

Research article

# Yielding to the rite/ right femininity: ad(o)/(a)pting to gender performativity

## Sometiéndose a la expectativa de feminidad correcta: ad(o)/(a)ptando(se) a la performatividad de género

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** The acclaimed ex-Disney star Hannah Montana underwent a radical transformation in her coming of adulthood and becoming Miley Cyrus. This change sparked some controversy and criticism, particularly following her performance at the 2013 VMAs. **Methodology:** To analyse this situation, Judith Butler's theories on gender performativity are particularly instrumental. **Results:** Applying gender performativity, when analysing the harsh criticism the singer received, sheds light on the patriarchal assumption that seem to inform this antagonism, especially when compared to other performances that same night. **Conclusions:** The media harassment Cyrus faced may stem from her non-adherence to expected patriarchal gender stereotypes. Her confident and bold performance could in fact be seen as an act of feminist empowerment. Currently, Cyrus presents herself as a less subversive and more conforming public character, which coincidentally or not, just so happens to be more popular and seems to receive kinder press by the media.

**Keywords:** performativity; sexual agency; femininity; gender norms; feminist; patriarchy; gender expectation; compliance.

## Resumen

**Introducción:** La aclamada exestrella Disney Hannah Montana realizó un cambio radical en su actitud y su imagen al convertirse en la adulta Miley Cyrus. Este cambio provocó cierta controversia y crítica hacia su persona, especialmente tras su actuación en los premios VMA en 2013. **Metodología:** Para analizar esta situación se resuelve usar las teorías sobre performatividad de género de la académica Judith Butler, cuyo trabajo en aspectos de género ha sido usado ampliamente en el ámbito de los estudios *queer*. **Resultados:** Al analizar las fuertes críticas que la cantante recibe usando la teoría de la performatividad de género se puede observar que subyacen en estas un tinte de corte patriarcal, especialmente cuando se compara con otras actuaciones esa misma noche. **Conclusiones:** Es posible concluir tras el análisis de la actuación de Miley, que parte del acoso mediático recibido por parte de la cantante provenga de su no adherencia al estereotipo de género patriarcal esperado de ella. Así mismo, su confianza en sí misma sobre el escenario y su atrevida actuación podría considerarse un acto de empoderamiento feminista. Actualmente, la cantante presenta una imagen menos subversiva y más conformista que resulta ser más popular en los medios.

**Palabras clave:** performatividad; potestad sexual; feminidad; normas de género; feminista; patriarcal; expectativas de género; obedecer.

## 1. Introduction

The once venerated Hannah Montana soon became the controversial Miley Cyrus through a rapid transformation that set her under the spotlight of media attention. Hannah Montana provided the world with a pretty and lovable heroine for millions of teens around the world to admire. The role model she presented was that of the idealized young female: the *perfect* blonde/brunette in innocent-looking attire.

She embodied the quintessential young female role model, characterized by a beautiful voice and fame attained solely through her natural singing talent-Hannah Montana enacted a white role model, however, ethnicity and race will not be addressed in this study, as doing so would diverge from the primary focus of this study-. Her image was that of a *well-behaved* and virtuous girl, aligning with societal expectations of femininity and appropriacy.

The character of Hannah Montana has now been long superseded by that of Miley Cyrus and her multiple personas, vilified, condemned, widely criticised, talked about, discussed, praised and still very much the focus of the media. The initial transition from one to the other seemed to outrage the public, and scandalize parents, who watched in awe/fear how their teens' heroine was turning into this highly sexualized, controversial and highly *incorrect* role model.

Much has been written about Miley Cyrus. Studies have been carried out about the superstar's representation in the media (Brown, 2013; Jenner, 2020; Oliver, 2014; Patrick, 2022), where she seems to embody the epitome of the poor rich girl's lost soul, whose fame has proven to be too overwhelming for her unstable self or 'the good girl gone bad' (Brown, 2012, p. 173).

However, there is a lot to be said about both, the character of Miley Cyrus and the multiple faces/personas presented in the media, which reveal the inherent assumptions that inform such representations and criticism of the superstar. Nonetheless, she seems to have *bettered* herself now, leaving behind her threatening non-conforming attitudes, but, which is the (in)/(e)volution she has undergone?

