

"Don't Call Me Angel": The Construction of Female Representation from a Postfeminist Perspective

Qiwen Hong^{1,a,*}

¹Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, Grattan Street, Parkville, Victoria, 3010, Australia
a. qhhong@student.unimelb.edu.au

*corresponding author

Abstract: *Charlie's Angels* (2019) is considered a feminist film, dedicated to promoting women's empowerment and gender equality related discourse. *Don't Call Me Angel* is the theme song of *Charlie's Angels*, co-performed by Ariana Grande, Miley Cyrus and Lana Del Rey, which advocates women's control over the body, eliminating gender stereotypes, bold self-expression as well as encouraging sisterhood. This article critically discusses the construction of female images in this pop music video from a postfeminist perspective, which means that this study adopts a qualitative method of social semiotics to draw conclusions by sorting out some scenes, lyrics and performances of *Don't Call Me Angel*. Firstly, some of the objectified female and sexual expression scenes in this music video reflect complex postfeminist emotions. Secondly, the music video retains the characteristics of the classic Hollywood action movies' femme fatale when constructing female images, especially highlighting the pornographic femininity and the masculinity of violent female images.

Keywords: post-feminism, female representation, semiotic analysis

1. Introduction

The new version of *Charlie's Angels* was released in 2019 and directed by Elizabeth Banks. This movie stars Kristen Stewart, Naomi Scott and Ella Balinska, and tells the story of three female agents with different personalities and skills who secretly carry out missions and prevent conspiracies to solve crimes. Kusumaningtyas and Juanda conducted a semiotic analysis of *Charlie's Angels* (2019) and found that the film contained feminist ideology, particularly regarding the ability of women to perform manly activities, emphasizing the concept of gender equality [1].

Ariana Grande, Miley Cyrus and Lana Del Rey teamed up to perform the movie theme song *Don't Call Me Angel*, which was released in September 2019. In the music video *Don't Call Me Angel*, three female singers emphasize women's empowerment and autonomy. They wore tight-fitting clothes, short skirts, long boots, and angel wings in the video, showing off their figures to the audience while protesting not to call them angels with a nonchalant and slightly provocative expression. The angels they portray are intelligent, capable, independent and fearless, subverting stereotypes about women being gentle, weak and dependent. The portrayal of this image echoes the excellent combat skills, independent thinking and task execution abilities of female agents in *Charlie's Angels*, making three female singers powerful and eye-catching in the music video. Such character portrayal helps to raise the audience's awareness of the diversity and strength that women exhibit in different fields, showcasing the potential of girls. However, according to Coon, although *Charlie's Angels* advocates

that women are independent and intelligent individuals, it is undeniable that the female body once again becomes a tool for seducing men in the film, and they are still the sexual fantasies of male characters [2]. This is in line with the portrayal of female images by post-feminism. Therefore, this study takes *Don't Call Me Angel* as a case study and examines the female representation constructed from the perspective of post-feminism through social semiotics. More specifically, the music video contains feminist symbols, but at the same time continues the male gaze strategy used in *Charlie's Angels* in its narrative style.

2. Male Gaze, Action Movie Female Representation and Post Feminism

In some magazine covers, advertisements, movies and music videos featuring women as protagonists, femininity has always been reinforced to satisfy the desire of male audiences to gaze. According to Mulvey, the portrayal of the male lead taking an active role in the film, the camera's imitation of the gaze, and the perspective of the audience who are positioned as men together lead to female body objectification in film and television works, thus strengthening the stereotypes related to gender representation [3]. In many popular cultural media works, people display a female image with a slender figure, plump breasts, exquisite makeup and sexy clothing, which has become the object of sexual fantasy for most male audiences [4]. In action movies before the 1970s, women typically played a beautiful and vulnerable role, often experiencing difficulties or violent events, while male characters in movies were often intelligent and powerful, dedicated to rescuing these female victims from danger [5]. After the 1970s, this situation gradually improved mainly due to the birth of some feminist films, such as *Aliens* (1986), *Thelma & Louise* (1991), and *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003). In some female action movies during this period, female protagonists were endowed with traits such as courage, wisdom, strength, and perseverance that were once commonly seen in male protagonists in the traditional sense. However, female action heroes are not common. After studying American action films from 1980 to 2016, Soberon found that the number of female action heroes was only about 4% of male action heroes [6]. King conducted a content analysis of 291 action movies with a police theme and found that female police characters are often portrayed as newcomers to the workplace and quickly attract the admiration of male colleagues [7]. Although more female characters exhibit independent and resilient qualities in today's popular culture, the camera is still dedicated to capturing the sexual attraction brought by their femininity [8]. Post-feminism gradually emerged and sparked controversy in the late 20th century. By actively showcasing the female body and some sexual cues, the traditional feminine temperament is preserved, achieving the substitution of sexual subjectivity and empowerment for female body objectification [9]. Unlike traditional feminism, post feminism showcases women's youth, fashion, charm, and power to provoke the male gaze. Certain aspects of conventional femininity, including beauty, care and allure are preserved, while aspects like inactivity, vulnerability and reliance undergo a feminist reinterpretation in this novel pattern, aiming to redefine girls as proactive individuals with the ability to make choices [10].

