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# Popular Music and Gender Equity: Integrating Popular Music into Gender Studies in Grade 9-12

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POPULAR MUSIC AND GENDER EQUITY:  
INTEGRATING POPULAR MUSIC INTO GENDER STUDIES IN GRADE 9-12

by  
Jiayi Wang

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University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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INTEGRATING POPULAR MUSIC INTO GENDER STUDIES IN GRADE 9-12

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## ABSTRACT

Equity studies has been indicated in Ontario's social sciences curriculum, and gender equity is included in the grade 11 course "Gender Studies." Popular music, a crucial part of popular culture, is one of the favourite pastimes among adolescents. The relationship between popular music and gender equity as well as the educational value of popular music has been discussed extensively in both the music and sociology areas. Connecting to gender equity education in schools, this paper demonstrates how gender topics are displayed in popular music and the implications of using 21<sup>st</sup>-century popular music to discuss gender equity in grades 9-12. In addition, the paper explores the relationship between popular songs and gender equity by critically analyzing redundant popular songs.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the relationship between 21<sup>st</sup>-century popular music and gender equity, and the benefits of integrating popular music into introducing gender equity studies in grades 9-12.

*Keywords:* popular music, gender, gender equity, popular culture, social studies, schools

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## Introduction

Music has been part of many historical movements for centuries and has been integrated in many social justice movements in North America. In the early stages of the civil rights movements, social justice groups used music to spread messages, inspire and gather people. Dr. Martin Luther King considered music as “the soul of the movement.” Recently, the gender equity movement, #MeToo, which fights for the equity of women, underprivileged people, the LGBTQ community, and minorities, has been discussed widely in the world. Music, particularly popular music, plays a crucial role in this movement. Many musicians use their music to declare their attitude toward the movement and express how it affects them, such as “Till it happens to you” by Lady Gaga, “Praying” by Kesha, and “Wild Hearts Cannot Be Broken” by Pink. Moreover, some famous popular musicians stood up and took legal action to address the inequitable treatment they received. For example, Taylor Swift, one of the wealthiest popular singers, was awarded one dollar by the jury in her suit against a man who groped her when they took a picture together; pop star Kesha spent several years in a legal battle against her former producer who has abused her physically and emotionally. Therefore, a few questions have accrued: how is gender equity embedded in popular culture, specifically in popular music? Are there any relationships between gender equity and popular music? Can we incorporate popular music, which adolescents love, into gender equity education?

Popular culture, constituted by art, films, music, social media, etc., is unique, constantly evolving with the times, and all around in daily life. Culture is a way of life, and music is part of the way people choose to live their lives (Kortaba & Vannini, 2009). Among popular culture, popular music, which researchers state “has been characterized as music that is in the moment” (Davis & Blair, 2011, p. 126), plays a significant role. With the rapid development of electronic

technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people are able to listen to popular music at all times and everywhere by using electronic devices, such as mobile phones, iPods, and tablets. Furthermore, popular music is often used as background music in commercials and television shows; the entertainment value of popular music is apparent (Jones & Rahn, 1977). Popular music has already blended in many people's daily lives, especially adolescents'; it has been defined as "the kind of music with words and a strong rhythm that many young people enjoy listening and dancing to" in the Cambridge dictionary (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

There are plenty of studies have confirmed the importance of music in adolescents' lives: North, Hargreaves and O'Neill (2000) found that 2465 adolescents in England listening to music for average of 2.45 hours per day; In a report in 2005, 85 percent of American students in grades 3 to 12 listen to music (Robert, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). There is no doubt that popular music is enjoyed by young students and it can easily attract students' interest; therefore, many educators intend to integrate popular music into teaching different subjects. However, the educational value of popular music has been questioned for decades. Frith (1987) argues that popular music lacks aesthetic worth; this probably contributed to the view that popular music is not important in pedagogy (Davis & Blair, 2011). Meanwhile, the appropriateness of introducing the topic of gender equity to students is also an unavoidable factor. Although gender equity is an essential component of the curriculum, educators decide whether to address these issues to young children based on their personal comfort levels and when it is appropriate to introduce these topics (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2014). In order to introduce gender equity to students, educators need to step out their comfort zones and try new strategies.

