her unique vocal talent and dual identity as a singer-songwriter have marked her as one of the pop music icons. Aguilera constantly re-discovers and re-invents herself, making statements in her work and being unapologetic for her multi-dimensional identity as a woman. Her ambition is fully expressed as she told Rolling Stone in 1999, "I always want to shock people, throughout my career. Like Madonna" (He, 2018).

Influenced by her musical mother, Aguilera held a strong passion in music and was known for her big voice since she was young (Biography, n.d.). Aguilera started her career as a Mouseketeer performing on “The All New Mickey Mouse Club” with other teen stars, including Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, Ryan Gosling, and Keri Russell (Biography, n.d.). In 1998, Aguilera debuted the soundtrack of the Walt Disney film *Mulan* at the concert festival Lilith Fair and signed with RCA Records, a record label of Sony Music (Biography, n.d.). In 1999, she released her self-titled album *Christina Aguilera* featuring her teen pop image, which sold more than 8 million copies and earned her a Grammy Award for the Best New Artist in 2000 (Biography, n.d.).

As one of the lead teen pop stars, Aguilera did not confine her musical path to her early teen image. Released in 2002, her second album *Stripped* advocates for feminine power and freedom with her highly sexualized image and new stage name “Xtina” (Biography, n.d.; He, 2018; Lindner, 2017). Despite the fact that *Stripped* sold more than 4 million copies, her new image was a shock to the public and was followed by “unwarranted feuds,” as Lindner called it, from the media and other pop music singers such as Fred Durst and Eminem (Biography, n.d.; Lindner, 2017). Aguilera was unapologetic of her transformation, as it is a deliberate departure from her early teen image, which she calls a “cookie-cutter sweetheart...without it being [her]” (Lindner, 2017). Her firm attitude was fully expressed in her music, and she was ready for the quest to establish her new image and to fight for who she was. Like other artists, Aguilera’s feminist identity and her sexual image are not mutually exclusive. She managed to further her sexual image as an expression of her truth in a dominant way. In *Stripped*, she called out the double standard between men and women in society and encouraged young women to embrace their power and growth, unashamed of her bold sexual display (Giles, 2017).

The icon went onto another era with her new look and music style in following years. After her marriage with record producer Jordan Bratman in 2005, Aguilera released her album *Back to Basics* in 2006, featuring jazz and soul music from the 1920s through 1940s and paying tribute to her musical inspirations such as Marvin Gaye, Etta James, Billie Holiday, and John Coltrane (Biography, n.d.; He, 2018). *Back to Basics* is Aguilera's "most exhausting" album, both musically and visually. It features her vocal acrobatics in nearly every song, and her iconic "Heeeeyyyyyy" became part of her identity as an artist with strong vocals (He, 2018). In parallel to her retro music style, she also adopted a classic Jean Harlow look with pinup style and iconic red lipstick and was nicknamed "Baby Jane" during that period (Biography, n.d.; He, 2018).

Aguilera continued to be inspired by her new identities in her music. In 2008, Aguilera gave birth to her first child Max, whom she shared with record producer Jordan Bratman from her previous marriage (Wood, 2015). This new mother identity was incorporated into her album *Bionic* in 2010, along with a number of bold choices including her hypersexualized image. *Bionic* as a bold experiment incorporated electronic edged sound and collaborations between Aguilera and other top artists, such as Tricky Stewart, Ester Dean, Nicki Minaj, Polow da Don, Ladytron, Le Tigre, Santigold, Peaches, and Sia Furler (Alexander, 2012; Biography, n.d.; Lansky, 2012; Powell, 2012). "Bionic to me is the definition of the superhuman abilities we as women have in everyday life," said Aguilera (Wood, 2015). Despite the fact that it was ranked top of the chart in the UK and US, it was more of an instantaneous sensation that faded out of public attention fairly quickly (Megarry, n.d.), unlike her previous albums. Aguilera confessed that "there's some rebellion to it" (Wood, 2015), and "it was ahead of its time" (Alexander, 2012; Lansky, 2012; Megarry, n.d.). From another perspective, Megarry (n.d.) identified *Bionic* as an album suffered from a clash between Aguilera's original artistic vision and her label

RCA's commercially driven ambition of keeping pace with the trend (Vena, 2010). Rather than a profound success, *Bionic* was not received as positively as her previous albums. In addition, she was going through a divorce and was exposed to extensive accusations such as that she was a copycat of Lady Gaga who then was a new-rising pop icon (Vena, 2010). However, a decade later, *Bionic* became more appreciated by fans, especially in the LGBTQ+ community (Megarry, n.d.).

In the face of the setback in her career and personal life, Aguilera expressed her unyielding attitude in her music. Her next studio album *Lotus* made its debut in 2012, featuring themes of “rebirths and comebacks” (He, 2018), as symbolically paralleled to the album cover of Aguilera rising from a lotus flower (Powell, 2012). One way to acknowledge her comeback is her presence on the reality show *The Voice* (Anderson, 2019). *Lotus* received mixed reviews (Powell, 2012). Commercially, *Lotus* was not a hit album, as it sold less than 73,000 copies (Montgomery, 2012). However, in comparison with the “polarizing [experimentalist]” *Bionic*, it “[sounds] safe” (Powell, 2012).

Though *Bionic* and *Lotus* did not mark the decade as her early albums did in the 2000s, Aguilera continued to create music after she formed a new family with fiancé Mathew Rutler and second child Summer Rain Rutler (Biography, n.d.). In 2018, Aguilera released her latest English studio album *Liberation* as a way to find her true self. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, Aguilera discussed her responsibility as a mother taking care of two children and her definition of musical expression (Stack, 2018). “This album just encouraged me to get back to my truth and things that felt real and that little girl that was truly passionate about music in the first place before the business of it swallows you up whole,” as she told Entertainment Weekly,

“... at the end of the day my passion and soul and integrity speak volumes more than just the material items” (Stack, 2018).

### **Her Voice Speaks Volumes**

Christina Aguilera is widely known for her highly sexualized image in the entertainment industry. In terms of the image management discussed earlier, she is also a rare survivor of the reversal from the bad girl image to the good girl image, not that she returned to her teenage *Mouseketeer* image, but that she created a new image away from her blatantly “dirty” (resonating with her single “Dirty” from her album *Stripped*) expression by becoming a mother in real life and a coach on *The Voice* (Lieb, 2019). Taking on a new role in society and in the industry, Aguilera presented herself to be more than a sexual image.

However, shedding her “dirty” image did not make her immune from media coverage. Aguilera went through difficult times under public opinion throughout her career. She experienced a divorce and an arrest, she sang wrong words in the National Anthem at the Super Bowl, and she is perceived as “too much of a diva” (Lieb, 2019, p. 172). What has never gone away was that ever since the start of her career, she has been constantly compared to another super pop star Britney Spears and was often discussed as Spears’ rival (Nolan, 2021). Nor is she ever exempted from being called a “bitch.”

Despite all these undesirable images as a public figure in addition to her sexual images since the early 2000s, Aguilera uses her music as a representation of who she is as a person. This unapologetic attitude, as seen in the way she presents herself, could account for that fact that she is “too much of a diva.” And this is true as she told Fuse in an interview in 2012, “If I’m a bitch, then I’m a bitch, if that’s what an assertive woman is to you” (Fuse. 2012). Still, she and her work remain publicly recognized and relevant to today’s society. This, without doubt, attributes

to her powerful voice and extraordinary musical talent, as commented by Thompson, “her songs are about survival and comeback... No wonder she was able to survive and come back.” (Lieb, 2019, p. 172; Miller, 2008).

Studying stars as texts helps understand the cultural narratives of women and their strategies in establishing power in the pop music industry. Literature and previous studies provide substantial knowledge on the stars and their images through a systemic examination of several contemporaneous female pop artists. By taking the Marxist idea of one’s labor defining oneself a step further, it is also valuable to examine the way female pop artists’ work represents themselves and the culture. Because their public images often overshadow their work, their work tends to be under evaluated. Therefore, the following primary research focuses on analyzing the lyrics of Christina Aguilera’s popular songs in her top studio albums through a qualitative content analysis. The analysis aims to answer the research questions below:

What are the themes in Christina Aguilera’s music? Are these themes culturally relevant? If so, how?

### **Methodology**

This research paper aimed to find the themes in Christina Aguilera’s music and the cultural relevance of these themes beyond Aguilera herself. Since her image, like many other female artists’, tend to be valued more than her work, namely their music, in the mainstream media, this study focused on her music. To achieve this goal, this research examined Aguilera’s lyrics through a systemic research method of qualitative content analysis.

