

A project entitled
The Pure Heroine and her Melodrama: Lorde's Star Image and Fan Identification

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Declaration

I, *CHEUNG Chun Sing*, declare that this research report represents my own work under the supervision of *Mr. WONG Yu Bon Nicholas*, and that it has not been submitted previously for examination to any tertiary institution.

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Abstract

The New Zealand singer-songwriter Lorde debuts in the music scene with the album *Pure Heroine* as a gothic, detached and critical adolescent in 2013. After a four-year hiatus, she returns to the limelight with her sophomore album *Melodrama*, disclosing vulnerability and singing about the overwhelming and profound emotions emerging from early adulthood. In the reading of Lorde's lyrics and music videos in this article, I yoke together the scholarship in star studies and fan studies to analyze her stardom. I contend that her star image is an intimate zone established for her fans, where they identify with the singer's (constructed) authenticity and the faithful representation of adolescents and young adults. Her star image, or persona, is fluidly constructed by the replication of the changing features of her fans. Taking into consideration participatory cyberculture, I further argue that despite the fans' increased agency to construct meaning in the process of stardom construction, their responses to the singer's media products only serve to strengthen her authenticity, thereby amplifying their identification with her.

Keywords: star studies, star image, fan studies, identification, adolescents, young adults, participatory cyberculture, Lorde

Introduction

The New Zealand singer-songwriter Lorde, at the age of sixteen, rose to fame in the music scene in 2013. Her first single, “Royals”, crowned number one on the Billboard Hot 100 for nine consecutive weeks, has earned her two Grammy Awards. The songstress has crafted two studio albums: *Pure Heroine* (2013), and *Melodrama* (2017), both of which received attention from critics. In 2013, when writing for *Rolling Stone* about *Pure Heroine*, Weiner (2013: para. 4) opines that “[h]er lyrics explore classic teen-pop themes – social anxiety, romantic yearning, debilitating ennui, booze-soaked ragers – with an eerie, zoomed-out detachment”. Approaching the release date of *Melodrama*, he (2017: para. 31) offers his readers a dramatically different perspective of the star image of Lorde and her work in *The New York Times Magazine*, stating that “[o]n the new album, that tendency toward cool detachment collapses again and again into a rush of outsize emotions”. Feeney (2017: para. 3) of *Entertainment Weekly* is of the same mind, noting that “[the] shape-shifting compositions give *Melodrama* a richer, more dynamic palette than the muted, minimalist beats of *Pure Heroine*”. Particularly engrossing is the plain and melodramatic transformation in the way she alters and (re)constructs her star image as an authentic adolescent/ young adult throughout her career. Guided by the scholarship ranging from star studies to fan studies, this paper gauges the interplay between the constructed, composite star image of Lorde and her fans’ identification with it. Her star image, I argue, is constructed as an intimate zone shared by her and her fans, who identify themselves with her authenticity and representation of adolescents and young adults, and the fluidity of her star image is arguably a replication of the distinctive features of adolescents and young adults. She enshrines the sense of otherness and alienation that they feel during adolescence in *Pure Heroine*, and she dramatizes their vulnerability and emotional complexity during emerging adulthood in *Melodrama*.

Literature review

One should not discern star image as a simple concept. Dyer (1998) articulates the idea to be a “complex totality” composed of “multiple yet finite meanings and effects” (63). A whole host of mediated and cultural texts intersect with each other in the production process of the star image (Glenhill, 1991), and it signifies manifold socio-cultural meanings and values in a highly structured way in the sense that these often reinforce or contradict with one another (Dyer, 1998: 63-4). Despite how perplexing it may seem, all of the possible star images found in the entertainment industry in fact hinge upon our instinctive tendency to identify ourselves with “whole and unified people” in the false hope that we are “whole and unified” (*ibid.*, 97). Star images vary, and yet the reason for the existence of stardom always remains static.

Star studies and fan studies revolve around the notions of intimacy and authenticity. Personae, the personalities created by stars, offer an everlasting para-social relationship between the star and the fan (Laughey, 2009), resulting in “an illusion of intimacy” within the fan’s minds (Schickel, 2000: 4). To be precise, the public engage with the cultural products manufactured by celebrities, then undergo an unconscious process of developing and enjoying intimacy or “real-but-imagined relationships” with them through a variety of media forms (Tolson, 2001: 451). Proximity itself does not satisfy the fans; they tend to pursue “authentic celebrity persona[e]”, and such endeavors will eventually contribute to their understanding of the social world and even their desired selves (Meyers, 2009: 904-905). “[Being] endlessly produced and remade in presentation” (Dyer, 2004: 12), stars are extraordinary and different from the ordinary public by nature. Nonetheless, fans still fall prey for the illusion of intimacy derived from the star’s constructed ‘authenticity’ that is presented in all kinds of media products (Tolson, 2001).

Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington (2017) revisit the three waves of fan studies and underscore the fundamental differences in their objectives of research, employment of concepts and methodology. The first wave principally dealt with the idea of power, when fans were regarded as groups of socially oppressed individuals, who actively resisted empowered stakeholders in society through creative media appropriation, also known as textual poaching (*ibid.*, Fiske, 2006, Jenkins, 1992). Socio-culturally oriented, the second wave intended to function as a mirror of the existing social structures such as inequalities, and meanwhile academics working on fan studies at that time began to examine the classification of fans, categorizing them based on an assortment of celebrities (*ibid.*). Together with the domination of Web 2.0, recent work on fan studies has turned to inquire “the *intrapersonal* pleasures and motivations among fans, refocusing on the relationship between fans’ selves and their fan objects” (*ibid.*, 6). This marks the advent of the distinctive intersection of the third wave of fan studies with psychoanalysis. For instance, Schneider (2005) scrutinizes a case, in which a Tamil teenager, living in a foster home in Switzerland, has idolized Jackie Chan and appropriated his films during his pastime. The author argues that Jackie Chan, for the research subject, serves to be “a necessary symbolic resource for the negotiation of questions of belonging and diaspora identity, and of the conflicts that come with them” (154). Fraser and Brown (2002), in an ethnographic study centering on fans of Elvis Presley, conclude that fans who regard themselves as disempowered and underrepresented tend to identify with stars who are constructed as powerful yet intimate figures owing to their eagerness to become more self-assured. Their findings align with Click, Lee and Holladay’s (2013). Lady Gaga, dubbed ‘Mother Monster’, manages to garner an enormous fan base by calling her fans ‘Little Monsters’ on social networking sites, while the identification developed between the diva and her fans is hugely predicated on the belief that ‘Little Monsters’ should celebrate and feel contented with their individual differences. Studies of this kind endeavor to manifest the way stars (and their star images) impact on the

construction of fans' mental states and identities, which will ultimately reflect the dramatic socio-cultural changes that take place in the entire world (Sandvoss, et al., 2017).

