

## One Girl Revolution: The Christian Feminism of Superchick

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### ABSTRACT

Since evangelical Christians became a major force in the US consumer marketplace in the 1970s, they have increasingly carved out a space for themselves in the arena of popular culture with their own brand of contemporary Christian music (CCM). This article proposes an analysis of how Christian alternative pop/rock band Superchick uses feminist discourse to promote the feminine adherence to purity and obedience of Christian religious directives. The origin of such a dichotomous relationship between form and substance can be traced to the Christian music industry's desire to frame Christianity as 'hip' and countercultural in contrast to its secular counterpart. Musical forms are appropriated freely without regard for the historical specificities of their genre and added lyrics promoting evangelical Christianity's values. The article examines how resisting the corrupt pull of secularism is frequently framed as an act of rebellion to win over young and teenaged audiences. I will especially focus on the period of the 1990s and early 2000s, when the so-called evangelical purity movement was popular and influencing the lives and futures of young American women and girls.

**Keywords:** cultural studies, music, language and linguistics, feminist history, activism and politics, gender studies

### INTRODUCTION

From the 1970s, evangelicalism has been on a steady upward trajectory within USA society, establishing itself as a culture-defining powerhouse (Byle Bruland, 1989). It has, in a postmodern turn, coalesced with neoliberal conservative politics; this is particularly perceptible in the gendered norms that shape contemporary American female identities (Flournoy, 2013). Evangelical women navigate postmodernity by negotiating a multiplicity of, sometimes contradictory, ideologies. This is evinced in their co-opting of a language of empowerment, which weaves feminist and postfeminist ideals into a conservative Christian and neoliberal framework (Eskes *et al.*, 1998; Gaddini, 2021; Marcuse, 1964). This commodified empowerment has proven influential in shaping cultural production and social relations, and has, since the 1990s, come to pervade popular discourse in the USA (Riordan, 2001). As mediated discourse is one of the arenas of the ideological struggle surrounding the term 'feminism' and the feminist movement in US culture and politics (Loke *et al.*, 2017: 123), the gendered subject constructed by Superchick, a prominent female-fronted Christian band, which embodies the contradictory notions of empowerment and traditional femininity, is a compelling lens for examining these complex dynamics.

In this article I will argue that the modern evangelical discourse, exemplified in Superchick's lyrics, reinforces women's subordination and an adherence to patriarchal Christian dynamics. By exploring evangelical themes of embattlement and aggressive masculinity, the analysis reveals how these narratives place the responsibility of sexual purity and modest behaviour on women. Additionally, the concept of 'princess theology' is critiqued for confining women to passive roles oriented toward heterosexual marriage. While Superchick's lyrics promote 'girl power' and rebelliousness, they simultaneously align with evangelical doctrines, illustrating a form of traditional evangelical feminism intertwined with postmodern individualism and consumerism, emphasising self-improvement through therapeutic language. The band's musical activity, which spans the early 2000s to the early 2010s, situates it at an intriguing point in evangelicalism's development. In the 1990s, evangelicals' engagement with mainstream culture had been on a steady upward trajectory, spurred by their outrage at divorce, abortion, the sexual revolution, and pro-ERA activism. A variety of movements sought to reaffirm traditional notions of propriety and gender complementarity (Hendershot, 2004; Kobes Du Mez, 2020). On the other hand, evangelicalism's consistent

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engagement with mainstream culture has led to it appropriating and adapting certain philosophies, such as feminism, that rethink the role of women within the Church and society (Byle Bruland, 1989; Cochran, 2005; Daly, 1975). To understand these relationships and where the female subject constructed by Superchick fits into them, I first look at the development of USA evangelicalism, the emergence of its material culture, and its engagement with feminism.

## MEET THE EVANGELICALS

Evangelical Christians are a largely Protestant subvariant of Christianity forming a distinct subculture within USA society whose ethos is predicated on the active sharing of the word of God, a literal understanding of the Bible, an emphasis on individual responsibility for salvation, and is characterised by moral and political conservatism (Flournoy, 2013; Hendershot, 2004). As Smith (1998) argues, evangelicals' vitality arises from disengaging with pluralistic society, emphasising their socially constructed distinction as an out-group, marked by a rhetoric of conflict and threat. Perceiving themselves as outcasts within a secular, anti-Christian culture, they assert the superiority of their morality that they derive from beliefs in 'ultimate Truth'.<sup>1</sup> Employing an individualistic 'personal influence strategy' in social activism, they impact political life and public discourse, despite their apparent limitations in understanding the broader social world. The activism of evangelical Christian women has, according to Kintz (1997), shaped political discourse since the early 1990s, leading to a conservative resurgence that has implications for contemporary politics. Women are attracted through promises of community, female agency within traditional roles, and the security offered by responsible male behaviour. Such a patriarchal conception of masculinity also known as 'muscular Christianity' has been, according to Kristin Kobes Du Mez (2020), instrumental in shaping US evangelicals' perspectives, fuelling Christian nationalism and the emergence of the Religious Right from the late 1970s. Led by charismatic leaders, including the likes of James Dobson and Jerry Falwell, the Religious Right emphasises predetermined gender roles, Christian nationalism, and militarism, and thus has close ties to the Republican Party as ideologically compatible. Though not synonymous with evangelicalism, some two thirds of white evangelicals consider themselves Christian nationalists (PRRI, 2023). Flournoy (2013) notes that, besides asserting that Christians in contemporary USA are being persecuted by the liberal Left and secular media, women of the Christian Right have staked their claim for the definition of a new feminism in line with conservative ideals and headed by prominent political figures such as Michele Bachmann and Sarah Palin.