Equity studies is included in Ontario's curriculum in grade 9 – 12. Gender equity is also an important component in equity studies. The grade 11 gender studies are introduced as:



This course enables students to explore the social construction of gender.

Student will learn about the dynamic nature of gender roles and norms; sexism and power relations; and the impact of representations of women and men in the media, popular culture, and the arts. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 58)

According to the curriculum, popular culture can reflect gender equity in society, and popular music is a part of popular culture. In addition, Kotarba and Vannini (2009) state, “Music is a universal language that people can immediately relate to and share” (p. 127). In schools, music is one of the most important subjects physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually (Petress, 2005). To be more specific, music provides a positive opportunity for many students to combine logical and cognitive knowledge with emotional and spiritual thinking (Hargreaves, Marshall & North, 2003). Among all kinds of music, young students most likely reflect on and connect with popular music that has the lyrics close to their living experiences and catchy melodies. For example, popular singer Taylor Swift’s song “Fifteen” is about the story of high school. It is easy to make adolescents around fifteen-years old feel that they resonate with the song because the lyrics are talking about a situation they are going through. Researchers also indicate that students can accept and comprehend social sciences more easily when educators use popular music as a teaching tool (Walczak, Alger & Reuter, 1989; Reuter & Walczak, 1993), and Krantz and Persson (2011) mentions that interdisciplinary work is preferably in secondary school if there are teaching advantages. Therefore, it is a viable and effective instructional strategy to combine popular music with sociology to introduce the topic of gender equity to young students in grades 9 - 12.

Considering that there is a wide range of popular music, this paper will focus on popular music published in the 2000s and performed in English. The paper will also demonstrate the

educational value of popular music and the importance of gender equity education, explore the relationship between popular music and gender equity, and discuss integrating popular music into gender equity education in grade 9-12 classrooms. Also, a selection of six popular songs will be critically analyzed to better comprehend the connection between popular music and gender equity.

## **Literature Review**

### **What is Popular Music?**

Music can be classified by genre, period, or style. Popular music is often considered as “the music of today” (Davis & Blair, 2011, p. 125). Although most people know and listen to popular music, researchers still feel that it is difficult to define the term “popular music” precisely (Brown, 1959; Cantrick, 1965; Denisoft, 1975). However, there is a criterion of the popularity of music that cannot be denied: “the more people involved, the more popular the music” (Lee, 1970; Jones & Rahn, 1977, p. 82). Popular music is “created by, especially for, the enjoyment and enrichment of everyday people in their everyday lives” (Bowman, 2004, p. 36) and represents the public’s taste of music and value orientation.

### **The Influence of Popular Music Among Adolescents**

Music is conveyed by many kinds of technology that adolescents love, such as CD players, MP3 players, computers, televisions, movies, videos, and electronic games (Lerner et al., 2005). More recently, accessing of music became more and more convenient; people can easily download and listen to music on their phones using mobile music applications (i.e., Apple Music, Spotify). An early research study also reveals that grade nine students listened to compact discs (CDs) or tapes 13 hours per week, and they mostly listened to popular styles of music. Just ten percent of the students in this study listened to classical or jazz music (Lamont, Hargreaves, Marshall, & Tarrant, 2003). According to Nielsen Music 360 Canada’s report in 2015, 74% of

Canadian teens own a smartphone, and they are more likely to use technical devices to listen to music than other generational groups. The report also reveals that Canadian adolescents listen to 40% more music than they did in 2013, and 95% of Canadian teens listen to music an average of 31 hours a week. Also, 65% of Canadian teens (ages 13-17) are more likely to use new technologies to discover and purchase digital music, which is the largest group among the survey. Based on former research and statistics, popular music is one of the preferred music types of young people (Hargreaves & North, 1997). The impact of popular music on adolescents can be seen in at least these four areas: lyrics resonance and behaviors; coping stressors; identity formation and idolization.