There is hardly any literature in star and fan studies concerning how Lorde's star image is constructed for the sake of gaining a large fan base. Mitchell (2016), in *Celebrity Studies*, has published an article about the singer. He demonstrates an overwhelmingly positive perception of the singer, seeing her as "a 'mole' who has perhaps temporarily subverted the US mainstream... to demonstrate that [pop music] can still be regarded as something of value" (67). He even proclaims that Miley Cyrus, who was severely loathed for her highly controversial image during the time when Lorde was promoting *Pure Heroine*, is one of those "faux feminists" (61). Lorde, he argues, preaches as well as practices real and impactful feminism (60). However, his article fails to furnish the reader with a critical perspective upon the star image of Lorde established from *Pure Heroine* to *Melodrama*. It is regrettable that the interconnection between Lorde's star image and how her fans identify with her is understudied, whilst this may shed light on how her stardom benefits from or capitalizes on the characteristics of her fans' identity construction at particular time periods of life.

Methodology

Semiotics is the overarching approach in the subsequent discussion about the meanings communicated through the examined mediated texts: the lyrics penned by Lorde and the music videos released by her. This approach is employed to study the meanings, ideas and messages made and conveyed by signs, e.g. languages and images, beneath the surface (Hobbs, 2012). Because there is an array of puns, conceits and metaphors within Lorde's lyrics, it is essential to look into what these signs connote, interconnect "with cultural values (or ideologies)" (*ibid.*, 91) and "produce richer structures of meaning than [were] assumed" (Gottdiener, qtd in Hobbs,

2012: 91). As for her music videos from those albums, i.e. “Royals”, “Tennis Court”, “Team”, “Green Light” and “Perfect Places”, her costumes and make-up offer substantial resources for studying her constructed star image, while the camera angles, setting, props, editing and other related elements have come under close scrutiny as well. All these are believed to help steer the paper towards substantiating the argument.

In response to the growing importance of social networking sites in the third wave of fan studies (Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington, 2017), this paper has deployed examples of YouTube videos in which fans of Lorde react to and review her music. A video entitled “TEENS REACT TO LORDE – ROYALS” was published in 2013. In the video, there is a group of teenagers, invited by Fine Brothers Entertainment (FBE), showing their reactions to the song and the music video of “Royals”. The YouTube channel “Reacts By Ash”, run by a 22-year-old American female called Ashley Ippolito, has published a video of the YouTuber reacting to *Melodrama*. The video has been viewed 205K times as in January, 2019. These videos, too, are brought into discussion to validate the argument that surrounds Lorde’s star image and her fans’ identification with it. To acquire personal responses to the cultural products released by Lorde from other individuals, the comments below the music videos on YouTube are taken into account of the fans’ perception towards those cultural products.

Otherness and alienation in *Pure Heroine*

As revealed in an interview in *60 Minutes Australia*, the stage name Lorde was spontaneously created out of the singer's obsession with the nobility and the idea of aristocracy, along with its pronunciation of 'Lord'. She added the letter 'e' to feminize the stage name. The notion of royalty, reasonably enough, has often left traces in her work, namely "Tennis Court", "Royals" and "Team" from *Pure Heroine*. These mediated texts are produced to direct Lorde's fans to envisage a gothic, detached, self-contained and anti-materialistic queen persona within the singer.

"Tennis Court" from *Pure Heroine* is strategically manufactured to establish an authentic persona within Lorde and to present her as an antithesis to the mainstream, enticing the recognition-seeking adolescents into adjoining her fan base. In the chorus of the song, the singer crowns herself "the beauty queen in tears". The image of ideal female beauty in the mainstream is stereotypically associated with the curvaceous female body (Overstreet, et al., 2010); however, the singer does not attempt to live up to this stereotypical image. In the single-shot music video, the camera focuses solely on her impassive, expressionless face and upper chest, without any intent to zoom in her breasts (Fig. 1). Thus, the absence of sexualizing the body of the songstress suggests that she denies a voyeuristic point of view of her body shape. Dressed in a black dress and wearing black lipstick, she sets up a gothic style. The sort of beauty queen she makes reference to is no doubt contrary to the mainstream concept of acceptable femininity, and the deployment of this style in the music industry is said to produce a heavy impact on the adolescents who seek recognition within the minority (Badaoui, et al., 2012). The singer later reveals the reason why she, as the "beauty queen", is "in tears" in the lyrics: she is "smiling out of fear". She wrote the song after she had found fame in the music industry, and so the song is one of her tactics to situate herself in maintaining authenticity in

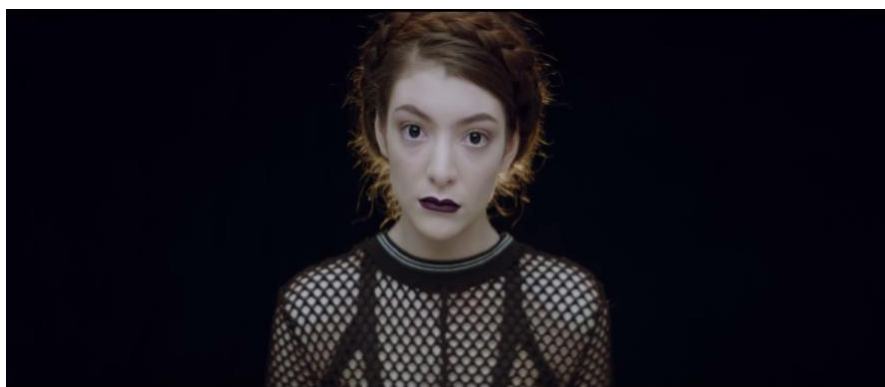
her star image. The fan would be lured by the claimed fear—losing her true self in the music industry full of insincere frauds, being under the “illusion of intimacy” (Schickel, 2000: 4) shared with the singer, who no longer appears to be out of the fan’s reach and instead is portrayed as an ordinary friend who has unwillingly rose to the unwanted fame.