Content analysis is the “systemic examination of texts...to analyze their prominent manifest and latent meanings” (Saldana, 2011). In Elo and Kyngas’s (2008) words, it is the process of “[distilling] words into fewer content-related categories” (p. 108). In terms of media

texts, content analysis allows researchers to understand the denotation of the texts, the “surface and apparent meaning” (Saldana, 2011), as well as the connotation of the texts, the “suggestive, connotative, and subtextual meaning” (Saldana, 2011). It also allows the researcher to make “inferences” from the texts to the context in which the texts are constructed (as cited in Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p. 68). The basic principle of conducting content analysis is to code the texts, identify patterns, and group them into categories for further analysis and discussion (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003).

This study focused on qualitative content analysis, because it rendered a more complete picture of the whole process with rich information and complexities, and it considered the culture and context of the texts (Tracy, 2013; Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). Therefore, qualitative content analysis is especially helpful in identifying how media texts reflect a certain culture and society, from which cultural artifacts are produced (Macnamara, 2005).

### **Validity of Qualitative Content Analysis**

Historically, the validity of qualitative research was downplayed in academia, for its lack of objectivity (Macnamara, 2005). However, this has been countered by the fact that, first, there are no purely objective research results, regardless of any research method (Macnamara, 2005). Secondly, media texts are “polysemic” (p. 5), and thus are subject to different interpretations by nature (Macnamara, 2005). What is also important to point out is that by understanding media texts through a qualitative content analysis, one can discover both their manifest and latent meaning (Macnamara, 2005). As scholar Macnamara (2005) noted, “qualitative analysis of texts is necessary to understand [media texts’] deeper meanings and likely interpretations by audiences – surely the ultimate goal of analysing media content.”

Due to the nature of the high complexity and low standardization of content analysis, “each inquiry is distinctive, and the results depend on the skills, insights, analytic abilities and style of the investigator” (as cited in Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 113). Moreover, as Saldana (2016) suggested, it takes valuable qualities in a researcher to conduct qualitative content analysis, as it not only requires the researcher to have decent organizational and creative skills, but it is also a test of their tenacity in learning, researching, and analyzing, their ambiguity endurance, and their flexibility throughout the process. Therefore, it is essential to inquire the way scholars explain the process from multiple sources using content analysis and to identify the gist of the method. In addition to recognizing the scientific aspect of content analysis, the researchers’ skills and creativity should also be acknowledged as contributions of the results.

### **Theoretical Practice**

Since the focus of this method is the content, the researcher is expected to read the data/texts closely and repeatedly, and then identify the patterns in the data in relation to the research goal (Wiklund-Gustin et al., 2020). The pattern-identification process is the coding process, and the pattern should be identified when certain data appears repetitively, regularly, and consistently (Saldana, 2016).

Coding is the “fundamental means of developing the analysis” (as cited in Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 186). It is the process of “labeling and systematizing the data,” and during the process, the researcher uses codes – “words or short phrases that capture a ‘summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute’” of the original texts, or as Saldana called “data” (as cited in Tracy, 2013, p. 189). This “primary-cycle coding” (Tracy, 2013) process requires examining, or breaking down, the data and then naming, or labeling, the data with representational words or phrases (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Tracy, 2013). In this stage, the “first-

level codes” are generated, which is the descriptive information coming directly from the data examined (Tracy, 2013). What Saldana (2016) suggests in the primary-cycle coding is to create three columns – with column one standing for the raw data, column two for preliminary codes or jottings, and column three for more abstract labels.

The next phase is the “secondary-cycle coding,” where the researcher will “organize, synthesize, and categorize” primary codes into interpretive codes (Tracy, 2013, p. 194). These codes are called the “second-level codes” and are generated by previous first level codes and the researcher’s further interpretation (Tracy, 2013). These interpretive codes also highlight the latent meaning of the data (Wiklund-Gustin et al., 2020). The researcher will group the codes into categories based on their similarity and difference (Wiklund-Gustin et al., 2020), reducing the data units (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), logically naming the categories, as well as further developing the categories based on their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Properties are the attributes of a category, such as frequency and duration; dimensions are the degree of a certain property, such as often/never and long/short (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Elo and Kyngas (2008) noted that this unit reduction process that generates “higher order categories” (p. 111) highlights the belongingness between data and categories. If necessary, subcategories can be established if nuances among categories appear (Saldana, 2016; Wiklund-Gustin et al., 2020).

Throughout the process, the researcher needs to engage in a “circular, iterative, and reflexive” (p. 190) process to examine and re-examine data and its codes, modify and re-modify code definitions, and create and re-create new codes (Tracy, 2013). Scholar Macnamara (2005) pointed out that there are a number of elements to look out for during qualitative content analysis, which will be useful for this research – adjectives that show people’s attitudes,

metaphors and similes, active/passive verbs, viewpoints of the narrator, tonal qualities, binaries, visual imagery in text, as well as context factors. In addition, Lofland et al. (as cited in Saldana, 2016) highlights cognitive aspects or meanings, emotional aspects or feelings, and hierarchical aspects or inequalities.

As the analysis goes on, based on the categories, the researcher may form more abstract and general phrases or sentences as themes or concepts (Saldana, 2016). By gathering the whole systemic process, the researcher may form their theory or assertions, the most abstract and general of all the stages (Saldana, 2016). Based on the fact that the process described above goes from the text-based, descriptive, and least-abstract categories to the interpretation-based, interpretive, and the most-abstract categories, this qualitative content analysis is considered an inductive process, according to the “sub-category” (abstract) – “generic category” (more abstract) – “main category” (most abstract) model in Elo and Kyngas’s writing (2008).

### **Qualitative Content Analysis of Media Texts**

The journal article by Cengiz & Eklund Karlsson (2021), “Portrayal of Immigrants in Danish Media – A Qualitative Content Analysis,” was used as a model in applying qualitative content analysis on media content. Cengiz and Eklund Karlsson (2021) used newspapers in Denmark as a source to gather raw data and analyzed the way immigrants and immigration were portrayed. In this model, the research process involved open coding in which the researchers identified key concepts, labeled them with codes, and then grouped these codes into broader categories according to the relation between these codes (Cengiz & Eklund Karlsson, 2021). What followed was the abstraction stage in which the previously formed codes and categories were reviewed, excluding overlapped codes and overly diverse and insufficient categories (Cengiz & Eklund Karlsson, 2021). In general, the analysis process followed a pattern of

“subcategories, generic categories, and main categories,” which resonates with the model proposed by Elo and Kyngas’s (2008). In the analysis, Cengiz and Eklund Karlsson (2021) identified four main themes with two subcategories under one of the main themes, and provided explanation and evidence, or examples, to support their categorization.

Similarly, in the analysis of Christina Aguilera in this paper, thirty-six English songs – six songs from six studio albums – were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. These six albums were chosen because they span from 1999 to 2018 and capture the majority of her music since her debut. In addition, these albums were once ranked top of the Billboard Chart, with *Christina Aguilera* at #1 in 1999, *Stripped* at #2 in 2002, *Back to Basics* at #1 in 2006, *Bionic* at #3 in 2010, *Lotus* at #6 in 2018, and *Liberation* at #7 in 2018 (Billboard, n.d.b). Billboard magazine not only collects and presents a variety of statistics that demonstrate the popularity of music artists’ work, but it also “[reports] on the latest news, issues and trends across all genres of music,” as the unsurpassed music media brand (Billboard, n.d.a).

Choosing six songs out of each of these top albums makes it possible to analyze each album in a more even and manageable way, and the reason of analyzing the albums is to find out what Aguilera’s music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century represents in a bigger picture. By focusing on the songs in the studio albums listed above, the selection process referred to the number of play times on Spotify as the parameter. Spotify is “the world’s most popular audio streaming subscription service with 381 million users” (Spotify, n.d.), which is helpful for this analysis to gain a general idea of what music is popular among the public. The sequence of the songs listed below starts with songs with most play times. As of November 14, 2021, the songs in album *Christina Aguilera* with most play times include “Genie in a Bottle,” “What a Girl Wants,” “I Turn to You,” “Reflection,” “Come on Over Baby (All I Want Is You),” and “So Emotional.” In

*Stripped*, the selected songs are “Beautiful,” “Dirrty,” “Fighter,” “Can’t Hold Us Down,” “The Voice Within,” and “Impossible.” In *Back to Basics*, there are “Hurt,” “Candyman,” “Ain’t No Other Man,” “Save Me from Myself,” “Mercy on Me,” and “Oh Mother.” In *Bionic*, there are “You Lost Me,” “Not Myself Tonight,” “Woohoo,” “I Hate Boys,” “Bionic,” and “Prima Donna,” In *Lotus*, the selected songs include “Your Body,” “Just a Fool,” “Let There Be Love,” “Blank Page,” “Army of Me,” and “Sing for Me.” In Aguilera’s latest English studio album *Liberation*, the selected songs are “Fall in Line,” “Accelerate,” “Twice,” “Unless It’s with You,” “Like I Do,” and “Maria.”