## PRODUCT PURVEYORS

Evangelical morality is deeply grounded in traditional notions of patriarchy and characterised by promoting heterosexuality and hyper-femininity, partly as a reaction to what they see as the increasingly shifting cultural landscape (Gill, 2007; Loke *et al.*, 2017; Townes, 2006). The threat of creeping secularisation is combatted by their creation of a diversified and ubiquitous Christian media and products industry (Carpenter, 2010). There is ample scholarship on evangelical material culture and evangelicals' ways of engaging with modernity: evangelical fashion and beauty ministries blend mainstream iconography with restrictive notions of feminine submission (Carpenter, 2010), while female microcelebrities and bloggers on social media are striving to break free from the patriarchal norms of traditional evangelicalism (Gaddini, 2021; Laughlin, 2020). Hendershot (2004) analyses the evolution of the Christian products industry that began in the 1970s, spurred by the increasing social and economic visibility of evangelicals, which forged a place for middle-class, white evangelicals within US consumer culture. Despite attempts to diversify, she notes that most<sup>2</sup> evangelical media is created by and for white individuals. Emphasising the integration of faith into everyday life and as a reaction to secular youth culture, Christianised alternatives of secular products and activities provide a way for evangelicals to live out their faith and reinforce their commitments, while helping teens construct a 'hip' youth identity. Contemporary Christian music has particularly, thanks to skilful marketing, evolved into a wealthy industry, with certain rock music bands, such as Creed and Switchfoot, crossing

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<sup>1</sup> 'American evangelicals believe not only that an unchanging and universal Truth exists, but—more audaciously, perhaps—that *they* are the ones who know it because God has revealed it to them' (Smith, 1998: 126).

<sup>2</sup> Superchick is an exception: founder Max Hsu is Asian American, while guitarist Dave Ghazarian is of Armenian descent (Easley, 2020).

over into the mainstream. Books, magazines<sup>3</sup> and videos are more explicit in their messaging and some of the key promoters of sexual abstinence and the so-called purity movement that peaked in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>4</sup>

## PURCHASING PURITY

Founded in 1993, the purity movement was a USA-based phenomenon, characterised by systematically associating salvation with sexual purity, and advocating for chastity and abstinence-only sex education (Fahs, 2010; Klein, 2018). Its primary promoters were the Southern Baptist initiative *True Love Waits* and the *Silver Ring Thing* pledge program, which offered teens a variety of purity products in order to sell the concept of purity itself (Gish, 2016; Machin and Thornborrow, 2003). Girls' passivity and hyper-femininity were further inscribed through participating in public declarations of abstinence, such as in ring ceremonies or father-daughter purity balls (Fahs, 2010; Gish, 2016; Hendershot, 2004). The negative consequences of these practices have been widely documented, and lead to shame, sexual anxiety (Klein, 2018), normalising sexual violence, damaging women's construction of their sexuality, and lack of knowledge about safe sex and sexually transmitted infections, directly harming women's sexual health (Fahs, 2010). In the following section, I will offer a brief overview of evangelical feminism and its inception.

## EVANGELICAL FEMINISM

In the 1970s, and under the influence of modern hermeneutics, evangelical feminism emerged (Cochran, 2005; Gallagher, 2004; Scanzoni and Hardesty, 1974). It challenged the evangelical movement's stance on biblical inerrancy and advocated for gender equality, in alignment with liberal feminist ideas, as well as in the use of inclusive language. Evangelical feminism highlighted the power of language in shaping beliefs and underscored the evolving nature of US evangelicalism, influenced by individualism and consumerism. This reshaped US evangelicalism, challenging traditional views on women's roles and contributed in turn to changes in evangelical theology (Cochran, 2005). Evangelical feminists navigated a delicate balance, adapting feminist ideas while maintaining core Christian beliefs (Byle Bruland, 1989). The evolution of the Christian products industry, which includes a variety of Christianised versions of secular products and media forms, established evangelicals as an important consumer demographic, thus cementing the link between evangelicalism and neoliberalism (Hendershot, 2004). The link between evangelicalism, neoliberalism, and postmodernism is evident in cultural shifts towards market-driven principles, impacting social and economic life. In such a consumer culture, promotion becomes a central communicative function, primarily concerned with selling ideas, organisations, individuals, goods, or services (Fairclough, 1993). Superchick's construction of femininity balances 'girl power' rhetoric with evangelical notions, perpetuating complementarity, purity, and modesty for the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1999). Their practices fit into the concept of 'power femininity' (Gill, 2008: 442), applauding women while re-inscribing them within a patriarchal worldview.

Evangelicals' engagement with modernity and feminism has been extensively documented (Barker, 2005; Burke, 2016; Byle Bruland, 1989; Campbell, 2007; Cochran, 2005; Fournoy, 2013; Gallagher, 2004; Gardner, 2011; Gish, 2016; Griffith, 2004; Hendershot, 2004; Kintz, 1997; Klein, 2018; Laughlin, 2020; Maddox, 2013; Valenti, 2009). However, a notable gap in research concerns the discourse of contemporary Christian music within a postfeminist neoliberal context, specifically how notions of empowerment can contribute to a distinct gender ideology. My study aims to address this issue, enhancing the understanding of the relationship between evangelicalism and feminism. Though seemingly supporting and empowering women, I argue evangelical discourse, as represented by Superchick's lyrics, encourages women's 'rightful' subordination to men and their adherence to the patriarchal dynamics inherent in Christianity. Beginning with an overview of evangelical embattlement marked by militaristic metaphors and an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy, my analysis delves into the construction of a dominant and aggressive masculinity, which frames male desire as uncontrollable and places the responsibility of guarding themselves on women. My study also explores how evangelical gender perspectives confine women to so-called princess theology, portraying them as passive objects geared towards heterosexual marriage. This conception ties into expectations of modest behaviour and sexual purity, conflicting with contemporary views on female sexuality and beauty. Superchick's songs address resulting anxiety and self-esteem issues, presenting a discourse of 'girl power' to empower female listeners. 'Girl Power' is an idea promoted by the 1990's globally successful British pop

<sup>3</sup> *Brio* (for girls) and *Breakaway* (for boys) mirror secular media in their gendered construction of (teenage) bodies, and promote heteronormative and complementarian ideals, marked by an oppressive focus on (principally) female bodily control (Hendershot, 2004: 11–88).

