

IMPOSTER NEXT DOOR:
A STUDY ON AUTHENTICITY IN THE MODERN POP STAR

by

Chris Cantu

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Thesis Supervisor:

Rachel Romero

Second Reader:

Amber Lupo

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“You'll never become a star, or get the lead, if you play it safe.”

-Glee

ABSTRACT

At the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards, twenty-year-old Taylor Swift became the youngest person ever to win the Grammy for Album of the Year for her sophomore album *Fearless*. The singer had lead writing credits for every track of the album, which debuted atop the Billboard 200 chart and spawned the three multi-platinum selling songs, including 'You Belong With Me,' 'Fearless,' and 'Fifteen.'

Less than a decade later, Taylor Swift has become the definition of an international pop star. She has broken records with sold out stadium tours, a series number one albums, and over 131 million Instagram followers. The aforementioned *Fearless* has since been certified Diamond, having sold over ten million copies worldwide. Despite this success, Swift maintains the humble, girl-next-door charm that sparked her initial success in music, becoming the quintessential blueprint for this trope in music.

We're currently in the era of the instant star, wherein everyday people have the chance to quickly become viral hits, earning them celebrity status almost overnight. This has inspired a wave of fame-seeking individuals that vie for their moment in the spotlight. How, then, does an everyday person build a career from their fifteen seconds of fame? Further, how does the entertainment industry sell the charm of these "regular" people in a market saturated with cool and glamorous artists? The answer lies in the kid-next-door trope popularized by Taylor Swift. This brand of marketing has been used by some of the most critically and commercially successful recording artists of the past decade, including Camila Cabello, Shawn Mendes, Alessia Cara, and Khalid.

While grassroots marketing of musical artists has existed since the beginning of popular music, the modern class of kids-next-door artists are unique in that the goal is never to evolve into a glamorized public figure. Instead, these celebrities establish their niche by becoming the voice for the everyday fan existing outside of the industry. They become the bridge between the common world and world of celebrity. Artists like these are critical because they represent both the media and the peer group, two vital institutions process of socialization. Therefore, these artists carry the influence to not only guide personal entertainment, but ultimately shape American culture.

Still, the kid-next-door trope is not without flaw. While these artists successfully reflect a large portion of the American experience, there are distinct gaps in the communities they represent. Their experiences are limited to the model that Swift initially constructed. How, then, can I fill in these gaps with my own experiences and identity in a way that still serves the kid-next-door trope that is so easily palatable to the general population?

My research seeks to analyze the various methods these artists used to build their following and maintain the kid-next-door aesthetic in their work. Analyzed content will include a series of music videos, song lyrics, and select social media used in the construction of these celebrities. From there, I will critique the trope altogether, focusing on the missing spaces, and how my artistic contribution seeks to fill these spaces. I will then use this information to write an EP in the style of these artists, promoting and branding myself accordingly in a manner that will attempt to break me into the music industry.

DEFINING A KID-NEXT-DOOR

At the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards in 2010, twenty-year-old Taylor Swift became the youngest person ever to win the Grammy for Album of the Year (Lafond, 2018). The award was just another accolade for Swift's sophomore album *Fearless*, which debuted at #1 on the Billboard 200 chart and spawned three multi-platinum selling songs, including 'You Belong With Me,' 'Fearless,' and 'Fifteen.' Most notably, Swift co-produced and had lead writing credits for every song on this album, which was completed when she was nineteen years old. This whirlwind of success came just on the heels of the notorious MTV Music Video Awards interruption scandal with Kanye West that launched her into an international spotlight. Still, Swift maintained the girl-next-door reputation that defined much of her subsequent body of work. Nearly a decade later, Taylor Swift remains as the definition of an international pop star, breaking records with sold-out international stadium tours, earning ten Grammys, sporting over 131 million Instagram followers, and ultimately being dubbed Billboard's Female Artist of the Decade. It goes without saying that Swift has legitimized herself as a classic example of the American Dream fulfilled. Her careful blend of personal relatability with glowing stardom has allowed her influence to extend over pop culture and American culture at large. Moreover, Swift has inspired an entire generation of young artists who work within the kid-next-door model to achieve international success.

This study aims to analyze how international pop stars like Swift maintain a sense of authenticity while constructing their image. I will begin by analyzing content ranging from music videos to song lyrics that help shape the construction of these celebrities. Additionally, I will study the threats to three of these artists' images and how the artists

responded to these threats. The five artists I've decided to focus on – Taylor Swift, Camila Cabello, Shawn Mendes, Alessia Cara, and Khalid – represent critically and commercially successful singer-songwriters who have all earned Grammy nominations and/or number one albums while using kid-next-door themes in their work. Collectively, these five sport nearly 200 million monthly followers on Spotify at the time of writing, giving them a significant musical platform from which to speak. This is particularly important in that these singer-songwriters serve as a voice for the everyday person outside of the industry.

