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# The Representation of Women in Filipino Song Lyrics: Implications to Cultural Norms in the Philippines

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## Abstract

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Cognizant that music in the Philippines functions both as a reflection of and a catalyst for societal values, this study examines the representation of women in Original Pilipino Music (OPM) and its implications to contemporary Filipino cultural norms. Anchored on cultural feminism, the study analyzes the portrayal of women in eight selected OPM song lyrics to identify underlying cultural meanings and their influence on gender norms. Using a qualitative research design, the study employs thematic content analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review and refinement, definition and naming, and interpretation. The analysis revealed that popular music functions as a powerful medium through which gendered ideas and cultural values are articulated and transmitted in Philippine society. The thematic analysis found recurring patterns that characterize these portrayals, including, Romantic Idealization and Women's Negotiation of Love, Self-Realization and Autonomy in Women's Experiences of Love, and Fluidity and Resistance of Women in Gender Representation. These themes collectively construct the representation of women that inform cultural norms. The study highlights how these representations are deeply influenced by cultural values and social contexts in the Philippines. By foregrounding cultural feminism, the analysis positions women's representations in OPM as integral to Philippine cultural identity. The study contributes to gender studies, cultural feminism, and Filipino cultural discourse, underscoring the need for greater critical awareness among songwriters, audiences, educators, and cultural stakeholders regarding the role of lyrics in shaping gender perceptions and cultural values.

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## Introduction

Music is a powerful medium for expressing emotions, constructing identities, and transmitting social norms. In the Philippines, Original Pilipino Music (OPM) occupies a central place in popular culture, functioning both as a reflection of social realities and as a mechanism through which societal values are reinforced (Maceda, 2007). Philippine music is rich and naturally melodious, rooted in a unique musical tradition that predates Western

influence (Divinagracia, 2019). Despite historical encounters with colonial cultures, Filipino music has remained diverse yet culturally cohesive (Sebio, 2023). While a significant number of OPM songs are written in English, Tagalog compositions remain equally central to the OPM canon, and the increasing quantity, popularity, and global reach of OPM attest to its enduring cultural relevance. As a distinct form of Philippine popular music,

OPM is the local embodiment of these wider musical functions, integrating Filipino ideals, experiences, and identities into its sound and, more crucially, its lyrics.

In the case of OPM, lyrics are purposefully composed and filled with meaning and acting as an important means for communicating cultural values and societal interpretations. Santos (2013) shared that “Music defines and reflects the culture of a country.” Investigating what songs depict, particularly within their sociocultural contexts, is therefore worth investigating. Studying the meaning of the OPM lyrics necessitates paying attention to style as it becomes an important variable especially with the coming of time that the genres continue to evolve and continue to pronounce variations yet distinctiveness in their content. In this context, studying the OPM is like reading about Philippine culture. Songs have become depictive of the rich history of the country, across historical periods, ranging from the so-called oppressed times, sad times, tragic ones to the more liberated age, freer and bolder. They have somehow captured the emotions that house the Filipino hearts. Because songs convey cultural meanings, they also serve as important avenues for the formation and reinforcement of gender identities. Filipino song lyrics often encode narratives of love, sacrifice, resilience, and relational morality, which contribute to shaping perceptions of gender roles and expectations. In the Philippine context, several scholars have examined how cultural texts, including songs, films, and popular narratives, construct gendered identities (Andres, 2024; Urbano *et al.*, 2021; Guha, 2025). Women, in particular, are frequently depicted in ways that highlight culturally valued traits such as emotional sensitivity, relational commitment, and self-sacrifice (Curran *et al.*, 2023; Cantillon & Hutton, 2020).

Filipinos relate to the Filipino songs and these songs have become people’s songs. This analogy is not far-fetched as it also exists in other communities abroad, elsewhere in the globe. Like in the case of Sri Lanka for example, songs are likened to totems that bind people of local communities together. Weerakkody and Kariyakarawana (2022), in their analysis of Sunil Santha’s contribution to Sri Lankan music, put forward that music is of paramount importance for people to possess common attributes that would make them a community.

Understanding cultural concepts is presumed a fundamental fact of society. To understand a woman, for instance, would require also understanding the stature of a man. Gender differences are allies to human differences. They co-exist with humanity itself. Only that they are not given a more comprehensive picture in the olden days and only now that the differences come out on the surface as they gain more and more recognition and consequently, acceptance, albeit still in varying levels. According to

Connell (2009), the feminist movement’s idea of power as a dimension of gender is relevant to discuss, for instance the image of men as the ruling gender and the portrayal in media of women as passive and stupid. Presumably, some of these concepts depict women in a negative way (Santonniccolo *et al.*, 2023), a position that is not favorable to women especially at this time that the rise of women empowerment is evident in all platforms. While scholarship on media and literature has explored gender representation in the Philippines (Urbano *et al.*, 2021), there is limited research examining how women are portrayed specifically in OPM lyrics. International studies suggest that popular music can simultaneously reflect and shape societal expectations regarding gender (Björck, 2011; Schmutz & Faupel 2010). In the Philippine context, where music is widely consumed and culturally influential, analyzing song lyrics provides insight into how women’s identities are socially constructed and culturally communicated.