**Lyrics resonance and behaviours.** The simplistic and real-life connective lyrical content is also a reason that adolescents love popular music (Bosacki, Francis-Murray, Pollon, & Elliott, 2006). A report shows that 17% of male adolescents and 25% of female adolescents like their favourite song because they feel that the lyrics resonate with them and they will pay more attention to the lyrics if they like the song (Roberts & Christensen, 2001). Adolescent are always hard to predict (Christenson & Roberts, 1998) so they may “respond to lyrics differently, depending on their individual psychological and developmental make-up” (Bosacki et al., 2006, p. 371). Although teenagers may have different understandings of the lyrics, the comprehension of lyrics can increase with age (Greenfield et al., 1987). According to Leming (1987), half of the gifted teenagers (11- 15-years-old) in a study confirmed the influence of popular songs on their views of important issues, and seventy percent of them rejected the negative lyrics in popular songs, such as lyrics about casual sex.

However, the influence of negative lyrics in popular music on adolescents’ behaviours is still being argued. According to the Gentile (1999), the National Institution on Media found that at

least one song contained sexual content among top ten CDs. Drugs, sex, violence, racism, homophobia, alcohol use and misogyny become more and more explicit in the lyrics. Many studies indicate the connection between adolescents' music preference and behaviours (Roberts & Christensen, 2001; Martino et al., 2006; North & Hargreaves, 2006; Roberts, Dimsdale, East, & Friedman, 1998). A study by Roberts et al. (1998) points out the true trigger of adolescents' risk behaviours is not their preference in music type but their negative emotions when they listen to music. However, according to the results from Miranda and Gaudreau (2011)'s analyses, it demonstrates that only "19.3% of adolescents were 'emotionally-negative listeners', 31.6% were 'emotionally-positive listeners', but that most (49.1%) were 'emotionally-limited listeners'" (cite in Miranda, 2013, p.13). Therefore, the risk behaviours of teenagers cannot be completely attributed to listening to popular music.

**Coping stressors.** In the period of transition and plasticity from childhood to adulthood (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009a, 2009b; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010), adolescents need to cope with many stressors, deal with complex issues, and face challenges (Arnett, 1999). "Music is their soundtrack during this intense developmental period" (Miranda, 2013, p. 10). The answers to adolescents' pressing questions can be found while they listen to pop music (Raviv et al., 1996). Indeed, studies proved that popular music plays a role in distraction and offers adolescents an entertaining way to ease tension, cope with loneliness and control their emotional state (Roberts & Christensen, 2001; North, Hargreaves, & O'Neill, 2000). Researchers found that the intention of using popular music is different between genders: female teenagers like to use music to reflect on their emotions, especially when they feel lonely or depressed. On the contrary, male teenagers prefer to use music as a stimulant or to create a positive self-image (Roberts & Christensen, 2001;

North, Hargreaves & O'Neill, 2000; Wells & Hakanen, 1991; Pediatrics, 2009). In sum, listening to popular music become a common way for adolescents to dealing with their pressures.

**Identity formation.** “Listening to pop music is such a central part of teenagers’ lives in a way that it becomes a ‘badge of identity’ for many of them” (Hargreaves, Marshall & North, 2003, p. 154). Popular music influences and participates in adolescents’ identity-formation process (North, Hargreaves & O'Neill, 2000; Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2001; Martino et al., 2006). The lyrics, rhythms, and harmonies provide stimuli that youth draw upon in learning sex roles, composing their sexual identities, shaping their values, and establishing their independence (Frith, 1983; Sebald, 1984). When adolescents listen to popular music, they can be free from parental control, therefore, “popular music provides a basis for self-expression, the construction of self-identity, the achievement of independence, and intimacy” (Raviv, Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Ben-Horin, 1996, p. 633). Also, popular musicians can influence adolescents through social learning by regarding as role models or even idols for adolescents (Raviv et al., 1996). Miranda (2013) metaphorize teenagers to a special social class, and they treat the music culture as their resistance when their rights are disrespected by adult authorities.