The tennis court, as a place, signifies a private space for fan identification. The title of the track appears at the end of the chorus; some might perceive this to be an intertextual reference to the Tennis Court Oath, the event marking the break of the French Revolution. Nevertheless, Lorde herself seemingly has another purpose by bringing up the subject, as she said in an interview:

“The tennis court was just kind of a symbol of nostalgia for me. It was something which was familiar and safe to me” (O’Keefe, 2013: para. 4)

The last line of the chorus is then an invitation sent from Lorde to her fans, asking for an intimate reunion where the singer and her fans could have fun while being their real selves, despite being encircled by phoney individuals. The lyrics and the music video of “Tennis Court” are the devices for Lorde to authenticate herself through self-disclosing her critique and fear of the mainstream. Lorde would be hailed as the heroine by those adolescents who find themselves not fitting in the Other but are desperate for a figure to look up to and spiritually connect with. “Tennis Court” constitutes an intimate zone where these teenagers and Lorde get united, and such intimacy is skillfully constructed by dissociating themselves from the Other.

“Baby be the class clown
I’ll be the beauty queen in tears
It’s a new art form showing people how little we care (yeah)
We’re so happy, even when we’re smilin’ out of fear
Let’s go down to the tennis court, and talk it up like yeah (yeah)” (“Tennis Court” from *Pure Heroine*)



(Fig. 1 - Lorde in a gothic dress in “Tennis Court”)

In the mega hit “Royals” from *Pure Heroine*, Lorde maximizes the degree to which she is an authentic representation of mundane adolescents and isolates herself from other queen personae. The singer first introduces her to the listener as an average teenager who has no acquaintance with luxury goods, and soon she begins criticizing the songs hailing the opulent and materialistic lifestyle in the pre-chorus. The monarchy she refers to is not hereditary, and yet she is fully aware of its immutability. The queen she aspires to become is the queen who “crave[s] a different kind of buzz”. She then takes the listener to her imagined coronation in the chorus, as she sings, “let me be your ruler... you can call me queen Bee”. Beyoncé, also known as ‘Queen Bey’, is another female singer who is called a ‘queen’. Her reign in popular culture is argued to only “[reflect] pro-capitalist ethics and exposes an internalization of neoliberalism” (Ward, 2017: 158) nevertheless. The music video of her song “Partition” offers a case in point (Fig. 2). Lorde’s song “Royals” is a critique of the lifestyle of the rich, and so the sort of queen Lorde proclaims herself to be does not correspond with Beyoncé’s queen persona. The omnipresence of the materialist culture across countries manifests itself in the music industry; internationally renowned hip-hop stars such as Nicki Minaj endlessly flaunt their wealth and success on both public and ‘private’ occasions, and their fame might be a consequence of their fans’ unconscious wish to possess enormous wealth to prove their socio-economic status in society. Teenagers, who find peer recognition and interpersonal relationships pivotal at this point of the lifespan, may have trouble completely identifying with

those stars. As a result, they turn to Lorde for identification, because it is argued that her image is constructed as an ‘intimate’ and ‘authentic’ friend. The sense of alienation from extravagance felt by most adolescents, therefore, is believed to set the scene for Lorde’s instant success. Her queen persona reinforces the influence of her stardom in the sense that the kinship based on the idea of loyalty is established between her and her adolescent fans. Lorde is envisioned as an anti-materialistic queen, while her fans are loyal supporters of her wisdom and boldness, again making obvious the fan’s subliminal proneness to identify with stars who appear to be perfect and ideal (Dyer, 1998).

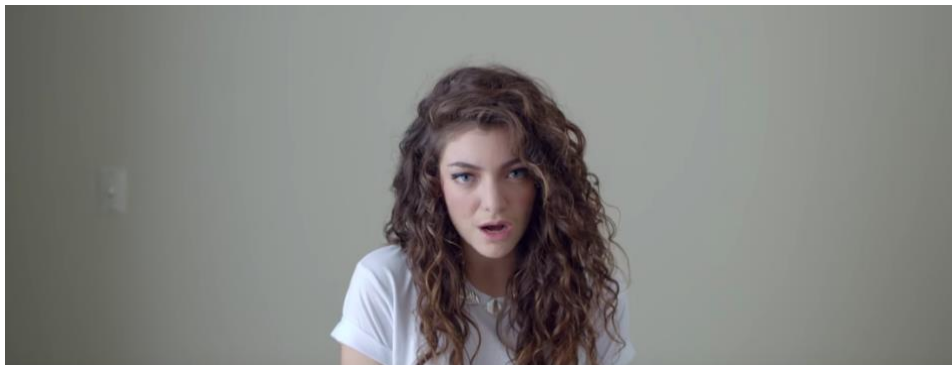
“I’ve never seen a diamond in the flesh
I cut my teeth on wedding rings in the movies
And I’m not proud of my address
In a torn-up town, no postcode envy
But every song’s like gold teeth, grey goose, trippin’ in the bathroom
Blood stains, ball gowns, trashin’ the hotel room
We don’t care, we’re driving Cadillacs in our dreams
But everybody’s like Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your timepiece
Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash
We don’t care, we aren’t caught up in your love affair
And we’ll never be royals
It don’t run in our blood
That kind of luxe just ain’t for us
We crave a different kind of buzz
Let me be your ruler
You can call me queen Bee
And baby I’ll rule, I’ll rule, I’ll rule, I’ll rule
Let me live that fantasy
...
We’re bigger than we ever dreamed
And I’m in love with being queen” (‘‘Royals’’ from *Pure Heroine*)

The music video and the song lyrics of ‘‘Royals’’ are inextricably intertwined in terms of the meaning communicated, which further fabricates the authenticity in her star image. Lorde, putting on a moderate amount of makeup and wearing a white T-shirt and a silver necklace, sits against either a pale white backdrop (Fig. 3) or a pale yellow curtain (Fig. 4) right in front of the camera throughout the footage. The hues here are in correspondence with the minimalist style Lorde has always strived to invent, as opposed to the extravagance commonly found in the music videos released by other pop stars. Figure 5 shows a scene from the music video of ‘‘High School’’ by Nicki Minaj, which was released two months before the release of the music

video of “Royals”. The female rapper falls into the category of one of those leading an opulent lifestyle that Lorde makes reference to in “Royals” for the extravagant accessories she wears. The quality of being simple and mundane in the music video of “Royals” is deemed deliberate, since Lorde has to practice what she preaches in the lyrics. The authenticity of her star image is reaffirmed by the consistency achieved by the lyrics together with the music video of “Royals”, justifying the considerable impact of the song on adolescents.