Nowadays, it is possible to find more favourable representations of the star, with the media treating her character with increased respect and admiration. A recent example of this positive shift is the coverage of her appearance at the 2024 Grammy Awards, where she received her first Grammy. However, what drives this positive shift in perception towards the pop star? Analysing this change requires exploring the interplay between her evolving public image, the media's shifting attitudes and broader cultural aspects related to gender normativity and expectations.

Throughout this paper my aim is that of analysing how the media has vilified and (de)constructed this character and her femininity. This framework will facilitate an examination of how Miley Cyrus's femininity has been judged according to hegemonic gender performativity expectations, to which she has not consistently conformed.

The more her behaviour deviated from these expectations, the harsher the media coverage of her character. Said media representations of the superstar impinge on the public's general impressions of her and her femininity, allowing for further interpretations of the assumptions that inform such (re)-presentations and (de)-constructions, where clear power relations are to be found.

### ***1.1. From Hannah Montana to Miley Cyrus***

The character of Hannah Montana, portrayed by Miley Cyrus, achieved widespread fame following the premiere of the Disney Channel television series *Hannah Montana* on March 24, 2006. The programme rapidly garnered popularity among young audiences, thereby establishing both the character and Miley Cyrus as prominent figures in popular culture. Nonetheless, following the conclusion of the *Hannah Montana* series, Miley Cyrus experienced a significant shift in her public image and career trajectory, marked by considerable controversy and portrayed by the media as a 'decline' in her reputation.

Even though some have argued this to be a consequence of the pressures and impacts of early fame on young performers, she has publicly expressed her desire to evolve out of the character of Hannah Montana as soon as the series had finished. This drastic shift in Miley Cyrus's public persona can be interpreted as her attempt to break free from the patriarchal gender expectations imposed on her due to her popularity as the Disney star that catapulted her to fame. This transformation signifies her desire to challenge and redefine the conventional norms of femininity that her earlier image, cultivated through her role as a tween idol, perpetuated.

#### *1.1.1. Hannah Montana in the rise*

The series' success was significantly augmented by its appealing musical content, compelling narratives, and relatable themes concerning the challenges of balancing a double life. This confluence of factors contributed to the extensive recognition and acclaim received by Hannah Montana and its lead actress, who rapidly became an international idol for tweens around the world.

Hannah Montana's popularity was largely due to the show's influence on young viewers who embraced the character's duality, namely how Miley Stewart managed to balance the ordinary experiences of a teenage girl with the extraordinary demands of a pop star. Hannah Montana was a highly successful girl impersonating the empowerment of girls, a very appealing articulation of *girl power* for tweens (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Blue, 2012). This duality allowed viewers to see a reflection of their own struggles with identity and self-presentation.

Furthermore, the character's ability to navigate these parallel lives can be said to have provided a framework for young audiences to explore and negotiate their own identities within the context of societal expectations and personal aspirations. The latter especially relevant in our highly digitized society, where becoming a celebrity or an influencer seems to score high amongst the future expectations of youths (Benson, & Adinlewa, 2022; Marshall, 2014; Serazio, 2010).

Additionally, the series emphasized values such as friendship, perseverance and authenticity. Miley Stewart's dedication to maintaining her personal values despite the pressures of fame offered a narrative of resilience and integrity. As observed by some, the portrayal of Miley's loyalty to her friends and family, along with her commitment to being true to herself, reinforced positive behavioural models for teenage viewers (Kennedy, 2014).

In addition to these thematic elements, the music associated with Hannah Montana played a crucial role in shaping the character's influence. These songs often carried messages of empowerment and self-confidence, resonating with the experiences and aspirations of young girls. The lyrical content and the character's on-screen performances promoted a sense of agency and encouraged viewers to pursue their dreams while remaining grounded in their values.

The global reach of the show further amplified its impact, given that *Hannah Montana* was broadcast in numerous countries, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers to connect with a diverse audience of teenage girls. The universal themes of adolescence, combined with the accessible format of a television series, enabled the character to serve as a relatable and inspirational figure for young viewers around the world. This provided the actress behind the character with world-wide popularity.