As a member of the Recording Academy and a singer-songwriter myself, the branding that these artists employ inform my own work and critical interpretation of popular music. These are fascinating in that they deliberately work against the Glitz & Glamor model that the entertainment industry has successfully sold for over a century. While the kid-next-door model has been used in the past, few artists have retained the identity for the duration of their career. In fact, the good-girl-gone-bad trope has been used in artists from Britney Spears to Rihanna, permanently altering their public image. In the modern era of streaming and quick releases, the general population seems to crave a greater sense of authenticity in their artists.

While there is no set definition for the boy/girl-next-door trope, there are recurring themes in the work of musical artists who have employed the branding. Of these, the most prominent theme seems to be that of moderation, which has further played out in through three primary ideas. The first idea, centered on youth, posits that the kid-next-door is independent, but not entirely free. The second idea, centered on identity, says that the kid-next-door is interesting, but not entirely outstanding. Finally, the third

idea, centered on discovery, describes the kid-next-door as rebellious, but not entirely reckless. This study will analyze how each idea is reflected in what the artists look, say, and do.

LITERATURE REVIEW: ELEMENTS OF CELEBRITY

Fame as a notable sociological concept is a relatively new addition to the field. While the idea of fame has always been recognized, sociologists have only discussed pop culture in a broad sense. Specific studies on celebrities – especially pop stars – as significant cultural influencers are usually limited to Lady Gaga, who herself is an anomaly in the world of pop music. Using Gaga as a model for the modern celebrity is not always appropriate in the instant star era. Today, regular people are suddenly thrust into the spotlight and are expected to retain their everyday charm while keeping up with the standards of the entertainment industry. Lil Nas X serves as the perfect example of this, having self-released his debut song, *Old Town Road*, that, less than a year later, spent a record 19 weeks at #1 on the Hot 100 and earned him six Grammy nominations. His promotion tour, however, was littered with newbie mistakes, including prematurely walking out of an interview – right in front of the camera. While these blunders may have been unintentional, they highlight the training classic celebrities go through when traditionally building their careers over years. Mathieu Deflem affirms this in *Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame*, stating that “the world of fame and celebrity today is very different than 10 years past, let alone two or three decades ago, with all due consequences for our research and teaching in the area” (2013, p. 129). Modern celebrity, then, sits on that balance between the world of the everyday person and the world of entertainment.

Due to the advent of social media, a celebrity is no longer a distant icon in Hollywood. In fact, a celebrity now reflects the friend that a fan would have in their real-life friend group. The role of celebrity even acts as an extension of the most personal, vulnerable attributes of the fans themselves. To these points, the body of literature I've compiled only briefly speaks on these fundamental qualities of the modern celebrity: building an authentic reputation, brandishing a public work ethic, and showcasing talent recognized by an already-established celebrity or institution.

Building an Authentic Reputation

Authenticity seems to be the first key component in constructing a modern celebrity. Often, a celebrity will emerge with an easily consumable stereotype before developing their own signature personality. Charles Fairchild notes that artists essentially have to prove that they are, in fact, genuine musical artists by adhering to an established musical culture (2007). Ferris further puts this in context for stars who began on singing competition shows:

Successful examples are those performers who extend their character from the original show [or medium in which they were introduced] into the celebrity version, thus proving their claim to 'authenticity' and reinforcing their star image (2015, p. 67).

A sense of trust between the artist and the fan must be built at this stage. The fan has to believe, to some extent, that the celebrity represents them. The process of emerging from this musical culture has to be covert, however. Allen notes that suspected "performances" of masculinity in male pop stars led to accusations of inauthenticity, which further associated these acts with manufactured or artificial pop music (2015). Allen uses Justin Bieber as an example, noting that his child-like frame and emergence as

a child star made it difficult for him to break into a bad boy phase. This implies that physical attributes and context of emergence must be taken into consideration when constructing a pop star. Consalvo also implies that the line male celebrities have to tread in presenting ‘authentic masculinity’ is particularly fine, noting that “the criteria for ‘acceptable’ masculinities is likely different in fiction and nonfiction representations of men” (2003, p.29). It seems, then that in building a celebrity, one must use elements of caricature without becoming the caricature itself.

Major changes in branding can obviously be made, however. Pop stars like Miley Cyrus, Ariana Grande, and Demi Lovato, who each built their original fan base around young tween and teen fans from children’s network shows, serve as the perfect examples of stars who have shifted their work to center around mature themes without considerable detriment to their careers. A more classic example of an artist who successfully shifted toward adult themes is Madonna, who Lister notes “self-admittedly... is not the most gifted vocalist or dancer, but the veracity and tenacity of her expression cannot be denied” (2001, p.4).

Brandishing a Public Work Ethic

This speaks to the second key component to the modern celebrity: work ethic. Ivaldi conducted a study in 2008 which sought to understand why exactly musicians admired their musical role models. Three major factors emerged from this study:

Dedication (with reasons including working hard, being committed and determined), popular image (e.g. being good looking, popular), and ability (e.g. being good on more than one instrument, overcoming physical difficulties) (2008, p. 181).