Cognizant that gender gaps are largely due to discrimination against women and so, therefore, it deserves attention. There remain many challenges, and the situations in the Philippines in context are no exemption. The oppression, disparity, marginalization, and discrimination that may be reflected in song lyrics constitute valid grounds for concern and therefore warrant systematic scholarly investigation. As music defines and reflects the culture of a country (Santos, 2013), this study puts premium on the role that song lyrics play as a literary text, and as a vehicle and transmitter of culture that can lead to better and more inclusive cultural norms.

Song lyrics reflect and influence societal meanings, especially beliefs about women and their responsibilities. OPM lyrics express and reinforce social conceptions of femininity, making them valuable texts for studying how cultural conventions around gender persist or are challenged. Building on this understanding, this study examined the representation of women in eight Original Pilipino Music (OPM) lyrics which paved the way to deduce implications to cultural norms. With that, the study answered these questions:

1. How are women represented in OPM songs?
2. What themes characterize these representations?
3. How do cultural values and social contexts influence the portrayal of women in these songs?

## **Related literature and studies**

### **Song lyrics as literary text**

In the domain of literary analysis, Ginting (2022) asserted that song lyrics are perceived as a constituent element of literary works, particularly poetry, and this

assumption is grounded on the observation that song lyrics share commonalities with poetry. Poetry is characterized by its concise and sublime language wherein every word conveys multiple meanings; it carries norms to which it has been attached (Reyes, 2024). Songs, composed by the poets, serve as one of the media through which feelings are expressed, aspirations and attitudes are articulated as a response to various life experiences (Ahmadi et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that every song lyric inherently carries explicit and implicit meanings, and the process of comprehending them often requires multiple stages, resulting in more profound interpretations of lyrical content (Ariska et al., 2021).

In terms of literature, Ceramella (2022) forwarded that there is a technical feature of poetry that allows music lyrics to fit into works of literature. Literature can be expressed through poetry or prose, but music is a singular way of expression. However, when poetry is set to music, particularly lyrical poetry with musically-inspired phrasing and rhythms, they reach their apotheosis, or most natural relationship. Poetry is known for its visual beauty, emotional content, and rhyme and meter, all of which are present in music lyrics. Music lyrics usually have some sort of intention, they are often filled with figurative language and more often than not, they have layers of meaning (Elmusa, 2016). Laube (2016) discusses the fluidity between the two forms, noting that while they are distinct, lyrics utilize the same "craft, intent, conventions, and form" as poetry. As lyrics function as a hybrid of poetic and musical discourse, they provide a rich site for exploring how experience is represented in language (Simbolon et al., 2025). On the aspect of lyrics being treated as literature worthy of analysis, Laube (2016) put forward that stretching the boundaries of literature into the realm of sound does not diminish it but instead provides greater emotional access to the words. He furthered that music adds a new dimension which pure writing simply cannot achieve. Words can gain literary merit by becoming musical. Mumford and Sons, a folk-rock band which found widespread success in its three albums from 2009, 2012, and 2015, provides a particularly fitting example.

Music is written when feelings find their way to be expressed, so songwriters write them down with poetic license. But then, it has to find its place and reach a wider grasp, performance is likely to ensue. That is where the musicality of the work comes into play. Bugeja (1992) argues that lyrics should not just be read as "poor poetry" but analyzed as a specific media format. He provides a methodology for analyzing lyrics that considers performance, sound, and text.

Research on songs in the Philippines has generally emphasized their cultural, emotional, and social functions,

but few have examined them through the lens of gender representation. Existing studies demonstrate the richness of Original Pilipino Music (OPM) as a cultural text, yet they often stop short of analyzing how women are represented in songs. For instance, Banguis (2021) investigated trends in OPM hit songs in terms of theme, emotions, and genre. Their study highlighted the diversity of lyrical content and the evolving themes in popular music but did not interrogate how women are portrayed in the songs.

Ascalon and Cabredo (2015) explored mood recognition in OPM songs using lyrics, employing computational methods to classify emotional tone. While their work demonstrated the potential of lyrics as data for affective analysis, it did not address issues of representation or cultural bias. Guayco and Macasaet (2014) analyzed Ilocano and Manila traditional wedding songs, showing how lyrics transmit cultural values and rituals. Their findings underscored the role of songs in preserving tradition, but the study was limited to ceremonial contexts and did not examine gender stereotypes.

Meanwhile, Medina (2015) discussed portrayals of women in Philippine literature, noting recurring themes of subservience and oppression. Although not focused on OPM, this work provides a critical foundation for understanding how similar patterns of marginalization may persist in song lyrics. Other local studies have examined Filipino folk songs and kundiman, often highlighting themes of love, patriotism, and sacrifice. These works affirm the cultural significance of lyrics but rarely interrogate the portrayal of women in songs. Conversely, Santos (2013) argued that music reflects national culture, emphasizing its role as a transmitter of values and identity. However, the study remained general and did not specifically address the portrayal of women in OPM.

Taken together, these studies affirm that OPM lyrics are rich cultural texts worthy of analysis. They demonstrate that lyrics can transmit emotions, traditions, and values. However, they do not sufficiently examine the cultural values and social contexts that influence the portrayal of women in OPM. This study addresses that gap by treating OPM lyrics as both literary texts, with poetic qualities and layered meaning. It focuses explicitly on gender representation, an area underexplored in Philippine song lyric studies, and links cultural feminism to show how women are depicted in ways that reinforce or challenge cultural norms.