#### 1.1.2. *Hannah Montana's 'death'*

After achieving worldwide international success with *Hannah Montana*, Miley Cyrus sought to distance herself from the wholesome 'bubble gum pop star' (Raiken, 2023) she had been manufactured as. -This is how Miley Cyrus describes herself in an interview in 2023, while referring to the Vanity Fair front page in 2008 which caused considerable controversy and uproar, with fans expressing their upset. At the time Miley apologised to the fans, however, in 2023 she refers to the photo shoot as the consequence of *brilliant choices* -.

In her transition from child star to adult performer, Cyrus saw herself having to navigate complex industry expectations and public scrutiny, which as presented by the media, made Cyrus seem like she was taking erratic career choices and displaying eccentric public behaviour. As I see it, it can be argued that in the case of Miley Cyrus, her actions during this period can be seen as a clear attempt to redefine her brand and artistic identity in an industry that demands continuous reinvention. As it was the case with Emma Watson, who cut her hair after the Harry Potter saga had come to an end, so did Cyrus.

Cutting her long mane was her first step towards this distancing from her first most noticeable public persona. Since this coincided with her transitioning from tweenhood to adulthood, this transformation was also mingled with the sexualisation of her image. This sexualisation of the female body in the music industry, if considered, can be observed to be the case with most female pop singers: Rihanna, Beyonce, Shakira, Carol G., Rosalía and Lady Gaga, are but a very small example of this female sexualisation, which seems to actually be the norm.

Miley Cyrus underwent a dramatic image transformation to assert her independence and distance herself from her younger Disney character. In her transformation, Cyrus adopted a more provocative and rebellious persona, most notably exemplified by the 2013 Video Music Awards (VMAs) performance, which drew widespread criticism for its 'explicit' content. I will focus on this music awards event to illustrate my argument, that the criticism Miley Cyrus received can be primarily attributed to her non-conformity to traditional gender expectations, rather than to her overt nudity or sexual insinuation. This analysis will demonstrate that the backlash she was object of was more rooted in her challenge of normative gender roles than in the explicit nakedness displayed on stage.

### 1.1.3. *The vilification of Miley Cyrus*

Miley Cyrus's performance at the 2013 VMAs elicited widespread criticism from both media and cultural commentators, highlighting the tensions between artistic expression and public decency. During this performance, Cyrus was made the centre of attention with her alleged provocative dancing and suggestive gestures, which were presented as inappropriate and shocking.

During the performance, Cyrus emerged from a giant teddy bear and proceeded to sing her hit 'We Can't Stop'. She was dressed in a fuzzy teddy outfit with a bear sticking out its tongue – something the singer emulated repeatedly throughout her performance – under which she wore a skin-coloured bikini, fully visible after removing the bear outfit halfway through the performance. During the performance, her actions included explicit dance moves such as twerking and suggestive gestures involving a foam finger (as can be seen in images 1 and 2 below). Admittedly, though highly suggestive in a sexual way, her performance could be said to have been far from coquettish. She was also wearing trainers and the way she moved on stage distanced from that of the innocent, naïve, good-girl sort of image that Hannah Montana epitomised back in the day.

As can be observed in the image below, Cyrus played with the foam finger, fully in control of her body and actions, seemingly defying decency, as she was accused of by the media.

**Figure 1.**

*Miley Cyrus performing at the 2013 VMAs*



**Source:** Heraldo (2013).

The performance seemed to have been choreographed to shock and entertain, utilizing elements that many viewers found controversial, which some even argued were inappropriate for mainstream television.



Cyrus' overtly sexualised behaviour and the symbolic appropriation of hip-hop cultural elements, such as twerking, were represented by the media as being perceived as a deliberate attempt to shed her child star image and assert her identity as an adult. The provocative nature of her actions was underscored by her use of the foam finger, which she employed in a manner that mimicked masturbation, adding to the performance's shock value. Undoubtedly, her performance significantly deviated from her former persona as a Disney Channel star.

In the Daily Mail her performance is described as 'shocking' when explaining how 'a half-naked Miley, tongue hanging out, gyrating and grinding her bottom in the most overtly sexual display' the author of this article had ever seen, other than Rihanna's performance on *The X Factor* final in 2010 (Sibary, 2013). In this article, as to showcase the 'horrific' change Cyrus has undergone, an image of Hannah Montana is juxtaposed to another of the performance, namely images 2 and 3 below.