Further studies even noted that, while ability was a considerable factor, “role

models were far less likely to be identified as a result of their ability” (2008). Work ethic then serves as the critical bridge between the role model and the fan. The artist must prove that, while they hold considerable talent, they must also put in effort in expressing the best version of this talent.

While an immensely talented performer may be highly valued, the performer may also potentially be deified, raised to a god-like standard of untouchable talent that turns them into an objectified spectacle rather than a real human being. This sometimes alienates fans who no longer see themselves in the role models they once admired. The industry is aware of this, and sometimes intentionally markets certain artists, like Beyoncé and Adele, to this extreme in order to amplify the air of mystery surrounding the brand. This draws intrigue by only allowing an audience into the artist’s world through their music and performances.

For new artists, however, this tactic is almost never employed. In fact, for competitive singing shows like American Idol, Fairchild writes that “judges point out more than once to suspected underachievers that a decent performance [is] simply not good enough” (2007, p. 363), implying that work ethic must be notable in order to connect to an everyday audience.

Showcasing Established Talent

The final, crucial component used in building a musical celebrity lies in the production of music that showcases an artists’ talent. While the term ‘talent’ is fundamentally subjective, the recognition of an artist’s ability by *another* established artist or institution seems to hold some weight.

Employing elements of genres that reach across audiences also seems to remedy

the lack of social appeal an artist may have. For example, in Allen's (2015) group interview, the male participants who expressed enjoying Bieber's music did so only with an explanation that they specifically appreciated the mature route his hip-hop-inspired music had taken. This was a clear nod to his *Believe* album, which featured three major rappers: Ludacris, Big Sean, and Nicki Minaj. Thus, there is a strong implication that a large portion of Bieber's current fanbase only emerged after the hip-hop community openly expressed a desire to work with him. Incidentally, Justin Bieber's origins are notable in that he was famously signed by Usher after posting a YouTube video of himself singing an R&B song.

Fairchild (2007) also writes that the *American Idol* series is predicated around the idea of a genuine talent found hidden in the ordinary. The premise of the show features three established music industry professionals – a platinum-selling pop star (Paula Abdul), a Grammy-winning producer (Randy Jackson), and an A&R executive (Simon Cowell) – searching for America's next great superstar. This structure is further echoed in modern talent competition shows such as *America's Got Talent* and *The X Factor*.

Finally, Lister (2001) makes an argument for the Prima Divas, such as Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, and Celine Dion. These three women in particular have each won the Grammy for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance, among numerous other awards. Performers like these who lead with uniquely powerful vocal ability tend to be legitimized by the awards they receive from established institutions like the Recording Academy, which, in turn, informs their celebrity status. Once the institutions have christened them, the major core of their fanbases, or stans, continue to legitimize their legendary status throughout the mainstream narrative. They then carry out the work of

holding newer artists to the standards of these classic artists.

Ultimately, scholars have introduced basic components of the makings of a pop star, but, even with these in mind, many other social factors play into the success of these musicians. Few discussed the importance of social media in the construction of the modern celebrity. Further, it was difficult to find an exact definition for the kid-next-door trope that I am studying. While my analysis aims to fill that gap in the data, the fundamental themes of authenticity, work ethic, and established talent were referenced throughout all six of my sources of literature, cementing these themes as critical elements of the celebrities I'm studying.

DATA AND METHODS

Because I was interested in how international pop stars maintain kid-next-door branding when building their image, I used unobtrusive method for this content analysis. For this project, I studied five artists on the Billboard 100 chart as of 2020: Taylor Swift, Camila Cabello, Shawn Mendes, Alessia Cara, and Khalid. These artists all have Grammy nominations/wins and chart-topping, platinum-selling albums released in the last five years that I will use for the content analysis. For each artist, I analyzed two music videos and four self-written songs, focusing on the branding used during the era of their mainstream breakout albums. Because these are singer-songwriters, their lyrics hold significant personal weight that speaks to the idea of authenticity. Music videos, on the other hand, put the artist and their music in a visual context in a manner that songs alone cannot. I also included at least one song wherein the artist is featured rather than as a lead

or solo. Because an artist typically contributes the most condensed, well-known version of themselves in the projects they're featured on, these guest appearances help understand the core of an artist's brand.