### **Cultural concept of women**

Culture shapes identity and sets norms for acceptable behavior, fostering strong community bonds among those who share a common heritage. These ties are

especially beneficial to women, as they provide support systems and shared responsibilities within their cultural communities (Cerna & Wallace, 2000). Across the globe, communities of women exist, which are strongholds of women empowerment. In Vietnam, chastity of women is deeply ingrained in its culture. True to its virtues, womanhood is bolstered by a system of practices (Bhandari, 2023; Schafer, 2010). In Thailand, women hold high social status and women assume varied roles for development (Richardson, 2020).

The concept of womanhood is widely recognized as a social and cultural construction, influenced by language, tradition, and collective experience. De Beauvoir (2016) argues that "woman" is a social construct imposed on females by civilization, defining them largely in relation to men as the "Other". Bryman (2011) articulates that culture is not a static reality but is continuously shaped through human interactions, leading to the emergence of categories such as "womanhood" and "femininity" as social constructs that are maintained and reinforced over time.

The category of "womanhood" serves as a prime example of social construction, as it is upheld through interactions among individuals who identify shared attributes within a group, thereby establishing social characteristics particular to that collective. Similarly, the notion of "femininity" is also derived from these interactions. Consequently, the meanings and interpretations associated with social constructions evolve across different contexts and periods. The language used to describe various socially constructed categories, including femininity and womanhood, is integral to this process. Additionally, Aaltio and Mills (2002) contend that womanhood and femininity encompass ideals and values that are rooted in cultural contexts. In this framework, song lyrics function as cultural artifacts that not only reflect but also reproduce societal assumptions about gender roles.

In the Philippine context, studies have shown that women are often portrayed in literature and music as subordinate or marginalized. Medina (2015) noted that portrayals of women in Philippine literary texts frequently emphasize subservience and oppression, a pattern that persists in contemporary discourses. Similarly, Guayco and Macasaet (2014), in their analysis of Ilocano and Manila wedding songs, demonstrated how lyrics transmit cultural values that reinforce traditional gender roles. These findings align with Citron's (2000) assertion that music performs important cultural work by reproducing societal ideologies, including class and gender hierarchies.

Global scholarship also supports this view. Popoola *et al.* (2020) and Onanuga (2017) documented how women

in popular music are often depicted as sexual objects, while Makina (2013) highlighted the persistence of stereotypes that portray women as manipulative or dependent. Although some studies, such as de Laat (2019) and Thiong'o (2015), have identified more empowering depictions of women, the dominant trend remains one of marginalization.

Synthesizing these perspectives underscores the need to explore how Filipino songwriters, as cultural agents, construct images of women in OPM. While international studies have extensively examined gender representation in pop and rap lyrics, Philippine scholarship has yet to fully interrogate how OPM songs shape cultural concepts of women in contemporary music. This gap is significant because OPM, as a vehicle of cultural transmission, not only reflects but also influences societal attitudes toward gender.

By employing cultural feminism, this study reveals how OPM lyrics reflect and shape the portrayal of women, showing the deep-rooted cultural values and social contexts that influence these representations. The language and imagery used in these songs are not merely artistic choices; they are embedded with societal attitudes that dictate how women are perceived, valued, and positioned in Philippine culture. For instance, traditional notions of femininity, familial roles, and societal expectations often manifest in lyrics, reinforcing stereotypes that can hinder gender equality. By critically addressing these portrayals, the study underscores the potential of music as a powerful cultural text that can challenge existing inequalities and promote a more gender-sensitive narrative, ultimately contributing to the broader movement for a gender-fair Philippines.

### **Portrayal of women in music**

Akhter (2020) wrote that one of the contemporary issues today is gender inequality. It was claimed that writers across the globe wrote about burning issues of their times, one being inequality. Elucidated in the study is the fact that some writers had suffered with this menace of the society themselves and have lightened this menace very keenly and acutely in their works. This carries its truth in the Philippines and neighboring countries, Thailand for one. This inequality according to Akhter (2020) is a result of bias and writers remain active reformists to bring a social change in the society.

Writers, including song writers, have this big accountability to the society where they belong. In the context of having lyrics as literary pieces, these writers can fall under the category labeled as social psychologists,

authors of literary texts. They press forth people's search to understand humanity. Because of their mastery and competence in treating psychosocial phenomena, authors emerge as bearers of a type of knowledge different from that of the scientist and that of the 'practical' person, busy getting on with everyday life (Reyes, 2019). This supports the stance that different variables are at play to understand social phenomenon, song influence and power in the frame of culture and gender as one in this case.

Citron (2000) contends that music grows out of a specific social context and in many ways expresses fundamental assumptions about the culture in which it originates. She claims that the person writing the song is also affected by cultural circumstances and assumptions which naturally affect the piece that is written. Furthermore, Citron argues that music performs important cultural work regarding reproducing societal values and ideologies. This could mean that important social variables such as class and gender can be inscribed in the lyrics that accompany a musical piece. These mean that songwriters' reality affects the songs they write. Presumably, writers use their own emotions, their own stance, their own experiences in translating something meaningful for the appreciation of the audience.

Female songwriters have, in various circumstances, been portrayed, whether through song lyrics, music videos, or media coverage, as empowered and likewise sexualized and objectified objects. In this regard, analyzing the domain of culture, highlighting the gender considerations, has been regarded as a valuable endeavor. This is largely owed to the immense significance of popular culture, which commands an expansive and influential audience (Haiduk & Fitch, 2022).

