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The passing of the postmodern in pop? Epochal consumption and marketing from Madonna, through Gaga, to Taylor

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ABSTRACT

Using the literature-in-marketing approach this study explores the transition said to be occurring in contemporary culture, society and philosophy between the waning postmodern and the ascendant post-postmodern. Research gauges a complex unfolding sociocultural moment that has major implications for marketing, but which heretofore has been little described. Song lyrics of prominent pop music artists, Madonna and Taylor Swift, are suggested to illustrate respective characteristics. Lady Gaga is held up as an intermediary between Madonna's deconstructive and Taylor's reconstructive selves. Themes of reputation, revenge and romance highlight how Swift experiments with re-compositions of self in relation to surroundings and vice versa. Her fabrications and manipulations thereof are supported by processes of communality, publicity and transition. The rise of Taylor Swift as a post-postmodern paragon provides insight into where the post-postmodern turn might be observed and how it may impact marketing theory and practice.

1. Introduction

Music can capture a moment. Although a great song might be timeless, never to be exhausted by repeat listening, it is in and of its time. "In a sense, albums are frozen pictures of a socio-historical context that is no more" (Askegaard, 2010: 353). Pop is additionally evidence of the consumption partaken by that culture; a product and experience sold to consumers. This article takes the idea that pop songs may henceforth represent a window to understanding consumer culture (Askegaard, 2010) and applies this idea to the context of transition between postmodern and post-postmodern periods. Madonna, Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift are proposed as pop music apogees of respectively the fading postmodern (as per Brown, 2003), the late-postmodern transition (see Corona, 2013; Fjellestad & Engberg, 2013), and the rising post-postmodern. Demonstrated is that their songs and their lyrics might help to denote this cultural shift and to provide insight into how this resonates and is repeated in consumer actions.

Although definitions of postmodernism are notoriously messy, frequently paradoxical and multi-faceted (Boje, 2006), it is this highlighting of ambiguity which the postmodern movement coagulates around (D'Urso, Disegna, Massari, & Osti, 2016). Within this deconstructive movement major characteristics and themes of postmodernism have been drawn in relation to marketing. Drawn on here are five which consistently appear in marketing literature: anti-

foundationalism, de-differentiation, fragmentation, the reversal of production and consumption, and hyper-reality (as per Brown, 1994, 2006; Firat & Dholakia, 2006; Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). Where postmodernism once referred to a new way of theorizing the contemporary historical moment (Denzin, 1991) it seems that a new dominant cultural logic is emerging as the present is rearranging itself (Gibbons, 2017). "At the end of postmodernism, in an era that experts fail to define in any meaningful manner because it swings between nostalgia and euphoria, in a political economy of fear and frenzy, new master narratives have taken over" (Braidotti, 2005: 169). Recognition seems generally to be of a turning away from postmodernism and a "new sense, meaning and direction arising" (Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, 2010: 4). We might be seeing "a complexification, a mutation or a termination of postmodernism" (Gutleben, 2015: 225).

Amongst the many different stances towards what comes after postmodernism, Cova, Maclaran, and Bradshaw (2013) identify common traits of enthusiasm, engagement and sincerity in what is essentially a post-deconstructive approach. They describe post-postmodernism as exemplified by the gathering of fragmented pieces resulting from deconstruction into a newly reorganised whole. Meanwhile Skandalis, Byrom, and Banister (2016) propose that if postmodernism represents deconstruction because of paradoxes then post-postmodernism suggests reconstruction despite paradoxes. Descriptions have been forming around a changing emphasis upon previous

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Table 1
Postmodern and post-postmodern characteristics.

Postmodern characteristics	Post-postmodern characteristics
<p><i>Anti-foundationalism</i> “Characteristic antipathy towards systematic generalizations and the totalizing metanarratives” (Brown, 1994: 38). This results in a “diversity or multiplicity of narratives, a liberation from all conformity, and a freedom to experience as many ways of being as desired” (Firat & Venkatesh: 229).</p>	<p><i>Rewriting</i> Rehabilitating and recreating pre-modern and modern meta-narratives hybridised with postmodern influences (Ateljevic, 2013; Braidotti, 2005). Hatherley (2009: 153) highlights how in architecture “typically postmodernist devices such as historical eclecticism and glib ironies seem to have entered a terminal decline and been replaced by rediscoveries of modernist forms, albeit emptied of their political or theoretical content”.</p>
<p><i>De-differentiation</i> “De-differentiation comprises the erosion and effacement of established hierarchies and the blurring of what were formerly clear-cut entities” (Brown, 1994: 38). This blurring has a further liberating effect, bringing freedom from constraints and conventions (van Raaij, 1993). Opportunities are for self-expression with all styles permitted and subcultures increasingly trendsetters (van Raaij, 1993), and emphasis on the contributions of marginalised groups (Brown, 1994).</p>	<p><i>Re-differentiation</i> Hassan (2003) describes the tension between the double processes of localisation and globalisation within postmodernism as celebration of difference and de-differentiation both challenge traditional identity markers. In the face of this a return may be to comforting markers of distinction (Kacen, 2000). Re-emergence of quasi-archaic values such as a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism and group narcissism, the common denominator of which is the community dimension (Cova & Cova, 2001).</p>
<p><i>Fragmentation</i> Fragmentation denotes the disintegration of knowledge, language, political and social life, mass market economics, the unified self and the disconnected array of vivid images generated by the media (Brown, 1994). Individuals have a host of roles, identities or selves which are fluid, mutable and negotiable (Brown, 2006). Postmodern consumers embrace multiplicity and variety through their consumption (D’Urso et al., 2016).</p>	<p><i>Reengagement</i> Rather than atomisation, post-postmodernism is a dense networking involving an appreciation of blended identities, heritages and backgrounds (Adams, 2007) and typified as engaged, sincere and enthusiastic (Cova et al., 2013). Post-postmodernism involves a reinstitution of ties between the self and society, and a reconstructive spirit (Ateljevic, 2013; Cova, 2016).</p>
<p><i>Consumption and production reversal</i> Consumption is prioritised in the fragmentation of other traditional sources of meaning (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). “Under postmodernity, the role of marketers and advertisers is to provide consumers with the raw materials with which consumers can construct unique identities” (Kacen, 2000: 349).</p>	<p><i>Rebalancing of production and consumption</i> Cova and Dalli (2009) describe more active and constructive contemporary consumers whose creative abilities have been increased due to their growing professionalism and where the threshold to creativity has been lowered by new technology. Prosumption, assumes a more participatory, creative, fluid and social view of production-consumption (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007).</p>
<p><i>Hyper-reality</i> “Hyper-reality, as exemplified by the fantasy worlds of theme parks, virtual reality and computer games, involves the loss of a sense of authenticity and the becoming real of what was originally a simulation” (Brown, 1994: 39). Under postmodernism objective reality emphasised by modernism gives way to representation as the real is no longer meaningful or necessary (Pretes, 1995), replaced by socially constructed and hyper-realities (Fullerton, 1988).</p>	<p><i>Alternative reality</i> Frangipane (2016: 527) explains how, “a number of contemporary novelists find various ways to alert us that they cannot tell the true or complete story, but then tell their stories anyway, justifying their existence by pointing to the things that narrative can give us, such as hope and satisfaction, or empathy”. Barr (2006) suggests that unreal narratives which alter and become reality characterise.</p>