The source for gathering lyrics is Genius. Genius is “the world’s biggest music encyclopedia” encompassing artists’ music as well as the stories behind the scenes (Genius, n.d.). Besides lyrics, Genius also displays annotations contributed and reviewed by the community, verse, chorus, and other elements in the lyrics, offering a brief structure of each song (Genius, n.d.), which can be useful for this research paper.

In the primary-cycle coding, the lyrics of the thirty-six songs were coded based on the patterns of the lyrics, which is the most particular stage of the coding process, according to Saldana (2016). Each song was critically listened to three times, and its lyrics were read three times in order to identify the patterns in each song. Multiple patterns could emerge in one song, and these patterns were recorded for further examination. This stage involved cycles for the codes to be refined over time, and these codes were the most descriptive in the whole process. This stage also followed the three-column model suggested by Saldana (2016), which consists of raw data, preliminary codes or jottings, and more abstract labels of descriptive codes. As encouraged by Tracy (2013), the coding process of this research began with “more detailed

fracturing” by breaking the data into “smaller pieces,” followed by grouping these specific pieces into bigger categories (p. 190) in the secondary-cycle coding process.

In the secondary-cycle coding, the more abstract descriptive codes were analyzed and grouped into higher-order interpretative codes, or categories. This process moved further away from the lyrical texts and towards the latent meaning of the content, forming less category units with more abstraction in their value. In this stage, not only did the codes become more abstract, but they were also analyzed and generated in relation to the context of the background information of the social environment, the songs, the albums, and the artist. The parameters used in this process involved properties and dimensions, attitudes and emotions, metaphors and similes, viewpoints of the narrator, power ownership, and active-versus-passive actions.

What followed was the more higher-level analysis which rendered more abstract themes or concepts, which were used altogether to form a theory, or an argument. This stage is marked by the highest order with the most abstract and most interpretive of all codes. In the case of this research, this stage formed the main thesis, which discusses the findings in the research in relation to the major patterns discovered in the literature review. To enhance the study’s trustworthiness, this paper also provided a procedure of the analysis through appendices to demonstrate the step-by-step coding process (Elo & Kyngas, 2008), from the specifics to the abstractions. The attached appendices are simplified in consideration of page tidiness.

### **Analysis**

This section analyzes thirty-six songs from the six albums mentioned above. This analysis aims to provide an interpretation of each song that lays the foundation for the following discussion section, which combines both the denoted and connotated meanings to generate a more holistic understanding of Aguilera’s music. Because the subject in these songs is referred to

as “I,” the following analysis and discussion will refer the subject to the presentation of Aguilera in the music, rather than her as an individual. For written purpose, the subject is discussed as Aguilera. See Appendix A to F after the conclusion section for a more detailed coding process.

### ***Christina Aguilera (1999)***

In album *Christina Aguilera*, the six most popular songs were analyzed. “Genie in a Bottle” as the most popular song describes Aguilera’s desire for a romantic relationship. She is clear that the lover has to treat her the right way in order to win her heart, and she makes the decision whether to be in love with the person or not. She also promises the lover that if he treats her the right way, she will grant him wishes. In “Genie in a Bottle,” Aguilera shows her confidence, self-respect, rationality, and agency in making decisions about being in love.

In “What a Girl Wants,” Aguilera praises her ideal partner for his sound qualities. She sings about understanding, patience, support, faith, loyalty, sensitivity but toughness, and coolness but tenderness, which are the qualities that a girl wants in a romantic partner. From the lyrics, it is important for a partner to take the time to know each other as a person and take one step at a time, instead of rushing in a relationship. Aguilera also points out that time will prove if a partner is worthy and that if a person is the right one, then he or she will also find the right one. In “What a Girl Wants,” Aguilera shows her standards for her partner and she cherishes him for being everything she needs.

In “I Turn to You,” Aguilera praises a person who always supports her when she goes through tough times. This person guides her when she feels lost and makes her feel safe from harm. This bond is her inspiration and gives her faith. Therefore, she feels that she can turn to him or her for anything. In “I Turn to You,” Aguilera expresses her vulnerability and need for

support and shows her gratefulness for this person who embraces her vulnerability and is willing to help her through hard times.

In “Reflection,” Aguilera feels forced to hide herself in this world and she almost forgets who she truly is. She questions her truth and realizes that she was not only fooling the world but also herself. To revert this dissonance between who she has been and who she really is, Aguilera is determined to seek her true self and be loved for who she is. Aguilera is not only singing *Reflection*, but she is also looking inside herself and trying to find her pure, original self.

In “Come on Over Baby (All I Want Is You),” Aguilera is inviting her potential romantic partner to move onto the next stage in their relationship. The decision to move onto the sexual experience is a big decision and now she is ready for it. Interestingly, the exact same lyrical phrase in this song “what a girl wants,” in conjunction with other similar phrases, such as “what a girl feels,” “what a girl likes,” and “what a girl needs,” manifests itself as a mirror of the song “What a Girl Wants.” In “What a Girl Wants,” Aguilera stresses the importance of spiritual connection between romantic partners. On the contrary, in “Come on Over Baby (All I Want Is You),” the physical, bodily connection is emphasized, linking to the thought that moving to the sexual aspect of a romantic relationship requires the prerequisite of a spiritual connection.

In “So Emotional,” Aguilera faces emotional fluctuations in a romantic relationship. Instead of hopes and happiness, she describes the instability and unpredictability of a relationship. By using phrases of the extremes, such as “black or white,” “high and low,” and “love or fight,” Aguilera opens up about the complications romantic partners go through in a relationship. She expresses her acceptance of this fact and willingness to move through it, which demonstrates a more mature vision of love.

## ***Stripped* (2002)**

Six songs were examined from Aguilera's album *Stripped*, the first of which is her most popular song in the album "Beautiful." "Beautiful" pertains a clear shift from self-consciousness, sensitivity, insecurity, and self-judgment to self-acceptance and self-affirmation. The lyrics speak to "I," "you," and "we" to create togetherness in fighting against insecurity and encouraging self-love among everyone. Aguilera is telling her audience not to let others' words affect the way they see themselves and they should stay positive, optimistic, and self-assured in pursuing their truths. With the power of self-acceptance, people are accepting both their imperfections and beauty, and that's what makes them beautiful and powerful.

"Dirrty" marks a stark turning point in Christina Aguilera's music. Aguilera acknowledges that she is "nasty" and "unruly" by using blatant sexual references and that she is letting loose and breaking her mold. She establishes dominance by claiming that people would give room for her when she enters the room and doesn't shy away from the "dirrty" party that she is in charge of. This song becomes a statement that Aguilera makes to distinguish herself from her earlier "sweetheart" teen image and announce her transformation to this unfettered, sexual, and powerful figure.

As the third most popular song in the album, "Fighter" begins with Aguilera realizing she was used and taken advantage of. She turns that anger into gratitude because others' wrongdoing has made her stronger. She has learned her lessons and is turning the negativity into constructiveness to better herself, becoming stronger mentally and physically. Her dedication and assertiveness hold the strength to condemn others' wrong-doing to her and to empower herself from the inside-out, so that no one can take advantage of her anymore.

In “Can’t Hold Us Down,” Aguilera brings up the double standard between women and men in society and encourages all women to speak up. She normalizes women’s agency to voice their thoughts and do anything they want. She remarks that women cannot, and will not, be held down. In addition to empowering women, Aguilera portrays men who do not respect women as little boys who are immature and annoying. She also notes that a real, mature man should treat his partner right by respecting her and understanding her. In “Can’t Hold Us Down,” Aguilera establishes solidarity with girls and women to empower themselves to stand against social injustice, to be heard, and to realize their self-worth.

In “The Voice Within,” Aguilera encourage girls to face their truths by accepting themselves, following their heart, and listening to their inner voice. She notes that the world may change the way people are, but they should hold onto their true self, because that is what gives them strength and makes them unstoppable. She believes people should see themselves as their own hero and therefore should be confident to take control of their own life and be the strongest supporter of themselves. Aguilera encourages her audience to find the power from within by listening to the voice within themselves.