The study done by Rasmussen and Densley (2017) stated that the songs they examined showed women as having less traditional roles and yet women were described as objects, which Blose (2012) explored. These studies were further supported by Popoola (2020), Onanuga (2017), and Lisara (2013), for they contended the songs they analyzed portrayed women as sexual objects. Then, Makina (2013) also braced the idea that songs generated words stereotyping the images of women. However, Thiong'o (2015) opposed the idea, for she discovered that the songs she investigated viewed women as cunning and they used their wisdom to take advantage of men. Also, de Laat (2019) reinforced the idea and claimed that women repudiate material wealth and infidelity.

Asian researchers have considered delving into examining the songs that depicted women negatively. One study has been conducted to examine women in songs; where women were seen as objects (Kapoor, 2018). These

forementioned studies form part of how the present study came into flesh. Song lyrics are assumed to be a powerful device in the proliferation of culture and songwriters being social agents have a pivotal role in making this culture very much reflective of its people. All being set, the gender divide must not have its place. Being a representation of people's life, the songs have to be gender fair.

### Conceptual framework

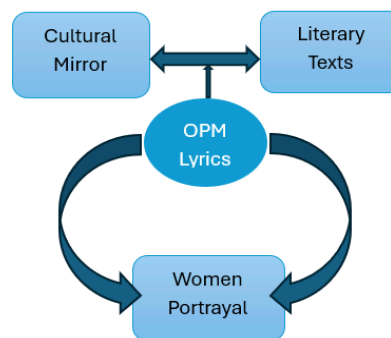


Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1 reflects the conceptual framework of the study. The framework positions Original Pilipino Music (OPM) lyrics at the center of analysis, emphasizing their dual function as literary texts and as a cultural mirror. This dual positioning reflects the study's core assumption that song lyrics are not merely aesthetic artifacts but culturally embedded texts that both reflect and shape social realities.

Viewed as literary texts, OPM lyrics are examined for their imagery, narrative patterns, and stylistic choices. This literary lens enables a close reading of how women are represented through thematic emphasis and relational roles within the songs. Simultaneously, the framework conceptualizes OPM lyrics as a cultural mirror. Through this cultural lens, the study acknowledges that representations of women in song lyrics are shaped by historical, social, and moral contexts. This perspective supports the objective of identifying how portrayals of women correspond to culturally sanctioned ideals such as emotionality, relational commitment, or passivity.

At the core of the framework is the bidirectional relationship between OPM lyrics and women's portrayal. The circular arrows signify that portrayals of women are not only reflected in lyrics but are also reinforced and normalized through repeated musical consumption. This recursive relationship reflects how women's portrayal emerges.

### Theoretical framework

This study used cultural feminism theory. Cultural feminism claims that there are essential differences

between men and women. The phrase "essential difference" talks about gender differences which are the essential differences between male and female. All the differences of male and female are re-attributed from their biological structure which cannot be chosen.

Alcoff (1998) said that cultural feminism tries to revalidate the devalued attributes of women such as non-violence, nurturing abilities, and emotional intelligence. Moreover, she defined cultural feminism as a variety of feminism which emphasizes essential differences between men and women that is based on biological differences in reproductive capacity. It attributes to those differences distinctive and superior virtues in women. Therefore, Alcoff (1998) argues the patriarchal orientation of defining women and she said, "Man has said that woman can be defined, delineated, captured, understood, explained and diagnosed to a level of determination never accorded to man himself, who is conceived as a rational animal with free will." Alcoff (1998) was supported by Rao (1995) that cultural feminism must be raised because according to her "no social group has suffered greater violation of its human rights in the name of culture than women." Echols (1983) construes that the meaning of cultural feminism is that it commends the positive aspect of feminine virtue, character and personality that is attributed to females for cultural feminism simply embraces the positive feminine virtues.

## Materials and Methods

### Research design

This study employed qualitative research design using thematic content analysis to examine the representation of women in contemporary Filipino popular songs. Song lyrics are treated as cultural artifacts, reflecting and shaping social norms, gender expectations, and cultural values within Philippine society.

The analysis was anchored on cultural feminist theory, which foregrounds women's experiences, relational identities, and emotional expressions as socially and culturally meaningful (Gilligan, 1982; Tong, 2009). This theoretical perspective enables the analysis of women's representation not solely in terms of power relations but also as a reflection of culturally embedded traits attributed to women in the Philippines.

### Sampling procedure

The selection of OPM was done purposively where predetermined criteria were used. The criteria include: (a) If there are 2 or more songwriters in a song, they should be

in one sex only e.g. all of the songwriters are male or otherwise all female; (b) Cultural prominence and popularity in the Philippines, as evidenced by mainstream circulation, online streaming metrics, and audience engagement; (c) The song content is dedicated to a person or to a human being; (d) The song is composed by a Filipino song writer.; (e) The song lyrics should contain descriptions referring to a female.

### Scope and limitation of the study

The present study analyzed eight (8) songs which include (1) Hayaan Mo Sila by ExB O.C. Dwags ft. JRoa; (2) Dahil Sayo by Inigo Pascual; (3) Pusong Ligaw by Jonalyn Viray; (4) Titibo-tibo by Moira Dela Torre; (5) Malaya by Moira Dela Torre; (6) Sundo by Aia De Leon; (7) Mundo by IV of Spade; and (8) Panaginip by Morissette Amon.