postmodern themes (see Hassan, 2003; Hatherley, 2009) which post-postmodernism remains linked with but transformative of (Gutleben, 2015; Nealon, 2012). Post-postmodernism incorporates pre-modern and modern elements into a set of new and distinctive characteristics (see Ateljevic, 2013; Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, 2010). Reviewed here are: rewriting, re-differentiation, reengagement, rebalancing of production and consumption, and alternative reality. “This change of prefixes from ‘de-’ to ‘re-’ marks a shift from the stance of negativity and opposition, of tearing matters apart to that of stitching things back together, of going back to previously held positions and convictions to revive and reconfigure them” (Fjellestad & Engberg, 2013: 3). A brief summary comparing postmodern and post-postmodern characteristics is provided in Table 1.

The post-postmodern turn has potentially significant consequences for marketing, closely associated as it has been with postmodernism (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). In arguing for a more theoretically informed historical-comparative tradition in consumer research, Holt and Searls (1994) call for more focus on the changing social conditions that lead the consumer to consume in a particular manner. Similarly regards culture: “We need to remember that brands succeed when they break through in culture. And branding is a set of techniques designed to generate cultural relevance” (Holt, 2016: 42). Marketing is a complex phenomenon immersed in human social behaviour that emerges in society when you create and communicate value propositions, but does so differently depending on the type of society in which it develops (De La Paz, 2014). Cova et al. (2013: 214) ask: “if the demise of post-modernity is understood as reflecting a shift in zeitgeist that renders postmodernism anachronistic, then where can we locate centres and convergences in contemporary critical theory?”

Post-postmodernism is such an attempt to understand and describe contemporary society and culture that might enrich marketing.

Nevertheless other than some recent attempts to define specific aspects (Skandalis et al., 2016), or understand the ideological direction of this shift (Cova et al., 2013), the post-postmodern turn remains ill-defined within marketing. The lack of attention paid to post-postmodernism is problematic in blurring already opaque definitions of cultural epochs. A number of recent authors for instance refer to postmodernism when the phenomena they investigate might be more accurately considered late-postmodern (i.e. Simmons, 2008) or post-postmodern (i.e. Cockayne, 2016). Distinctions between the movements though subtle are nonetheless significant. Different emphasis is placed on deconstructions and reconstructions of the self in relation to and of sociocultural surroundings. Postmodernism deconstructs grand themes and then plays with the resulting fragments, reassembling into parody, pastiche and retro reimaginings (Brown, 1999), which in turn are themselves typically re-deconstructed. Such is the case with Madonna, and to lesser extent Lady Gaga, both of whom engage with critique of and subversively reimagine their selves and surroundings, only to later re-critique and reinvent these. Post-postmodernism, as revealed in this paper, instead crafts new reconstructions of fragments that can be socially told and re-told (Thomas, White, & Samuel, 2018), and in so doing re-reconstructed into evolving agglomerations. Such is demonstrated by Swift who re-imagines herself through fabulations that shared socially reorientate surroundings around her.

The contribution of this article is therefore to use a creative research approach to better distinguish the post-postmodern in relation to marketing. Corroborating existing theory, analysis identifies characteristically post-postmodern leitmotifs to be prevalent in the lyrics of Taylor Swift, who is found to take a reconstructive approach to self in songs. Extending existing literature, the singer’s lyrical preoccupation with reputation demonstrates a socially reconstructive self. Repeated leitmotifs of revenge and romance highlight how Taylor Swift

Table 2
Selected songs.

Madonna				Taylor Swift			
Song	Year	Album	Writing credits	Song	Year	Album	Writing credits
Material Girl	1985	Like a Virgin	Brown, Rans	Love Story	2008	Fearless	Sigman, Lai
Papa Don't Preach	1986	True Blue	Elliot, Ciccone	I knew you were trouble	2012	Red	Swift, Shellback, Schuster
Vogue	1990	I'm Breathless	Ciccone, Pettibone	Shake it off	2014	1989	Swift, Martin, Schuster
Human Nature	1995	Bedtime Stories	Ciccone, Hall, McKenzie, McKenzie, Deering	Blank Space	2014	1989	Martin, Shellback, Swift
American Life	2003	American Life	Ciccone, Ahmadzai	Bad Blood	2015	1989	Martin, Shellback, Swift
Hollywood	2003	American Life	Ciccone, Ahmadzai	Look what you made me do	2017	Reputation	Fairbrass, Antonoff, Fairbrass, Manzoli, Swift, Fairbrass, Manzoli
Candy Store	2007	Hard Candy	Ciccone, Williams	Gorgeous	2017	Reputation	Schuster, Martin, Swift
Girl Gone Wild	2012	MDNA	Ciccone, Benassi, Benassi, Vaughan	I did something bad	2017	Reputation	Swift, Martin, Schuster
Illuminati	2015	Rebel Heart	Ciccone, McDonald, Gad, Griffin, Dean, West, Brown, Webster	This is why we can't have nice things	2017	Reputation	Swift, Antonoff
Rebel Heart	2015	Unreleased non-album single	Ciccone, Bergling, Pournouri, Al Fakir, Lidehall, Pontare	Call it what you want	2017	Reputation	Swift, Antonoff