Besides, adolescents’ music preferences help them find group identity and integrate into the youth culture (Diamond, Bermudez & Schensul, 2006). During adolescence, friendship, support from peer group and sense of belonging is important. Adolescents rely on their peer group and want to align their values, attitudes, and behaviours with their peers (Raviv et al., 1996).

**Idolization of popular singers.** Idolization is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored in popular culture and a characteristic of early adolescence. Whiteley (2013) describes her teenager granddaughter’s idolization of a pop singer:

My thirteen-year old grand-daughter is in love with Justin Bieber. So is her best friend. He is an important element in their friendship: they can sing all his songs; they know his likes and dislikes; what he looks for in a potential girlfriend. They contribute regularly to updates on his fan club, chatting about his latest concerts, rhapsodizing about his looks. They are also academically bright, articulate about their views on life. (p. 81)

Raviv et al. (1996) found that popular musicians can influence adolescents by serving as role models and idols. Sebald (1986) categorized six sources of adolescents' idolization: romanticism, sex and fetishism, ecstasy, fascination, identification and heroes as "messengers." Pop singers can deliver messages through lyrics, songs, appearance, interviews, and statements that adolescents trust (Bar-Tal et al., 1991). In a study that specifically analyzes the causes, expressions and reliance of idolization of pop singers among adolescents, worship and modelling have been considered as two important components of idolization (Raviv et al., 1996):

Worship refers to an unusually intense admiration and reverence of an idol. This can be expressed in such behaviors as actively collecting information and artifacts related to the idol or trying to meet him/her personally. Modeling refers to the desire to be like an idol, which may involve imitation of the idolized figures by, for example, copying their dress, hairstyle, speech, activities, and any other social behavioral patterns. (p. 632)

Studies demonstrate that idolization of pop stars is related to adolescents' age and gender (Frith, 1983; Fine et al., 1990). For instance, a study among Israeli boys and girls showed 85% of girls idolize female singers and 58% of boys prefer male singers at age 10-11, while approximately 50% of girls and 75% of boys idolize male singers at age 13-14 (Raviv et al., 1996). Thus,

idolization that emerges from popular music plays an important and functional role in adolescents' lives and their development process.

### **What is Gender Equity?**

The definition of gender equity has been stated in UNESCO's Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework (2003):

Gender Equity is the process of being fair to men and women. To ensure fairness, measures must often be put in place to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from operating on a level playing field. Equity is a means. Equality is the result. (para. #6)

Gender equity and education have been tied together for centuries. Women's access to education has been considered as "a central policy initiative in the struggle for women's equality" (Coulter, 1996, p. 433). In Canada, after the women's movement during the late 1960s and the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (1970), women's inequality in education has been emphasized. Coulter (1996) found that women's inequality in the education field can be attributed to three key factors: the stereotyping of sex-roles in textbooks (Batcher, Brackstone, Winter, & Wright, 1975), women's absence from the curriculum (Pierson, 1995), and women's failure to enroll in mathematics, sciences, and technology courses. Educators made efforts toward gender equity in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, the policy framework and sex-role socialization theory. However, in the 1990s, most of the attention of the teacher federations was focused on maintaining public education. Educators were facing the threats to job security, salary, time, and autonomy so that they did not have much energy and time to deal with gender equity issues. Also, compared with employment, poverty, and social security, education is far behind the agenda of the women's movement (Coulter, 1996).