(Fig. 2 - Beyoncé in a jeweled outfit in “Partition”)



(Fig. 3 - Lorde against a white backdrop in “Royals”)



(Fig. 4 - Lorde against a yellow curtain in “Royals”)



(Fig. 5 - Nicki Minaj with her extravagant accessories in “High School”)

Lorde is acutely attuned to the liminal quality of adolescence, and so she sets up an exclusive clique for adolescents in “Team” through the manipulation of her queen persona and the idea of royalty. “Tennis Court” and “Royals”, as discussed above, serve to heighten her leading and supreme role amongst those adolescents who find themselves unfit for and irrelevant to the mainstream and/ or the materialist culture. “Team” proceeds to centralize Lorde and portray her as the leader inside the clique of teenagers with its intro:

“Wait 'til you're announced
 We've not yet lost all our graces
 The hounds will stay in chains
 Look upon Your Greatness and she'll send the call out” (“Team” from *Pure Heroine*)

The fan, listening to the song, is invited to have a private and intimate audience with the Queen (the persona constructed by Lorde herself), during which she asks her fans to stay patient and wait for the command she makes. The clique, consisting of Lorde and her adolescent followers, is said to hold back and not to vent their rage. The line “the hounds will stay in chains” implies that they have no intention to grapple with the culture that bothers and annoys them for the time being. What they have decided on doing instead is enjoying themselves in spite of being separated from the outside world, as demonstrated by this particular part of the first verse:

“Dancin' around the lies we tell
 Dancin' around big eyes as well
 Even the comatose they don't dance and tell” (“Team” from *Pure Heroine*)

The fact that the clique is exclusively run by adolescents is made more evident by its accompanying music video, which visualizes the imagined world described in the chorus:

“We live in cities you'll never see onscreen
Not very pretty, but we sure know how to run things
Livin' in ruins of a palace within my dreams
And you know we're on each other's team” (‘‘Team’’ from *Pure Heroine*)

I would contend that the ruin Lorde and her followers reside in signifies the intimate zone where they voluntarily isolate themselves from others due to the otherness they collectively feel. What they relish is neither an extravagant lifestyle nor a grand palace, while simply a ruin where they are allowed to assemble and identify with one another provides what they need during adolescence. By creating such a meeting point, ‘‘Team’’ has proved to consolidate the throne of Lorde in her fan base, since she functions as a caregiver who recognizes the adolescent’s developmental need and offers them a comfort zone. I would further argue that ‘‘Team’’ is a product meticulously combining the meaning embedded within both ‘‘Tennis Court’’ and ‘‘Royals’’ because the black-and-white outfit Lorde wears in the music video (Fig. 7) has hinted at such a way of interpretation. The juxtaposition of these two colors in the outfit in ‘‘Team’’ is an active reference to those found in the music videos of ‘‘Tennis Court’’ and ‘‘Royals’’, with black in the former and white in the latter. It is then probable to say that the fear of the mainstream in ‘‘Tennis Court’’ and the criticism over materialism in ‘‘Royals’’ have resulted in the creation of the clique that is alienated from others in society in ‘‘Team’’. The centrality of Lorde and her reign are plainly observable in Figure 7, in which she is sitting in the middle and is surrounded by adolescents, symbolizing a hierarchy that in fact contributes to the respectability of the queen persona.



(Fig. 6 - The ruin governed by the clique of adolescents in “Team”)



(Fig. 7 - Lorde in her black-and-white outfit in “Team”)

All these songs, which are the only singles accompanied by music videos from *Pure Heroine*, make strategic use of her queen persona. They are also found potent in validating her as the authentic representation of adolescents who continually wrestle with what characterizes adolescence: the feeling of otherness and alienation. The non-single tracks from the same album, in a similar fashion, disclose other tactics that Lorde employs when making herself appear to be ‘authentic’ to her fans. “Ribs” is one of those exemplars.

Essentially akin to “Team”, “Ribs” pertains to the uniqueness of adolescence, but “Ribs” affords the singer’s adolescent fans consolation through sympathizing with them. This is made

possible by the process of leaving childhood behind and growing up, which may engender insecurities among most adolescents. The singer opens the song by:

“The drink you spilt all over me
'Lover's Spit' left on repeat
My mom and dad let me stay home
It drives you crazy, getting old” (“Ribs” from *Pure Heroine*)

The opening verse turns the spotlight on adolescence itself and the freedom occasioned by it. The intertextual reference to the song “Lover’s Spit” by the Canadian band Broken Social Science released back in 2002 is believed to highlight the longing for coming of age, stated by one particular line from the song:

“You know it's time that we grow old and do some shit” (“Lover’s Spit” from *You Forgot It in People*)

On the surface, adolescence for Lorde marks a significant milestone for her since she was allowed to stay at home without her parents being there and also to throw a house party for her and her friends. However, the first line of the verse provides a rather different perspective on the practicalities of adolescence. The moment when a drink is being spilt seems to be an analogy for the fact that childhood has elapsed and can no longer rewind, which directly echoes with the last line of the verse that implies the state of bewilderment Lorde herself claims getting into. She goes on authenticating herself in another verse:

“This dream isn't feeling sweet
We're reeling through the midnight streets
And I've never felt more alone
It feels so scary, getting old” (“Ribs” from *Pure Heroine*)

Here the singer expresses her inner struggles as an adolescent who feels lonely and terrified, and so the conception of adolescence is problematized and made more complex than usual. The insecurities about growing up are often overshadowed by the ecstasy derived from sex and drug use in English popular culture. To take one quick example: “We Can’t Stop” by Miley Cyrus is a song about ecstasy that was also released in 2013, with two million copies sold in the United States. Given that there was a lack of songs that address adolescents’ state of mind in a less ‘ecstatic’ sense, “Ribs” is then obscurely in demand and much needed for adolescents

to identify with. The scholars of star studies, Tolson (2001) for example, submit that fans tend to seek authenticity from the stars they admire through a host of media products as one of the ways to authenticate their imagined relationships with the stars. “Ribs” thereby exemplifies Lorde’s awareness of teenagers’ insecurities about the transition from childhood throughout adolescence or even into young adulthood. The song is also arguably a planned way for Lorde to authenticate herself, because her fans would imagine experiencing the same kind of struggles concerning selfhood during adolescence.