reconstructs herself in relation to her surroundings and reconstructs her surroundings in relation to herself. This marks a significant departure from Madonna who lyrically deconstructs herself in relation to her surroundings and deconstructs her surroundings in relation to herself. More so than Gaga, who moves towards reconstructive engagement with her surroundings, but ultimately comes back to pulling these and herself apart. Relating such conceptual insights back to marketing practice, this article concludes by illustrating how Swift uses communal, publicity and transitional processes to gather materials, solicit feedback and find space for her self-surrounding reconstructions.

2. Literature-in-marketing

Introducing his study [Askegaard \(2010: 358\)](#) outlines the value of analysing song lyrics: “If they are neither ‘literature’ nor ‘text’ (in the usual sense of the word), these lyrics still constitute an interesting source for insights into consumer culture. In terms of mirroring the consumption particularities of a specific socio-historical context within a very limited range of expression, there is presumably little art that can beat these lyrics in terms of accuracy.” Consumer culture is reflected in music and music is ubiquitous in consumer culture ([Bradshaw & Holbrook, 2008](#)). As such song lyrics have been used as a means for analysing cultural and consumption phenomena. To illustrate, [Askegaard \(2010\)](#) looks at the Beach Boys' lyrics as embodying themes of nascent postmodern consumption. [Hunter \(2011\)](#) uses hip-hop lyrics to explore race and gender in contemporary global conspicuous consumption. Reviewing Bruce Springsteen's output [Rhodes \(2004\)](#) demonstrates the richness of song lyrics as documentation of social life. Meanwhile [Davies \(1996\)](#) looks for postmodern themes in punk rock lyrics. Nevertheless “in spite of their ubiquitous presence in modern popular culture, song lyrics have been fairly overlooked in consumer research so far” ([Askegaard, 2010: 355](#)).

The lyrical analysis approach used in these studies, and here, is representative of the marketing-in-literature and literature-in-marketing sub-genres ([Brown, 1999b](#)). Although a somewhat blurry distinction the former involves analyses of marketing and consumption portrayals in works of literature, whilst the latter analyses marketing texts such as advertisements ([Brown, 1998](#)). Literature is deeply associated with marketing and consumption ([Brown, 2015](#)) and there is an established intersection between literature and consumer research ([Stern, 1989](#)). [Stern and Schroeder \(1994\)](#) outline how literary and art theory can be a fertile source of ideas and interpretations when analysing marketing and [Stern \(1990: 329\)](#) suggests “adding literary methods to philosophical and historical ones in order to provide richer insights into reading marketing theory”.

Previous such studies have according to [Brown, Stevens and Maclaran \(1999: 12\)](#) “drawn on a number of literary techniques such as

new hermeneutics, genre criticism, reader-response theory, and post-modern feminist literary criticism”. A somewhat ad-hoc mixture of literary theories and approaches has henceforth been applied to selecting and analysing texts and this study continues this postmodern approach. Literary theory would seem to fit across the plural post-modernities summarised by [Firat and Venkatesh \(1995\)](#), as it might also be well-suited to post-postmodernities which have so far drawn extensively on interpretations of literary texts as a means of identifying and describing such characteristics.

Advantages of using literature-in-marketing come from the collective recognition of literary masterpieces that can make these useful tools for engagement ([Brown, 1999b](#)). Also how re-reading and reflecting can offer historical context and contemporary insights into consumer landscapes ([de Burgh-Woodman, 2014](#)). Thus [de Burgh-Woodman \(2014\)](#) describes how consumer research has identified the importance of literary narrative as a way of embodying the metaphorical or symbolic meaning of consumption giving rise to continuing interest in a literary approach as an interpretive mode. Literary criticism is an “additional way of knowing the consumer, of shedding light on little explored areas of interest that can augment the research stream in progress and stimulate questions for further inquiry” ([Stern, 1989: 332](#)).

Seeking to apply the literature-in-marketing approach to popular music in search of the post-postmodern shift, selected songs from Madonna, Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift's back catalogues were reviewed ([Table 2](#)). As per [Askegaard \(2010\)](#) songs were chosen with lyrical themes that relate somewhat to the postmodern and post-postmodern leitmotifs previously outlined. Thus lyrics covering the individual self, social relationships, and wider sociocultural surroundings could be considered more critical and cynical or post-ironic and sincere, in accordance with [Doyle's \(2018\)](#) distinguishing of postmodern and post-postmodern fiction. Such judgement calls were iterative and subjective. There are many more songs in each artists' catalogues that background research suggested to have less overt leitmotifs. Hence this is a selective approach to the singer's work picking examples thought to be of interest to this particular study. Literary procedures are impositional in the sense that texts are investigated with intent ([Eagleton, 1983](#)). According to [Brown, McDonagh and Shultz \(2013: 600\)](#) “this does not mean that literary methods are rigid or doctrinaire, since a flexible, iterative, back-and-forth interpretive process prevails in practice. However, they do approach the data from a top-down perspective rather than a bottom-up manner.”

Finally the three artists represented here were chosen as a desire was to use musicians with both career significance and longevity, who are creatively prolific, and involved in writing at least some of their most well-known songs. Starting with Madonna, who as outlined has been closely associated with postmodernism, Gaga, who has variously

Table 3
Summary of findings from reading Taylor Swift.