### Data analysis

On processing data, the study employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006, 2021), guided by the study's conceptual framework that views OPM lyrics as literary texts and as a cultural mirror informing women's portrayal. The analysis began with familiarization through repeated readings of the selected song lyrics to gain an in-depth understanding of their themes, narratives, and cultural contexts. Treating the lyrics primarily as literary texts, this phase focused on comprehending how women are positioned within the stories and emotional worlds constructed by the songs.

During the initial coding phase, recurring ideas, images, motifs, and narrative situations related to women's representation were identified. Rather than focusing on technical linguistic features, the coding emphasized literary meanings such as character roles, emotional trajectories, relational dynamics, and implied values. These codes were then clustered into preliminary themes that captured dominant gendered constructs, including emotional expression, relational commitment, autonomy, and power relations.

The themes were reviewed and refined by returning to the full set of lyrics to ensure that they accurately represented the corpus and cohered with the study's cultural and feminist perspectives. Each theme was then clearly defined and named, drawing on relevant cultural and feminist concepts to articulate how women's portrayals reflect or challenge prevailing social norms. The final phase involved interpretation, wherein the themes were situated within Filipino cultural values and historical contexts. Attention was given to both male- and female-narrated songs to examine how women's portrayals

are constructed and circulated through OPM. Through this process, thematic analysis operationalized the framework by linking literary representations in song lyrics to their broader cultural implications, thereby addressing the study's objectives without privileging a strictly linguistic analysis.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study based on the thematic analysis of selected Original Pilipino Music (OPM) song lyrics. Guided by the framework of cultural feminism (Alcoff, 1998) and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the discussion addresses how women are culturally represented in popular Filipino songs and how these representations reflect broader societal values.

### Representation of women in OPM songs

An examination of eight OPM song lyrics revealed how women are portrayed across popular Filipino music. Across the corpus, women were consistently portrayed in terms of emotional expressiveness and relational engagement.

The lyrics of Hayaan Mo Sila (ExB O.C. Dwags ft. JRoa) gave advice about "letting women chase" and not taking women or relationships too seriously. The song describes women as deceptive, replaceable and that they are using men for their gain. The song frames women as objects of male desire.

In Sundo (Aia De Leon), the female character was depicted as emotionally vulnerable, empathetic, and attentive to the needs of others. This representation aligns with cultural feminist perspectives that recognize emotional labor and relationality as central aspects of femininity (Barna, 2022; Gilligan, 1982).

Conversely, male-narrated songs, such as Dahil Sayo (Iñigo Pascual) and Mundo (IV of Spades), portrayed women as objects of admiration or idealization, emphasizing beauty, nurturing qualities, and moral guidance. These portrayals, while highlighting reverence for women, also risk reinforcing traditional gender expectations, positioning women primarily in relational or supportive roles rather than as autonomous actors. The songs situate women within conventional gender roles. These portrayals emphasize women's desirability, emotional dependence, or availability within romantic relationships, thereby reinforcing expectations that prioritize women's roles in relation to men. Similar patterns have been observed in studies of Filipino media, where women are frequently framed as objects of affection or

desire rather than as independent social actors (Tolentino, 2001).

For Pusong Ligaw (Jonalyn Viray), the woman was pictured as a dreamer without the man. The meaning of life is likened to fulfilling a dream - that is living with the man of her dreams.

Ikaw ang pangarap, nais kong makamtan  
Sa buhay ko ay ikaw ang kahulugan  
(You are my dream, I want to reach  
You are the meaning of my life)

Interestingly, Malaya (Maira Dela Torre) and Titibo-tibo (Maira Dela Torre) offer a more empowered representation, depicting women exercising personal choice, independence, and non-conformity to traditional norms. For example, in Malaya, the lyrics articulate a desire for self-liberation from relational dependency, reflecting growing recognition of women's agency in Filipino society.

The song, Panaginip (Morissette Amon) expresses intense emotional experience when with someone she loves — describing the beloved as almost unreal, like a dream come true. The lyrics focus on feelings of joy, liberation, and wonder when in the presence of this person, and the fear of losing that connection. Within the Philippine socio-cultural context, these portrayals reflect enduring gender norms shaped by patriarchal values. Philippine literature and cultural studies have long documented how women are commonly depicted as relational beings whose identities are defined by romance, morality, and social expectations rather than autonomy (Medina, 2015). Such constructions are historically linked to traditional ideals of Filipino femininity, which continue to influence contemporary cultural expressions, including popular music.

Rao (1995) shares that "no social group has suffered greater violation of its human rights in the name of culture than women." The words support Alcoff's (2006) argument that women can be defined, delineated, captured, understood, explained and diagnosed to a level of determination never accorded to men. It is in her stance on the position of women that she posits that for many contemporary feminist theorists, the concept itself, is in itself, a problem.

Fundamentally, the concept of a woman really is the main and central concept for feminists because it needs to be the point of departure for any feminist theory and feminist politics, predicated on the transformation of women through their lived experiences in contemporary culture and the continuous evaluation of social theory and practice from, of course, the point of view of a woman.

Being a concept, it is crowded with the over-determination and supposition of male supremacy that creates ambivalence on how woman is viewed (Pham-Nguyen, 2024), invoking in every location the limit, in contrast with the other, or mediated self-reflection of a culture that is built on the welfare of females. The domination of male in any level or form should not be a commonplace ground in human life. The context of equality brings forward the idea of connectedness, of solidarity towards a common goal, and that is recognizing the equal power of women if not their indispensability in many areas (Lawson, 2022).