<sup>4</sup> Reacting to the perceived liberalisation of mores in American society, the purity movement chiefly promoted abstinence and reinforced traditional gender roles (Hendershot, 2004; Kobes Du Mez, 2020).

band the Spice Girls, a concept that rapidly gained traction in what became known as postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004). The female subject constructed in my analysis of the corpus of lyrics maintains a rebellious stance, framed as countercultural, yet aligned with evangelical doctrine and prescribed codes of behaviour. The latter ultimately inscribes it as part of traditional evangelical feminism which is indicative of the postmodern shift towards an individualist, consumer-based society predicated on an ethos of self-improvement frequently mobilised through therapeutic language (Cochran, 2005).

## METHODOLOGY

My analysis is grounded in a framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) that understands language as a social practice shaped by social and historical constraints, and which shapes identities, relations and systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough, 1993). The relationship between text and social practice is mediated by discourse; text production and interpretation are mutually influenced by the nature of social practice. CDA systematically explores the complex causality and determination of discursive practices, events, and texts, and broader social and cultural structures, and how they are ideologically shaped by power relations and struggles (Fairclough, 1993). The effects produced by lexical choices are examined from the standpoint of feminist stylistics to elucidate how Superchick construct a gendered subject who simultaneously embodies the figure of an empowered woman alongside a modest and feminine evangelical figure (Mills, 2005: 4–6).

Self-defined as not just a band, but a movement, Superchick was founded in 1999 in Chicago by Max Hsu, the band's keyboardist, disc jockey and main lyricist. Known for its constantly changing line-up, members included Matt Daly on bass, vocals and synthesisers, Brian Fitch and Brandon Estelle on drums, Justin Sharbono on guitar, Dave Ghazarian on lead guitar, Melissa Brock on rhythm guitar and backing vocals, and her sister Tricia as lead vocalist (Rate Your Music, n.d.; Sarachik, 2013). Their energetic sound blends rock, pop, punk, R&B, and rap, drawing comparisons to No Doubt and Avril Lavigne (Concert Archives, 2021). Lyrics address themes of self-worth, aiming to help listeners become more secure as intended by God (Hertz, 2002). Their understanding of music as ministry, Ghazarian's involvement with *Campus Crusade for Christ* (Easley, 2020),<sup>5</sup> and their views on sexual purity (Penney, 2002: 38–40) situate them within traditional evangelicalism.

Superchick released six albums between 2001 and 2013, achieving significant commercial success (Christian Music Archive, 2020). Their songs were released during the peak of the purity movement (Hendershot, 2004). In this period, evangelicals saw heightened right-wing political engagement due in part to the 9/11 terror attacks in the USA (Kobes Du Mez, 2020), and evangelicals were negotiating a new feminine subjectivity which combined feminist with complementarian ideals (Flournoy, 2013). Despite a primarily evangelical fanbase, some songs gained mainstream popularity. In 2008, *Rock What You Got* debuted at #65 on The Billboard 200 (2008) and was nominated for a Grammy Award the following year (IMDb, n.d.). The track *One Girl Revolution* was part of the 2001 film *Legally Blonde* (IMDb, n.d.), contributing to the band's crossover appeal. The song's inclusion in this film, which has been characterised as postfeminist (Schwartz, 2023), inspired the choice to select Superchick as the subject of my analysis. This is grounded in my experience with CDA and interest in the intersection of language with various cultural forms, particularly from a feminist perspective. Although, being neither a citizen of the USA nor an evangelical, but raised in a Catholic household, my perspective is necessarily that of an 'outsider'.

The band, which was initially formed to minister to young girls struggling with self-esteem (Easley, 2020), conveys a positive image that may not immediately reveal its evangelical ethos, and might even be interpreted as feminist. My analysis sought to ask: is their message indeed feminist, and, if so, what type of feminism is expressed in their lyrics? Can one be feminist and complementarian, or is the convergence impossible? Following a close reading of Superchick's discography, thirteen songs were selected based on two criteria: expressing a sense of isolation and embattlement, a trait broadly characteristic of evangelical media. Lyrics relating specifically to women/girls, be it in a perceived feminist or complementarian way.

Analysing lyrics of popular songs is a useful tool for problematising the meanings expressed therein (Whiteley, 1997). What is central to my analysis, is that ideas about gender, and how women and men should (not) behave are not fixed by the author or songwriter; rather, they are fluid, situational, and shaped by audiences, other media and social institutions. These guide listeners towards certain meanings: such is the notion of male aggression versus female passivity, both in society as well as heterosexual marriage; the latter is typically framed as women's central aspiration. Both the construction of women as passive objects and the centrality of heterosexual marriage in their lives are themes expressed in the analysed corpus (Cohen, 1997).