Post-postmodern characteristics	Reconstructive self	Reconstructive surroundings
<p><i>Rewriting</i> Self-centric storytelling blending diverse fragments. Rewriting appreciates the power of perceptions of oneself by others and is used as a means of controlling.</p> <p><i>Re-differentiation</i> Demarcation of in and out groups with rivalries between celebrated and deepened.</p> <p><i>Reengagement</i> Social surroundings are of heightened importance, albeit with oneself at the centre.</p> <p><i>Rebalancing</i> Relationships are crafted and managed.</p> <p><i>Alternative reality</i> Interpretations of others are considered but overridden in favour of the author's perspective.</p> <p>Implications for theory and practice Corroboration of and elaboration upon the distinctive post-deconstructive characteristics of post-postmodernism. Pop cultural evidence of their emergence.</p>	<p><i>Reputation</i> Narratives surrounding the author are monitored and manipulated. Monitoring these allows the self to be reconstructed in line with favourable external fabrications. Manipulating rather than deconstructing surrounding narratives is means of reorienting these towards the self.</p> <p><i>Revenge</i> Solicits and recounts conflicts between self and other as means of demarcating the self against the other.</p> <p><i>Romance</i> Blurred real and imagined, past and prospective relationships are described, embellished and hypothesised as a means of reflecting on the self.</p> <p>A more self-centric and potentially darker side to reconstruction is hinted at than previously identified sincerity, enthusiasm and engagement.</p>	<p><i>Communality</i> Social surroundings provide materials for and feedback upon self re-compositions</p> <p><i>Publicity</i> Drama of conflict increases the communal materials and feedback available and is the resource somewhat superficial relationships and heterogeneous groups can form around</p> <p><i>Transition</i> Nostalgic blended real-fantasy scape belies deconstruction attempts and permits hypothetical assemblage and experiments with re-compositions</p> <p>Particular processes may facilitate the self-centric approach to communal engagement and the deliberate manipulation of fantasy and reality sought by post-postmodern consumers.</p>

been dismissed as Madonna-derivative or held up as more transformative, was felt to possibly embody the late-postmodern in that she is both highly original yet frequently familiar. Swift was selected because of her prevalent and at times polarising cultural significance. There is a cohesiveness in focussing on three female, caucasian, blonde, American, pop musicians. In this respect a fit is with the established literatures looking at the changing face of post-postmodern fiction (i.e. Doyle, 2018; Timmer, 2010) and consumption (i.e. Cova et al., 2013; Skandalis et al., 2016), which have to date largely derived from North American-European perspectives, and indeed have often been inspired by critique of American pop culture. There is certainly scope to explore other artists in relation to the meaning associated with post-postmodernism, and indeed other musical protagonists or genres might open up alternative discussions of things such as the racial inferences of this shift. This might also help to diversify the cultural perspectives underlying epochal theory. Such avenues were however not the focus of this piece (Table 3).

3. Epochal Pop Paragons

3.1. Madonna's postmodern reign

Probably the most successful female music artist ever in terms of her record sales, tour receipts, brand recognition and longevity, from her debut album in 1983 Madonna's song lyrics, associated videos and performances have been considered to overlap with and exemplify the postmodern era. Madonna is suggested by Sécardin (2002) to epitomise postmodernism. Firat and Venkatesh (1993) invoke Madonna as representative of postmodern rebellion of one; not interested in wider movements or change, but in doing one's own thing. Watts (1996) discusses the electrifying fragments of her postmodern performance. Brown (2003) labels Madonna a postmodern paragon and describes her marketing prowess at reading this era.

Indeed postmodern traits emerge when re-reading Madonna. Anti-foundationalism is displayed in lyrics that repeatedly make a point of ignoring norms and taboos, those surrounding sex in particular, as the singer's individual desires are asserted and pursued. 'Human Nature' (1995) is a typical outpouring of scorn for outside constraints on biological and intellectual drive: "I'm breaking all the rules I didn't make". External narratives and their controlling tendencies are repeatedly rejected in favour of expressing one's own chronicle. The mode of debate may change. In 'Papa Don't Preach' (1986) the father figure is implored to understand the singers' choice, whilst in 'Illuminati' (2015) she

derides contemporary conspiracy theories: "Behind the curtain of the new world order, It's not platinum encrypted corners, It's not ISIS or the phoenix, pyramids of Egypt, Don't make it into something sordid.". The fierce sense of owning self-narrative and repudiation of external ones remains the same.

De-differentiation comes into the way Madonna's work has long referenced gay culture in songs such as 'Vogue' (1990), which took its cues from the gay ballroom scene. As in this song's assertion that "it doesn't matter if you're black or white, a boy or girl", race and gender are themes which Madonna plays with and subverts. However sexuality, race and gender, present though they frequently are in Madonna's outputs, are secondary to the individual's search for immediate pleasure. They are interesting to the extent they can be played with, co-opted and enjoyed as part of one's own journey.

In-the-moment self-pleasure is a recurrent refrain with Madonna reflecting the postmodern position that "since deep purpose and deep commitment no longer exist, living and receiving gratification from each moment, hedonism, gains importance and priority" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993: 228). Looking forward rarely features. Looking back meanwhile is depicted as for purposes of self-reflexivity to understand one's current state, with deeper nostalgia derided. These are outlined in the song 'Rebel Heart' (2015), where the singer describes the evolution of her identity over time: "Outgrown my past and I've shed my skin, Letting it go and I'll start again, start again, Never look back, it's a waste of time, I said: 'Oh yeah, this is me, And I'm right here where I wanna be'".

Consumption is a theme of several Madonna songs. 'Material Girl' (1985) is a description of searching for a lover with financial means. Here "the boy with the cold hard cash, is always Mister Right". Lyrics in this record and elsewhere are playful with and somewhat subversive regards consumerism. 'American Life' (2003) for example, is an exhibitionistic yet self-aware commentary on the consumerist American dream which she has aced. "Do you think I'm satisfied?" the singer asks after listing her many markers of success. Consumerism alone is implicitly not everything, but enjoyment is of material goods, and appreciation is of their importance in a material world.