In “Impossible,” Aguilera portrays an imbalanced romantic relationship in which the other partner lacks the effort to communicate with her. She is asking the partner to let down his guard and be open in communication, or it would be difficult and impossible to love him. Regardless of the effort she puts in the relationship, the relationship would not work out if it is only one-sided. This song connects with “So Emotional” from the former album *Christina Aguilera* (1999), in which unstable emotions persist by keeping “going up and down” when disclosure, honesty, and sincerity is imbalanced in a romantic relationship. “Impossible” also

points to a more mature view of being in a romantic relationship and its complications. Aguilera sings the imperfection of love and its accompanying struggle.

### ***Back to Basics (2006)***

Following Aguilera's marriage in 2005, *Back to Basics* was released in 2006. In "Hurt," Aguilera sings about her deep regret for what she has done in the past and her hope for reversing the pain she inflicted onto the other person. With a deep apologetic attitude, she wishes to go back in time and treat the other better. She regrets her anger and indifference and wishes she had been more forgiving and loving. Unfortunately, it is too late and irredeemable, and she has to face the pain, as she sings "I've hurt myself by hurting you." She reveals her vulnerability and hopelessness in going back in time. She points to the fact that hurting someone can end up hurting oneself, which brought her to self-reflect and take responsibility of her past.

In "Candyman," Aguilera sings about a man who talks sweetly and is irresistible. She uses the references of Tarzan and Jane to refer to a romance story of a woman who has gone through a transformation after meeting this untamed man and releasing her un-tameness and unruliness. This points to the notion of the girl who actively embraces her sexual side, which corresponds with the sexual reference in the lyrics, such as "...makes my panties drop." Much of the song shows the strong affection the woman has for the man. However, Aguilera gave a twist to the story by singing "good things come for boys who wait," which emphasizes the necessity of rationality and self-control in the progression of a relationship. Since the focus of the man is on his sweet talk, which implies who he is on the inside may be different from his sugar-coated words. Therefore, Aguilera makes a claim to alert people not to be blinded by what they hear or see, because what is more important is on the inside, and it takes patience and time to figure out

what is underneath the surface. This point also connects with the idea of patience in Aguilera's "What a Girl Wants" in album *Christina Aguilera* (1999).

In "Ain't No Other Man," Aguilera praises a man who has earned her heart with his charm and unique qualities, as she sings "you're the kind of guy a girl finds in a blue moon." She sees him as special because he has passed every test that she has made. Out of all the men, he is the only one who has everything she needs – class, style, and soul – and he is a "badass." Aguilera has a standard for her lover and she is rational about choosing the right man. Therefore, when she finds one, she is proud of him and herself for finding the right man.

In "Save Me from Myself," Aguilera confesses it is not easy to love her. Despite the man being everything she needs, she is open about the complicatedness of a relationship. She confesses she is not perfect, and therefore especially grateful for her partner who makes her feel trustworthy, dependable, and safe. She appreciates his selflessness and devotion, and what she sees as the most important quality is his tenderness, because it transforms her, as she sings "your tenderness is what I need to make me a better woman to myself." Aguilera is open about her vulnerability and imperfection, but what makes her better is a quality love that can help her become a better self.

In "Mercy on Me," Aguilera begs for forgiveness for her wrongdoing in the past. She confesses her sin – her deceitfulness, evilness, scorn and carelessness, and she regrets all of these for which she tries to redeem herself. She feels apologetic and ashamed, so she is determined to correct herself and be on the right path by asking for forgiveness and guidance. Aguilera unveils her vulnerability, singing about pain and regret, and beseeches redemption, promising a more virtuous path.

“Oh Mother” is a song dedicated for Christina Aguilera’s mother, in which Christina reflects on her memory of suffering through domestic violence as a child and appreciates her mother for protecting her. Christina’s mother suffered from Christina’s father’s abuse since they were married, but she did not leave him until he started abusing their children. Her father failed to deliver his promise and her mom was “sick of believing the lies and trying to hide, covering the cuts and bruises.” Despite these painful memories, Christina praises her mother’s selflessness and love for the children, because “she could have died fighting for the lives of her children.” She is also comforting her mother that she can feel safe with her daughter because they are no longer in danger, and together they will not let the tragedy happen to them again. Christina assures her mother that she will keep her safe the same way her mother did when she was a child, as she sings “you got me, I got you, together we always pull through.”

### ***Bionic* (2010)**

The first song examined in album *Bionic* is “You Lost Me,” in which Aguilera accepts a failed relationship because of the partner’s disloyalty. This song shows that a healthy romantic relationship requires two people to contribute and invest in the relationship. When such effort becomes one-sided, the imbalance would destroy the relationship. Aguilera reveals her vulnerability yet determination to get rid of this toxic relationship full of lies and deceptions. She realizes if her suffering and pain outweigh her happiness, she would leave this relationship behind and move on. This song portrays the failing side of love, revealing the struggles that can be faced by anyone.

In “Not Myself Tonight,” Aguilera is portrayed as out-of-control. She feels brand new because she is different and unusual. She does not care about what people say, because all she cares about is having fun and enjoying the moment of freedom. Her confident and assertive

attitude establishes her dominance and agency to do whatever she likes. She is expanding her identity by showing people that part of herself is more than what she usually seems. In “Not Myself Tonight,” Aguilera normalizes the need to free herself from constraints and judgement, including the need of pursuing sexual pleasure. She establishes her power by breaking boundaries and expressing freedom in every possible way.

In “Woohoo,” Aguilera focuses on bodily pleasure that she commands. She establishes solidarity with other women, normalizing the naughty, or sexual, pleasure they seek and reducing men to sexual tools whose priority is to provide sexual pleasure for women. Aguilera also shows power over everyone else by calling herself “mama” in “take it off before mama gets bored” and reinforces the hierarchy with her on top over other women and all women over men/boys. Rather than in a derogatory way, she uses the word “bitch” to compliment women for taking control. In addition, Aguilera reflects on the social expectation of women which sees women seeking sexual pleasure as unacceptable, by singing “I know I probably shouldn't but... I'm feeling good.” However, her careless and rule-less attitude is taking her to break the rules.

“I Hate Boys” is filled with antagonistic attitude towards men whom Aguilera also calls “boys” and “dogs” in this song because of their immaturity and wrongdoings to women. She hates them for their disrespectful attitude for women, their “inflated ego,” and their “little d\*cks.” She phrases men as derogatory and see them as inferior, objectifying them for their sexual organ and reducing them to less than a full human being. This is a similar way that mainstream media objectified women, as she sings, “All these dirty little boys that think that the girls were only made for toys.” Meanwhile, she flatters herself for being attractive, which gives her the confidence and power to be judgmental about men. Her unapologetic attitude allows her to boldly deny men’s value as a full human being and make fun of them for their wrongdoings.

She is so fed up with men's immaturity that she is aggressively critical of men and emphasizes "I H-A-T-E Boys" in the song.

"Bionic," one of the songs in the same-name album, is Aguilera's invitation to her new creation and statement of her power. She phrases herself as powerful, creative, and full of surprises that she can "hit you like a rocket," "break your...imagination with what [she] makes," and "give you a migraine...till you're insane," because she is "the future...like a hurricane." No one can stop her or surpass her, as she sings, "Many times imitated, not duplicated, can't be replaced." She does not expect people to understand or "keep up with what [she] creates," because she is confident in her new, bold adventure. Emphasizing her (stage) name "X-T-I-N-A" in the song indicates her dominance and power over everything else. Her confidence in claiming her power works as a statement of her un-stoppable-ness.

In "Prima Donna," Aguilera establishes her power by claiming herself as the prima donna. She enjoys her power and does not care about any judgement, as she "rules the world" and orders people to succumb to her. Her bold and forceful attitude sets herself on the throne, while creating a sense of togetherness with other women, whom she calls "ladies" and normalizing when women want to have some naughty fun. She claims her power to rule the world and lead women to claim their rights to do whatever they want without judgement, including pursuing sexual pleasure. "Prima Donna" is similar to "Not Myself Tonight" from the same album, because it specifically points to the "special night" that she refers as the moment of freedom and enjoyment.

