

## HARRY STYLES'S UNIQUE PERSONA: DEFYING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Apoorvaa Mandar Bichu  
Creighton University

In 2010, Harry Edward Styles was a round faced, curly haired, bright eyed aspiring young singer, hoping to win *The X-Factor*, with his bandmembers. Ten years later, the band is on hiatus, and Styles is the breakout star, having released two record breaking albums and starred in an Oscar-nominated movie. While his accomplishments have evolved, so has his image. From a clean-cut popstar, he is now a fashionable rock icon, having hosted the Met Gala, and performed with the likes of Shania Twain. The image Styles has created has led him to be perceived as a pioneer in his field as he challenges the socially normative standard of masculinity through his genderfluid clothing, music about embracing his sexuality, and quotes about self-acceptance.

My essay will begin with a description of my artifacts: Styles's "Lights Out" music video and his *Guardian* interview from December 2019, both of which communicate Styles's unique gender and sexual identity. I will then analyze the rhetorical theories of persona and image in my literature review and how they connect to the theory of hegemonic masculinity. In my analysis section, I argue that through the patterns of divergent music, sexual ambiguity, fashionable symbolism, and a style of acceptance, Styles's image defies hegemonic masculinity. Finally, I will examine how studying contemporary pop sensation Styles's efforts to resist being boxed in by gender will contribute to the theories of celebrity persona and hegemonic masculinity and draw conclusions from the same.

### *Description of the Artifact*

Harry Styles is a 26-year-old singer, songwriter and actor. He is best known for being one of the five singers in the hugely successful boyband *One Direction*, which lasted from 2010-2015. Shortly after, he starred in the movie *Dunkirk* (2017), and released his albums: *Harry Styles* (2017) and *Fine Line* (2019). During his band career, he was seen as a heartbreaker due to his highly publicized relationships with stars such as Taylor Swift, and Cara Delevingne. His solo career, however, saw Styles flouncing around in androgynous dresses, singing songs about being attracted to both guys and girls, and keeping a hushed public persona.

I am looking at Styles's current public image to identify themes that have contributed to his unique image in promoting a different kind of masculinity. I will be studying broader patterns of his music, sexuality and style by citing examples from his *Guardian* interview on how he views his identity, as well as his music video "Lights Up," which celebrated his sexuality and unapologetic persona. I will also be providing an oppositional reading about how his seemingly different image may actually be relatable to his fans because of the message of acceptance it espouses.

His path in creating his own unique identity is reminiscent of music legends such as Prince and Freddie Mercury. Styles's persona development comes at a time when dominant society is being pushed to recognize, accept, and accommodate transgender people; while backlash against that has led to the passing of laws mandating that people use the bathroom that corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth. In a culture of non-binary and polysexuality acceptance as well as the popularity of gender reveal parties (which reify traditional notions of gender), Styles is poised to comment on this ongoing cultural debate. The paper therefore examines how Styles views hegemonic masculinity and defies it to create his public persona and manage his image.

### *Literature Review*

The theoretical framework I will be using are the theories of public persona, image management and hegemonic masculinity. All three of these rhetorical theories tie into Styles's brand as a pioneer in his field, when it comes to one's unique identity, and what it means to be a man.

I first want to focus on the roles of persona and image. Persona is defined as, "the ethos, roles, identity, authority and image a rhetor

constructs and performs (or that others construct for a rhetor to perform) during a rhetorical act."<sup>1</sup> Image is "a verbal and visual representation, emphasizing particular qualities and characteristics, that create a perception of the rhetor in the viewer's mind."<sup>2</sup> Image functions within the larger picture of persona. In order to construct and perform a persona, a rhetor creates an image to emphasize certain qualities in order to be perceived by the audience in a certain way.