Lastly lyrics frequently focus on visual delectation, such as the inuendo laden outlining of self in 'Candy Store' (2007): "See which flavour you like and I'll have it for you, Come on in to my store, I've got candy galore, Don't pretend you're not hungry, I've seen it before, I've got Turkish delight baby and so much more". Sexual aesthetic as well as performance is recurrent. However, for all of the importance of the visual in lyrical themes, the veneer is often appreciated as such, and much like materialism is not immune to playful and probing questioning. Thus

'Hollywood' (2003) ponders "how can it hurt you when it looks so good?"

3.2. Lady Gaga's late-postmodern interlude

In looking beyond postmodernism research sought to identify a more recently emerged pop musician who might similarly embody that which comes next. Lady Gaga, who burst to prominence in 2008 with her debut album, has previously been suggested as indicative of a shift away from postmodernism. Drawing attention to her post-postmodern reconstructive tendencies [Varriale \(2012: 258\)](#) believes that in "a complex dialectic between visual subversion and narrative construction... the latter aspect should not be underestimated". Linking this with her social engagement [Rossolatos \(2015\)](#) outlines Gaga's crafting of a manifesto to define and regulate the parameters of her follower community. The sincerity of her efforts to represent fans, particularly those from the LGBT community, is apparent in songs such as 'Born this way' (2011) which affirms the value of being gay. This avowal is presented in openly religious terms moreover; *'It doesn't matter if you love him or capital H.I.M.'*, reflecting a move towards more sincere and constructive dialogue with theology. Whereas Madonna merely mocks sacred references, Gaga enjoys iconoclastic imagery but also engages with religious texts in more depth, and reinterprets to explore concurrent past and present themes. 'Bloody Mary' (2011) and 'Judas' (2011) explore Biblical stories as such.

Yet postmodern traits can be observed in Lady Gaga's lyrics also. Deconstructing and playing with her surroundings she blurs high and low cultural sensibilities, indulges in pastiche, and has multiple paradoxical and illusory selves ([Holtzman, 2015](#)). These draw upon gay subculture and pop cultural bricolage ([Corona, 2013](#)), much as does Madonna who was "flirting with such representations before Gaga was born" ([Rossolatos, 2015: 240](#)). She likewise shares a Warholian taste for pastiche and subversion of pop and celebrity culture. Reviewing the video for her single 'Bad Romance' [Radia \(2014: 198\)](#) summarises its "orgy of iconoclastic scenes and images" as a deconstruction of American pop culture. Gaga also turns her deconstructive eye on herself and frequently analyses her own relationship with fame: *"If only fame had an IV, baby could I bear, Being away from you, I found the vein, put it in here"* ([Applause, 2013](#)). The hyper real and surface meanwhile reaches a zenith in the outré outfits of Gaga, whose humour, eye for design, and magpie picking up of past references can be seen in her many infamous outfits. Gaga is extremely simulacral and fake highlights [Rossolatos \(2015\)](#). She is an exemplar of postmodern "style as a substitute for identity and presentation rather than essence" ([Kacen, 2000: 350](#)). Her spectacle is arguably a thrilling version of what has gone before; hysterical ([Holtzman, 2015](#)) or hypermodern ([Corona, 2013](#)), rather than post-postmodern. Yet redolent of the "cabaret irony behind postmodern kitsch that allows the dark smile to appear now and then" ([Ward, 2012: 472](#)), beneath such surface a cynicism can be found, particularly in depictions of relationships often set out as conflicting and violent with two egos unable to be reconciled. On the surface and beneath it Lady Gaga is often apparently postmodern.

3.3. Taylor Swift's post-postmodern rise

Another singer is examined as a potential embodiment of a purer post-postmodernism. Taylor Swift is one of the most successful musical artists of the 21st Century so far. Song-writing and performing from her early teens, she broke into the mainstream as the best-selling musician of 2008 ([Grigoriadis, 2009](#)). Taylor's engagement with contemporary culture has not been free of controversy. "As much as Reputation seeks to duck the conversation, it is an album in which victimhood, white privilege and freedom of speech loom large" ([Empire, 2017](#)). Her political positioning and cultural appropriation have been criticised. [Cullen \(2016\)](#) for example finds a privileged white perspective on race in her 2010 VMAs performance, whilst the Guardian newspaper was prompted to ask upon the release of her 2017 album 'Reputation' if her

adept use of social media, fostering of a diehard support base, and obsession with petty score-settling, make her a predecessor or envoy of Trumpian values ([Editorial, 2017](#)). Her intervention in the 2018 USA mid-term elections in favour of local Democratic candidates generated even more media conversations than her previously apolitical positioning had done ([Snapes, 2018](#)). She seemingly touches a cultural nerve in a way that Madonna once did and Lady Gaga wishes she could.

Storytelling is a distinctive feature of Taylor Swift's songs. These typically take the listener on a journey documenting a relationship. 'Blank Space' (2014) outlines for example a potential romance from beginning to end. Within these are references to classical figures, such as the Romeo-Juliet theme of 'Love Story' (2008), but also contemporary interpretations of female empowerment. 'I Did Something Bad' (2017) is reviewed by [Empire \(2017\)](#) for instance as a single which sets Swift up as a glacial manipulator of men. In this song Swift makes explicit her understanding that narratives are individually crafted, including those in relation to herself. But rather than tear these down she joins in this craft in order to manipulate narratives to own advantage: *"I never trust a narcissist, but they love me, So I play 'em like a violin, and I make it look oh so easy, Cause for every lie I tell them, they tell me three, This is how the world works, now all he thinks about is me"*. For Swift it seems that re-writing is weaponised; a process of fabulating the self and manipulating the fabulations of others.