### ***Lotus (2012)***

In *Lotus* (2012), "Your Body" has gained more traction than other songs in the album. "Your Body" describes Aguilera's state of being care-free and bodily-pleasure-oriented without

any emotional attachment. She shows her unusual, “disturbed” side that only wants to have a fun time with a person’s body. Her rebellion and desire for sexual pleasure is high and she is direct and forceful about her need in which she takes great pride. She establishes her power by doing whatever she wants with no constraint, especially for sexual pleasure, which links to her other songs such as “Dirrty” from *Stripped* (2002) and “Not Myself Tonight” and “Woohoo” from *Bionic* (2010).

In “Just a Fool,” Aguilera unfolds the hardship of a relationship breakup. She discloses the conflict between expectation and reality which leads to relationship imbalance and failure. She accepts the failed reality and asks both parties to take responsibility. Aguilera expresses her distress and vulnerability in a romantic relationship when it takes a toll on the partners. Despite of the remaining love, she realizes the cruelty of love and chooses to let go and move on. “Just a Fool” links to “You Lost Me” from *Bionic* (2010), which shares the similar themes of melancholy, relationship breakup, and the struggling side of a relationship.

In “Let There Be Love,” Aguilera spreads an invitation of bodily pleasure. She blatantly expresses her bodily desire and gives guidance on the according course of action. Being direct about her desire for touch, Aguilera expressively and celebratorily normalizes her need for fun and enjoyment, which indicates her power and dominance.

In “Blank Page,” Aguilera admits her wrongdoing and wishes for reconciliation of a relation, where a specific type of relation is not specified. Her lyrics move from “how do I say I’m sorry” to “how do we say we’re sorry,” highlighting that the fault takes both sides and both parties need to take responsibility to fix it. She regrets and is ashamed for her mistakes, but she hopes to start over with this person while establishing a sense of togetherness. Aguilera

expresses her vulnerability in “Blank Page,” which resonates with her messages in “Mercy on Me” and “Hurt” in *Back to Basics* (2006), calling for redemption and reconciliation.

“Army of Me” can be understood as a sequel of “Fighter” from *Stripped* (2002), as multiple groups of parallels are found between the two. Lyrics such as “wiser,” “stronger,” and “fighter” are used and in the same way in both songs, emphasizing Aguilera’s mental and physical growth and invincibility. “What you thought was your best decision just became your worst mistake” in “Army of Me” shares a paralleled meaning with “you dug your own grave” in “Fighter,” in that a person’s wrongdoing comes back at him or her. “Army of Me” shows a multidimensional Aguilera who has “thousands faces of [her]” to beat whoever has wronged her. She also establishes her come-back with her determination by connecting to the same empowering meaning in “Fighter” where she expressed in the early 2000s.

In “Sing for Me,” Aguilera reflects on her career as a singer. She admits that there is a vulnerable side of her underneath the cover of her power. She gains support from singing and sees it as her remedy, because singing is her way for self-care. She incorporates her true self in her music, singing “when I open my mouth, my whole heart comes out.” Seeing singing as a way to embrace and express herself in a truthful way, Aguilera sees it as a part of her, a way for her heart to be liberated. As the song’s name indicates, Aguilera sings for herself in an act of self-acceptance, self-love, and self-empowerment, which links to her song “The Voice Within” in *Stripped* (2002), telling people to listen to themselves and follow their heart.

### ***Liberation* (2018)**

*Liberation* (2018) is Aguilera’s latest English-language album. In “Fall in Line,” Aguilera encourages young girls to take ownership of themselves. She sings that girls should not feel indebted to others, and they have the agency to control their body and soul. They should not

be reduced to merely “flesh and bone,” highlighting the value of their mind, their soul, and their subjectivity as a whole. Aguilera uses herself to set an example who speaks her mind even at the expense of her life by singing “they’re gonna burn me at the stake, but I got a fire in my veins, I wasn’t made to fall in line.” She opens up the path for others to empower themselves and teaches them to live their truth bravely. She encourages young girls, which also applies to women in general, to know their worth, speak their mind, and fight back against the box that society constrains them to.

In “Accelerate,” Aguilera enjoys the moment of freedom and establishes her dominance of doing whatever she wants. “Smile, cry later” is what she proposes to live in the moment. She creates a sense of togetherness with “all my boss ladies” to rule the world while enjoying themselves. Aguilera warns men that if they “try to play us we gonna start a riot up in here” to warn them not to mess with her or women in general. The theme of this song resonates with that in “Prima Donna” and “Woohoo” in *Bionic* (2010).

In “Twice,” Aguilera falls into a deep contemplation about herself and her life. She uses groups of dichotomies to reflect her inner conflict, such as wrongs/rights, devil/angel, heaven/hell, water/fire, filthy/pure, forever/end, forgiveness/sin, treason/true, and enemy/love. She also feels torn because “you’re my danger and that’s what I need, but it still hurts me.” Aguilera is finding the meaning of life, which is full of complications and opposites. She accepts everything she has done in the past and she is willing to experience it “all again without think twice.” Aguilera unfolds her struggle and vulnerability, and highlights the complicity of life, presenting a mature viewpoint of it by accepting her past and acknowledging the multidimensional aspects of life, because all she experiences makes her who she is.

In “Unless It’s with You,” Aguilera confesses her insecurity but eventually embraces a

new start of love. She reflects on her past in which “the most beautiful beginnings can go down in flames,” which makes her afraid and vulnerable in facing a new marriage. Comparing to the pain and sadness a marriage could bring, she would “rather be alone.” However, she turns to another point of view by wanting to be married to a person who accepts her and truly loves her. This gives her the strength to overcome her fear and to decide to be in love again. Instead of material objects such as “white picket fence,” “dozen roses,” or “a wedding dress,” she only cares about the genuine connection that she shares with her partner. Moving from fear of uncertainty, she is now determined and looks forward to a marriage. “I don’t want to get married unless it’s with you” is Aguilera confession to a new marriage. “Unless It’s with You” acknowledges the fear a marriage can bring to individuals, even from the point of view of an adult like Aguilera who had been through the ups and downs in a marriage. However, this highlights her strong determination and the love she has for the person of importance.

In “Like I Do,” Aguilera portrays herself as a boss with experience, money, and status, who is superior to men, as she sings “boy you can’t do it quite like I do.” She establishes authority over men and tells them “boy you’re so much better when you don’t speak” and “show me what it is,” because she wants them to show her the proof, instead of bragging. This connects with “Candyman” in *Back to Basics* (2006), where she believes substances weigh over words. She establishes her power by flattering herself, disdaining men, and being in control of everything. She can be playful sometimes, but she also wants people to respect her and succumb to her power.

Adopted from her middle name, “Maria” is a song where Aguilera is desperately looking for a girl named Maria and pleading her to guide her way. “Maria” can be interpreted as Aguilera looking for her inner pure and truthful self. Aguilera feels lost without Maria, she is not satisfied

with her current being, and she feels spiritually restrained and empty on the inside. Thus, she wants to find her deeper self and to bring her true self back. In her lyrics, Aguilera sees her inner Maria as more powerful than her surface self to save her. This song resonates with “Sing for Me” in *Lotus* (2012) and “Twice” in *Liberation* (2018), where she is looking inside herself to guide her way.

## **Discussion**

This section discusses the themes and meanings that are found in Christina Aguilera’s music through a close examination of thirty-six songs. It is noteworthy that this discussion is limited to the context of the songs selected and examined. For the convenience of writing, this paper addresses the coded categories as themes represented predominantly, but not fully, by the songs and albums. Five major categories, or themes, are examined – (1) romance and love, (2) introspection of vulnerability, (3) gratitude for support, (4) empowerment, and (5) sexual liberation. The following sub-sections are discussed based on individual album albums and overall discussion on the cultural narratives found in the songs examined in this study.

### **Individual Album Discussion**

Within the album *Christina Aguilera* (1999), the six songs capture the theme of (1) romance and love, (2) introspection of vulnerability, and (3) gratitude for support. In “Genie in a Bottle” and “What a Girl Wants,” Aguilera presents herself as the one who sets the standards and criteria for her potential partner such as the desired qualities in a partner. In “Come on Over Baby (All I Want Is You),” she is ready to move onto the bodily stage in a romantic relationship. However, love is not always satisfying. “So Emotional” examines the emotional struggle one experiences when the relationship lacks stability. Thus, under the category of love and romance, both the exciting part and the unstable aspect of a love relationship are explored. In “Reflection,”

Aguilera reveals her vulnerability of lacking her true self, and in “I Turn to You,” Aguilera expresses gratitude for someone whom she can always rely on and who she feels safe with.