Linking image and persona to hegemonic masculinity, men are often expected to behave in a certain way through their persona and image in order to be perceived as masculine. Hegemonic masculinity is "a set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy."<sup>3</sup>

Masculine hegemony can be seen in a variety of ways: "discourses of appearances (e.g., strength and size), affects (e.g., work ethic and emotional strength), sexualities (e.g., homosexual vs. heterosexual), behaviors (e.g., violent and assertive), occupations (e.g., valuing career over family and housework) and dominations (e.g., subordination of women and children)."<sup>4</sup> The rhetorical concept of hegemonic masculinity often functions as an imposed ideal on men.<sup>5</sup> Men are

---

<sup>1</sup> Palczewski, Catherine Helen, Richard Ice, and John Fritch. 2016. *Rhetoric in Civic Life*. 2nd ed. PA: State College Strata Pub.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jewkes, Rachel, Robert Morrell, Jeff Hearn, Emma Lundqvist, David Blackbeard, Graham Lindegger, Michael Quayle, Yandisa Sikweyiya, and Lucas Gottzén. 2015. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Combining Theory and Practice in Gender Interventions". *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17 (2): 112-127. doi:10.1080/13691058.2015.1085094.

<sup>4</sup> Ricciardelli, Rosemary, Kimberley A. Clow, and Philip White. 2010. "Investigating Hegemonic Masculinity: Portrayals of Masculinity in Men's Lifestyle Magazines". *Sex Roles* 63 (1-2): 64-78. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9764-8.

<sup>5</sup> Connell, Raewynn. 2005. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: University of California; Carrigan, Tim, Bob Connell, and John Lee. 1985. "Toward A New Sociology Of Masculinity." *Theory and Society* (14), 551-604. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00160017>

expected to work towards being strong, emotionally subdued, assertive, career-oriented and dominant. These behaviors are often reiterated by the male role models they see in magazines, movies and television. Reeser and Gottzén (2018) found in their research of YouTube public personas that masculinity factors in greatly when it comes to emphasizing traditionally masculine behaviors like risk taking, pain tolerance or disconnecting from one's emotions<sup>6</sup>.

As such, there have been countless studies done on the development of the public self and image, and how influential celebrities are in shaping public behaviors and attitudes. According to Marshall, "Celebrity and its elaborate discourse fostered by journalism, along with an online culture that has intensified the significance of the individual profile, have spawned a clear need to investigate persona."<sup>7</sup>

Hegemonic masculinity and how it ties into one's persona and image has been heavily researched over the past few decades when it comes to how we view celebrities. Research in England conducted on 148 young people in England examining celebrity talk showed that stars like Justin Bieber or the band One Direction were often seen as outside "the realm of appropriate cultural taste" because they did not subscribe to the ideal masculine identity and were seen as too girly.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite these studies that emphasize on how traditional masculinity factors into constructing one's image and public persona, there is also research that emphasizes on the rise of a new kind of celebrity, men who are sensitive, in tune with their emotions and even comfortable with the label feminist.<sup>9</sup> An example of this would be the renowned singer Prince Roger Nelson who experimented with a more

---

<sup>6</sup> Reeser, Todd W., and Lucas Gottzén. 2018. "Masculinity and Affect: New Possibilities, New Agendas". *NORMA* 13 (3-4): 145-157. doi:10.1080/18902138.2018.1528722.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall, P David. 2013. "Persona Studies: Mapping the Proliferation of The Public Self". *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 15 (2): 153-170. doi:10.1177/1464884913488720.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, Kim, Laura Harvey, and Heather Mendick. 2015. "Justin Bieber Sounds Girly': Young People's Celebrity Talk and Contemporary Masculinities". *Sociological Research Online* 20 (3): 124-138. doi:10.5153/sro.3738.

<sup>9</sup> Feasey, Rebecca. 2017. "Masculinit(ies) And The Male Celebrity Feminist". *Men And Masculinities* 20 (3): 283-293. doi:10.1177/1097184x17718587.

fluid sense of gender while performing by wearing androgynous clothes and make-up and singing songs celebrating both the masculine and feminine, and deciding to “not perform the traditional production of male to masculine man” when it came to his public persona.<sup>10</sup> Themes of gender and sexuality are reflected in music for decades, whether that be a stylistic, lyrical or performative choice by the artist.<sup>11</sup>

The image and public personas of musicians and singers as observed through their performances exert a huge impact on the way audiences perceived their own gender and sexual identity.<sup>12</sup>