## **Gender Equity Issues in the Society**

Although many gender equity movements have been promoted in recent years, gender differences can still be easily found in Canadian society. Because of the gender of a person (applicant, employee, etc.), he or she may be treated in an inequitably manner. The workplace seems to be a major area where women experience gender inequity. For example, many studies discuss women faculty members facing disadvantages in male-dominated fields: structural impediments, gender discrimination, “glass ceiling,” and inequitable salaries (Settles et al., 1996; Sonnert & Holton, 1996). Moreover, the social competition is intense and science technology is updating faster every day in the 21st century. Researchers mention that gender certainly is a crucial aspect in social comparison (Guimond & Roussel, 2000).

Gender discrimination in action and language is overt; however, gender stereotypes in people’s ideology are concealed and often lead to biased judgments (Kunda & Spencer, 2003). Sometimes, this concealing of gender bias is hard to notice, and people may not be aware that they actually hold gender bias in their minds, especially in male-dominated fields. For example, there is a case concerning a male-dominated symphony orchestra in the 1970s and 1980s. The orchestra changed the audition form and asked applicants to perform behind a screen so that the judges could not know the applicants’ genders, and this small change greatly increased the number of women selected for the symphony orchestra (Goldin & Rouse, 2000). The applicant’s gender easily evoked the stereotype-based expectations and images in judges’ minds and led to a significant preference toward selecting men (Hoyt, 2007); this continues to happen in job interviews in male-dominated fields.

## **The Importance of Gender Equity Education in K-12**



Living in a social environment in which gender differences still exist in many fields, it is important for young students to understand the democratic ideals of gender equity. Sears (2003) states that the educational system plays an important role for citizens in how to deal with social problems in children's younger years. Gender equity education can help students better comprehend and attach great importance to gender equity issues in society. Fioriello (n.d.) states that since schools are places where children receive basic education, a course about gender equity offered at schools will help eliminate gender problems in every field and is beneficial for addressing gender inequalities in schools. Gender studies is a significant component in social science subjects. According to Yell (2009), social studies require students to think about ideas, concepts, people, places, events and even facts. Yell (2009) reveals that introducing gender education can enhance students' critical thinking skills.

Introducing gender equity is also necessary for educators to teach students to avoid behaviours or words that promote gender discrimination. K-12 students' minds are still developing, so they are easily influenced by peers, family and the environment; for example, students may use a word they heard from different sources, but they do not know this word is discriminatory, such as faggot or sissy. If we do not educate students with gender equity knowledge, they may bring the discriminatory words to their friends and make fun with their peers using these insults, and that may evolve into bullying in school over time. It is necessary for educators to try their best to reduce verbal attacks and eliminate school bullying. "Social acceptance of this abuse and resistance to intervention help to normalize the harassment" (Klein, 2006, p. 49). However, intervening to attempt to solve this deeply rooted issue is also significant for educators. Gender equity courses will be one of the most effective ways to prevent and restrain language violence in advance. Young

students will comprehend gender equity knowledge in classroom and recognize the disrespectful words to different genders and avoid using these words from a young age.

Furthermore, some former research indicates “students’ academic achievement, attendance, access to challenging coursework, engagement, participation in extracurricular activities, behavior, and even their likelihood of committing suicide have all been linked to their race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation” (Dover, 2009, p. 506). In schools, a traditional view of gender roles might be counterproductive and may reproduce the existing inequities between genders. Bradley and Charles (2004) point out that the highly curricular differentiated systems require students to decide their major during adolescence, at a time they generally conform to gender stereotypes. This provides more opportunity for gender stratification in subjects and stimulates gender differences. A research study that aims to notarize “whether there are any patterns of bias in subject choices and whether schools tend to conform to traditional perceptions of some subjects being ‘girls’ subjects and others ‘boys’ subjects” (Institute of Physics, 2013, p. 7) has been done by Institute of Physics (IOP). It reported that 49% of co-ed schools in England are strengthening gender imbalance on subject selecting while 19% are overcoming the imbalance (IOP, 2013, p. 7). Through the gender imbalance phenomenon in certain subjects and the classification system in schools, schools are conveying “a specific gender code” and then constructing “individuals’ gender identities and gender roles” (MacDonald, 1980, p. 22).