To briefly conclude this part of discussion, *Pure Heroine* is an intentional configuration of the construction of the queen persona of Lorde, who draws upon the notions of otherness, alienation and insecurities. The purpose of it is to bewitch her adolescent fans, who are hunger for identification with a prominent figure appearing to share the exact same feelings with them during adolescence.

Vulnerability and emotional complexity in *Melodrama*

The queen persona is significantly less evident in *Melodrama* than in *Pure Heroine*, for the only occasion where Lorde refers herself as a (party) queen in the latest album is in the promotional track “Sober”. Another difference between her star image in *Pure Heroine* and that in *Melodrama* lies in the way she reveals her vulnerability: her fans are given a glimpse of her (constructed) vulnerability in “Ribs”, and yet *Melodrama* provides them with a broad overview of that. The variation of star images has never been uncommon. As Dyer (1998) puts it, different images of a star may seem contradictory but are arguably complementary, perpetually creating various forms of cultural meaning throughout a star’s career. The transformation of Lorde’s star image, therefore, can be read as an enhancement of the imagined

intimacy between her and her fans. This is skillfully achieved through dramatizing, undressing and humanizing the queen persona that is previously presented to be detached and out of reach.

“Green Light” is intended to reinvent Lorde’s star image by the delineation of the singer’s entangled with the heartbreak she experiences after a breakup. Her emotions are further complicated by her loathing as well as her wish to liberate herself from loathing. Notably, this form of disclosure of her thoughts and feelings is rarely spotted in the preceding album. A sense of rage from the singer can be detected in certain parts of the lyrics:

“I know about what you did and I wanna scream the truth
She thinks you love the beach, you’re such a damn liar
...
Well those great whites, they have big teeth
Hope they bite you
...
I whisper things, the city sings ‘em back to you” (“Green Light” from *Melodrama*)

The song is addressed to her ex-boyfriend, who is said to be a bad liar and therefore deserve Lorde’s public condemnation through her songs being played and sung across cities. The way she rants about her ex-boyfriend is a far cry from the way she makes criticism in *Pure Heroine*. When she is first introduced as a new artist to the music industry, she tends to disregard the mainstream culture and derive pleasure and identification from a clique of adolescents instead. “Green Light” from *Melodrama* differs markedly. It demonstrates a considerably higher degree of intensity of hatred towards her ex-boyfriend in relation to her inability to get rid of the melancholy and hostility she feels. The repeated use of the analogy between green light and the idea of moving on is made obvious in the chorus:

“Cause honey I’ll come get my things, but I can’t let go
I’m waiting for it, that green light, I want it
Oh, I wish I could get my things and just let go
I’m waiting for it, that green light, I want it” (“Green Light” from *Melodrama*)

It may be true that the singer’s heartbreak is authentic for her as a person; however, I would maintain that the dramatization of her suffering from the breakup is an intentional demeanour.

“Green Light”, serving as Lorde’s first single released after a four-year hiatus, is likely to

strongly favour the reconstruction of her star image. This is predicated on the public revelation of her vulnerability and unresolved desperation to let go of the past relationship as well as the subsequent anger. The aloofness coming out of her queen persona is replaced by the universal experience among emerging adults—heartbreak. The detached and critical queen persona in *Pure Heroine* has made her stand out from the crowd of singers; however, the radical change from that to a heartbroken young adult persona humanizes and further authenticates her, with her leadership and respectability among her fans still intact.

It is also worth noting that her outfit in the music video of “Green Light” also contributes to the reconstruction of her star image. Dominated by black and/ or white, the outfits she wears in the music videos from *Pure Heroine* have proved to successfully portray her as a gothic teenage girl. Contrary to expectations, Lorde returns to the music scene wearing a pink dress and a pair of sneakers (Fig. 8). She explains the reason why she has changed her style of clothing in a YouTube video about the music video:

“I always had dark lipstick on and in a weird kind of outfit. And this time, I was like, I want to look the way my friends see me. I want to feel like I could be any one of the young people who listen to my music.”
 (“Vevo Offscreen - Lorde”)

Saying that the outfits she used to wear look “weird”, she makes an explicit denial of her style in the past and intends to make connection with young adults nowadays by wearing an entirely different kind of outfit. The departure from her gothic style doubtless embodies the change of her persona, but I contend that her transformation has to do with the discourse of star authenticity (Dyer 1991; Meyers 2009). The fans she has garnered in the *Pure Heroine* era have gradually become young adults (so has Lorde herself), and consequently she has to keep pace with the changes on her fans’ lives and their newly formed identities. To illustrate, the young adults adoring Lorde might have already experienced several relationships and breakups and might go clubbing on a regular basis, and so they are no longer the same adolescents they once were. As young adults, they might have gone through the stage of identity diffusion and

started to connect to society both cognitively and emotionally. The continuation of her queen persona in *Pure Heroine* would fail to furnish them with an intimate zone where they could identify with a relevant yet prominent figure. The existing persona Lorde constructs in “Green Light”, or *Melodrama*, would be able to perform that task. The song and its accompanying music video are then the mirror of the vulnerability and the lifestyle amongst her grown-up fans. To put it simply, Lorde ‘grows up’ with her fans to preserve her stardom.