The contrast between the two versions of the same person is quite remarkable, not only in terms of outfits, but even more so in relation to attitudes. In image 2 we can see a very provocative, I dare say, empowered Miley Cyrus, who is in charge of the situation and, as the lyrics of her song foretell, who does what she wants to. She is twerking and bending in front of R&B singer-songwriter Robin Thicke, at the time she positions the foam finger she is holding between her legs. Her expression conveys a sense of carefree enjoyment, as she sticks her tongue out in a subtle act of defiance. In contrast, in image 3 we are shown a prudish looking blonde acting in a coquettish sweet manner.

**Figure 2.**

*Cyrus' 2013 VMAs version*



**Source:** Sibary (2013).

**Figure 3.**

*Cyrus as Hannah Montana*



**Source:** Sibary (2013).

Miley Cyrus' performance was widely criticised and described in negative terms by various media outlets. In *The Guardian* her performance was described as 'raunchy' (Michaels, 2013). In U.S media outlet *TIME* the terms used to describe her performance were 'bizarre/raunchy/lewd/rocking' (Nicks, 2013). Runtagh in *People* described it as a 'raunchy' and 'infamous foam finger ride' (2018).

*PopCrush* described the audience's reaction as largely negative, noting that many, including prominent figures like platinum-selling and Grammy Award-winning rapper Drake, appeared unimpressed with her overtly sexualised performance (Miley Cyrus Performs, 2013). In platforms such as *SPIN* Cyrus's performance was reported to have been referred to as 'obscene', 'resembling porn', 'pornographic', 'lewd' and 'gross' just to mention a few (Reilly, 2013). This performance was even foretold to represent an end to her entire career given that it was an 'all time low' (Clarke, 2013). Added to all the above, the singer was also accused of cultural appropriation due to the introduction of twerking in her show (Freeman, 2013; Gaunt, 2016; McMillan Cottom, 2013; Zink, 2016).

Overall, the media response to Miley Cyrus's 2013 VMAs performance highlighted a general consensus of disapproval, focusing on the performance's indecent and provocative nature, which many felt was a stark and inappropriate departure from her previous public image. Perhaps, the latter was partially to blame for the considerable public outcry this performance provoked, the fact that an ex-Disney star had gone so unpredictably and undesirably *wrong*, deviating from the well-marked out path of the Disney good girl. But, what was so *wrong* about her performance? Was she really that *raunchy* and pornographic?

As a matter of fact, that same evening there were other singers on stage who might be argued were considerably more provocative and I dare say pornographic than Cyrus, but not much was said about them. Namely, Lady Gaga's performance, I would argue, is particularly provocative due to her choice of attire and theatrical representation. Initially, she appeared in an outfit resembling a nurse's uniform and a nun's habit (see image 4). This could have set a controversial debate, especially considering the end of her act. Throughout the performance, Lady Gaga rapidly changed into multiple customs and wigs, each transition executed with striking speed.

The performance culminated with Gaga appearing nearly nude, her breasts covered only by seashells and wearing minimal thong underwear. This final striking image (see image 5), evoking the aesthetic of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, was arguably an overtly sexual display, representing a bold statement on the intersection of art and sexuality in contemporary performance. Lady Gaga's moves, as can be seen in images 5 and 6 are highly suggestive and coquettish, with Gaga's knees knocking in image 6, emulating the highly sexualised manga female image.

Nonetheless, this performance did not seem to receive as much negative feedback as did Miley Cyrus'. Why would that be? Why was Miley Cyrus's performance viewed in such negative pornographic terms whereas Lady Gaga's was barely mentioned in the media? I believe the answer to these questions can be obtained by analysing the events using Butler's gender theory on performativity.