In Swift's narratives she is often wronged by third parties. Self-awareness and irony add nuance to this didactic, as in the playful 'Shake it off' (2014), but division between Swift, her allies and outsiders is clear, highlighting a tendency towards re-differentiation. The song 'Bad Blood' (2015) depicts for example a friendship turning sour: *"Did you think we'd be fine? Still got scars on my back from your knife, So don't think it's in the past, These kind of wounds they last and they last"*. Repeatedly drawn are distinct groupings and conflicts. Transgressions against Swift and her in-group are deeply felt and revenge is a motif often deployed by Swift, particularly on her 2017 album Reputation (a concept which Madonna would likely dismiss; others' opinion of oneself being irrelevant). The lyrics of 'This is why we can't have nice things' (2017) once again attack a former friend, even breaking into a laugh at one point as words of forgiveness cannot be completed with a straight face: *"It was so nice being friends again, There I was giving you a second chance, But you stabbed my back while shaking my hand, And therein lies the issue, Friends don't try to trick you, Get you on the phone and mind-twist you, And so I took an axe to a mended fence"*.

Emphasis in Swift's lyrics is not directly on the self, as with Madonna, but on the connections oneself has with others. [Žižek \(2017\)](#) suggests that we live in a time of pseudo conflicts whose function is to block the explosion of true ones. In Taylor's case such pseudo-conflicts appear to open up possibilities for self-assembly. Picking over these relationships is stimulating: *"I'm really gonna miss you picking fights"* she sings in 'We are never ever getting back together' (2012), one suspects un-ironically. Relationships allow for different sides to be shown, such as the girl-next-door versus megastar dichotomy different songs portray (e.g. Blank Space vs. Shake it off). They are additionally source of frustration when they do not go Taylor's way. On 'Look what you made me do' (2017) she explains: *"I don't like your little games, Don't like your tilted stage, The role you made me play, Of the fool, no, I don't like you"*. Pleasurable or problematic, relationships provide materials for Swift's lyrical reconstructions of self amidst social groups.

More than just reflecting on social exchanges, a sense of equalisation of production and consumption can be related to Swift's descriptions of relationships as co-constructed and maintained or ended by the singer herself. Where Madonna consumes lovers Taylor creates then consumes hers. 'Call it what you want' (2017) talks for example about crafting a successful relationship with an ideal partner: *"All the drama queens taking swings, All the jokers dressing up as kings, They fade to nothing when I look at him"*. The accomplishment of this is important as a rebuttal of outside comments. Similarly feuds are generated at least in part by Swift's refusal to let these go and with public airing. The object

of consumption in so many of Taylor's songs, a more active involvement is in the construction and management of relationships valuable for their self-reconstruction potential.

Finally the often hypothetical stories contained in Taylor Swift's song lyrics are a semi-explicit fabulation of reality. 'Blank Space' (2014) for instance is a daydream inviting a lover into a relationship then imagining how this might then pan out: "Oh my God, look at that face, You look like my next mistake, Love's a game, want to play?". This is typical of Taylor's hypothesising style that blurs reality and fiction, past, present and future, redolent of post-postmodern fiction (Barr, 2006; Frangipane, 2016). Beyond daydreaming however, it is important to Swift that her fabrication of reality is prioritised as reality. Thus 'Shake it off' (2014) repeats the derogatory comments thrown at Swift's persona, then cheerfully waives these away and affirms self-fortitude regardless. 'Look what you made me do' (2017) focuses more narrowly and vindictively on rebutting another's account of a mutual exchange. Meanwhile on 'I did something bad' (2017) she outlines: "If a man talks shit/Then I owe him nothing", demonstrating how disagreeable narratives will be aggressively responded to. Although she explores discarding external narratives much as Madonna might, effectively neutering different versions of events to her own in each of these songs, Swift then goes a step further in that she seeks to then establish and impose her own version of events through her storytelling skills (see Frangipane, 2016; Iggers, 2009).

4. Discussion

4.1. Post-deconstruction

In taking the literature-in-marketing approach to identify post-modern themes within song lyrics, this article reiterates Madonna's status as postmodern paragon. Lyrically Madonna deconstructs herself in relation to her surroundings and vice versa. She displays what Doyle (2018) summarises as techniques of deconstruction and irony, through which postmodern literature dismisses values such as truth and meaning as illusions. As a number of Madonna's recent songs show, such as when deconstructing the contemporary conspiracy theories that might be hallmark of post-postmodern alternative reality (Barr, 2006; Iggers, 2009), this critical perspective evolves alongside her surroundings. Thus supported is the idea that different eras overlap and interact (Boje, 2006). Nealon (2012) sees the 'post' in post-postmodernism as indicating continued links to that which preceded; a recognition of postmodernism's mutation rather than annihilation and its becoming something different (Cova, 2013). Indeed Lady Gaga, who displays a similar self-surroundings critique, demonstrates how this may be the case. The late-postmodern is captured by Gaga in songs which employ simulacra, spectacle and pastiche in order to hedonistically entertain, but also connect with fans and open up dialogue with those who would seek to suppress.

Postmodernism henceforth remains vibrant, re-inventive, and calls for its demise may be somewhat overblown (as per Brown, 2016). Nevertheless a decline in both postmodern scholarship within marketing and Madonna's commercial fortunes can be observed over the previous decade. Lady Gaga's musical star has seemingly burned brightly but briefly. Nobody would discount either a comeback (as Gaga's recent foray into film highlights), but more than coincidence these might be representative of a shift in contemporary culture, society and philosophy away from post-postmodernism. After all Firat and Venkatesh (1993: 241) argued that "no matter how much Madonna is criticised by the metanarrative points of view (the mainstream will criticise her 'vulgarness', and the left her 'commercialism') she will continue to find large audiences as long as she represents and combines the postmodern aspects of critique of the metanarrative and the marketable commercial sensationalism of the fragmented spectacle".