The analysis combines two linguistic approaches. Form-and-meaning analysis considers formal characteristics like vocabulary, mood, and modality to decode the texts' intended meaning. This is complemented by a feminist stylistics approach to the lexical choices and how these represent women versus men and their respective place in

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<sup>5</sup> An international parachurch organisation committed to evangelising (Cru, 2024).

society. Special attention is paid to how the self has been commodified and individualised by appropriating feminist discourse (Morris and Korobov, 2020), particularly the notion of empowerment (Thompson, 1987). An interpretative and qualitative analysis grapples with the fundamental contradictions of these two concurrent identities in the context of US evangelicalism. This is marked by competing discourses of traditional femininity and independence, which are characteristic of a postmodern identity creation increasingly adopted by evangelical women in the USA (Flournoy, 2013).

## MUSIC AS MINISTRY

As a *dispositif*, music can help shape a particular moral worldview; within the evangelical context, this musical framework is intertwined with discourse that perpetuates and legitimates idealised archetypes, and imparts moral directives to uphold a specific social order. Music's power to shape public perceptions has long led to its use as a tool of propaganda, notably due to musicians' function as 'truth bearers' who can be instrumental in mobilising members of a movement and establishing an 'us versus them' dichotomy (Street, 2003: 114–127). Music, importantly, contributes to the ongoing process of producing, contesting, and redefining the categories of gender and masculinity, such as the characterisation of women as stumbling blocks, princesses and passive recipients of male desire, focused exclusively on romantic love (Cohen, 1997). Music can, furthermore, underscore the importance of purity, female passivity, beauty capital and advance a commodified version of 'girl power'.

### Us and Them

Media helps individuals construct aspects of their identity, such as their sense of 'us' and 'them' (Kellner, 1995: 8), a distinction frequently employed in evangelical cultural products. The framing of evangelicals as embattled is exemplified in the song *Cross the Line* (Brock *et al.*, 2008b). The perceived danger of constructing an identity that differs from the secular norm is made implicit using militaristic metaphors to evoke an impending conflict:

Everybody freeze – don't step over the line  
 Don't stand up, they'll shoot down the first one who tries  
 (...)  
 Revolutions start when someone crosses the line

The theme of revolution is repeated in *One Girl Revolution* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b): 'I can find my revolution, I can learn to stand alone,' and *One and Lonely* (Brock *et al.*, 2002): 'Some days it's hard to be a one girl revolution.' A discursive focus on war and violence draws on a model of dominant masculinity traditionally used to express exercising agency (Lazar, 2006; Maddox, 2013) Such a defensive attitude towards secularism can be interpreted as a reaction towards the pluralistic landscape of contemporary postmodernism which necessitates a continuous renegotiation of adherents' subjectivity for the Christian ideology to evolve and adapt accordingly (Flournoy, 2013). A clear distinction between the 'in-group' and 'out-group' (Tajfel and Turner, 2004: 374) is established by the repeated use of the personal ('we', 'you', 'us' versus 'they'), and indefinite pronouns ('somebody', 'someone', 'all', 'everybody', 'everyone') (*Cross the Line*, Brock *et al.*, 2008b). Deontic modality is employed to communicate a supposedly societally desired course of action:

Follow the leader, stay in the lines  
 (...)  
 Go with the crowd  
 (...)  
 Play it safe, play by the rules (Brock *et al.*, 2008b)

### Stumbling Blocks

Binary distinctions, particularly regarding gender roles, are also a foundational aspect of how western culture is organised, and one of the principles of evangelicalism. Evangelical Christian media discursively constructs men and women as fundamentally different. This difference is rooted in the centrality of a dominant masculinity versus a passive femininity. A marker of this rhetoric is the infantilising practice of referring to women of all ages as 'girls' (Maddox, 2013: 19–20), a term which appears over 40 times in the analysed body of material. Men are consistently framed as inherently sexual beings, while women are expected to be pure, virginal, and submissive, guarding their bodies from the animalistic urges of men (Carpenter, 2010: 34; Fahs, 2010: 120). I contrast two lines from the song *Barlow Girls* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a), wherein Superchick echo the belief that men are primarily interested in sex, while women desire exclusively romantic love:

'Cause they don't flaunt what the boys want more  
(...)  
No girl should feel she has to trade  
Her body for love or be an old maid

The underlying implications are as follows: first, by using the verb 'flaunt', failing to dress modestly is equalled to showing off and 'asking for it' – a construction notoriously deployed in rape trials. Secondly, pre-marital or, indeed, any sexual intercourse is perceived as something women might be willing or pressured to exchange for what they truly desire. Conforming to a passive model of femininity, which includes withholding sex to obtain a long-term commitment, ascribes to and reinforces dominant discourses of heterosexuality that construct women as sexual gatekeepers and as passive recipients of male desire (Moran, 2016: 11). The metonymic construction of 'her body' further equates women's personhood with their physicality, a common trope in complementarian theology where women are created 'for' men (Valenti, 2009: 25). In the line 'You might feel like public property / You might, you might, you shouldn't be', the song *Barlow Girls* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a) further expands on this implication. By referring to women as de facto objects, 'public property' implies that a certain mode of dress means forfeiting bodily autonomy. This supports patriarchal society's objectification of women's bodies which can lead to justifying violence against them (Kilbourne, 1999: 278).