3. Methodology

This study uses social semiotics to analyze the music video *Don't Call Me Angel*. The main research objective is to analyze the semiotic information contained in the music video from a critical perspective to discuss the complex postfeminist emotions and the construction of female images. Saussure asserted that the connection between the signifier and the signified does not adhere to rigid or predetermined rules [11]. The social context and the creator's intention greatly influence the construction of the relationship between the two. Therefore, social semiotics not only focuses on the denotation and connotation contained in symbols, but also on the context and intentions of creators and performers in works. Social semiotics primarily aims to systematically investigate the utilization

of textual strategies in conveying messages [12]. Therefore, this study not only focuses on the information conveyed by symbols with visual effects but also involves and explains the texts related to women's rights awareness and emotions contained in specific lyrics. *Don't Call Me Angel* has a wealth of textual and visual symbol resources in terms of lyrics, costumes, scene arrangement and performance. This study sorted and deconstructed the overall narrative of this music video, three female singers, driven by a sense of female empowerment, clashed with male dominated shots, inspiring a brilliant artistic performance with a postfeminist ideology.

4. Deconstructing *Don't Call Me Angel*

Don't Call Me Angel largely reproduces some of the plots in the movie, telling the story of three female agents with different personalities and illustrating how they complete tasks and handle cases. The participation of three well-known female singers indicates that this song is the tone for women's voices. In some audiovisual shots, it can be found that sexiness and masculinity coexist.

Ariana Grande's exposed skin is always the salience of the frame. In the sequence (1:32-1:38), the camera features close-up shots of Ariana Grande's face, pink plump lips, and exposed shoulders, and then uses backlighting to give her a full shot of her figure, emphasizing a sexual suggestion and aligning with the traditional male gaze. From the perspective of clothing style, her pink makeup and white wings are symbols, usually associated with innocence, kindness and romance, indicating that she plays the traditional gentle angel role. In fact, angels have traditionally been used to describe gentle, kind, beautiful and sexy female images from a man's perspective, and are also their sexual fantasies [13]. Ariana Grande's windblown white short skirt evokes the classic on-screen image of the sexy goddess Marilyn Monroe in a low cut white dress. At the same time, Ariana Grande performed some sexy self-touch dance moves, such as swinging her hair and body, showcasing her figure and exposed skin to the audience in front of the camera in an extremely provocative posture. From the perspective of postfeminist ideology, this may mean that Ariana Grande provokes men with her provocative autonomous body display. As Ariana Grande continuously repeats "Boy, don't call me angel," the lyrics she sings imply that even though she looks like an angel, she rejects being addressed in that way by men. In the following scene, she switched her flirtatious expression and became somewhat cold and indifferent, continuing to sing: "See you here with somebody. You sizin' up my body, oh yeah. Don't you know that I bite when the sunset? Yeah. So don't you try come around me". This implies that women will not blindly submit to men, and if they feel offended, they will take a tough stance and become aggressive at certain times. The camera here presents Ariana Grande standing on the rooftop at a low angle, creating a sense of oppression and implying her position as a ruler and leader. Ariana Grande skillfully played with the walkie talkie, and then a controlled helicopter quickly swept across the sky. Walkie talkies and helicopters are symbols that represent authority and power closely linked to male traits, typically within the scope of male dominated professional fields, such as the military.

Compared to Ariana Grande, who maintains her lady style, Miley Cyrus conveys more of a wild temperament. In terms of dress, Miley Cyrus wears a white sports vest, black short, and black boots. In the sequence (0:48-0:50), Miley Cyrus walks around the centre of the boxing ring with an angry expression on her face, wearing a pair of boxing gloves around her neck. Boxing is an iconic sport that embodies masculinity, typically showcasing the muscles of a man's body and highlighting his sense of strength. Miley Cyrus wears various expensive metal necklaces around her neck, especially a pendant with a Chanel logo. The display of luxury jewellery symbols embodies consumerism and implies her essence as an independent woman with wealth. As Miley Cyrus sings: "Uh, I make my money, and I write the checks. So say my name with a little respect. All my girls successful, and you're just our guest". The lyrics here convey that women are fully capable of achieving success in their careers without relying on men and achieving economic independence. She regards men as