Take STEM subjects (i.e., mathematic, physics, chemistry) as a representative example: according to the survey from Darcy (2013), women graduate made up 39% of STEM graduates and 66% of non-STEM graduates. Within STEM fields, with the exception of science and technology disciplines, the number of female graduates is much lower than male graduates, particularly in engineering, in which the proportion of female graduates is only 23%. Also, there

were only 22% women working in STEM fields in Canada in 2014, so it is obvious that a large gender gap does exist in the STEM fields. One of the reasons that stimulates the gender gap is that STEM is subconsciously labelled as male-dominated fields in K-12 schools by educators and students. “A common trend has long been established among educators who have worked on the assumption that certain subjects are more appropriate for boys than girls” (Fioriello, n.d.). The educators’ gender stereotypes on subjects will lead to the disparity in teaching girls and boys and limit students’ career choices; also, it will be hard for girls who are denied equal access to science education to step into the STEM field (Fioriello, n.d.).

As well as musical activities, it can influence adolescent’s gender-role development, for example through gender stereotypes (O’neill, 1997). The song lyrics that include gender stereotypes will build up and even strengthen gender stereotype and discrimination in adolescents’ minds (North & Hargreaves, 2008). Moreover, gender difference in music preference are often stereotyped. Based on former research, girls are enjoy listening to pop music while boys are enjoy listening to rock and hip-hop music. However, this gender gap is being narrowed down. Study found that rock music is now equally appreciated by girls and boys (Mulder etc.al, 2010). A music type can no longer be labeled as gender, and everyone has the equal right to like it and perform it.

Thus, gender equity in K-12 schools is a good approach to promote gender equality, eliminate gender stereotypes in subjects, and advocate equitable access to every field for both students and educators.

### **Challenges in Teaching Gender Equity**

Gender equity is a crucial part of social justice and it also combines with many serious and complicated questions; therefore, it is hard to teach gender equity in only one course or one lesson (Blake, 2015). Furthermore, in school education, theoretical knowledge is always taught first,

which easily leads students to disinterest (Jernström & Lindberg, 1995). Adolescents may find it difficult to understand the complex theoretical content in gender equity, be confused about the definition of gender equity, and even feel bored about the history of gender equity movements. Moreover, addressing gender equity issues directly may make gender minority students feel more marginalized or uncomfortable.

Another point is, educators' stereotype of gender can be infused in many students' minds at a young age and then be reinforced during students' high-school years (Kessels, 2005). According to Coulter and Greig (2008), the feminization of teaching still remains a reality in Canada since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Female teachers are more likely to say that teaching was their "first career choice" (Robertson, 1993, p. 53). Therefore, female teachers are more likely to support girls when they are interested in becoming teachers than they are in other jobs (Sears, 2003). This may influence female students to believe that jobs like teaching are more suitable for girls than boys. "In these often subtle and unselfconscious ways, teachers help shape children's gender play" (Sears, 2003, p. 181). Moreover, if educators use gender labels frequently when they communicate with students, the central gender self-definition will be imperceptibly rooted in students' minds and continue to affect their lives (Thorne, 1993). For instance, teachers prefer to attribute males' achievements to ability but females' achievements to efforts (Robinson & Lubienski, 2011), which will leave the assumption that boys are born more talented than girls and girls need to make efforts to keep up with boys; once the assumption becomes internalized in female students' self-cognition, they may lose confidence and motivation in these subjects.