Teachings of gender complementarity frequently construct men as flawed (Maddox, 2013: 14):

You hate men, is what you say  
And I understand how you feel that way  
(...)  
All princes start as frogs, all gentlemen as dogs  
(...)  
But some boys can become men (*Song 4 Tricia (Princes and Frogs)*, Hsu, 2002)

Again, this example draws on the motive of a dominant, inherently aggressive masculinity. Aggression is understood as a 'natural' feature of maleness and expressed through declarative statements employing the indefinite pronoun 'all' to indicate their general factualness. Women are expected to respond to this masculinity with both patience and understanding:

Just wait till it's plain to see  
What we're growing up to be (Hsu, 2002)

This is expressed via deontic modality using the imperative instruct on appropriate female behaviour or lack thereof ('wait').

### Princess Theology

Women's inaction is highly regarded in evangelical circles, and informs what has come to be labelled as 'princess theology'. A year before Superchick's second album *Last One Picked* (2002) and during the peak of the purity movement, John Eldredge's popular book *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (2001) reinforced the importance of male leadership and female passivity. In it he describes girls' dreams of being rescued by a Prince Charming as being part of God's creation. These themes are central to two tracks on the album: *Song 4 Tricia (Princes and Frogs)* (Hsu, 2002) and *Wonder (If She'll Get It)* (Brock *et al.*, 2002). In the former, Eldredge's stance is echoed in the line 'All girls dream of a fairy tale'. The declarative mood and the indefinite pronoun 'all' present this information as factual. This assumption is not just a product of evangelicalism but draws from contemporary 'princess culture' responsible for perpetuating gender stereotypes and encouraging girls to submit to their prince once being proverbially rescued by him (Orenstein, 2012: Chapter 2). Women are portrayed as in need of rescuing in *Wonder (If She'll Get It)* (Brock *et al.*, 2002):

Knight in shining armour  
Hero to rescue me

Here, men are seen as protectors and rescuers, who complete a woman, and it echoes longstanding folktale tropes in western culture (Propp, 1975). Princess mythology's ubiquity is just another example of the mutual influence of evangelicalism and popular western culture, and their centring of female victimhood and passivity.

## Good Things Come...

Judith Butler argues that the gender identities prescribed of women and men are not inherent but need to be continuously constructed through repetitive action (Butler, 1999). Or, perhaps in the case of evangelical women, inaction. The notion of waiting, tied to women's forced passivity, pervades the analysed corpus:

They wanna see how they're gonna grow up (*Barlow Girls*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a)  
 I've been waiting here so very patiently (*TV Land*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001)  
 I am a voice yet waiting to be heard (*One Girl Revolution*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b)  
 Just wait till it's plain to see  
 What we're growing up to be (*Song 4 Tricia (Princes and Frogs)*, Hsu, 2002)  
 He is the one that I've been waiting for  
 (...)  
 I've waited my whole life for the day I am his (*Wonder (If She'll Get It)*, Brock *et al.*, 2002)

This final example presupposes that waiting for one's predestined partner is supposed to not only ensure a blessed union (Burke, 2016; Gaddini, 2021; Gardner, 2011), securing a man is women's goal and purpose in life. Despite (or perhaps due to) evangelicals' often vehement opposition to women's bodily displays and sexual autonomy, the objectification of the female body in evangelical ministries and media is widespread (Carpenter, 2010: 34–35). Self-objectification is apparent using the possessive pronoun 'his'. Women are constructed, and as the example indicates, encouraged to see themselves as gifts to be given to their future spouse. Evangelical media generally espouses this centrality of heterosexual marriage following centuries of Christian teachings on the supposed 'containment' by marriage of female sexuality.

## Going Steady

Commercial teenage culture (both secular and evangelical) continuously pressures girls to get a boyfriend and encourage them to long for romantic love (Bayton, 1997). Despite advances in women's rights, becoming a wife and mother is still seen as their end-goal (Morris and Korobov, 2020), especially within evangelical circles where these roles are constitutive of the ideal woman (Gaddini, 2021). Purity teachings particularly identify women as in need of guidance and protection from a male figure (Gish, 2016). These aspirations are central to the song *Wonder (If She'll Get It)* (Brock *et al.*, 2002):

So beautiful I know our children will be  
 (...)  
 I promise to love him  
 Forevermore  
 I've waited my whole life for the day I am his

The verses presuppose the aim of marriage and a nuclear family. Epistemic modality ('I know') indicates certainty about future children. Vocabulary associated with marriage vows and women being 'given in marriage', equating 'dreams' to marriage and children, perpetuates a patriarchal understanding of women's roles, valuing them in relation to men and male exchange, rather than as individuals.

## Pure Is Cool

Brought up in evangelical Christianity, US girls' preparation for heterosexual marriage is supposed to begin in childhood and is most saliently promoted in purity teachings. These instruct fathers to monitor all aspects of their daughters' lives and instil in them the importance of modest attire and obedience, grooming them for heterosexual marriage, when they are to be handed over to their husbands. Obedience and modesty are also promoted in evangelical media (Gish, 2016).<sup>6</sup> The sexual purity doctrine is most clearly defended in the song *Barlow Girls* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a):

They don't date, they won't date  
 They wanna see how they're gonna grow up  
 Who they're gonna be  
 But in the meantime, they might feel unloved  
 When all the girls around them are hooking up  
 But I know for sure it's never popular to be pure  
 And while some guys might be passing them by

<sup>6</sup> Magazines encourage girls to imagine what Jesus would think of their outfit (Gish, 2016).