(Fig. 8 - Lorde in a pink dress dancing in the street in “Green Light”)

“Sober” serves to complicate her party queen persona as an emerging adult, who is still in the course of soul-searching during young adulthood. In “Team” from *Pure Heroine*, Lorde is “dancin[g] around the lies [they] tell”, while “Sober” is the polar opposite of that:

“It’s time we danced with the truth
Move alone with the truth” (‘Sober’ from *Melodrama*)

It has been argued that “Team” is an anthem for a clique of adolescents who cannot identify with others in society. Their self-alienation suggests that they pretend to be uninterested in making sense of the outside world. “Sober”, however, explicitly states that Lorde and her fans have to confront with “the truth”, repudiating the laissez-faire attitude they once adopted during adolescence. *Pure Heroine*, thus, can be seen as an embodiment of adolescents’ incapacity to understand the self and the world; meanwhile, *Melodrama* is crafted to be a representation of

the commencement of self-discovery existing throughout young adulthood. This again shows how the singer is attuned to the changes upon her fans brought by maturity, which elucidates the transformation of her star image and keeps her fans identifying with her. “Sober” is the only song on *Melodrama* that receives the mention of the word ‘queen’, while it used to dominate the narrative of *Pure Heroine*. Yet, the party queen persona she constructs in *Melodrama* is out of line with the queen persona in its predecessor. Instead of ruling a clique of adolescents, Lorde is depicted as a queen who derives pleasure from a party where she meets a romantic interest and has got drunk in “Sober”. The song later goes beyond only revolving around the party and moves on to grapple with the central question to her selfhood:

“We're King and Queen of the weekend
Ain't a pill that could touch our rush
But what will we do when we're sober?
When you dream with the fever
Bet you wish you could touch our rush
But what will we do when we're sober?
These are the games of the weekend
We pretend that we just don't care
But we care
But what will we do when we're sober?” (“Sober” from *Melodrama*)

She acknowledges the fact that the strong feeling of affection she shares with the “King” is not everlasting, and these feelings may not remain when they have gone sober in the morning. If drunkenness and hooking up here denote a sense of avoidance, sobriety is then a mental state where the singer has to face the music and encounter the reality. She makes herself appear to be a young adult who has matters waiting to be resolved but chooses to shun them through partying, drinking and being entangled in romantic/ sexual relationships. The song also drops reference to “Royals” to debunk the claim that “we don’t care” by stating “we pretend that we just don’t care but we care”. It seems that Lorde attempts to tear off the mask worn by her queen persona in *Pure Heroine* to reinvent her star image. Simultaneously, she is convincing her fans that there is a need for young adults to re-examine their selfhood that was once buried by their insecurities and/ or immaturity during adolescence. “Sober” seemingly indicates that Lorde tries to exploit young adults’ readiness to engage in the process of soul-searching and

fathoming the meaning of life. Consequently, her fans would regard her as an ‘authentic’ and intimate figure whose life experience is essentially similar to theirs, exposing the obscure influence of the shared ‘intimacy’ on her young adult fans as suggested by Schickel (2000).

“Sober II (Melodrama)” makes visible Lorde’s tactics to dramatize the emotional complexity experienced by young adults, functioning as a replica of the melodramatic, intense moments that usually take place in emerging adulthood. Composed as a sequel to “Sober”, “Sober II (Melodrama)” addresses the happenings after an all-night party, as illustrated by the first few lines of the song:

“You asked if I was feeling it, I’m psycho high
Know you won’t remember in the morning when I speak my mind
Lights are on and they’ve gone home, but who am I?” (Sober II (Melodrama) from *Melodrama*)

The singer admits having tremendous fun at a party, though she believes that the one who asked her whether she “was feeling it” will soon forget asking her that question. This points to the brevity and meaninglessness of the euphoria brought by partying, which is however a popular way used by young adults to evade issues in their lives. Left all alone in a room with lights on, Lorde calls into question her identity besides only being a pleasure-seeker. The juxtaposition of ecstasy, emptiness and bewilderment in the above verse foreshadows the assemblage and influx of emotions embedded in the upcoming lines:

“We told you this was melodrama
Oh, how fast the evening passes
Cleaning up the champagne glasses

And the terror and the horror
When we wonder why we bother
And the terror and the horror
God, I wonder why we bother
All the glamour and the trauma and the fuckin' melodrama” (Sober II (Melodrama) from *Melodrama*)

These lines explicate the crux of the entire album that young adulthood is always about the acknowledgement of inner intense feelings and the overt, unapologetic expression of them. The use of the past tense in the line “[w]e *told* you this was melodrama” is presumably purposeful.

It seems like that Lorde and other young adults have previously forewarned all their strong and noticeable emotions, and now the warning statement has proved to be true. The idea of young adulthood is made to be characterized by the expression of these emotions as a result. Through the employment of the subject pronoun “we”, the singer situates herself alongside her young adult fans, making clear that they are alike due to their propensity to display a wide diversity of emotions. This particular line is deemed to reinforce the effect of fan identification, since her fans would be convinced by the idea that they and their adored star are commonly experiencing what typifies young adulthood. Later, when “[c]leaning up the champagne glasses” after the party, Lorde is shown to be bothered by other kinds of emotions ranging from extreme fear to appealing excitement. Both the party itself and the after-party could be interpreted in a metaphorical sense in relation to the complexity of emotions. On one hand, young adults would feel elated when celebrating freedom and endless ventures as they enter young adulthood as if it is a party. On the other hand, at times they would also feel lonely and lost when adapting to the life as an adult, as though the party has ended and they have to go back to their ordinary lives again. In brief, the title track of *Melodrama* deploys partying as a trope in order to illustrate emotional complexity occurring during young adulthood. As Lorde appears to experience fluctuations in emotions similar to her fans’ experience, she seems ‘stripped down’ and resembles “an average person that resonate with the audience’s own experiences” (Meyers, 2009: 893), again maintaining the “real-but-imagined relationships” between the ‘real’ star and her fans (Tolson 2001: 451).