"guest" and emphasizes her contemptuous attitude towards the status of men. In this scene, the camera shot the boxing ring at a high angle, with a man in a suit but dishevelled clothes tied to a chair. This shooting angle gives people a sense of oppression, completely subverting the male gaze, and instead supporting the insignificance and helplessness of the bound man in the camera. Although the suit, as a symbol of power, suggests that this man may be a successful business person, from Miley Cyrus's performance, she did not show any respect or humility towards the man. Compared to this man, she is in a dominant position. Miley Cyrus grabs his hair, bites his ears like a wild beast, or punches his abdomen in a series of extremely aggressive and provocative actions. These performance actions also break the conventional law of romantic relationships between male and female protagonists, suggesting the unnecessary nature of romantic plots in women's lives. At the same time, the appearance of men as supporting roles in the music video implied that women do not necessarily need men to help them solve difficult problems by using force. They could be more manly than men. The repeated appearance of Miley Cyrus's bare muscular arms, tattoos on her arms, and cuts on her forehead in the camera reinforces this masculinity. Meanwhile, in this scene, Miley Cyrus angrily sings: "Uh, don't call me angel when I'm a mess, Don't call me angel when I get undressed". "Mess" and "undress" respectively refer to troubled moments in women's lives and some plots in their intimate relationships. Miley Cyrus rejects the labelling of women's bodies through lyrics, implying that using the sexually suggestive word "angel" to describe situations where the body is exposed is a violation of women's personal rights and autonomy.

Lana Del Rey in the camera always appears alternately in different scenes. In the sequence (2:23-2:27), she is situated in a scene like a luxury hotel suite, with wallpaper, bonfires, and lighting presented in shades of grey and warm yellow, creating a mysterious, ambiguous, and warm atmosphere. Lana Del Rey wears a silk red nightgown, legs bent, and lying on the bench in a seductive way. The connotation of red is passion and vitality, and the texture of silk conveys a noble and luxurious temperament. Accompanied by soothing and exotic chorus clips, Lana Del Rey's slightly exposed cleavage and exposed shiny and delicate legs are presented in close-up shots; these shots are largely suggestive of sexuality and objectify Lana Del Rey. More specifically, objectification is achieved by emphasizing certain parts of the female body, such as the chest and buttocks, to promote their sexual attraction and imply that women are disposable, lifeless tools used to satisfy male desires [14]. Through the display of Lana Del Rey's exposed skin, her body became the object of the male gaze. In another scene, she is wearing a tight-fitting outfit, operates surveillance screens in the control room where bulletproof vests are stored, and plays with a knife in the corner. The entire scene is shrouded in black and blue tones, creating a dangerous, oppressive and tense atmosphere. The presence of bulletproof vests and the sharp knife break the stereotype that women lack abilities in martial arts, physical fitness, and scientific and technological fields. On the contrary, they can independently perform tasks and excel in all aspects. Lana Del Rey then picks up a knife and throws it at a humanoid target in the distance. The camera takes a close-up of this target, with the knife inserted into the male genitalia, symbolizing a form of castration. The scene of a knife inserted into the male genitalia is a form of punishment that conveys women's protest against patriarchy and their aversion to gender discrimination or sexual violence in daily life in an impactful manner.

When three female singers appear in the frame at the same time, the intimate relationship between the girls is always well displayed. In the sequence (3:16-3:22), It is worth noting that the most masculine Miley Cyrus first holds Lana Del Rey's face tightly against her forehead. Then, in the next scene, Miley Cyrus is in the middle, with her hands resting on the shoulders of Ariana Grande and Lana Del Rey and licking Ariana Grande's face with her tongue. Although Miley Cyrus is regarded as a tomboy in this team, these intimate contacts seem to be intended to emphasize sisters' friendship and strengthen the relationship between women.

5. Discussion

Don't Call Me Angel contains a clear feminist discourse. Firstly, in terms of scene layout, the magnificent castle hall, the controlled helicopter, and the highly technological control room all symbolize the economic strength and power possessed by the three women in the music video. The boxing ring of Miley Cyrus hints at girl power. In terms of attire, the metal necklace, black punk rock style vest, tight fitting clothing, short skirt, and long boots showcase the girl's rebellious personality. Miley Cyrus's physical attack on men in the boxing ring is anti-masculine behaviour, clearly expressing hostility towards men. However, from the lyrics and the performances of the girls, this music video is full of postfeminist characteristics, showing a complex and intertwined relationship between women's rights and anti-women's rights concepts. "Don't call me angel" is a proposition intended to break the traditional way men refer to their sexual fantasies. In most shots, the expressions of three female singers are contemptuous, arrogant, cold or angry. However, it is worth noting that feminine attire and sexy dance movements that help strengthen the male gaze are also ubiquitous in the music video. For example, Ariana Grande's white angel look is a symbol of sensuality and submission. Lana Del Rey lounges on a bench in a sexy red silk nightgown, reminiscent of a Japanese food game called Nyotaimori. Nyotaimori means that the body of a lying woman is used as a sushi plate, and this is also a typical example of the objectification of the female body. However, from a postfeminist perspective, this can be seen as a confident and sexy display of a girl's body challenging gaze and empowering process.