I think they've caught someone's eye  
All the boys in the band want a valentine from a Barlow Girl  
Boys think they're the bomb  
Cause they remind them of their mom

The decision to remain sexually pure is discursively constructed as defiant through an inversion of contemporary commonsense, which (Line 6), affirms chastity as 'sexy' (Gardner, 2011: 18). Line 5 employs epistemic modality to provide a value judgement on non-evangelical women's behaviour, contrasting them unfavourably with the ideal chaste young woman and framing the Christian teenager as morally superior, though potentially an outcast (Line 4). The outcast motif draws upon heroic outcast memes that have become ubiquitous in western culture, with its origins in folklore. Superchick's male members elaborated on their views regarding sexual purity in an *Open Letter to Girls*,<sup>7</sup> published in teen Christian magazine *Campus Life* (Penney, 2002: 38–40). In it, they underscored the negative consequences of dressing provocatively, framing chastity as correct and appealing to 'cool' men, thereby attempting to appease female readers' anxieties about not conforming to a secular norm. Their advice for girls to police the way they dress with the aim of 'taking it a little easier on (us) guys' likewise implies women's responsibility for controlling men's sexual thoughts and impulses (Penney, 2002: 38–40; Sharma, 2008) which is a widespread, longstanding trope circulating not just in Christianity but also in Islam and Judaism.

Arguably, although secular and evangelical culture share their obsession with objectifying the female body, the latter is especially focused on control, viewing women as dangerous sources of temptation, or stumbling blocks, responsible for managing men's overwhelming sexual desires (Carpenter, 2010; Gish, 2016; Klein, 2018). In *Barlow Girls* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a), women are implicitly faulted for attracting male attention:

You can get noticed with your body  
Sexual hypnosis by being hottie

Their desirable appearance, reinforced using the term 'hottie', is symbolically invested with a power of influencing or 'hypnotizing'<sup>8</sup> men (of course, this goes back to Greek mythology and is perpetuated throughout history as an aspect of western Romanticism). Dressing provocatively is seen by evangelicals as tantamount to engaging in sexual intercourse, though girls seem to be chastised regardless of what they wear (Klein, 2018). The song goes on to shame and caution immodest women:

You might feel like public property  
You might, you might, you shouldn't be (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a)

In the first verse, speculative epistemic modality links immodest attire with objectification ('public property'); meanwhile the second verse combines the repetition of the modal auxiliary 'might' with the deontic expression 'you shouldn't be', underscoring immodesty's negative consequences and delivering an injunction on inappropriate behaviour.

### Beauty Capital

The bodily discipline imposed on and demanded of women specifically within US Christian evangelicalism and more widely within western culture is a pervasive element of social control, exhibited through pressures to conform to a certain standard of beauty (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). In both religious and secular contexts, women are often valued primarily for their physical beauty (Carpenter, 2010). Neoliberal media frame the central preoccupation of femininity as becoming desirable to men, while simultaneously projecting confidence and indifference towards one's appearance, marking a shift from overt sexual objectification to subtler sexual subjectification, in favour of the male gaze (Gill, 2008; Moran and Lee, 2011; Mulvey, 1999). Transferring responsibility to women as individual, rational, self-regulating neoliberal subjects ignores the impact of cultural influence on their internalising of socially constructed ideas about gender (Gill, 2008; Moran, 2016).

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<sup>7</sup> 'I'm sure most of you have figured out that the sexier you dress, the more attention you get. But even though the attention can feel good, it's really not good for you. Everyone deserves to be loved, not lusted over. When you dress to impress, guys notice, but when you try to live a life that's honoring Christ, a whole different set of guys notice. (...) So if you're feeling left out because you don't show off your body, don't date yet, or if you're thinking about taking it a little easier on us guys by dressing a touch more conservatively, I promise you're going to get noticed. In fact, I can name at least five skateboarding, guitar playing, skydiving, motorcycle riding, snowboarding, rock climbing guys in this band who are going to think you're the bomb' (Penney, 2002: 38–40).

<sup>8</sup> Hypnosis is 'a state similar to sleep, in which someone's thoughts and actions can be influenced by someone else' (LDCOE, 2018).



Evangelical and secular discourse, while differing in prescribed behaviours, share the centrality of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1999), for which female beauty must be continuously performed (Carpenter, 2010). Women in the analysed song lyrics are exclusively its objects:

Watching TV, checking Britney, televised,  
My guys checking out her thighs (*One and Lonely*, Brock *et al.*, 2002)

Men, on the other hand, are not similarly objectified. Ideal evangelical women are constructed as: ‘Ordinary girls they don’t live in the fast lane’ (*Barlow Girls*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001a), or the synonymous ‘just your average Jane’ (*One Girl Revolution*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b). They do not stand out from the crowd or follow ‘an exciting way of life that involves dangerous and expensive activities’ (LDCEO, 2018).

Though pressures to conform to a certain standard of beauty influence the lives of women and girls regardless of their religious affiliation, Griffith (2004) notes that these pressures are even more intensely felt within the evangelical community. Their outward appearance is seen as a reflection of inner beauty and strength of faith. Women’s performance of a specific feminine and sexualised appearance fosters a shared feeling of belonging among members of the community. This is amplified by a host of consumer-driven practices,<sup>9</sup> which normalise women’s obligation to adhere to a set of restrictive and heteronormative visual standards (Flournoy, 2013). ‘Beauty capital’ is obtained by the possession of an ideal thin physique, in the US context sometimes referred to as the ‘Scandinavian Barbie’: tall, thin, blonde and blue-eyed (Gaddini, 2021: 5). Throughout the corpus there are multiple instances where beauty and perfection are equated with thinness and framed as a desirable characteristic in the individuals one is surrounded with: ‘I wanna live in TV land where they’re so thin and pretty’ (*TV Land*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001c). Fatness is therefore seen as dangerously representative of ‘appetite’, something which the demure Christian woman should not show.