The ascendancy of Taylor Swift suggests a significant shift from deconstructive to reconstructive positions regarding the self and its

surroundings. This is an artist who does not dismiss illusions for self-expression, but instead crafts them for self-advantage. Rather than Madonna's on-going rejection of external metanarratives which infringe upon herself, Swift interacts with those who opine on herself as part of a process of crafting and asserting narratives of her own. If group identity is subservient to Madonna's search for in-the-moment pleasure, for Taylor picking over in-and-out-group identity is pleasure. Where Madonna analyses and plays with the self, Taylor analyses and plays with others in relation to the self. Consumption has a role in Madonna's lyrics as a facilitator of pleasure, but in Taylor's lyrics producing pleasurable outcomes is more prominent. Hyper-real surface visuals are of more interest to Madonna, whereas fabricating and asserting realities are a/the focus for Swift. Reaffirmed therefore is a post-postmodern turn in popular culture characterised by reconstructive tendencies (as per Fjellestad & Engberg, 2013; Hatherley, 2009) and Swift's experimenting with dichotomies such as the ingénue or femme fatale reiterates the post-postmodern oscillation between poles (Vermeulen & Van Den Akker, 2010) and assemblage of paradoxical fragments (Skandalis et al., 2016) previously noted.

4.2. Self reconstruction

Findings add Swiftian detail to how the post-postmodern may be shaping up. "Postmodernist sensibility invites the (re)cognition that all social reality is constructed, and that the distinction between the real and the fantastic is more in the orientation one has towards one's surroundings than in the nature of those surroundings" (Firat & Dholakia, 2006: 131). This is a perspective which invites an individually orientated critique of both self and surroundings. In the postmodern era each individual has their "own small narrative to tell and those small narratives replace the grand and universal narratives of the past" (Maoz & Bekerman, 2010: 437). Madonna has a consistent and established personal self, projected through lyrics focussed in their assertion of herself. Often this individualistic narrative is in opposition to the metanarratives of others. Demolished in song when they intrude, it is in such deconstruction that Madonna claims for herself a strong sense of purpose. For thirty years she has acted the provocateur in singing about her individual right to sexual pleasure. This fight is the fire that drives and the cause which collates her being.

The late-postmodernity embodied by Lady Gaga exhibits a similar deconstructive emphasis, but has perhaps run out of metanarratives to rail against as many longstanding ideological obstacles to self-expression have faded. Instead the singer plays with micronarratives in pursuit of self-expression before approving or shocked others. Gay culture is for example mined for its enjoyably hedonistic fragments that can be displayed to show tribal solidarity or separation. Gaga "seems to exist only by way of appropriation and projection of the gaze and desire of others" (Holtzman, 2015: 21). Micronarratives however are small. As such their deconstruction and display is finite. Likewise their reconstruction and reconnection. Gaga's periodic sincere attempts are moreover limited by the singer's inherent self-involvement, self-awareness, sense of humour and restlessness.

This is not the case for Taylor Swift however, whose reconstructive sensibility is quite distinct. Reversing the postmodern process, reading Swift suggests that post-postmodernism invites the recognition that the distinction between the real and fantastic lies in the orientation of those surroundings towards oneself. In turn this position invites reassemblies of self and surroundings. Swift assiduously monitors and manipulates her reputation. Solicited through motifs of romance and revenge she gauges feedback on her self-assembly. Reactions provide the materials for and enable the singer to step outside of, observe and adjust her craft, before further assembly. Swift likewise engages with surrounding narratives that relate to herself and manipulates these so that they orientate as she sees fit. For the singer storytelling is a process of self-fabulation and coopting the fabrications of others. Self-effacement somewhat obscures this fabrication and gives the option of retreating

from unsuccessful assemblages, but this distinctive post-postmodern shift is revealed nonetheless and it is an intriguing one. Taylor's pragmatic and purposeful post-postmodern reconfigurations (Cova et al., 2013) are thus focussed upon reconstructing the self in relation to her surroundings and vice versa. In so doing she develops and asserts individual identity through manipulation of self and surroundings.

4.3. Facilitating reconstruction

Beyond further defining the post-postmodern, Taylor Swift's processes of self and surrounding reconstructions link with broader discussions of evolving consumer culture helping to illustrate how the epochal shift may influence marketing. First Taylor's prioritisation of oneself amongst a supporting cast denotes her understanding of reconstruction as facilitated by communality. This has been similarly recognised by Thomas et al. (2018), who illustrate how *communitas* facilitates post-postmodern hybridisation, experimentation and meaning making amongst contemporary pilgrims visiting Lourdes. Reputation is an overarching theme of Swift's songs prefiguring an interest in the perceptions of self by others. Made frequently explicit is her awareness of and considered response to other's opinions. Taylor requires surrounding social groupings to provide the materials and the audience for her communal self-assembly. This echoes Cova and Cova (2002: 596) who suggest that: "attempts at social re-composition are also visible: people who have finally managed to liberate themselves from social constraints are embarking on a reverse movement to re-compose their social universe." It seems that we need social recognition in order to affirm our break from social constraints. Much as Belk and Costa (1998) describe the fantasy experiences of a primitive alternative reality amongst mountain men; a transient consumer tribe based around invented traditions and invocation of myth, Swift likewise invents and invokes herself in relation to others. The other is present to assist enactment, similar to Tumbat and Belk's (2013) description of co-constructed performance as interdependent but individual performances, where blurred actors and audiences work together because they must.

Second, if there are no longer any ideological obstacles to rail against, it seems these have to be created. Swift avoids established metanarratives, neither provocatively defenestrating them as does Madonna, nor indulging in magnanimously battling them on behalf of others, as per Gaga. Instead within the narratives she herself crafts Taylor introduces conflicts. As such her lyrical interactions may be representative of publicity. Arvidsson, Caliandro, Airolti, and Barina (2016) conceptualise 'brand publics' as aggregations of a large number of isolated expressions that have a common focus; in this case interactive drama. Publicity may usefully capture a looser post-postmodern communal agglomeration such as that of digital communities. Weijo, Hietanen and Mattila (2014: 2072) note that online consumers are "engaging in communities from a more individualistic perspective" as they highlight a more individual orientation to communal engagement. "There is a growing evidence that social media support a publicity-oriented consumer culture, oriented around appearance and visibility rather than identity and belonging, and where value co-creation is structured by private or collective affects, rather than deliberate and common values" (Arvidsson et al., 2016: 728). Indeed "online communities have become organic aggregate meeting-places not necessarily focussed around a brand or practice, but rather around loosely connected consumption interests and lifestyles under which various discourses are negotiated" (Weijo et al., 2014: 2077).