**Figure 4.**

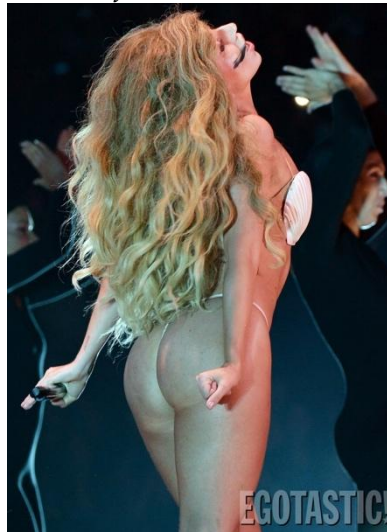
*Starting the performance*



**Source:** toofab (2013).

**Figure 5.**

*Final outfit (back)*



**Source:** lapatilla (2013).

**Figure 6.**

*Final outfit (front)*



**Source:** Purepeople, (n.d.).

As it has been showcased in this article, Cyrus' performance was widely talked about, sparking widespread criticism and debate, drawing attention to issues of sexualization, race and cultural appropriation in popular music performances. The public and critical backlash highlighted the tensions and expectations placed on the former child star. These expectations, I contend, are imbued with patriarchal views on gender performativity, which can be further dilucidated by resorting to Judith Butler's theories of gender norms and expectations.

## 2. Methodology

In order to analyse the data presented above, I will resort to Judith Butler's theories on gender and gender performativity. For the sake of clarity and to avoid repetition, I will concurrently analyse the character of Miley Cyrus while explicating Butler's theoretical framework. This parallel approach will allow for a more integrated and comprehensive examination of the subject matter.

### *2.1. Judith Butler and the constraints of gender performativity: the (right)/(rite-like) femininity*

Judith Butler is a preeminent scholar in the fields of philosophy, comparative literature, and gender studies and has profoundly influenced contemporary understandings of gender and gender expectations, especially as far as non-heteronormative sexuality is concerned. In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (first published in 1990), and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (first published in 1993), she presented revolutionary concepts – albeit not entirely new – that challenged traditional views of gender as a fixed and inherent attribute.

Butler's work draws on and extends the ideas of philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Simone de Beauvoir. From Foucault, she adopts the view that power is diffuse and pervasive, operating through societal norms and discourses rather than through overt domination. From de Beauvoir, Butler takes the insight that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, emphasising the socially constructed nature of gender (Butler, 2004).



By synthesising these influences, Butler provides a robust framework for understanding how gender identities are formed and maintained through social interaction and cultural practices.

At the core of Butler's theories is the notion of gender performativity. This concept posits that gender is not an innate quality or a stable identity, but rather an ongoing series of acts, gestures and behaviours that individuals perform, often unconsciously, in accordance with societal expectations and norms. According to Butler, these repeated performances create the illusion of a stable gender identity (Butler, 1993, 1999, 2004). Notwithstanding the fact that Butler acknowledges the limitations of her theory of gender performativity, especially in the light of trans and materialistic criticisms (Butler, 2024), I find this theory particularly instrumental in order to analyse the object of study selected for the purpose of this article, namely, the (in)/(e)volution of Miley Cyrus.

Furthermore, and more importantly for the purpose of analysis in this article, Butler's theories have equipped scholars and activists with the conceptual tools to critique and analyse the regulatory practices that enforce gender conformity and gender expectations. By highlighting the performative nature of gender, as differentiated from performing a gender, Butler opens new avenues for examining how social institutions, media, and cultural practices shape and constrain individual identities.

Butler asserts that gender is constructed through repetitive social practices and is thus inherently unstable and fluid. This perspective diverges significantly from earlier feminist theories that tended to view gender as a binary attribute rooted in biological sex. Furthermore, Butler differentiates between gender being performed and gender being performative. The former pertains to the way in which a person behaves and acts out their gender. In contrast, the latter refers to the process by which these actions constitute and reinforce societal norms, effectively rendering gender as a regulatory framework, where there exists a right thing to do/be, almost in a rite-like manner. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler states:

[...] performativity cannot be understood outside a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *fa* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (1993, p. 95).

One of the critical implications of Butler's theory is the way in which she deconstructs gender as an iterative, ritualistic performance that inherently constrains and limits individuals. Deviations from the rite-like expected performance that inherently constrains, and limits individuals may lead to ostracism and rejection. This process of performativity imposes societal norms and expectations, thereby regulating *acceptable/right* expressions of gender and reinforcing traditional structures of power and control.

The refusal to adhere to these norms can only be enacted by accepting 'to pay the consequences' (Butler, 2004, p. 214). This dynamic illustrates the pervasive power of societal expectations in regulating behaviour and the significant penalties imposed on those who deviate from established gender roles, something that Miley Cyrus can be said to have been the living proof of. An illustration of the policing and criticism Miley faced is evident in the backlash following her performance at the 2013 VMAs.