In “Perfect Places”, Lorde publicizes the fear of solitude and the feeling of insecurity about her identity as a young adult figuring out the future ahead of her. The pre-chorus of the song centres around the recurring motif of partying:

“Are you lost enough?
Have another drink, get lost in us
This is how we get notorious” (Perfect Places from *Melodrama*)

Lorde makes explicit that consuming a huge amount of alcohol is the typical way that young adults attempt to escape from reality, which is regarded as one of the many characteristics of young adulthood. Although a sense of ecstasy is made obvious here, these lines also reveal a sense of fear engendered by loneliness. Drinking with friends from the same age group is depicted as effectively dispelling that kind of fear, and yet this is known to be useless by nature (as shown in the song “Sober”). This form of escapism makes the “lost” singer bear resemblance to her young adult fans who seek temporary pleasure from drinking to forget pain and struggles that terrify them. The singer continues to sing about fear in the chorus:

“All of the things we're taking
'Cause we are young and we're ashamed
Send us to perfect places
All of our heroes fading
Now I can't stand to be alone
Let's go to perfect places” (Perfect Places from *Melodrama*)

She yokes together being young and feeling ashamed, implying that young adults are still faced with insecurities even after childhood and adolescence. Thematically, this relates back to the dramatization of vulnerability, the thread that runs through the album. It is also rather apparent to spot the stark contrast between the queenly and self-assertive Lorde in “Royals” and the vulnerable and even “ashamed” Lorde in “Perfect Places”. Such a dramatic difference in terms of her image, as I see it, is an act of humanizing the virtually ‘divine’ Lorde. Later, through bringing up the demise of prominent figures in the music industry, the singer creates a gloomy and hopeless ambience to the song. She annotates this very line on Genius:

“I felt the loss of Prince and DB hard last year. A massive light went out.” (Genius)

The reference to these big names points to the dark side of living within this post-heroic period of time from the perspective of young adults. They have now lost the source of inspirations or a role model to guide them through the adaptation to adulthood, subtly hinting at a sense of insecurity about the future. Interestingly, Lorde does not portray herself as a figure replacing

those heroes, and instead she mourns for their death with every other young adult. Once again, her persona seems to have smoothly transformed from a queen of a clique of teenagers to a more ‘average’ young adult. She proceeds to proclaim her desire to stay close with other young adults (also her fans) by stating that she “can’t stand to be alone”. Apparently, Lorde here aims to ask for intimacy with her fans to cope with the dread of solitude. In the course of adjusting themselves to the life as an adult, Lorde serves as a site for companionship, hence a figure for identification amongst her young adult fans.

The visual text accompanying the song works in tandem with the lyrics to construct Lorde as a terrified, lonely and vulnerable young adult, amplifying the degree of fan identification. The star is located on an uninhabited island alone, and there are scenes showing her being in different parts of the natural landscape. The video starts with Lorde entering the gate which leads her to the beach (Figure 9), and it seems to represent the advent of young adulthood. The beach is spacious, and it resembles the possibilities offered by the identity as an adult. However, the video soon shifts to show Lorde running wildly, running away from something (Figure 10). The running scenes build up tension and disrupts the peacefulness created previously, and emerging adulthood is therefore depicted as a phase of the lifespan that is filled with terrible struggles. As said before, alcoholism runs through *Melodrama* and is presented as the measure for young adults to deal with stress and the reality. This motif again leaves its trace in the video of “Perfect Places”. In Figure 11, Lorde is drinking a bottle of wine solo. While there are champagne glasses on the table, there are no guests sitting around the table. This scene is a striking example of the idea of solitude, and it succeeds to vividly illustrate the feeling of loneliness inside many young adults. The music video closes with the scene where Lorde sings to a lightbulb, asking the question “what the fuck are perfect places, anyway?”. Coupled with the closing line of the song, the dimness in Figure 12 outlines the hopeless and depressing side

of young adulthood. “Perfect Places” manages to unveil Lorde’s (constructed) vulnerability, and simultaneously it mirrors the young adult fan’s own vulnerability. This would eventually lead to the extension of fan identification because the fan is offered the ‘authentic’ quality of the singer that contributes to their self-understanding (Meyers, 2009).



(Fig. 9 - Lorde entering the beach in “Perfect Places”)



(Fig. 10 - Lorde running wildly along the coast)



(Fig. 11 - Lorde drinking alone)



(Fig. 12 - Lorde singing to a lightbulb)

Lorde has continually made attempts to reconstruct her star image in *Melodrama*, leaving behind the carefree and self-contained queen persona in *Pure Heroine*. She appears as a young adult who suffers from the influx of the unprecedented emotions occurring during emerging adulthood. It is believed that Lorde is attuned to and thus skillfully capitalize on the distinguishing characteristics of her young adult fans, so that they would continue to identify with her star image and her stardom construction would stay solid.

Fans' reactions

The construction of Lorde's stardom and its possible impact on fan identification have been discussed in a comprehensive manner. Yet, the interweavement between stardom and fans' participation ought not to be neglected. Hollinger (2006) calls for a careful examination into the driving force behind the fan's identification with the star, rejecting the passivity of fans and arguing that "fans use stars in unique and varied ways to serve their social and psychic purposes" (43). Scholars of fan studies perceive fans to be "pro-sumers" (Toffler 1980: 5) who possess agency in stardom construction (Fischer and Landy 2004). Their participation in cyberspace is also considered "decentering the production of star discourses" (McDonald 2000: 115). Jenkins (2006) regards "[e]xpressions – involvement in the production of new creative forms" (para. 8) as one of the main features that define fans' online participation. Taken together, fans are capable of actively making use of the existing official texts produced by stars to produce texts that carry new meaning in the process of stardom construction.

The rest of the paper is intended to examine Lorde's fans' responses to her music and star image via studying the 'reaction videos' and the comments below Lorde's music videos on YouTube. This way of textual analysis aligns with Lau's (2019) methodological approach in delving into the star image of Chinese movie stars. In her monograph, she mainly scrutinizes the blogs, posts on both social networking sites and fan forums. Even though I could only analyze the mentioned texts due to the constraints of this essay, it is believed that the selected user-generated content would be representative of fans' responses to a certain extent. These responses will usefully demonstrate more possible perspectives of understanding Lorde's star image. However, they will still correspond with the contention of this paper: Lorde's stardom hinges upon her fans' identification with her authenticity and representation of them.