The major themes in *Stripped* (2002) are (1) romance and love, (2) introspection of vulnerability, (4) empowerment, and (5) sexual liberation. Five out of six songs – “Beautiful,” “Dirrty,” “Fighter,” “Can’t Hold Us Down,” and “The Voice Within” – can be seen as empowerment anthems for the self, female (girls and women), and anyone. Among these songs, some also indicate multiple themes. For example, “Beautiful” not only empowers everyone to accept and love themselves but Aguilera also looks into her own vulnerability and imperfection and tries to overcome her insecurity. In “Dirrty,” Aguilera describes herself as powerful and dominant while liberating her sexual pursuit. Additionally, in “Impossible,” Aguilera struggles in a romantic relationship which lacks open communication and leaves her powerless to love.

The major themes identified in the album *Back to Basics* (2006) are (1) romance and love, (2) introspection of vulnerability, and (3) gratitude for support. In “Candyman,” Aguilera emphasizes the qualities, or substances, of a partner, over his sweet talk and in “Ain’t No Other Man,” she praises her lover for being everything she needs. Surrounding the theme of love, “Save Me from Myself” manifests as an expression of gratitude for Aguilera’s partner whose love helps her become a better woman. Aguilera also looks at her past in “Hurt” and “Mercy on Me,” regretting for her mistake and pleading for redemption. In “Oh Mother,” Aguilera expresses her genuine gratitude and dedicated support for her mother, while reflecting on the suffering they went through when Aguilera was a child.

In album *Bionic* (2010), major themes include (1) romance and love, (4) empowerment, and (5) sexual liberation. Five out of six songs in this album – “Not Myself Tonight,” “Woohoo,” “I Hate Boys,” “Bionic,” and “Prima Donna” – show Aguilera’s power and

dominance while empowering herself and women all together. “Not Myself Tonight” and “Woohoo” combines both empowerment and sexual liberation with an unapologetic attitude in pursuing bodily pleasure. These two songs, together with “I Hate Boys,” “Bionic,” and “Prima Donna,” are forceful in establishing Aguilera’s invincibility and desire for fun. In the ballad “You Lost Me,” Aguilera experiences a heartbreaking breakup as a result of her partner’s disloyalty which “infected” their relationship. This reveals the dimension of a failed romantic relationship.

The dominant themes in album *Lotus* (2012) are (1) romance and love, (2) introspection of vulnerability, (4) empowerment, and (5) sexual liberation. Similar to “You Lost Me,” “Just A Fool” describes a breakup of a romantic relationship, highlighting the harm it can bring to the partners. However, “Just A Fool” focuses more on the imbalance, lack of communication, and dishonesty that lead to the relationship failure. In “Blank Page” and “Sing for Me,” Aguilera looks inside herself and acknowledges her need for support. In “Blank Page” specifically, she wishes to build a sense of togetherness with someone, whereas in “Sing for Me,” she finds strength in herself. After facing her vulnerability, she empowers and expresses herself through her singing. “Army of Me” in *Lotus* (2012) can be understood as a sequel of “Fighter” in *Stripped* (2002), because it expresses identical self-empowering messages. Both themes of empowerment and sexual liberation are predominant in “Your Body” and “Let There Be Love,” in which Aguilera expresses strong desire for bodily pleasure and freedom.

The themes identified in album *Liberation* (2018) are (1) romance and love, (2) introspection of vulnerability, (4) empowerment, and (5) sexual liberation. In “Fall in Line,” Aguilera empowers herself, girls, and women to hold on to their truth and take ownership of themselves. In “Accelerate” and “Like I Do,” Aguilera not only establishes her own power over

men but also indicates her desire for bodily pleasure. In “Twice” and “Maria,” she contemplates on her truth and tries to find her inner self to guide her way in life. In “Unless It’s with You,” she faces her insecurity about failed relationships and becomes hopeful for a marriage when she meets the right man. Aguilera explores a much more mature, yet still positive, outlook for love.

### **Overall Discussion**

The cultural narratives in Christina Aguilera’s music are found to represent multi-dimensional aspects of life. Five major themes of cultural narratives are identified in Aguilera’s music – (1) romance and love, (2) introspection of vulnerability, (3) gratitude for support, (4) empowerment, and (5) sexual liberation. Such multi-dimension includes family, relationships, marriage, and different social responsibilities a woman experiences. It includes a range of subjectivity or feelings, such as being afraid and insecure, being repentant and apologetic, and being assertive and confident. It also captures a range of attitudes, such as being caring, supportive, and loving, as well as being naughty, crude, and rebellious. These traits are not mutually exclusive but rather inclusive, which points to the complexity that exists and is essential in a full human being’s life.

Based on the analysis and individual album discussion above, this research shows that Aguilera’s music involves a variety of topics and dimensions within each topic. The theme of (1) romance and love explores that love can be both exciting and frustrating. People can feel both powerful and powerless to love the other. It describes love as happiness, but sometimes it can be unstable and can result in a failure. The theme of (2) introspection of vulnerability encompasses one’s insecurity, past mistakes, need for support, and pursuit of a truthful self. In many of Aguilera’s songs, such as “Beautiful,” “Fighter,” “Army of Me,” and “Sing for Me,” one’s vulnerability is converted into power through self-love and self-empowerment. Besides

expressing power from the perspective of a female individual, her lyrics also empower others, including girls, women, and everyone, as captured in the theme (4) empowerment. In the theme of power, two major forms of power are identified, and one of them is power-without, meaning that power can be displayed and used to establish dominance. The other type of power is power-within, representing the inner power one has to love self and embrace one's imperfections and insecurity. Aguilera's lyrics also carry appreciation for people who have been supportive, as explored in theme (3) gratitude for support. The theme of (5) sexual liberation is also explored on different levels, moving from more implicit sexual hints to more explicit sexual references. What is important to point out is that the songs that fall under the theme of (5) sexual liberation are accompanied by the theme of (4) empowerment. This departs from the dominant narrative of women's powerlessness and passiveness. More specifically, sexuality in Aguilera's music is normalized, celebrated, and expressed as a form of power.

In comparison with the findings in the literature review section and the findings in this research, the cultural narratives found in Christina Aguilera's music challenge and expand the dominant cultural narratives of women in the pop music industry. Characterized by various and multi-dimensional themes, the cultural narratives found in Aguilera's music is culturally significant because they portray women as able to do everything in every way, and they show that women are more than just images and objects. These narratives fight against the objectification of women through the male gaze which portrays women as inferior and powerless in a narrowed way. Aguilera's music establishes a sense of togetherness with the audience, and it portrays women in a way that they are not confined by, and will not settle in, a narrowed box or definition upheld by the dominant narrative. The mainstream music portrays women as passive whose existence is to please the viewer as body parts to arouse men's sexual desire or as men's

accessories that should only care to look sexy and pretty. On the contrary, the themes in her music portrays women as full human beings with subjectivity and renders women agency in owning their thoughts, speaking their mind, and practicing self-empowerment. This empowering cultural narrative acknowledges and empowers women to embrace their subjectivity, realize their value, and own their power in controlling their life. Though Aguilera's music does not deny the sexualization of women, it openly celebrates and normalizes women's sexual desire by portraying women as active agents who have sexual needs. This cultural narrative of sexual liberation normalizes women's sexuality and advocates for the pursuit of pleasure, which, as discussed earlier, goes hand in hand with the concept of power in her lyrics. Additionally, beyond sexuality, Aguilera's music contains the various aspects of life a full human being experiences, such as romantic relationship, marriage, and family. It also captures the complexity of life one would experience, such as a sense of insecurity, love struggle, and repentance. These themes highlight the multi-dimensional aspects of life women experience and acknowledge women's subjectivity, which are lacking in the way women are portrayed in the mainstream media.

Additional thematic dynamics in Aguilera's music are identified. This research also found the progression of the messages in Aguilera's music, especially about love and identity. From *Christina Aguilera* (1999) to *Liberation* (2018), the messages gradually became more complex, such as moving from the teenage romantic relationship to the more serious stage of marriage. Over time, the messages also involve more content of sexual liberation. For example, sexual experience was suggested in "Come on Over Baby (All I Want Is You)," whereas in "Woohoo," sexual pleasure was directly mentioned in the lyrics alongside the message of empowerment. Writer Evan Ross Katz and DJ Louie commented that the era of *Stripped* (2002)

is Christina Aguilera's defining moment (DJ Louie XIV, 2022). *Stripped* (2002) does not stand alone, as it also laid the foundation for Aguilera's later-coming music in a way that the messages in her music started becoming more daring, more complex, and more diverse, as explored above.