### *Report of the Findings of the Analysis*

Based on my analysis of the two artifacts: Harry Styles’s *Guardian* interview of December 2019, and his music video “Lights Up” released in October 2019, I argue that there are specific rhetorical patterns that can be identified when it comes to how Harry Styles’s unique public persona and image challenges hegemonic masculinity. These include: divergent music (music that pushes the boundaries of gender and sexuality), sexual ambiguity (keeping his labels of gender and sexuality ambiguous), fashionable symbolism (wearing clothes regardless of

---

<sup>10</sup> Gay, Tyler, Tina H. Deshotel, and Craig J. Forsyth. 2019, "Performing Deviance in Front Stage Spaces: Prince Roger Nelson and The Boundary Fluidity of Masculinity". *Deviant Behavior* 42 (1): 1-17.

doi:10.1080/01639625.2019.1635862. 4

<sup>11</sup> McClary, Susan. 1991. "Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, And Sexuality". *Choice Reviews Online* 28 (10): 28-5615-28-5615.

doi:10.5860/choice.28-5615.

<sup>12</sup> Hansen, Christine Hall, and Ranald D. Hansen. 1990. "The Influence of Sex and Violence on the Appeal of Rock Music Videos".

*Communication Research* 17 (2): 212-234.

doi:10.1177/009365090017002004; Kalof, Linda. 1999. "The Effects of Gender and Music Video Imagery on Sexual Attitudes". *The Journal of Social Psychology* 139 (3): 378-385. doi:10.1080/00224549909598393;

Zhang, Yuanyuan, Laura E. Miller, and Kristen Harrison. "The Relationship between Exposure to Sexual Music Videos and Young Adults' Sexual Attitudes." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 52, no. 3 (2008): 368-86.

https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150802205462.

whether they are seen as masculine and feminine), and style of acceptance (creating an attitude of accepting one's identity unapologetically).

### *Divergent Music*

Since his departure from One Direction, a band known for its pop music devoured by teenage fans world-over, Styles has dabbled in an alternative rock music. But his music is unique because unlike One Direction, which aimed at painting Harry and the boys as charming playboys wanting to win over women through songs like "What Makes You Beautiful" and "Steal Your Girl," Styles's songs often focus on pushing the boundaries of gender and sexuality. He sings songs without the use of specific pronouns and even sang a version of "Girl Crush," a romantic song typically sung from the female point of view.

In "Lights Up", Styles is seen being embraced by scantily clad, joyful people of all genders, as he beams proudly into the light, a metaphor for accepting his identity. The song was released on October 11<sup>th</sup>, National Coming Out day, and featured Styles in various costumes as he asks the audience in a resounding lyric, "do you know who you are?"<sup>13</sup> "Lights Up" is the epitome of the message Harry Styles's music aims to portray: embrace yourself as you are, and love who you want, a stark contrast to the fixed boxes that hegemonic masculinity and a heteronormative society expects one to fit in.

### *Sexual Ambiguity*

One of the main ways Harry Styles pushed the norms of traditional masculinity is by purposely adopting a sense of sexual ambiguity, whether that be in the way he views his own gender or his tight-lipped attitude when it comes to his own sexuality.

In the *Guardian* interview, Styles says, "Am I sprinkling in nuggets of sexual ambiguity to try and be more interesting? No. In terms of how I want to dress, and what the album sleeve's going to be, I tend to make decisions in terms of collaborators I want to work with. I want things to look a certain way. Not because it makes me look gay, or it makes me

---

<sup>13</sup> Yassin, Diana. 2019. "Harry Styles 'Lights Up' In New Music Video". *The Michigan Daily*.

<https://www.michigandaily.com/section/arts/harry-styles-%E2%80%99lights-%E2%80%99-new-music-video>.

look straight, or it makes me look bisexual, but because I think it looks cool.”<sup>14</sup>

Adopting this attitude of ambiguity when it comes to his fashion or album design choices, challenges notions of hegemonic masculinity because Styles’s persona and image drive home the message that as long as one feels “cool”, the aesthetic of whether something appears to be gay or feminine should not matter.

### *Fashionable Symbolism*

One major way in which Harry Styles pushes the boundaries of traditional masculinity is through his clothing choices, which are increasingly risqué after his departure. So influential is Styles’s fashion sense, that he became the youngest co-host of the Met Gala in 2019, dressed in a see-through blouse with a pearl earring.