From the portrayal of female characters, this music video continues the image of the femme fatale from classic Hollywood action movies, with all three women eroticized. In most of the shots, they are wearing angel wings from the Victoria's Secret show, short skirts that accentuate their long legs or tight tank tops and uniforms that accentuate their cleavage. To some extent, these elements shape sexy women from the traditional male perspective. In addition, masculine female images also exist in this music video, especially in the roles played by Miley Cyrus and Lana Del Rey. Unlike Ariana Grande's performance, Miley Cyrus portrays a wildness that is detached from femininity in most shots, such as close-up shots of her angry, fierce, and indifferent expressions. She fights in the boxing ring, showcasing her arm muscles and forehead wounds to the camera. Lana Del Rey is often shown to be wise and calm rather than emotional in the traditional stereotype. At the same time, she is good at manipulating various high-tech equipment and shows talent in martial arts. They use violence to strengthen masculinity.

6. Conclusion

This article deconstructs the music video *Don't Call Me Angel* using social semiotics, to discuss the postfeminist traits contained in it and its portrayal of female images. Findings suggest *Don't Call Me Angel* embodies a "double entanglement" of symbolic representations associated with postfeminist sensibilities. Although three female celebrities actively display their bodies and sexual orientation in music videos to emphasize their control over their bodies and self-empowerment, it is undeniable that the clothing and performance movements retain a lot of heterosexual qualities to attract the male gaze. On the one hand, the singers declare female power and speak out for women with a rebellious attitude, but on the other hand, the construction of some symbols still retains the characteristics of hegemonic aesthetics and neoliberal consumerism. This "double entanglement" causes the music video to present an interesting binary opposition to the representation of women. Firstly, it shows the extremely sexy and charming side of female agents, suggesting that female characters are often the objects of male obsession. Secondly, it also creates a more masculine image of violent women, intending to challenge the traditional gender stereotypes and reflect the strength and independence of women. Although *Don't Call Me Angel* is a music video, it continues the consistent portrayal of female characters in

Hollywood action movies. Further research can focus on a series of contemporary pop music videos with postfeminist sentiments created by female celebrities such as Ariana Grande, Miley Cyrus and Lana Del Rey, to explore the construction of self-representations of postfeminist celebrities contained within them.

References

- [1] Kusumaningtyas, V. N., & Juanda, J. (2022). *Representative feminism in Charlie's Angel 2019 film*. *Apollo Project: Jurnal Ilmiah Program Studi Sastra Inggris*, 11(2), 111-116.
- [2] Coon, D. R. (2005). *Two steps forward, one step back: the selling of Charlie's Angels and Alias*. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 33(1), 2–11. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JPFT.33.1.2-11>
- [3] Mulvey, L. (1975). *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
- [4] Bridge, S. K. (2020). *Gendering music in popular culture*. *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc158>
- [5] Gauntlett, D. (2008). *Media, gender and identity: an introduction*. Routledge.
- [6] Soberon, L. (2021). *In action cinema's crosshair: a longitudinal mapping of enemy images in the American action film*. *Poetics*, 85, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101512>
- [7] King, N. (2008). *Generic womanhood: gendered depictions in cop action cinema*. *Gender & Society*, 22(2), 238-260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243207310715>
- [8] Dejmanee, T. (2016). *"Food porn" as postfeminist play: digital femininity and the female body on food blogs*. *Television & New Media*, 17(5), 429-448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415615944>
- [9] Zorlu, D. (2022). *Powerful women, post-feminism, and fantasies of patriarchal recuperation in Magnificent Century*. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 20(2), 220-242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2022.2036053>
- [10] Zaslow, E. (2009). *Feminism, Inc: Coming of age in girl power media culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [11] Saussure, F. D. (1983). *Course in general linguistics*. Bloomsbury.
- [12] Aiello, G. (2006). *Theoretical advances in critical visual analysis: perception, ideology, mythologies, and social semiotics*. *Journal of visual literacy*, 26(2), 89-102.
- [13] Inness, S. A. (Ed.). (2003). *Disco Divas: women and popular culture in the 1970s*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- [14] Gutiérrez, M., & Ubani, C. (2023). *A conceptual framework of the sexual objectification of women in music videos*. *Feminismo/s*, (42), 27-60. <https://doi.org/10.14198/fem.2023.42.02>