Third, transition might capture an intermediary space less about interactivity or exchange, and more about entering, writing a segment, and then departing (see Cova, 2013). Skandalis et al. (2016) find evidence of consumption experience as both tribal and individual to negotiate the interplay between the real and the fantastical. Amongst an online gaming community they show that a transitional consumption experience involves a constant transition between shared reality and

individual fantasy. Similarly Elliot (2016: 23) writes that craft consumption "provides an alternation between fantasy and reality and traditional and contemporary worlds". Taylor lyrically creates such a transitional space between reality and fantasy. In regards to the singer's romantic musings for instance, Swift's genuine relationship experiences are fused with multiple hypothetical takes on these. She displays a proclivity to daydream regards future romance, but also revisit and rewrite her past. Chittenden (2013) describes the prospective remembering of future relationships and reverse nostalgia of Swift's lyrics that resonate with teenage fans. Nostalgia, which has been noted as an emotion that reinforces bonds within online consumer communities (Koetz & Tankersley, 2016), might offer a temporal transitional space for reconstructive fabrication. Indeed Kohn (2010) describes nostalgia's reconstructive use as a means of recreating place identity otherwise disaggregated by globalisation. Meanwhile Davies (2011: 136) asks "at a time when the past is collapsing into the present at such a rate that nostalgia begins with last year could the future have imploded on us in the guise of a new era?" Taylor Swift's lyrics would suggest that it has.

5. Conclusion

Pop song lyrics offer an insight into cultural expression and consumption. In this case the reading of pop song lyrics helps to distinguish post-postmodern characteristics from the postmodern and the late-postmodern, "it is through the convergence of disparate critical accounts around a singular, if ill-defined object that real cultural change may happen, academic or otherwise (Breu, 2011: 200). Taylor Swift's post-postmodern lyrical leitmotifs relate back to Cova et al. (2013)'s summary of post-postmodernism as post-deconstructive, Vermeulen and Van Den Akker (2010)'s description of its eclectic reassembly of fragments, Frangipane (2016)'s highlighting of a reengagement with narratives, and Doyle (2018)'s illustrating of these narratives as sincere and post-ironic.

In highlighting a reconstructive emphasis of the self in relation to surroundings and surroundings in relation to the self, lyrical analysis develops understanding of how post-postmodern traits may resonate in contemporary culture, particularly the didactic between individuals and collectives. Hesmondhalgh (2008: 329) notes that "music provides a particularly interesting example of modern relations between consumption and self-identity" in that it is intensely linked to both the private self and collective public experiences. Taylor Swift is revealed to exploit these to reconstructive self-advantage. The post-postmodern stance implies a more engaged approach to relationships from a highly self-centric perspective as a means of telling and retelling experiences (as per Thomas et al., 2018). Collectives additionally provide opportunities for publicity-seeking; with social drama generating feedback on experimental reconstructions (as per Simmons, 2008), and transitional space for negotiating assemblages of fantasy and reality (as per Skandalis et al., 2016).

Together these processes might shelter tentative reconstructions from the postmodern dissimulating critique. "Just as postmodernism is intrinsically linked to and informed by modernism, post-postmodernism must assess and utilize thematic and stylistic aspects of postmodernism and employ them against the strategies and beliefs of its predecessor to find a path forward" (Doyle, 2018: 260). To the extent that consumption can facilitate reconstructions through communal, publicity and transitory processes, this is likely to have implications for marketing practice. Contemporary pilgrimage for example, can reconcile "a post-postmodern duality that accepts the freedom of the individual but recognises their need for experiences that are grounded in a socio-historical 'truth'" (Thomas et al., 2018: 420). Taylor Swift's commercial success is arguably rooted in successfully operating within this new consumption orientation.

A theoretical challenge from reading Taylor Swift is that the broader political or theoretical rejuvenation of post-postmodernism discussed by authors such as Žižek (2017) may be questionable. Swift's

reconstructive efforts seem to be self-centric and without grand objectives in terms of a turning away from dystopia towards innovative coalitions to solve problems (Adams, 2007). The post-postmodern engagement, enthusiasm and sincerity identified by Cova et al. (2013), appears in this case to be somewhat superficial, sociopathic, and couched in fabulation. Cova et al's. purposeful reconfigurations are here very much for self-advancement, often through manipulation and sometimes at the direct expense of others. This coercive potential of music echoes Bradshaw and Holbrook (2008: 39) who draw attention to “the apparently predominant commercial thrust toward and mass susceptibility to manipulation, as born out by the ubiquity of background music and by the apparent lack of meaningful counter-play by consumers”.

The dark edge of these insights hint that if ideological reassembly is to take place, it may be naïve to presume this will come from a left-wing perspective (see Cova et al., 2013; Žižek, 2017). Swift's lyrical themes and grounding seem to be redolent of present political phenomena, which from a largely right-wing position fabulate new hyper-sensitive self-centric narratives, ascendant despite their apparent paradoxes (see Fordahl, 2018). Doyle (2018: 259) realises how the compassionate post-postmodern vision of finding new ways of working “faces a growing rival in intolerant, potentially extremist forms of sincerity”.

Given such significance the hope is that other scholars will be encouraged to similarly take up this discussion of post-postmodernism in relation to consumer culture and consideration of its practitioner and theoretical implications. They might also do so using the literature-in-marketing approach as the literary worlds of social media, vlogging, online conspiracy theories or virtual games may offer particularly rich yet currently underexplored insights into facets of contemporary consumer culture, and in particular the new online communities, brand publics and transitional spaces where these may be particularly manifested.

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