What is consistent throughout Aguilera's music is the message of power and dominance, such as having a clear standard for a partner, speaking one's mind, and pursuing sexual pleasure. What is also consistent among her songs is the dichotomy and coexistence of power and vulnerability. Power and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive. Rather, vulnerability can be transformed into power through self-acceptance and self-love. Much of her music focuses on the self where self-reflections and truths reside and the self is the source of individual power, meaning that the power with-in lays the foundation for one's power with-out. Besides blatantly claiming one's power in various ways, her music also sees accepting one's own vulnerability and imperfection as a form of power.

Christina Aguilera's music is not limited to herself. Rather, it centers around the cultural narrative of multidimensional identities of females. Despite using "I" as the subject in the songs, the messages in the songs explore the meaning as a young girl, a lover, a daughter, a woman, and a self who has both a surface self and an inner self. In reference to my former research<sup>1</sup> on *Bionic* (2010) in 2021, she creates diverse representations of women by portraying women as superhumans who take on different social identities. She also explored her role as an artist, a wife, a mother, and a woman who has multiple sides as a complex human being. As exemplified by my former research and current research, her music portrays women as capable of being both sexual and powerful, powerful and vulnerable, and vulnerable and selfless.

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<sup>1</sup> See my [video presentation](#) of my research on *Bionic* (2010).

## Conclusion

This paper points to the value of studying pop culture, pop music, and star image. It digs deep into the meaning and cultural narratives that these seemingly enjoyable cultural products, as well as constituents, carry. This research shifts the focus from the image of female artists to the work that they produce which is often overlooked by the mainstream media. The cultural narratives in the mainstream pop music industry reduce women to objects and images, depriving them of subjectivity and ability to control their own life. Such understanding of the dominant cultural narratives informs current research to study the way music lyrics represent cultural narratives in a bigger picture. This study finds that Christina Aguilera's music challenges the dominant cultural narratives while illuminating the multi-dimensional aspects of life, as well as subjectivity and agency of women.

Cultural narratives of pop culture come and go, and part of the characteristic of pop culture is ephemerality. However, cultural narratives are not necessarily short-lived. Instead, they can live across time and space, especially with cultural elements that are produced and kept in a retrievable form, such as a music album. Besides the medium of cultural elements, their meaning lives across time and space, too. As Christina Aguilera's says, "After I'm gone, I want my body of work to speak for itself...and my work will live on" (Spotify for Artists, 2018).

It is noteworthy that this study is not an end of itself. The analyzed samples are by no means generalizable to all Christina Aguilera's songs, nor other' female artists' songs. The identified themes are used to group the individual songs together and to point at a general direction, or a bigger picture, of her music. Additionally, each song and each album has its own creation process and story to tell. Therefore, Christina Aguilera's music cannot be generalized by the most popular songs analyzed. Her other songs are also worth being closely examined. It is

also important to note that each song has its own focus, charm, and process of creativity. Although many of her songs share similar themes, many of them tell the same story from different angles and explore different paths of artistry. For example, her experience of domestic abuse by her father was expressed in “I’m Ok” from *Stripped* (2002) with a focus on her damaged feelings. “Oh Mother” from the same album focuses more on her gratitude and promises of support for her mother. In addition, many of her songs are co-written and co-produced with collaborators, such as Linda Perry, Alicia Keys, and Sia. For instance, most of the lyrics of “Hurt” from *Back to Basics* (2006) were written by Linda Perry whose father passed away, and Aguilera adapted it to her own version. Though performed by Aguilera, these co-created songs are co-created stories. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the idea and inspiration behind the scenes as well.

This research is conducted with a focus on the lyrical content. Therefore, it does not intend to include, and therefore lacks, the analysis of the sound or image in Aguilera’s music. In an industry like pop music, in which sound, image, and texts are interwoven, it is difficult to render a holistic understanding of pop music without one or the other. Not only do her images change alongside the meanings of her music, but the genre and style of her music evolve, too. Therefore, this paper only aims to serve as a starting point of studying star image and pop music with a qualitative method. With a focus on quality, this study is conducted at the expense of quantity of pop music. However, this acknowledgement serves as a crucial guidance for future studies to continue studying Aguilera’s songs that are not covered in current research, as well as other artists’ work. It highlights the importance of research with qualitative and quantitative method side by side. This paper also points to a perspective of musical expertise as a way of

studying music. Studying visuals, music theory, as well as the relations between vocals, sound, images, and texts may render a more holistic understanding of contemporary pop music.

Appendix A  
Album: Christina Aguilera (1999)

Song	Primary		Secondary				Themes			
	Preliminary	More abstract	Property/Dimension	Attitude/Emotion	Metaphor/Simile	View-point		Power Ownership	Active/Passive	Annotation (Genius.com)
Genie In A Bottle	Long to be free; Show effort to be with me	Self control; Agency for decision	Yearning/high Confidence/high Self-respect/high	Rational; Inviting; Determined	I=Genie	I, You	I	I/Active	Referenced	Romance/ Love; Self-respect; Confidence
What A Girl Wants	Criteria for a romantic partner	Agency for decision	Gratefulness/high Determination/high Confidence/high	Grateful for understanding	/	I, You	I	I/Active	/	Romance/ Love; Determination
I Turn To You	You are my support	Need for support	Gratefulness/high Vulnerability/high	Grateful for supporting	/	I, You	You (who support me)	I/Passive	Referenced	Emotional Bond; Vulnerability
Reflection	Hide, forget, and lose true self, Find true self	Determine to find and be loved for true self	Self-reflection/high Proactivity/high Motivation/high	Determined ; Eager to break free and seek truth	/	I	World>I, but I will make it so I>World	I/Passive → Active	Referenced	Self-discovery Introspection Determination
Come On Over Baby (All I Want Is You)	Impatience; Ready for next step; Bodily contact	Bodily contact = deepened relationship (spiritual as first step)	Excitement/high Confidence/high Determination/high	Inviting; Determined	/	I, You	I	I/Active	/	Romance/ love; Confidence; Determination
So Emotional	Extremes/ Opposites to describe feelings	Relationship Fluctuation; Instability; Complicacy ; Unpredictability	Determination/high Introspection/high	Curious; Insistent; Emotional	/	I, You	You (romantic partner)	I/Passive You/More Active	Referenced	Romance/ love; More complex view of love; Determination

Appendix B  
Album: Stripped (2002)

Song	Primary		Secondary						Annotation (Genius.com)	Themes
	Preliminary	More abstract	Property/ Dimension	Attitude/ Emotion	Metaphor/ Simile	View- point	Power Ownership	Active/ Passive		
Beautiful	Unacceptance to acceptance of self; Individual to Collective	Self-love, self-acceptance; togetherness, optimism	Assertiveness/high Optimism /high	Insecure → Confident, Constructive	/	I, You, We, every-one	I was powerless → powerful inside-out	I/Active	Referenced	Self-Empowerment; Self-love; Self-Acceptance
Dirty	Nasty, dir(r)ty; "time for my arrival"; have fun; sexual reference	Let loose of self; break my mold; do not take judgement	Unruliness /high Domi-nance/high	Unruly; Playful; Proud; Free	/	I, We, My girls, Your boys	I	I/Active	/	Sexual reference; Fun; Assertiveness; Dominance
Fighter	Been taken advantage of, turn anger into positivity for growth	Become stronger (mental, physical); better self	Assertiveness/high Self-Empowerment/high	Dedicated; Assertive; Grateful	/	I, You, "this man"	I	I/Active	Referenced	Self-growth; Self-empowerment; Assertiveness; Strength/Power
Can't Hold Us Down	Call out double standard; fight back; together with girls/women (g/w)	Women have the right to speak, choose, and do anything	Assertiveness/high Determination/high Empowerment/high	Assertive; Encouraging	Men who do not respect women = little boys	I, My girls, You	I, Girls, Women	I, We/Active	Referenced	Self and Women Empowerment; Assertiveness; Encouragement
The Voice Within	Accept and listen to self; follow self heart; see self as worthy	Hold onto self for strength; you are your own hero	Edification /high Inspiration /high	Encouraging; Constructive; Supportive	/	I (talk to) young girl(s)	You (young girls), I as your support	I, You/Active	/	Girl-empowerment; Self-value; Encouragement; Support
Impossible	Impossible to love if lack communication (comm)	Seek open communication (comm) in relationship	Yearn for sincerity /high Struggle/high	Helpless; Painful	/	I, You (lover)	/	You/More Active	/	Romance/love; Struggle