For Taylor Swift, I will be analyzing the lyrics of 'You Belong With Me,' '22,' and 'Fifteen' as well as the music videos of the first two songs. I will focus on her *Fearless* era and include her feature on Boys Like Girls' 'Two is Better Than One.' For Camila Cabello, I will be analyzing the lyrics of 'All These Years,' 'Real Friends,' and 'Havana,' and her feature in Pitbull's 'Hey Ma,' as well as the music videos for the last two songs. I will also focus on the marketing era of her debut, self-titled album. For Shawn Mendes, I will be analyzing the lyrics of 'Something Big', 'The Weight', 'Hold On', and his collaboration with Camila Cabello in 'I Know What You Did Last Summer' as well as the music videos for the first two songs. I will also focus on the marketing era of his debut album *Handwritten*. For Alessia Cara, I will be analyzing the lyrics of 'Here', 'Wild Things', 'Seventeen,' and her feature in Logic's song '1-800-273-8255' as well as the music video for the first two songs. I will also focus on the marketing era of her debut album *Know-It-All*. Finally, for Khalid, I will be analyzing the lyrics of 'American Teen', 'Young Dumb & Broke,' his feature with Halsey on Benny Blanco's 'East Side,' and his feature on Shawn Mendes' song 'Youth,' as well as the music video for the first two songs. I will also be analyzing the marketing era of his debut album *American Teen*. I studied each artist individually first, coding the data by printing each set of song lyrics and highlighting recurring themes. I subsequently examined the resulting themes. I approached the music videos a little differently, simply watching each video and noting the themes each artist presented. I specifically focused on characterization, attire, setting,

character interactions, and other significant visual motifs. Finally, I reduced both descriptive and literal codes from the text and videos into three analytical themes.

There were important limitations in my study that should be addressed. I limited my study to only a handful of artists that are relevant as of 2020. Future studies might reframe what it means to be a kid-next-door in a different era. Also, because this was a content analysis, I wasn't able to use other methods like focus groups or in-depth interviews to understand public perception of these artists and whether they fit within the kid-next-door genre. Despite these limitations, a content analysis was sufficient to answer my research questions.

FINDINGS: ELEMENTS OF A KID-NEXT-DOOR

The purpose of this study was to analyze how international pop stars use the kid-next-door aesthetic when constructing their image. Because their "front stage" and "back stage" personas are presented as one, they are uniquely vulnerable public figures. These artists further reflect both the media and the peer group, two critical institutions process of socialization. In order to maintain this balance, the artists explore innocence through three major themes: youth, identity, and discovery. Below, I discuss how each theme is played out in the lyrics and videos from each artist.

Youth: Independent, but not Free

Defining a boy-next-door or girl-next-door becomes relatively simple when we break down the term. The first word of the phrase focuses on the youth of the individual, and these artists address this early phase of their life in the lyrics that they write. Both

Alessia Cara and Taylor Swift have songs named after a specific age in their life, including 'Fifteen,' 'Seventeen,' and '22.' The range of ages here suggest that it is this transition period from teenager to young adult that defines a kid-next-door. Further song titles that speak on this theme of youth obviously include Mendes and Khalid's 'Youth' as well as Khalid's 'Young, Dumb, & Broke' and 'American Teen.' Within the lyrics themselves, artists use the words 'boy,' 'girl,' or 'kid' to describe either themselves or their peers in twelve of the twenty songs I analyzed. Each artist also mentioned a parent at least once in one of their songs, with Cabello, Mendes, and Cara specifically writing about a parent giving them advice. Swift, Mendes, Cara, and Khalid all write similar lyrics about having "so much time" or the "rest of my life," while Cabello speaks about reuniting with an old flame after "all these years," despite only being 20 at the time of release. Other artists released their debut mainstream pop albums around the same age, with Swift, Mendes, Cara, and Khalid releasing theirs at 18, 16, 19, and 19 respectively. However, a large part of this transition period from adolescence to adulthood is idea of earning independence, but not being entirely free. Whether it's personal responsibilities, financial limitations, or social pressures, the kid-next-door constantly faces challenges in the process of independence. They must work to get what they want. This goes hand in hand with the element of public work ethic that a musical artist needs to establish their celebrity status.

Moreover, the singer also appeals to fans by expressing ideas of freedom in what they say, how they look, and what they do. Swift, Cabello, Cara, and Khalid all write lyrics about "getting out of here" or "leaving this place" when referring to where they live or where they're at. The kid-next-door, while sometimes proud of their hometown, can't

wait to leave to start their own life, but must finish out a season in the place they currently reside. Every artist except for Mendes speaks about "their dreams" or "dreaming," describing it as a form of escapism that is sometimes shared with friends.

When studying music videos, we can see what the artist looks like and does to express youth, independence, and freedom. Transportation seems to speak the most to these themes. In the videos analyzed, the main character never drove their own car, and every artist produced a video with a variation of them walking down the street with friends. Cars seemed to be a rarity, driven only by an outside "cool kid" or the "oldest kid" in the friend group. Further, some artists rode on public transportation, specifically busses. This image serves as a symbol of limitation: the artist can go anywhere, but only if the bus can take them there. Otherwise, they must walk.

Location also seemed to play an important role in conveying youth. Swift, Cabello, Mendes, and Cara all feature scenes of their characters hanging out at their respective homes, while Swift, Mendes, and Khalid's videos all end up at a football field. Again, the boundaries of adolescence extend to available recreational spaces. The kid-next-door must either socialize under their parents' roof or in a very public space with other adults, limiting the amount of independent actions the boy or girl can take.