These suggest that contemporary OPM constructs women along a continuum of emotional relationality and agency. The representations of women in OPM songs largely mirror prevailing cultural narratives about femininity in Philippine society. While some portrayals appear neutral or affectionate, they continue to reproduce traditional gender roles and power asymmetries. However, in the face of these traditional depictions of women as nurturing, there is an emerging trend of songs highlighting autonomy and self-determination. This duality reflects ongoing negotiation between cultural reverence for traditional femininity and contemporary feminist ideals, consistent with studies on Southeast Asian popular music and gender (Barentdregt, 2017; Lockard, 1996). These underpinnings underscore the role of OPM as a cultural medium that both reflects and reinforces dominant social attitudes toward women, revealing the persistence of gendered expectations within popular Filipino music.

### **Themes characterizing representation of women in song lyrics**

#### **Romantic idealization and women's negotiation of love**

The songs present women as objects of admiration or desire, emphasizing physical beauty, loyalty, and moral purity. For example, *Dahil Sayo* (Iñigo Pascual) and *Mundo* (IV of Spades) depict women as idealized partners, whose primary value lies in their ability to inspire affection and devotion. These representations, while celebratory, risk reinforcing traditional gender norms by framing women predominantly in relation to men and romantic relationships. The theme highlights the tension between societal admiration for women and the limitation of their roles to relational or aesthetic functions. This mirrors findings in Southeast Asian media studies, where women are often simultaneously venerated and constrained by gendered expectations (Somani, 2023).

The songs depict women as emotionally expressive, empathetic, and dedicated to sustaining

relationships. In *Pusong Ligaw* (Jonalyn Viray) and *Sundo* (Aia De Leon), women are portrayed as enduring emotional hardship for the sake of loved ones, demonstrating patience, care, and unwavering support. This aligns with the cultural expectation of women as primary emotional caregivers, a role deeply embedded in Filipino familial and relational norms (Tolentino, 2001).

From a cultural feminist perspective, these depictions reflect the socially recognized moral and emotional contributions of women (Gilligan, 1982). Emotional labor, while often undervalued in societal discourse, is highlighted as a defining aspect or romantic idealization of Filipino femininity. The songs reinforce this notion by portraying women as relationally grounded, nurturing, and morally responsible, mirroring the broader societal valorization of selflessness and relational commitment.

In *Panaginip*, the woman in the song openly reveals her emotional state. She mentions how she feels uplifted, free, and enchanted ("my world feels like heaven," *isa kang panaginip*) in the presence of her beloved. Her intense focus on love and longing reflects romantic aspiration and emotional openness, rather than detachment. The narrative of *Panaginip* places romantic connection at the heart of the woman's sense of fulfillment and self-expression. This portrayal of a woman, being honest about her emotions and desire, challenges more conservative norms where women may be expected to conceal or downplay feelings, especially in earlier generations of Filipino culture.

In the above context, femininity is equivalent to self-sacrificial construct that a cultural feminism framework considers as a distorted version of the inherent capacity of women to care. For instance, in the song, *Pusong Ligaw*, the concept of love is not depicted as the partnership of two people, but as an extrapolation that woman's identity is subsumed to masculinity. The lyrics, "*Ikaw ang pangarap, nais kong makamtan / Sa buhay ko ay ikaw ang kahulugan*" (You are my dream... You are the meaning of my life), reveals the precarity of idealized romance that undermines women's autonomy and renders their aspirations as finite and relational. Banking on the seminal concept of cultural feminism, these lyrics represent the co-opting of femininity, where it is derived and contingent upon "male otherness."

#### **Self-realization and autonomy in women's experiences of love**

This theme reflects that women are represented as active agents in shaping their own lives. From a cultural feminist standpoint, it underscores the recognition of women's moral and personal autonomy, highlighting the

capacity to challenge prescribed social roles (Tong, 2009). By including narratives of agency, OPM provides space for alternative constructions of femininity beyond relational or emotional expectations.

The theme is grounded on how Filipino song lyrics portray women as reflective, self-aware individuals who actively make choices in romantic contexts. Rather than being defined solely by relationships, women are shown recognizing their emotional needs, asserting independence, and redefining love on their own terms. In a cultural setting where women are often expected to prioritize emotional sacrifice and relational harmony, the songs reflect a gradual shift toward personal growth, and emotional self-determination.

Across the songs, especially on *Pusong Ligaw*, *Malaya*, *Sundo*, *Hayaan Mo Sila*, *Titibo-tibo*, and *Panaginip*, self-realization and autonomy emerge in manifestations like emotional awareness where women reflect on their feelings and acknowledge vulnerability; choice and independence where women decide when to stay, leave or redefine love; resistance to emotional sacrifice where women must endure love unconditionally; and on the liberation of romantic agency where women are portrayed as emotionally self-directed individuals rather than passive partners.

For instance, the lyrics of *Hayaan Mo Sila*, "Baka 'di mo alam na hindi na bilang / Sa daliri ang binibining sasaktan ka lang" (Maybe you don't know... the ladies who will only hurt you), is a precaution that transforms the narrative of love from being a manifestation of mutual growth to a defensive stance against women deceit. This is reflective of the hegemonic constructs, positing that women who move away from the submissive ideation of *Binibini* archetype are categorized as pejorative like "chick" or "bitch." While this may be seen in the negative, it acknowledges the autonomy and power of women, and that despite the labeling, they are self-realized.