This unattainable female beauty standard fosters perpetual anxiety, known as ‘normative discontent’ (McRobbie, 2008: 98), which results in psychological issues (Grogan, 1999). Personal happiness and self-esteem are contingent on achieving this normative ideal, potentially leading to a negative self-image and even disordered eating:

But one imperfection takes away my grin  
Not that I think I’m ugly  
But acne throws me for a backslide  
I won’t go outside  
(...)  
No lunch cause the jeans don’t fit days (*One and Lonely*, Brock *et al.*, 2002)  
I don’t know the first time I felt unbeautiful  
The day I chose not to eat (*Courage*, Brock and Hsu, 2005)

While women may be aware of the oppressive effects of such dominant discourses—such as, ‘It’s not like I even need to be competing with unreality TV, fantasy / Not for a smart girl like me’ (*One and Lonely*, Brock *et al.*, 2002)—they are nonetheless affected by them (Moran, 2016). Though the track *So Beautiful* (Brock *et al.*, 2008c) pushes back against beauty standards, it reinscribes the centrality of attractiveness. Furthermore, by contrasting light to darkness, beauty is equated with goodness, an ancient bifurcation that remains a burden for women today:

We are a beauty that’s our own  
(...)  
We are light, we were born beautiful  
We were meant to be more than just these shadows of girls

## Girl Power

The pressures to embody a modest and desirable femininity are externally prescribed by identifying with the successful performance of femininity with continuous self-improvement. Such a commodified feminism is insidiously couched in a rhetoric of choice that encourages the consumption of pro-girl artefacts with which to purchase empowerment (Braun, 2009; Gill, 2008; Moran, 2016; Riordan, 2001). Once a signifier of competence and ability, this has increasingly become associated with a contemporary construction of female sexuality primarily catering to the male gaze (Tolman, 2012). The 1970s feminist concept of female empowerment decisively made its way into the mainstream in the 1990s with postfeminism, and it did not take long for it to be subsumed into neoliberal capitalist ideology. As a commodity, its focus has shifted to an individualistic pursuit of self-improvement, also dubbed ‘girl power’ (Riordan, 2001: 284–288). This empty signifier is no longer a politically

<sup>9</sup> Self-help books for women bear titles such as *Less of Me: A 30-Day Devotional for Your Weight Loss Journey* (Lehman, 2017).

liberating concept that maximises women's agency, but a product that can be purchased by adopting the latest product, idea, or style (Goldman, 1992; Macdonald, 1995).

Despite evangelicals' criticisms of feminism (Gilder, 1993; James, 1992; LaHaye, 1993) and their promotion of a traditional, restrictive sexual morality, feminism has undeniably influenced and transformed evangelical ideas in the modern era. The development of evangelical feminism provided an alternative to secular feminism and allowed evangelical women to redefine their spirituality in terms of contemporary culture, using scripture as a therapeutic means to address psychological and social anxieties (Cochran, 2005). In this vein, Superchick use their platform to push back against the restrictive bodily ideals imposed on young women. The distinction between 'real' and manufactured beauty is expressed in *TV Land* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001c). Note the use of the verb 'safe' to evoke the theme of conflict in typical evangelical fashion:

Sometimes you've got to choose between real and plastic surgery  
(...)  
Make it safe to be ordinary gonna do my own show  
It's about us real live girls in TV land

This notion of 'safety' further evokes how the world can be a dangerous place for a woman. Elements of the analysed corpus focus on a few themes which fall under the category of this postfeminist girl power rhetoric. The first concerns self-acceptance and refusing objectification:

I've got better things to do than be shown off  
I won't be the doll you lock up in a box (*Real*, Ghazarian *et al.*, 2002)  
There are trophies to win  
instead of being one of yours (*Anthem*, Brock *et al.*, 2005)

Meanwhile a second set of lyrics grapples with the issue of female agency and resisting wifely submission:

Not a Stepford wife made to obey (*Alive*, Brock *et al.*, 2008a)  
I can find my revolution, I can learn to stand alone  
(...)  
I'll be everything that I want to be (*One Girl Revolution*, Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b)  
I will find my voice my stand (*Real*, Ghazarian *et al.*, 2002)  
We are not what you think  
you can't keep us in our place (*Anthem*, Brock *et al.*, 2005)

Influenced by neoliberalism, girl power is markedly individualistic, as evidenced by the multiple repetitions of the personal pronoun 'I', which appears 36 times in the track *Real* (Ghazarian *et al.*, 2002):

But I want to be real  
I want to find out who I am  
And I will find my way to heal  
And I will find my voice my stand  
I am who I am  
I am woman hear me roar and I am salt, I am sand  
A million starfish stranded, landed, I'll throw back what I can  
I'll save the planet, change the world, I'll make a lone girl stand,  
I've got better things to do than be shown off  
I won't be the doll you'll lock up in a box

The above excerpt reveals a particular construction of femininity that is active and decisive, rather than passive, as evidenced by the repeated use of the epistemic modal auxiliary 'will', and phrases starting with 'I am' that reveal how the subject constructs herself. In the final line, she constructs herself not through what she is, but what she is not, making use of a common evangelical rhetorical trope relying on binary oppositions (Smith, 1998). Noun phrases 'my way', 'my voice', 'my stand' inscribe themselves in the contemporary understanding of feminism as synonymous with self-actualisation and betterment, otherwise known as postfeminism (Moran, 2016). 'I am who I am' is, likewise, incredibly reminiscent of James' (1992: 168) call for an evangelical version of feminism, though there is no official indication that it was the source of Superchick's inspiration. This track might be especially empowering to girls, however, because of the music genre of rock itself.