In terms of attire, every artist chose to focus on comfort over style in their videos. All artists wore jeans at some point, while the guys typically wore round neck t-shirts, and the girls wore light jackets or hoodies. Swift and Cabello also played shy, nerdy girl characters complete with glasses and messy buns. This speaks to the idea that the kid-next-door should never brandish expensive clothing or styles, unless they are playing an unrelated character like an alter ego or "cool kid." After all, the kid-next-door must be

interesting, but not too interesting.

Identity: Interesting, but not Outstanding

The second part of the kid-next-door phrase references reputation. Like the element of reputation used in initially building a celebrity, the kid-next-door must prove that he or she is relatable -- living next door means sharing the same contextual experiences. However, there is still an air of mystery and individualism tied to the artist -- living next door means the artist has their own, unique experiences. Balance is absolutely crucial here and is oftentimes done by contrasting dichotomies rather than using instances of both at the same time. This is most clearly represented in the music videos.

Swift, Cabello, and Khalid all play simple or nerdy versions of themselves, but also play the opposite role in their alter egos. For instance, Swift plays both the literal girl next door, pining over the boy in 'You Belong With Me.' However, she also plays the boy's head cheerleader girlfriend in the same video. Similarly, Cabello plays an awkward girl living with her grandmother in 'Havana,' but also plays the roles of the glamorous telenovela star and the confident movie star in the movies and shows she watches in the video.

The songwriters are also self-aware of the folly of their youth, writing about the chaotic blur of growing up. Khalid's anthem proudly boasts that he is "young, dumb, and broke," while Swift mentions in '22' that people her age are "happy, free, confused, and lonely at the same time." Admitting this speaks to the idea of authenticity, while the artists remain in control of their narrative by owning these traits themselves.

The balance of interesting but not outstanding also lies in being something of a

cool misfit. This tends to be tied in with the overarching sense of innocence that the kid-next-door possesses. Swift and Cara disassociate themselves with the cool kids in their lyrics, while Cabello visually joins them in this disassociation in her Havana' music video. It seems as if the "cool kids" they're referring to tend to party, drink, or otherwise participate in highly social activities, while they would rather be home alone or with a small group of close friends. In discovering their identity, the kid-next-door realizes that they don't quite relate to popular trends and would rather march to the beat of their own drums, as Cara mentions in "Wild Things." She writes "we have no apologies for being... we'll be just fine," alluding to the idea that the kid-next-door is comfortable with this simple identity. Not being the coolest kid is okay for them because they tend to be a part of a friend group in which they feel validated.

Khalid spends most of his time in the 'American Teen' music video hanging out with mischievous friends who sneak alcohol into an arcade, disrupt customers at a grocery store, and steal shoes from a bowling alley. Khalid notably doesn't participate in any of these activities, but there is clear understanding that his friends don't expect him to, either. Similarly, in Swift's '22' music video, she throws a lively birthday party at her house with friends. While she is clearly of legal drinking age, the video never once shows her drinking and instead focuses on the silly activities the group engages in throughout the night. Similarly, in the 'Here' music video, Cara wanders around a party in which her peers are drinking and smoking marijuana while she merely observes the scene before her. A key element of the kid-next-door is that they are a familiar face in the crowd they inhabit but aren't often the center of attention. In other words, they are well known by the community, though they aren't necessarily close with everyone in the community. Khalid

and Cabello highlight this balance in the "Young, Dumb, & Broke" and "Hey Ma" videos respectively, in which they acknowledge various members of their community without having these members join them like Mendes does in "Something Big" music video.

Finally, a huge part of maintaining their identity lies in the balance between being social and being independent. If the cool kids are universally popular, the kid-next-door must be able to enter and leave a room unnoticed. Cara's "Here" music video places her at a party that she feels entirely out of place at. The camera follows her from room to room as she narrates the events playing out before her, all while noting that she'd rather be "at home all by myself." She eventually ends the song waiting for her friends alone, outside of the party. Cabello echoes this in "Real Friends," where she writes that she feels "alone in every crowded room." Every video from the selected artists also features a scene where their character is alone, oftentimes in their room, which symbolizes a deeply personal space. Mendes himself spends an entire video walking through an empty house in "The Weight," a stark contrast to "Something Big," in which he shared an entire football field with friends and various community members. However, part of the transition from adolescence to adulthood is discovering these personal boundaries through trial and error.

Discovery: Rebellious, but not Reckless

As the artists I'm studying are singer-songwriters, most of their talent is recognized in their ability to tell stories through their music. These stories are typically themed around instances of self-discovery. Once again, however, a careful balance must be met in order for the kid-next-door to sell the brand. These artists should be able to be playfully

rebellious without being outrightly reckless. Swift, Cara, and Khalid do an excellent job of demonstrating this in their music videos for '22,' 'Wild Things,' and 'Young, Dumb, & Broke' respectively. As previously mentioned, Swift throws a birthday party wherein activities include adults racing down a hill on tricycles, hanging out on at the beach, and throwing confetti inside Swift's house. Cara and friends play in shopping carts and host a bonfire in 'Wild Things.' Finally, Khalid's 'Young, Dumb, and Broke' video showcases students slacking off at school, ultimately culminating several high school kids having a water gun fight on a football field.