A critical analysis of contemporary OPM reveals triumph for self-realization that is often stifled by the thematic "othering" of women. Cultural feminism posits that women possess a unique moral voice centered on "ethics of care" (Gilligan, 2013); the lyrics of the song deemed this care as liberating and freeing to gain autonomy and self-realization.

### **Fluidity and resistance of women in gender representation**

This theme captures how songs portray, challenge, or reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations,

particularly how women are expected to act within romantic, social, and cultural contexts, and what these representations suggest about broader Filipino norms around gender. This theme articulates how the Filipino song lyrics depict women as negotiating, challenging, or subverting traditional gender norms, particularly in romantic and social contexts.

On fluidity, women are shown performing a range of roles, sometimes conforming to societal expectations, sometimes diverging from them. This demonstrates that femininity and gendered behavior are not fixed. On resistance, women actively challenge restrictive cultural norms by asserting autonomy, pursuing self-realization, or redefining relational and emotional expectations. Together, these dimensions reveal how the popular music examined both mirror and shape Filipino cultural attitudes toward women, love, and gender identity.

In *Hayaan Mo Sila*, the song portrays women as independent actors who make their own romantic choices. The depiction of women exercising freedom, whether framed as desirable or threatening. This implicitly reflects resistance to traditional passive female roles. The male viewpoint highlights the tension women face in asserting agency against societal expectations. In *Dahil Sayo*, the female figure influences the emotional and relational dynamics of the singer. While she is idealized, her impact on the narrative suggests fluidity in gender roles, positioning women as active contributors to emotional experiences rather than passive objects of desire. Her presence subtly asserts resistance to reductive portrayals of women in love.

The song, *Pusong Ligaw* centers on a speaker navigating heartbreak and romantic uncertainty. The female perspective emphasizes agency and choice, showing that women are not confined to relational expectations but can explore emotional complexity on their own terms. This represents both fluidity in romantic roles and resistance to norms that idealize women as passive or eternally loyal. *Titibo-tibo* vividly illustrates the negotiation of gender identity and expression. The protagonist begins as tomboyish and nonconforming but adjusts her behavior after experiencing romantic attraction. While some critics argue this reinforces heteronormative ideals, it also depicts fluidity in gender roles and the tension between selfhood and societal expectation. The song implicitly addresses the resistance of women to rigid definitions of femininity, even as it shows social pressures to conform.

*Malaya* explicitly emphasizes autonomy and emotional freedom. The female speaker chooses to prioritize personal liberation over relational obligation,

resisting cultural expectations that women must sacrifice personal agency for love. The song portrays a powerful form of resistance to traditional gender norms while affirming women's right to define their own romantic and emotional paths. In *Sundo*, the female perspective highlights proactive decision-making in relationships. The speaker decides when to engage and when to retreat, asserting control over her romantic interactions. This exemplifies both fluidity—shifting between emotional engagement and personal space—and resistance to the passive role often assigned to women in conventional narratives. *Mundo* narrates that while the female figure is idealized as the center of the singer's world, she is portrayed as emotionally significant and influential, suggesting agency within relational dynamics.

Even within an idealized frame, women are shown to shape experiences and expectations, reflecting subtle resistance to purely decorative or passive roles. *Panaginip* celebrates the female speaker's inner emotional life, dreams, and desires. By centering women's perspective and imagination, the song highlights women's authority over their own emotional narratives, demonstrating both fluidity in gendered roles as they imagine and pursue love on their own terms, and resistance to cultural norms that often marginalize women's emotional agency.

The songs challenge rigid gender norms, presenting a playful reversal of traditional feminine stereotypes, highlighting flexibility and diversity in contemporary representations.

### **The cultural concept of women in the song lyrics**

In culture studies, it is not enough to "read" cultural artifacts from an aesthetic perspective; they also need to be examined from a social and material one. According to cultural studies, identity is created via experience, which includes representation—the taking in of signs, the deriving of meaning from them, and the application of meaning. Cultural studies see meanings as contested and hybridized, while everyday life is fragmented and multifaceted. Songs are a non-material kind of culture that can be examined from the standpoint that they hold meaning that translates human experience into musical interpretations and represent reality.

Cultural feminism asserts that males and females have essential differences. Therefore, both must be regarded as fairly and differently essential. It supports and commends the female positive attributes to be regarded as essential and not inferior. Hence, even though the Philippines is regarded as a patriarchal country where women are in a lesser stature (Fontanos, 2023), the composed lyrics must consider the Philippine culture as

owned by both, and by other genders as the larger consideration.

Rehfeldt, Tyndall, and Belisle (2021) posited that music works as a cultural system as it possesses a system of inheritance. Aside from music or its lyrics sharing one's culture, music such as OPM has an impact that can also affect the view of Filipinos on women. Music's lyrics convey meaning and convey culture.

Through a cultural feminist lens, the selected OPM songs reveal competing constructions of womanhood. Male-voiced songs largely reproduce traditional femininity centered on emotional labor, relationality, and inspiration. Female-voiced songs, however, increasingly foreground agency, self-definition, and emotional boundaries, challenging the cultural assumption that women's value lies primarily in their capacity to care for others.