Some of his fashion choices are seen in “Lights Up”, where his outfits range from him being half naked in boxers to a brightly bedazzled sequin suit to a billowy shirt with ruffled sleeves.

In his *Guardian* interview, Styles addresses this fashionable symbolism as he says, “I think it’s a very free, and *freeing*, time. I think people are asking, ‘Why not?’ a lot more which excites me. It’s not just clothes where lines have been blurred, it’s going across so many things. I think you can relate it to music, and how genres are blurring.”<sup>15</sup>

Harry Styles has cultivated a public persona that actively encourages comfort in one’s identity as opposed to conforming to the labels that hegemonic masculinity would appear to espouse.

### *Style of Acceptance*

Although one can argue that Harry Styles’s public image is groundbreaking in terms of the rhetorical patterns identified above, we can put forth an argument that through his music and fashion choices, he is creating a safe space for *his* fans to relate to, because of the style of acceptance that he has put forward. This was seen in the way fans, especially those belonging to the LGBT+ community felt seen after

---

<sup>14</sup> Lamont, Tom. 2019. "Harry Styles: 'I'm Not Just Sprinkling In Sexual Ambiguity To Be Interesting'". *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/dec/14/harry-styles-sexual-ambiguity-dating-normals-rocking-a-dress>. para 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, para 27.

seeing Styles being intimate with people of genders in "Lights Up,"<sup>16</sup> and through lyrics such as "I am never changing who I am," which cultivate attitudes of self-acceptance.

In the *Guardian* interview, Styles addresses how when he blurs the boundaries between masculine and feminine in his music and fashion, he is trying to create a sense of reflection and self-acceptance in the audience's minds. He articulates this in his *Guardian* interview when he says, "What women wear. What men wear. For me it's not a question of that. If I see a nice shirt and get told, 'But it's for ladies.' I think: 'Okay? Doesn't make me want to wear it less though.' I think the moment you feel more comfortable with yourself, it all becomes a lot easier."<sup>17</sup>

By creating content where labels of gender and sexuality do not seem to matter as much, Styles's unique public image resonated with his audience who may feel like their identities do not need to be limited by hegemonic masculinity.

#### *Contribution to Rhetorical Theory*

Based on the case study conducted, I examine how Styles's unique public persona deepens our understanding about how his image has attempted to create a new kind of masculinity, not bound by the shackles of hegemony.

As mentioned, image refers to the visual or verbal representation of the rhetor that creates a certain perception in the audience's mind. Persona is broader in that it takes into account the image, ethos, identity and authority of the rhetor. I attempted to see how these two concepts were shaped by hegemonic masculinity which refers to the specific hierarchical roles and norms for men in society.

Harry Styles uses his image and persona to challenge hegemonic masculinity and open a conversation about gender in our society. Singers and actors have the luxury of being more experimentative with

---

<sup>16</sup> Yassin, Diana. 2019. "Harry Styles 'Lights Up' In New Music Video". *The Michigan Daily*.

<https://www.michigandaily.com/section/arts/harry-styles-%E2%80%98lights-%E2%80%99-new-music-video>.

<sup>17</sup> Lamont, Tom. 2019. "Harry Styles: 'I'm Not Just Sprinkling In Sexual Ambiguity To Be Interesting'". *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/dec/14/harry-styles-sexual-ambiguity-dating-normals-rocking-a-dress>. para 26.

the way they approach their gender as opposed to sport stars or politicians who might be expected to conform to traditional masculinity. By using songs that talk about embracing yourself despite what you look like or who you are attracted to, and by wearing clothes without caring about whether they are masculine enough, Styles's public persona perpetuates the idea that labels do not matter as much as cultivating an attitude of self-acceptance. In his interview, he is unapologetic about who he is, what he wears or the type of music he creates. Researching Harry Styles's impact in creating a new type of masculinity is pertinent because he breaks the norms of mainstream masculinity and questions the need to be perceived in a socially normative way.