An important subgenre of the rebellious, but not reckless trope expects these artists to be sexy but not sexual. This is best demonstrated in Camila Cabello. In her music video appearances for 'Hey Ma' and 'Havana,' she is often the object of attention for most men in the video. However, Cabello never goes beyond a cheeky wink and grin, openly admonishing men who try to pursue any physical interaction with her. Interestingly, her later smash hit 'Señorita' with boyfriend Shawn Mendes is an exception to this. The music video is notorious for its sexually charged storyline, and the lyrics tell an equally steamy story, marking Cabello's first instance in which she invites the audience beyond the usual wink-and-grin.

Back on her breakout videos, however, Cabello's sexuality is also reflected in the outfits that she wears. She often dons tight or somewhat revealing clothing in her music videos as a solo artist, though this isn't necessarily new. Cabello initially debuted within the group Fifth Harmony, who were brought together by Simon Cowell during the second season of The X Factor USA. Her and her fellow female bandmates were perpetually sexualized in their Fifth Harmony music videos, particularly 'Worth It,' 'Work From

Home,’ and ‘All In My Head (Flex).’ Notably, the group was entirely composed of women of color: Lauren Jauregui is a fellow Cuban, Ally Brooke comes from Mexican heritage, Dinah Jane comes from Polynesian heritage, and Normani Kordei comes from Creole heritage. Cabello was particularly vocal about the group not feeling comfortable during sexualized performances, especially given their young ages at the time. In her solo videos, however, ‘Hey Ma’ and ‘Havana’ were set in hot, humid Cuba, making her miniskirts appropriate for the climate but not nearly as revealing as the skirts worn by the other nameless women in the videos.

Finally, Cabello’s lyrics tend to emphasize sensuality. She writes in Spanish for ‘Hey Ma,’ singing “*si tocas mi piel, tu saciarás mi sed,*” which directly translates to “if you touch my skin, you will satisfy my thirst.” In ‘I Know What You Did Last Summer,’ Mendes and Cabello sing about Cabello’s infidelity, with Cabello writing,” he knows dirty secrets that I keep” and “another’s hands have touched my skin.” Again, in ‘Havana,’ Cabello writes in an extended version of the track “I knew it was him when he came from behind,” providing a suggestive innuendo. Much of this emphasis on sexuality in Cabello, however, can be attributed to the sexualization of women of color in popular culture. Cara only writes about sensuality – being “chest to chest with a lover” - when reminding a suicidal listener about the small joys in life in “1-800.” In other videos by Swift and Khalid, themes of love are present but never go beyond a few kisses or a playful hand on the knee. While, as previously mentioned, Mendes’ later career is built upon his sexuality, his early music videos are surprisingly void of any sexual tension at all. All of these artists, however, only express their romantic and sexual interests with opposite sex partners.

Lyrically, these writers employ word play to tread the line of innocence and rebellion. Khalid and Mendes both use ‘high’ to express enjoyment, but never specify whether this is the result of marijuana or simply the thrill of the moment. Cara specifically uses the word “rebels” to describe her circle of friends in ‘Wild Things,’ writing that they “make [their] own rules.” In ‘22.’ Swift lists a series of activities that generally break social mores and norms including eating breakfast at midnight, falling in love with strangers, and forgetting about deadlines – much like I am doing with this thesis now.

A rare example of a character being reckless is written about in Swift’s ‘Fifteen,’ in which she implies that her best friend Abigail unwillingly lost her virginity to an older boy that Swift had previously rejected. Swift writes about how she had been in love with this boy, but her decision to ultimately choose herself over him sits in clear contrast with her friend’s decision to “give everything she had to a boy who changed his mind [about her].” Cara writes about similar experiences in ‘Here.’ In her narration of the events at the party she’s at, she notes that she’s next to “the boy who’s throwing up ‘cause he can’t take what’s in his cup no more,” while she avoids clouds of marijuana on her way out of the party. When kids-next-door talk about outright recklessness, they tend to do so in context of their own caution. Once again, this highlights the artists’ self-awareness and unique perspective as an outsider in a world of cool kids.

CRITIQUING KID-NEXT-DOOR

In building my roster of artists with successful kid-next-door themes, I found that the most abundant users of the tactic were typically made up of a specific group of artists: straight, White, middle-class girls. While this isn't problematic in and of itself, the whole premise of the kid-next-door is accessibility to the everyday people around us. But with a growing population of ethnic and sexual minorities, the lack of representation within this genre misses several key demographics. Whether through diary-like lyrics or relatable music videos, the kid-next-door genre is the key to intimately introducing the greater market with people from otherwise marginalized communities, without the stereotypes.