It is widely accepted that certain musical styles, sounds, and instruments are associated with the performance of collective presuppositions regarding gender. In Euro-American cultures, rock music typically symbolises

masculinity. Within this masculinist discourse, women occupy one of two roles: sex object or tomboy (in other words, an imitation male). Since society teaches women how to behave in accordance with prescribed feminine roles, and because of the inherent male genderedness of rock, girls are not usually exposed to images of inspirational female role models in popular culture. In fact, women playing an electric guitar or performing rock and roll are seen as breaking the gender code (Bayton 1997; Coates 1997; Cohen, 1997). Superchick, at first glance, attempts to transgress this code. In *Real* (Ghazarian *et al.*, 2002), the singer occupies the traditionally masculine role of rockstar, she is ‘a girl with a band’ and ‘a velveteen rabbit made of steel with a plan’. This is contrasted with what she is not, that is to say ‘a beauty queen’, staking her claim to embody a more independent femininity. However, empowerment in their songs is mostly achieved by adopting the role of tomboy. In *One Girl Revolution* (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b), independence is framed using a militaristic, hence, traditionally masculine metaphor (Kobes Du Mez, 2020):

I’ve got the rifle, gonna be myself  
I’ll shoot the shot  
Bang  
That you hear ‘round the world (Ghazarian and Hsu, 2001b)

Meanwhile, in *Anthem* (Brock *et al.*, 2005) girls are celebrated for embodying multiple femininities:

We are fire inside  
We are lipstick and cleats  
(...)  
We are girls with skinned knees  
We are concrete and grace  
(...)  
Here’s to the girls on their boards with bruises and scars  
Here’s to the girls whose fingers bleed from playin’ guitar

Yet, underscoring that they can be both tomboyish and feminine (‘lipstick and cleats’), these metonymic constructions reinforce a complementarian masculine-feminine dichotomy, wherein boys are ‘hard’, and girls are ‘soft’.

## CONCLUSION

The prevalence of discourses espousing female passivity, modesty, and submission in the examined body of material in evangelical media speak to the ongoing promotion of patriarchal and complementarian notions of gender that, though claiming to value women as members, still view them as rightfully subordinate (Byle Bruland, 1989; Gaddini, 2021; Gish, 2016; Valenti, 2009). Though the article reflects on US evangelicalism’s engagement with feminism through popular music in the early 2000s, it does not consider the sonic form of the music, and other multimodal elements, thus opening potential for further scholarship. Likewise, future research could focus on the way in which femininities have come to be articulated through the discourses of more contemporary CCM artists.

Evangelicals, especially women, continually negotiate their subjectivities within a postmodern context (Flournoy, 2013). To maintain their cultural and ideological relevance, they forge youth identities and evangelise; evangelicals constantly engage with secular culture which, in turn, subtly modifies some of their beliefs. For example, evangelicals’ engagement with feminism has resulted in a partial ‘liberalisation’ of the traditional mandates of wifely submission within evangelical marriage (Hendershot, 2004: 34–94). The emerging trend of evangelical feminism and the prevalence of girl power rhetoric in Christian music and media, noted here in the examined corpus, speaks to the commodification of empowerment, characteristic of postfeminism and neoliberalism that strips any notion of empowerment of its political, shall we say feminist, significance (Gill, 2008; Loke *et al.*, 2017). As modern society has shifted towards a market-driven, consumer culture, postfeminist discourse has increasingly come to emphasise the importance of self-improvement (Fairclough, 1993; Riordan, 2001). This has, likewise, influenced the development of evangelical feminism, particularly its traditionalist strain. Due to Superchick’s views on music ministry and the importance of purity until heterosexual marriage (Easley, 2020; Penney, 2002), their lyrics firmly inscribe themselves within traditionalist evangelical feminism as outlined by Cochran and here (2005).

Much like Superchick view music as delivering ministry, digitalisation has made other cultural forms like vlogging and social media increasingly prominent in evangelical culture. These platforms can not only spread religious messages but also challenge traditional evangelical views and power structures (Barker, 2005; Campbell, 2007; Gaddini, 2021). Though this is beyond the scope of my current analysis, members’ activity on social media,

which persists though the band is no longer active, could offer insight on Superchick's views regarding contemporary topics.

Social media has become an important tool for evangelicals to spread their views: past years have seen an advent of female evangelical 'microcelebrities' on Instagram (Gaddini, 2021: 3). Such platforms offer evangelical women the possibility to perform authority, either in specific spheres—like performing an idealised version of womanhood—or by challenging male-dominated structures (Gaddini, 2021). Challenges to the traditional concept of male headship have also appeared from elsewhere within evangelicalism, such as in prominent Bible teacher Beth Moore's departure from the Southern Baptist Convention in 2021. Her move was also motivated by racism within the movement and evangelicals' embrace of the white nationalism of Donald Trump (Smietana, 2021). Regardless, white evangelicals remain an important demographic for the Republican Party, having widely supported Trump in the 2016 elections. In that year, the former US president received the vote of 81% of white evangelicals and 73% of white evangelical women (Gaddini, 2021; Martinez and Smith, 2016).

Superchick's lyrics portray the dichotomy between evangelical womanhood and 'empowerment' which still largely characterises contemporary evangelicalism. There remains potential for future scholarship on how evangelical women's identities are articulated through more contemporary forms of media, as well as how, and if, this has influenced women's perception of their traditionally 'subordinate' role within evangelical society. It is also important to recognise how audiences negotiate meaning in popular music and whilst this article has articulated how dominant discourses on masculinity and femininity are supported by this music, it would also be useful to identify where listeners and audiences have read or manipulated text into counter-discursive formations.

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