### *Conclusion*

I argued that Harry Styles is a pioneer in the way he has redefined what it means to be a man, through the rhetorical patterns I observed: divergent music, sexual ambiguity, fashionable symbolism and a style of acceptance. Styles's public persona as a sexually ambiguous performer with bold, gender-bending fashion and music choices could be one of the factors that contributed to his increased popularity and successful solo career. As I observed in my literature review, hegemonic masculinity is pervasive in scope, and is often perpetuated by the media. By creating an attitude of acceptance and no-holds-barred creative expression, Styles seems to have created a unique public persona and image that will continue to be influential, yet relatable to young fans navigating their own identities for years to come.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Kim, Laura Harvey, and Heather Mendick. 2015. "Justin Bieber Sounds Girlie': Young People's Celebrity Talk And Contemporary Masculinities". *Sociological Research Online* 20 (3): 124-138. doi:10.5153/sro.3738.
- Carrigan, Tim, Bob Connell, and John Lee. 1985. "Toward A New Sociology Of Masculinity." *Theory and Society* (14), 551-604. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00160017>
- Connell, Raewynn. 2005. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: University of California.
- Feasey, Rebecca. 2017. "Masculinit(ies) And The Male Celebrity Feminist". *Men And Masculinities* 20 (3): 283-293. doi:10.1177/1097184x17718587.
- Gay, Tyler, Tina H. Deshotels, and Craig J. Forsyth. 2019. "Performing Deviance In Front Stage Spaces: Prince Roger Nelson And The Boundary Fluidity Of Masculinity". *Deviant Behavior* 42 (1): 1-17. doi:10.1080/01639625.2019.1635862.
- Hansen, Christine Hall, and Ranald D. Hansen. 1990. "The Influence Of Sex And Violence On The Appeal Of Rock Music Videos". *Communication Research* 17 (2): 212-234. doi:10.1177/009365090017002004.
- Jewkes, Rachel, Robert Morrell, Jeff Hearn, Emma Lundqvist, David Blackbeard, Graham Lindegger, Michael Quayle, Yandisa Sikweyiya, and Lucas Gottzén. 2015. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Combining Theory And Practice In Gender Interventions". *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17 (sup2): 112-127. doi:10.1080/13691058.2015.1085094.
- Kalof, Linda. 1999. "The Effects Of Gender And Music Video Imagery On Sexual Attitudes". *The Journal Of Social Psychology* 139 (3): 378-385. doi:10.1080/00224549909598393.
- Marshall, P David. 2013. "Persona Studies: Mapping The Proliferation Of The Public Self". *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 15 (2): 153-170. doi:10.1177/1464884913488720.
- Lamont, Tom. 2019. "Harry Styles: 'I'M Not Just Sprinkling In Sexual Ambiguity To Be Interesting'". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/dec/14/harry-styles-sexual-ambiguity-dating-normals-rocking-a-dress>.
- McClary, Susan. 1991. "Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, And Sexuality". *Choice Reviews Online* 28 (10): 28-5615-28-5615. doi:10.5860/choice.28-5615.

- Palczewski, Catherine Helen, Richard Ice, and John Fritch. 2016. *Rhetoric In Civic Life*. 2nd ed. PA: State College Strata Pub.
- Reeser, Todd W., and Lucas Gottzén. 2018. "Masculinity And Affect: New Possibilities, New Agendas". *NORMA* 13 (3-4): 145-157. doi:10.1080/18902138.2018.1528722.
- Ricciardelli, Rosemary, Kimberley A. Clow, and Philip White. 2010. "Investigating Hegemonic Masculinity: Portrayals Of Masculinity In Men's Lifestyle Magazines". *Sex Roles* 63 (1-2): 64-78. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9764-8.
- Styles, Harry, "Lights Up" YouTube video, October 11, 2019, 2:55, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NZvM1918\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NZvM1918_E)
- Yassin, Diana. 2019. "Harry Styles 'Lights Up' In New Music Video". *The Michigan Daily*. <https://www.michigandaily.com/section/arts/harry-styles-%E2%80%98lights-%E2%80%99-new-music-video>.
- Zhang, Yuanyuan, Laura E. Miller, and Kristen Harrison. "The Relationship between Exposure to Sexual Music Videos and Young Adults' Sexual Attitudes." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 52, no. 3 (2008): 368-86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150802205462>.