To be fair, the modern model for this aesthetic is Taylor Swift, who is the embodiment of the girl-next-door characteristic traits. Her 2020 Netflix documentary, *Miss Americana*, highlights how being a quiet good girl ultimately lead to her breakthrough success and attainment of the American Dream. Throughout the documentary, Swift notes that she had to (and continues to) battle intense sexism in climbing her way to the top of the music industry, and now uses her platform to empower voices like women and sexual minorities. Still, much of the success that she's found, that perhaps the other artists on my roster haven't yet found, is likely attributed to the amount of privilege she carries as a white woman.

In fact, in understanding what it means to be a kid-next-door, it became clear that the trope was inherently tied to what it meant to be an American, a good ol' boy, or a quiet, harmless singer. While my artists hung out at the edge of rebellion, their identities were ultimately "safe." I can't quite fault the artists themselves on their marketing; however, I'm critical of how their labels choose to market them. For instance, Khalid, a

black man, must seemingly play up his middle-classness in his music videos when playing to a predominantly white pop audience. Thankfully, he uses this setting to present his own narrative. For instance, a black prom king and queen are portrayed by Khalid himself and Normani Kordei of Fifth Harmony.

Meanwhile, Cabello, a Cuban-Mexican, plays up her sexiness in a way that Swift has never been asked to, and is constantly marketed as simply the “Havana girl” despite quite openly referencing her homes Miami and Mexico in her music as well. Could these themes be a reflection of how different communities must adapt to a mainstream culture outside of entertainment? Interestingly, Cara and Mendes, both Canadian, almost never reference their home country in their music.

Further, as previously mentioned, all of these artists publicly identify as straight, despite being vocal allies of the LGBT community. Cabello and Mendes in particular have been mired in controversy over their sexuality, with Cabello rumored to have had a secret relationship with former bandmate Lauren Jauregui. Despite Mendes and Cabello dating, and him making several official statements insisting that he’s not gay, Mendes continues to have his sexuality questioned by skeptics across the internet. Whereas other male pop singers like Harry Styles and Nick Jonas have faced similar accusations, unlike Mendes, they have left their official orientation ambiguous or even leaned into ideas about exploring their sexuality – all while continuing to date women. Mendes and Cabello’s relationship, on the other hand, has often been under intense scrutiny, with fans and critics alike suggesting it might be an elaborate PR relationship. For context, the pair went public with their relationship around the release of their Summer 2019 collaboration, *Señorita*, which went #1 on the Billboard 100, garnered a Grammy

nomination, and has been streamed over a billion times on Spotify. In spite of the success of the single, the couple is still publicly dating, remains affectionate and romantic in front of cameras nearly a year later.

Finally, I think the biggest hole to fill in this genre is the lack of male representation. There is a myriad of personal issues that men face, but don't have the diary-style lyricists to speak on them. Addressing toxic masculinity, in particular, isn't discussed enough in this genre. Themes like the hyper sexualization of boys, male body image issues, and emotional repression are seldom discussed by men in music. Mendes is typically resigned to speaking on his feelings for his romantic interests, though in a future album he discusses dealing with anxiety in 'In My Blood.'

With young singer-songwriters like Billie Eilish and Conan Gray on the horizon, the former of which recently did a clean sweep at the 2020 Grammys, the kid-next-door genre proves to continue to be relevant. With these writers comes darker, more personal themes that Generation Z feels much more comfortable speaking about. As for my work, while I alone am unable to fill every missing representation in the genre, it's crucial that I speak on these qualities that I do have experience with.

BECOMING KID-NEXT-DOOR



Figure 1. Album Cover for Imposter Next Door

In writing my debut EP, *Imposter Next Door*, I played off of the themes of the kid-next-door model that I studied, while incorporating themes of imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and questions of authenticity. The project aimed to fill the gaps that my five artists did not address: notably touching on rejecting sexual norms, confronting race and culture, and directly speaking to the gray areas we face as young adults. As this was my artistic debut, I made a point to be intimately involved with every facet of this project. From writing every lyric, melody, and chord progression to staging and designing my album cover, my artistic direction was a critical component of the authenticity so crucial

to a boy-next-door.

The process of designing the album cover was multi-layered and a bit nuanced. I used my backgrounds in photography, fashion, modeling, graphic design, and creative direction to ultimately decide on the final image. First, I scouted several locations in the small town that I went to high school in, which served as the setting for most of the songs on the EP. I eventually settled on the local laundromat, which allowed for the homey, everyday aesthetic that my music conveyed. Aesthetically, I framed the light to cast a shadow across my face, referencing my “dark side” that I write about in the music. Further, the chair to my left is broken, while the one on my right is fully intact, speaking to the duality of the boy-next-door I write about.