This incident highlights the social scrutiny, and normative expectations imposed on her public persona, particularly regarding her departure from traditional gender norms. Her *crime* was not to conform, as Lady Gaga did, Cyrus chose to portray a confident, empowered woman totally in control of her desires who did not comply with a more submissive provocative image, normalised in the media.

Conversely, as Jagger argues, once it is understood that the concept of performativity for identity categories, such as sex and gender, is grounded in a combination of speech act theory and a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity – particularly in a Nietzschean sense where there is no ‘doer behind the deed’ – the notion of agency is consequently called into question. This questioning extends to the potential for resistance and social change, as the framework suggests that ‘individuals are constituted by, rather than preceding their actions’ (Jagger, 2008, p. 9).

However, agency, critique, resistance, and change are intrinsically linked to the subversion of identity according to Butler. This subversion entails creating space for alternative significations and challenging the discursive regimes of compulsory heterosexuality and phallocentrism. By disrupting these normative structures, it becomes possible to explore and establish new forms of identity expression that resist traditional constraints. In relation to this, Cyrus’s non-conformity can be viewed as an attempt to disrupt the existing order in relation to femininity.

Although Butler’s framework was primarily developed to understand and articulate non-heteronormative sexualities, its disruptive potential can also be employed in representing non-conforming female heterosexual identities. This broader applicability underscores the theory’s capacity to challenge and subvert traditional gender norms, allowing for the recognition and legitimization of diverse expressions of female identity that resist conventional heteronormative constraints.

## ***2.2. Miley Cyrus and her departure from the expected gender performativity***

In relation to expected gender performativity, numerous studies have focused on analysing how genders are portrayed, positively valued, and reinforced in the media (Dobson, 2014; Mazzarella, 2013; Scarcelli & Farci, 2024; White, 2015). Research has demonstrated that stereotypical female displays in media often emphasize subtle and understated representations of femininity, which are positively reinforced by the number of comments and likes received on social media platforms (Butkowski, et. al., 2019). These findings suggest that traditional gender norms continue to be perpetuated and validated through digital interactions, highlighting the ongoing influence of societal expectations on gender expression.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that Miley Cyrus’s performance at the VMAs, where she so openly and overtly displayed her agency in providing herself pleasure when using the foam finger (see images 1 and 2), at the time she was defiantly sticking her tongue out, was met with such antagonism and harsh criticism. Cyrus’s performance deviated significantly from the subtle, understated representations of femininity typically expected and reinforced by media portrayals.

Her explicit display of sexual agency on mainstream television directly challenged these conventional norms, resulting in significant backlash and further highlighting the rigid boundaries within which female behaviour is often constrained and judged. This reaction underscores the persistent societal discomfort with women asserting their sexual autonomy in public spaces.

Miley Cyrus's brand of feminism appears to be characterised by its emphasis on fearlessness and autonomy. It advocates for unrestrained self-expression and the freedom to make personal choices without fear of judgement. This approach can be said to appropriate a traditionally masculine-coded form of individual liberty, exemplified by an indifference to societal norms and the pursuit of unabashed self-expression.

This includes behaviours such as public nudity, hedonistic partying, and living a lifestyle epitomized by the carefree ethos Cyrus sings about in her 2013 hit *We Can't Stop*, which became a ubiquitous anthem during that summer. This form of feminism challenges gender norms and expectations and underscores a radical redefinition of female agency and empowerment that is at odds with a patriarchal expectation of the female gender. She could in fact be said to be articulating a feminist manifesto, encouraging other women to non-conform and empower themselves (Apolloni, 2014; Łyszko, 2021; McNicholas, 2017).

Conversely, the more provocative, semi-nude Lady Gaga did not spark such antagonistic responses, her gender performativity was adequately adjusted to the expectation. She was fittingly naked and provocative, enacting a coquettish, seemingly vulnerable and pleasantly non-threatening female, which was merely exposing her nakedness to be enjoyed.