Appendix C  
Album: Back To Basics (2006)

Song	Primary		Secondary					Annotation (Genius.com)	Themes	
	Preliminary	More abstract	Property/ Dimension	Attitude/ Emotion	Metaphor/ Simile	View- point	Power Ownership			Active/ Passive
Hurt	Deep emotions; Wish reverse but irredeemable	Apologize for past; Wish to redeem past; Sadness reach limit	Apology /high Regret/high	Regret; Apologetic; Miss; Sad	/	I, You	/	/	Referenced	Vulnerability; Self-reflection; Apology; Memory
Candyman	He talks sweet and makes me happy, but I am still wise	I do not give away easily; I need time to know him	Praise/high Fun/high Affection/high Rationality/high	Excited; Rational; Passionate; Sensible; Critical	/	I, He	I	I/Active (make critical decision)	Referenced	Romance/ Love; Sexual hint; Passion; Excitement; Rationality; Patience
Ain't No Other Man	You have everything I need and you "passed every test"	I have standard and he matches all my expectation	Fun/high Proud of him and myself /high	Excited; Celebratory; Rational/Critical	/	I, You	/	/	Referenced	Romance/ Love; Passion; Rationality
Save Me From Myself	Hard to love me; Praise you; You transform better me	"Tenderness" as most important quality, on top of others	Vulnerability/high Trust/high Gratitude/high	Appreciative; Content	/	I, You	You (my man)	You/More Active	Referenced	Romance/Love; Self-Reflection; Devotion; Vulnerability
Mercy On Me	Confess sin; Beg forgiveness; Regret and seek redemption	Want to correct my wrongdoings and do better	Regret/high Seek forgiveness and redemption/high	Apologetic; Ashamed; Determined	/	I, You (lord)	Lord	I/Passive	/	Vulnerability; Self-reflection; Repent; Wish to redeem
Oh Mother	Suffer from dad violence; Move on strong w/ mom	Appreciate mom's love; Promise mom my love	Appreciative /high Vulnerability/high Love/high	Painful (past); Determined; Loving	/	I, She (mom) → I, You (mom)	Collective strength between me and mom	Mom and I /Passive (past) → /Active (now)	Reference	Selflessness; Vulnerability; Mom's Love; Strength; Togetherness

Appendix D  
Album: Bionic (2010)

Song	Primary		Secondary						Annotation (Genius.com)	Themes
	Preliminary	More abstract	Property/ Dimension	Attitude/ Emotion	Metaphor/ Simile	View- point	Power Ownership	Active/ Passive		
You Lost Me	Failed relationship; Disloyalty; Imbalance; Move on	End of relationship of doomed by dishonesty, imbalance	Sadness /high; Determination/high	Vulnerable, but determined	"World is infected"= damaged, impure	I, You	/	/	Referenced	Romance/ Love Vulnerability; New start
Not Myself Tonight	"Out of control"; Unusual, new self; Freedom	Dichotomy between out of control and in control	Rebellion/high Dominance/high Forcefulness/s/high	Bold; Celebratory; Proud; Liberative	/	I, You	I	I/Active	Referenced	Fun; Sexual Reference; Freedom; Self-Empowerment; Independence
Woohoo	Bodily pleasure (BP); women in control	Advocate women's pursuit and dominance	Rebellion/high Dominance/high Boldness/high	Proud; Confident; Forceful; Celebratory	Cake="my as**"	I (top), My girls, You (Boys/Men)	I as "mama"	I/Active	Reference	Fun; Freedom; Bodily pleasure; Empowerment; Dominance
I Hate Boys	Extreme attitude; call out men's wrongdoing; power over	Men as inferior are reduced and objectified	Aggressiveness/high Critique of men/high	Unapologetic; Confident; Forceful	Men=dogs Worm=bad quality in men	I, Boys, You (my league)	I	I/Active	Reference	Critique; Confidence; Empowerment
Bionic	My journey is full of surprise and shock	Transform self and transform everyone else	Determination/high Power/high	Proud; Forceful; Confident; Cheerful	I=future	I, My creation, You	I "shout my name X-T-I-N-A"	I/Active	Reference	Creativity; Boldness; Determination; Independence; Power
Prima Donna	Enjoy my power; "I rule the world"	I am not limited to anything; I can do anything and people listen	Power/high Dominance/high Fun/high Confidence/high	Proud; Forceful; Liberative; Assertive	/	I, Ladies (together-ness)	I	I/Active	/	Power; Independence; Liberation; Assertiveness

Appendix E  
Album: Lotus (2012)

Song	Primary		Secondary					Annotation (Genius.com)	Themes
	Preliminary	More abstract	Property/ Dimension	Attitude/ Emotion	Metaphor/ Simile	View- point	Power Ownership		
Your Body	Fun; Unusual; Let loose; Pursuit of bodily pleasure	Normalize bodily pleasure and pursuit of fun, no commitment	Desire for sexual pleasure/high Rebellion/high	Forceful; Direct; Proud	/	I, You	I	I/Active	Assertiveness; Dominance; Sexual Reference; Fun; Power
Just A Fool	Hardship of breakup; Conflict; Failed relationship	Face sad truth; Take responsibility; Move on	Acceptance/high Introspection/high	Regretful; Distressed; Vulnerable	/	I, You	Reality "Love was cruel"	/	Romance/Love; Distress; Melancholy; Vulnerability
Let There Be Love	"Club song" Fun; Sexual reference	Normalize bodily pleasure and sexual desire	Desire for sexual pleasure /high Fun/high	Direct; Celebratory; Excited	/	I, You	I	I/Active	Boldness; Control; Sexual reference
Blank Page	Admit wrongdoing; Hope for redemption	Take responsibility; establish togetherness	Vulnerability/high Self-reflection/high	Introspective; Regretful; Ashamed	/	I, You, Our	/	I/Passive "I am...waiting for you to bring me back to life"	Vulnerability; Apology; Confession; Self-reflection
Army Of Me	Fighter's sequel, Growth (mental and physically)	Multidimension of self; Fight back; establish statement	Power/high Victory/high Determination/high	Brave; Determined; Bite-back attitude	/	I, You (enemy)	I	I/Active	Bravery; Determination; Power; Empowerment
Sing For Me	Singing is my remedy, self-love, and faith	I sing for self; authenticity; singing is part of me	Liberation /high Vulnerability/high Self-love/high	Expressive; Determined; Open; Free	/	I (all long the song for self)	I	I/Active	Self-expression; Self-reflection; Determination

Appendix F  
Album: Liberation (2018)

Song	Primary		Secondary						Annotation (Genius.com)	Themes
	Preliminary	More abstract	Property/Dimension	Attitude/Emotion	Metaphor/Simile	Viewpoint	Power Ownership	Active/Passive		
Fall In Line	Ownership of self; Agency of voice and action; Self truth	Growth, fight against injustice; be self; pursue truth	Empowerment for girls and women/high	Determined; Encouraging; Caring; Brave	“Burn me at the stake”= deadly punishment	I, You, Girls	I, You, Girls	I, We/Active	Referenced	Pursuit for Truth; Agency; Empowerment
Accelerate	Fun; Enjoy the moment “smile, cry later”; Free	In control; Togetherness with women	Fun/high Power/high	Playful; Dominant	/	I	I (over men)	I/Active	Referenced	Fun; Control; Dominance; Sexual reference
Twice	Dichotomies / Extremes in seeking truth	Finding meaning of life; accept self and past; Complicity	Question/high Determination/high Vulnerability/high	Contemplative; Introspective	/	I, You	/	I/Active	Referenced	Determination; Struggle; Self-reflection; Complicity; Life
Unless It's With You	Complicity of marriage; Scared of failure; Conflict; New start	Insecurity; Long for honesty and simplicity; Commitment	Vulnerability/high → Determination/high	Afraid → Brave; Authentic; Introspective	/	I, You	/	I/Active	Reference	Romance/Love; Marriage; Vulnerability; Wedding; Courage
Like I Do	Unsurpassable; money, experience, and status	Establish power, dominance, and authority	Power/high Confidence/High Dominance/high	Distain (boys/men); Playful; Proud of self	/	I, You	I	I/Active	Referenced	Power; Self-empowerment; Sexual reference; Dominance
Maria	Finding Maria = my inner, truthful self	Feel lost, restrained, empty w/o Maria; need guidance	Introspection/high Vulnerability/high	Pleaing	/	I, Maria= You	Maria (inner self)>surface self	I/Active	Referenced	Vulnerability; Self-Discovery; Desire for guidance

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