Several songs construct women primarily through relational roles, a core concern of cultural feminism. Women are portrayed as emotional anchors whose presence gives meaning, stability, and inspiration to male subjects. These representations align with what Alcoff (1998) describes as the cultural positioning of women as bearers of emotional coherence, valued for their affective contributions rather than autonomous subjectivity.

Similarly, the songs highlight emotional availability, reinforcing the cultural expectation that women perform emotional labor within intimate relationships. While the portrayal is affectionate and affirming, it nonetheless situates femininity within nurturance and support, reflecting culturally sanctioned gender norms.

It can also be forwarded that in the songs, women are depicted as emotionally expressive, longing, and vulnerable. Cultural feminism recognizes emotional expressiveness as a meaningful dimension of women's experience; however, Alcoff (1998) warns that such traits become limiting when they naturalize women's suffering or endurance. These songs frame pain and devotion as integral to femininity, reinforcing the idea that women are expected to remain emotionally loyal despite personal cost. In contrast, songs like *Titibo-tibo* and *Malaya* mark a significant shift in the cultural construction of women. These songs articulate female subjectivity through self-awareness, boundary-setting, and emotional autonomy. From Alcoff's (1998) perspective, such representations resist essentialist femininity by allowing women to speak from their situated experiences rather than being defined by relational expectations alone.

On one hand, *Malaya* is particularly aligned with cultural feminist critiques, as it redefines care for the self as

a legitimate moral act. The woman's decision to leave a painful relationship asserts agency without rejecting emotional depth, illustrating Alcoff's (1998) argument that feminism must reclaim women's experiences without confining them to prescribed roles.

Consistent with Alcoff's (1998) theory, these lyrics demonstrate that femininity in OPM is not a fixed essence but a culturally produced identity, shaped by power relations, narrative voice, and evolving social contexts. The tension between endurance and autonomy in these songs reflects broader negotiations of women's roles in contemporary Philippine culture. In this context, Buenconsejo (2015) emphasizes the importance of thoroughly examining the circumstances that shape traditions, particularly the material conditions supporting them. Furthermore, he expresses concerns about the potential for music to reinforce bias and discrimination, raising questions about its future consequences for the world. This is parallel in the tenets of Alcoff's (1998) cultural feminism which emphasizes women lived experiences, relational orientations, emotional labor, and moral agency while also interrogating how these traits are socially constructed rather than biologically essential. Alcoff (1998) cautions against treating "woman" as a fixed identity, arguing instead that femininity is shaped through cultural, historical, and discursive practices.

## Conclusion

This study examined the representation of women in selected Original Pilipino Music (OPM) song lyrics and explored the cultural meanings embedded in these representations. The analysis revealed that popular music functions as a powerful medium through which gendered ideas and cultural values are articulated and transmitted in Philippine society. The thematic analysis posited recurring patterns that characterize these portrayals, including, Romantic Idealization and Women's Negotiation of Love, Self-Realization and Autonomy in Women's Experiences of Love, and Fluidity and Resistance of Women in Gender Representation. These themes collectively construct the representation of women that inform cultural norms. The study highlights how these representations are deeply influenced by cultural values and social contexts in the Philippines.

Understanding the cultural concept of a woman through song lyrics entails exploring the genre as a literary text that carries the discourse from which meanings can be derived. Foregrounding cultural feminism, the song lyrics have presented women as part of Philippine culture. On this note, it can be forwarded that cultural studies through song lyrics are worthy undertaking since the song lyrics are considered transmitters of the value system. These song

lyrics that compose the music reflects the culture it represents.

Considering that song lyrics is a literary genre, the meaning it carries and how this meaning reaches different platforms and audiences deserve research investigation. How these form part of our understanding of cultural concepts such as the concept of women can give us clarity and better direction in our cultural norms. Presenting a concept in a negative light can be detrimental to the culture it inhabits. The underpinnings of the misrepresentation that can be transmitted through song lyrics can devalue the value system of the Philippines, which may affect how other countries appreciate the country and its people, hence the relevant consideration of its implication to our present-day norms.

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of popular music in shaping cultural perceptions of women. The research contributes to broader discussions in gender studies, cultural feminism, and Filipino cultural discourse. The findings call for greater critical awareness among songwriters, listeners, educators, and cultural stakeholders regarding the impact of lyrical content on gender perceptions and cultural values. Future research may expand the scope of analysis to include other musical genres, temporal comparisons, or audience reception studies to further examine the evolving representation of women in Philippine popular music.

## Ethical Statement

This study did not involve human participants. The primary data consist of publicly available song lyrics and musical compositions, which are treated as cultural and textual artifacts rather than personal narratives. The analysis focuses on the thematic features of the songs, without attributing interpretations to specific individuals. Proper acknowledgment of sources is observed to respect intellectual property and authorship.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the conduct and publication of this research. All procedures followed were in accordance with institutional and ethical standards, and there were no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes of this study.

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## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized ChatGPT to support idea generation and manuscript structuring during the writing process. No AI tools were used for data collection, data analysis, or interpretation of results. Following the use of this tool/service, the authors conducted a review and made necessary modifications, assuming full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the paper.

## Author Contributions

**MMR:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Methodology, and Data Collection; **JADR:** Writing - Original Draft and Methodology; **KGC:** Writing - Review and Editing and Data Collection; **CLPC:** Writing - Original Draft, Validation, and Data Collection; **JCR:** Writing - Original Draft and Methodology; **DOC:** Formal Analysis and Writing - Review and Editing; **DHLD:** Review and Editing and Validation

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