### 2.3. Miley Cyrus and her (in)/(e)volution

After having portrayed the rebellious female singer in the media, with overt acts of empowered sexualization during the 2013 VMAs, Miley Cyrus presents herself differently in 2024. She now embodies a more traditional femininity, characterised by long, wavy hair and a form-fitting, flattering dress as she accepts her Grammy award. For the event, she wore a designer dress that featured a high slit and was embellished with sparkling sequins. The one-shoulder gown highlighted her figure, and her hairstyle was a 70s-style blowout, showcasing a blend of modern glamour and vintage flair.

While she performed her song *Flowers* she was wearing a dress featuring a see-through design with intricate detailing (see image 7). The dress was primarily made of thin mesh, with solid coverage over her chest and bikini area, and adorned with safety pins and antique beads, providing a sexy look that acceptably revealed and emphasised her natural beauty. The outfit was complemented with a pair of striking black high heels that added to the glamorous look. This attire can be seen as signifying a shift from her earlier rebellious image to a more traditionally feminine one.

#### Figure 7.

*Miley Cyrus performing at the 2024 Grammy Awards*



**Source:** Grammy Awards, 2024

Miley now embodies a more traditional femininity. This transformation raises the question of whether Cyrus has ultimately conformed to the expected gender performativity she previously resisted. This change can be interpreted as an evolution of her public persona and artistic expression. However, it might also be perceived as a regression or involution from her earlier, more radical feminist stance that challenged conventional norms. As studies mentioned above showed, traditional representations of femininity are often encouraged and positively evaluated through likes and comments on social media, similarly, a parallel can be drawn with Miley Cyrus's recent recognition.

Her final adherence to conventional feminine norms has been rewarded with a Grammy, suggesting a similar dynamic of reinforcement and validation within the entertainment industry. This parallelism highlights the continued societal preference for traditional expressions of femininity, both in digital and professional accolades. Her initial acts of defiance in her earlier career being now invalidated by the change she has undergone, and the consequence likeability and success of this renewed conformity.

## 5. Conclusions

The character of Miley Cyrus during her earlier career, when she was redefining herself against the character of Hannah Montana, could be interpreted as embodying a form of feminist expression that openly defied the conventions of respectability and propriety traditionally imposed on female behaviour. Her performance in the 2013 VMAs deviated from the expected norms of gender performativity traditionally imposed upon female pop singers. This deviation was particularly significant given her origins as a teenage idol under the Disney franchise, which is emblematic of idealized, compliant femininity and the princes archetype.

By subverting these expectations, Cyrus challenged the conventional paradigms of femininity perpetuated by such platforms. Her actions not only resisted the stereotypical roles assigned to female performers but also critiqued the rigid constructs of gender and propriety in the entertainment industry. By performing in this manner, Miley Cyrus posed a significant challenge to the patriarchal system and its entrenched norms. Her embodiment of an empowered woman, fully in control of her body and actions, threatened the established social order. This subversion of traditional gender roles likely contributed to the harsh criticism she received, as her performance disrupted the societal expectations of female behaviour autonomy. The backlash she endured could thus be interpreted as a reactionary defence of the patriarchal status quo, which sought to reassert control over women's bodies and agency (Butler, 1990; McRobbie, 2009).

As this article shows, ultimately, Miley Cyrus appears to have yielded back to conventional notions of femininity. Initially gaining fame as an actress embodying the quintessentially innocent character of Hannah Montana, she later transformed into a representation of empowerment, independence and boldness during her performance in the 2013 VMAs, that made her the object of a considerable amount of criticism by the media and fans. Nonetheless, overtime, Cyrus has seemingly reverted to a more traditionally *right* version of herself – according to patriarchal expectations – or rite-like accepted expressions of femininity. Coincidentally or not, it is after this reversion to a more traditional femininity that she has won her first Grammy, eleven years after her VMAs reviled performance. This trajectory highlights the tension between individual expression and societal expectations of gender (Butler, 1990; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).



As this article has demonstrated, gender expectations and performativity impose constraints on the expression of gender. These limitations are further reinforced by media representations and the pressures exerted by various media outlets, which subsequently shape public perceptions of gender. For genuine progress to occur, it is imperative for more female singers to challenge and transform traditional gender expectations, thereby fostering a cultural evolution that embraces diverse, more open and encompassing expressions of gender identity. Such changes could help dismantle entrenched stereotypes and promote a more inclusive understanding of gender roles.

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