In terms of my outfit choice, I paired fitted black skinny jeans with leather Chelsea boots and a classic black belt with an unlined, denim jacket, wifebeater, and characteristic black band on my left hand. The outfit served to strike a balance between class and responsibility (Chelsea boots, belt, ring, etc.) with more relaxed, youthful styles (denim jacket, black skinnies, etc.). The wifebeater in particular was chosen to convey a sense of vulnerability, juxtaposed with the promise ring worn on the ring finger of my left hand.

Finally, in terms of the graphic design of the cover, I used Times New Roman against the gritty, black and white photo to evoke a sense of dissonance. Unlike most debut releases, which emphasize the artists’ names, I chose to omit mine altogether in lieu of simply the EP name, which serves as something of a nametag for the subject of the photo – in this case me. My mouth is crudely scribbled over, as a nod to the sense of self-censorship most my kid-next-door artists had to concede to. This lends focus to my eyes,

which express a myriad of emotions from glassy, lifelessness to slight concern to curious innocence. Altogether, the cover art went through several drafts of photos and designs before ultimately being approved by my team.

While I am still recording, producing, and mixing the music myself, below are lyrics from two songs from the EP (“Imposter Next Door,” “Mine Alone”) which best speak to these themes.

Imposter Next Door

Verse 1:

Guess I’m no longer seventeen
‘Cause all my dreams came true
Dated the homecoming queen
Got to kiss her boyfriend, too

(Still I)

Fight until I’m strong enough
To prove that I’m a man
‘Cause if no one ever calls my bluff
Maybe that’s just who I am

Chorus:

Imposters just pretend until there’s nothing left to erase
But is this lie a mask
Or is it my true face?
I might not be golden, but I’m not yet rust
Imposters like me are just the easiest to trust

Verse 2:

Say I deserve to take up space
Say my body belongs
‘Cause you won’t mispronounce my name
When you’re singing my songs

(Still I)

Believe the shadow in the mirror
When he doubts my crooked smile
And suddenly my face is smeared
And suddenly I’m a child

Chorus

Bridge :

At the end of my rope, I’m a puppet on a string

Beholden to my role, though I don't feel a thing
But I can let go
I can let go
Yo me suelto

Mine Alone

Verse 1:
Caught your smile across the room
How friendly
Side hug 'cause I'm leaving soon

But I feel your breath against my neck
It's burning
Struggle to keep you in check

Pre-Chorus 1:
I'm not cold
But I'm shaking
Praying you can hear my thoughts

Chorus:
My body's mine and mine alone
You could feel my lines and scratches, oh
But you will never live inside this home

Verse 2:
Said I'm the flavor that you crave
I'm not candy
Not the sweet you get to taste

My love is more than skin and bone
Don't take me
Touch me with your words alone

Pre-Chorus 2:
I'm not cold
But you're shaking
Now that you can hear my thoughts

Chorus

Bridge:
And I know it's just the chemicals speaking
Or maybe it's your drink
But I'm a lot less sexy than you think
(It's a lot more simple than you think)

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze how modern pop stars use the music videos and lyrics to practice the kid-next-door branding model. The analysis of six peer-reviewed articles revealed the basic components used in building a celebrity, including presenting an authentic reputation, brandishing public work ethic, and showcasing established talent. These themes were also present in the kid-next-door model the artists in my study used.

Much of being a kid-next-door is a balancing act, never falling too close to an extreme. In their youth, they search for independence without being entirely free. Artists write about working toward their eventual dreams. They live through their current reality and challenge the pressures to which they're subjected. Artists are shown passing time with friends and finding simple joys to keep them afloat despite these challenges.

In their identity, they hold qualities of interest without allowing those qualities to make them too popular. Kids-next-door are cool misfits, known by everybody without necessarily being close friends with everybody. They have a unique perspective of the world they inhabit, allowing chaos to exist around them without taking part. While they require solitary moments to themselves, they are supported by a tight-knit, small group of friends. In this group, their voice is heard, and they have a specific role to fill. Further, they are aware of their youth and the resulting confusion that comes from this state of transition.

Finally, in their self-discovery, they allow themselves rebellion without devolving into total recklessness. This speaks to their need for an individual identity. Kids-next-door are empowered by their youth to try new things but are bound by an unwavering sense of innocence that they strive to hold onto. Many of these artists experience romance

but never translate it into sex. While the kid-next-door is apt to constantly self-discover, they also learn from the recklessness of their peers, actively avoiding common pitfalls.

Artists like Taylor Swift, Camila Cabello, Shawn Mendes, Alessia Cara, and Khalid are vital in that they come closest to bridging the world of celebrity with the world of the everyday person. Songwriters like these are involved in the personal process of escapism while directly influencing the actions and ideals of individuals in culture. Thus, kids-next-door celebrities offer a unique insight into American culture and its functions. As this genre continues to grow, however, there is plenty more room for newer voices to extend the conversation. These voices should focus on a broader array of experiences that are otherwise unheard of in a mainstream music market. As I continue to write and eventually distribute my music, I hope that my work and eventual career in music helps fuel the voices within and outside of the industry that are often shut out. In doing so, perhaps we can create a richer culture.

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