The fan's responses to *Pure Heroine* primarily centre around how much Lorde appears to be 'identical' and 'intimate' to them. In the video entitled "TEENS REACT TO LORDE - ROYALS", eleven adolescents ranging from the age of fourteen to eighteen are asked to react to the music video of "Royals" and comment on both the song as well as the singer. One of the teenagers expresses her identification with the singer, saying that:

"Music nowadays is talking about like parties or Gucci. In reality, nobody really lives like that. So we really can't relate to the songs. But this song is super relatable... She's ordinary like us." (Jeannie, 18)

The scathing criticism about materialism in "Royals" makes the song itself reflecting reality for Jeannie, and consequently she treats the song as a mirror of her own life experience. She presumes that she and other adolescents live an ordinary life, while she is convinced the ordinariness depicted by Lorde in the song. In other words, Lorde has become the authentic representation of teenagers thanks to her construction of her ordinary quality. Other two teenagers, namely Rebecca and Chelsea, put forward another point of view when voicing their opinions on how they read the song:

"I think referencing expensive things just makes people want all that stuff, and that's not necessarily healthy. We need to be okay with what we have, and I think having that in a song is good." (Rebecca, 17)

"I'm happy with where I am. I have my family. I have my friends. There's nothing really more I could ask for. I mean, money's always nice, 'cause they say money can't buy happiness, but, you know, bacon is pretty close. You can buy that." (Chelsea, 16)

The above three teenagers first display a sense of otherness, as they fail to identify with the stars who sing about the extravagant and opulent lifestyle. Then, they extend the meaning of the song, recognizing how it makes them feel grateful for and satisfied with their ordinary lives. Lorde succeeds to enshrine those adolescents' mundane lives and their identities, accounting for why her fans resonate with her. To identify how her fans receive another song from *Pure Heroine*, the comments below the music video of "Team" on YouTube are studied. One of the most liked comments addresses the idea of intimacy:

“There's something so enchanting about the sentiment "We're on each other's team". It's very warm and friendly... But it's still a declaration of empathy, of comradeship in the shared struggles of life for those that face them. Kinda similar to "I like that you're lonely, lonely like me...I could be lonely with you." Very pure.” (K-Blue)

This YouTube user attaches adolescence to loneliness and struggling, but “Team” is thought to function as a source of comfort that seems to soften the hardship of adolescence. Lorde is understood to be a figure offering spiritual companionship for adolescents. Not only does the song spawn the illusion of intimacy (Schickel 2004) among her fans, but it also reaffirms the similarities shared between Lorde and her fans (as shown in the phrase “shared struggles”).

Her young adult fans seem to be deluded by the authenticity constructed by Lorde, believing in the perplexities of her own life as an emerging adult. In the video of reacting to the album *Melodrama*, Ashley Ippolito (under the name of ‘Reacts by Ash’) perpetually shows her strong identification with the singer and her credence to the singer’s constructed authenticity. She applauds “Green Light” as a remarkable comeback single, saying:

“Lorde has literally disappeared for the last four years... but we really don’t know what she’s been up to, what she’s done, what she’s experienced, who she kind of is as a person, and I feel like this album is just really gonna dive into that, like you can already tell so much about her, what she’s gone through just from this song alone.” (Reacts by Ash)

The song is perceived to be an accurate reflection of Lorde as a ‘real’ person and her ‘real’ life experience during her four-year hiatus from the music industry. The YouTuber, when negotiating with the reinvented star image of Lorde, also implies her “pursuit of truth” (Meyers 2009: 905) in terms of the singer’s private life. Her resonance with the singer might be based on her false belief that the vulnerability portrayed in “Green Light” replicates her own life as a young adult. It is particularly interesting that the YouTuber compares Lorde to other “fake” pop stars later in her reaction to “Perfect Places”, noting that:

“What the fuck are perfect places? That’s so like something that is also this generation. We look for perfection. We look for this ideal image, but that image isn’t even real. If you look up to a celebrity or someone and you think they’re perfect or they have this sort of lifestyle, it’s all fake. You know what I mean? Like nothing that you see is really real ‘cause we’re all trying to get to a certain place that doesn’t really exist.” (Reacts by Ash)

It seems that she has awareness of the constructedness of stars, and yet she is still under the illusion created by Lorde in *Melodrama*. Lorde, as I have argued throughout the paper, is made to look authentic, intimate and vulnerable for adolescents/ young adults, while such a less obvious way of stardom construction in essence is not markedly different from other conventional ways of building up the image of a star. A fan of Lorde's named Ivan M. left a comment on the music video of the song, pointing to the evocative quality of it:

I know it's not just me, this song feels like the end of the teenage era. All the love, kisses, evenings, sunsets, lovers, heartbreaks, friends, adventures...
It's full of youth, but at the same time it's sad. This makes me smile, but at the same time, it makes me want to cry. It creates images on my mind that never existed before in my life. This... This take[s] me to perfect places. (Ivan M.)

This comment specifically focuses on the perplexed emotions that young adults collectively feel; furthermore, the fan manages to create more meanings relevant to the life as an emerging adult, and he has shared them based on the existing text. Given that this comment has received roughly one thousand and three hundred times, one may assume that this kind of thought is agreed by many and reflects a popular belief. Such comments are believed to enrich the meaning of the pre-existing lyrics, hence the representation of young adulthood. Nonetheless, the multiplicity of meaning regarding Lorde's star image conveyed by the fan's responses only serves to intensify their identification with the singer.

Conclusion

Underpinned by the critical scholarship of star studies and fan studies, this paper has probed into Lorde's star image and how her fans identify with it. The New Zealand singer seems to apprehend the key to instant and continual success in the music scene: the establishment of steadfast intimate ties with her fan base. To this end, she constantly plays with the notion of authenticity, replicating the defining hallmarks of adolescents and young adults. *Pure Heroine* embodies the honest glorification of the state of being unfit for the outside materialist world. She proudly crowns herself queen of adolescents and gracefully blesses them with a site for

identification, while the queen does not fail to authenticate herself through criticizing other ‘fake’ people and disclosing her dread of adulthood. As the star image is said to be under perpetual reconstruction (Dyer 2004), a transformation of hers is destined to take place. *Melodrama* strips down Lorde and writes a drama about her vulnerability and the perplexities of her emotions prompted by the advent of young adulthood. Her ‘authenticity’ is solidly constructed thanks to the articulation and replication of the psychological world inside young adults. This paper has also taken into consideration participatory cyberculture, as stardom construction is now “a collaborative effort wherein fans participate in the meaning-making process” (Lau 2019: 163). Lorde’s fans are found to be vigorous in giving responses to the existing texts and competent to attach more meaning to them. The course of meaning-making, however, seems to further accentuate their identification with the singer and her authenticity. Lorde’s star image is and will always be in the making, and yet it is virtually certain that she will ‘grow up’ and gradually ‘grow old’ with her fans.

Word Count: 7950 (lyrics and direct quotes excluded)

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