In addition, there are objective factors, such as parents and religious beliefs, that may hinder gender equity education. Warner and Steel state that "family life is deeply gendered" (p. 503). Children's gender images are in part shaped by their parents. For example, parents may object to

schools overstepping boundaries, particular parents from religious groups who may hold more rigid gender concept:

More traditional notions of gender are found among those individuals in mainline Christian and Jewish denominations than among those who do not consider themselves religious. And those who hold more conservative views (fundamentalist Christians) are even more traditional in their expectations about appropriate roles for women and men, in both the family and the labor market. (Warner & Steel, 1999, p. 507)

Introducing gender equity to young students from religious groups may be confused about their beliefs or their parents' thoughts toward gender equity, and easily put them into a difficult dilemma. In sum, teaching gender equity in schools not only novel teaching methods are needed when teaching gender in schools, but educators themselves need to reduce the stereotype of gender first, as well as address the impact of family and religion on students in terms of gender equity, which all require great efforts.

### **How Gender is Displayed in Popular Music**

There are many scholars who demonstrate the relationship between gender and popular music in sociology, gender studies, and music studies (Clawson, 1999; Leonard, 2007; Schippers, 2002; Whiteley, 1997). Connell and Gibson (2003) state that the popular music industry is “permeated by gender norms and expectations at all levels” (p. 8). Much evidence reveals that gender plays a significant role in the popular music industry, for example the genres and music styles; the audiences; youth subcultures; and gender stereotypes in song lyrics and music videos (Shuker, 2005). Björck (2011) further summarizes gender issues in the popular music industry into two interdependent perspectives of quantitative and qualitative: sexual representation and gender

signification. Males are more represented in some music genres and few women are able to get a clear position in the music industry except singers. Pop music seems to be largely consistent with two masculinity-related features: aggressive and proficient in technology (Björck, 2011). Furthermore, Whiteley (2000) states that sexual stereotypes and even sexism exist in popular music, and she mentions an interesting fact about gender stereotypes in popular music again in her later 2013 article journal:

While pop is acknowledged as the mainstream discourse of popular music and, as such, most likely to (re)produce conventional femininities, it is surprising to discover that rock – the so-called “voice of the 1960s counterculture” was equally conservative in its framing of gender. (Whiteley, 2013)

Even in the most counterculture style of popular music, the gender stereotype has been rooted in it. In sum, there is no doubt that gender and gender related issues exists in the popular music industry. I will use examples to further explain how gender is displayed in three important components of popular music: lyrics, music videos, and performers.

**Lyrics.** Gender has been present in popular music lyrics throughout the past decades. In the 1980s, a study analyzing popular song lyrics from the 1940s to 1970s showed that 96% of lyrics contain gender stereotypes (Cooper, 1985) and reflect the social attitudes toward male and female at the time. For instance, the lyrics of the song “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World” (1966) by James Brown:

*And after man make everything everything he can*

*Even though the man makes money*

*To buy from other man*

*This is a man's world*

*This is a man's world*

*But it wouldn't be nothing*

*Nothing without a woman or a girl*

Although it is claimed that all the efforts and success of men are inseparable from women, it still describes the world as a “man's world” and attributes all the achievements of modern civilization to the efforts of men. Women are portrayed as objects that men need for their success in the male-dominated world. In 1971, a late famous music critic and feminist Ellen Willis proposed a test of sexist lyrics for heterosexual love songs in popular music:

A crude but often revealing method of assessing male bias in lyrics is to take a song written by a man about a woman and reverse the sexes. By this test, a diatribe like "Under My Thumb" is not nearly so sexist in its implications as, for example, Cat Stevens's gentle, sympathetic "Wild World"; Jagger's fantasy of sweet revenge could easily be female—in fact, it has a female counterpart, Nancy Sinatra's "Boots"—but it's hard to imagine a woman sadly warning her ex-lover that he's too innocent for the big bad world out there. (Willis, 1971, p. 136)

However, popular songs that contain feminist and gender equity message still exist in the past decades. For instance, “Respect” (1967) and “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man” (1967) by Aretha Franklin, and “I am Woman” (1971) by Helen Reddy. The lyrics of “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man” (1967) definitely delivers gender equity message to both women and men:

*They say that it's a man's world*

*But you can't prove that by me*

*And as long as we're together baby*

*Show some respect for me*

*If you want a do-right-all-day woman (woman)*

*You've got to be a do-right-all-night man (man)*

Over time, there is no doubt that the image of female characteristics began to be valued and given more self-significance in popular music lyrics, for example, “Run the World” and “Flawless” (2013) by Beyoncé, “Woman” (2017) by Kesha, and so on. Interestingly, the lyrics of Beyoncé’s popular song “If I Were A Boy” (2008), already completes the “Willy Test” by gender-swapping through the lyrics:

*If I were a boy*

*I think I could understand*

*How it feels to love a girl*

*I swear I'd be a better man.*

*I'd listen to her*

*Cause I know how it hurts*

*When you lose the one you wanted (wanted)*

*Cause he's taken you for granted (granted)*

*And everything you had got destroyed*

Although the lyrics of this song discuss how would a woman will do if she is a boy in a tense relationship, the image of a woman who is vulnerable to affection is still highlighted in the song. But in the end of the song, when the woman switched back to female character and talk to the man who made mistake, she is no longer the submissive female figure once common in pop lyrics, but the one who refuses to wait and begins to live for herself:

*It's a little too late for you to come back*



*Say, it's just a mistake*

*Think I'd forgive you like that*

*If you thought I would wait for you*

*You thought wrong*

**Music videos.** Music videos, another visual expression of popular music, also plays an influential role in children and adolescents' lives. According to Wallis' (2011) study of the representation of males and females in the current music videos, gender display is a prominent feature of music videos, and the differences between gender displays depend on the gender of the lead performer in the video. Furthermore, "the gender displays that were significant reinforced stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity" (Wallis, 2011, p. 168). Although women have gradually gained equality in the real world and want to reduce gender stereotypes in popular culture, sadly women in music videos are still presented as vulnerable and in need of male care (Wallis, 2011). Willis (2011) also points out that "nearly all the male performers in the videos wore neutral clothing while provocative clothing was worn by the majority of women" (p. 168). For example, in the music video "Blurred Lines" by Robin Thicke (2013), men in professional suits watch women walk around in provocative clothes, and the men perform dominant actions to women, such as pulling their hair.



Figure 1: Robin Thicke "Blurred Lines ft. T.I., Pharrell" (Thicke, 2013)  
Images accessed at: <https://youtu.be/yyDUC1LUXSU>; October 2018.

However, based on the trends of popular culture and the form of the popular music industry in recent years, there are recently more themes that advocate gender equality, as well as acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity (Whitely, 2000; Banet-Weiser, 2004); the gender stereotypes disseminated in popular culture are gradually diminishing. Using Beyoncé (2008)'s "If I Were a Boy" again as an example, the music video depicts the female singer played traditionally male role such as that of a police officer and live a day as a male.



Figure 2: Beyoncé "If I Were A Boy" (Beyoncé, 2009)  
Images accessed at: <https://youtu.be/AWpsOqh8q0M>; accessed October 2018.

More and more music videos are aiming to inspire girls and gender minorities, and some music videos even feature only female performers. For instance, in the music video of the song "Try" by Colbie Caillat (2014), women of different races and ages boldly shed their makeup and hairstyles to show their true selves, and no male performers appear in the entire video.



Figure 3: Colbie Caillat “Try” (colbiecallait, 2014)  
Images accessed at: <https://youtu.be/GXoZLPSw8U8>; accessed October 2018.

**Performers.** In popular music, not only lyrics and music videos contain gender information; pop music performers also deliver gender message themselves. Wallis (2010) mentions the connection between musical artists and gender:

Although most musical artists do not produce their own music videos, in assuming a highly gendered identity, in performing gender, these artists are participating in the maintenance and production of the gender status quo. (p. 169)

Wallis (2011) further demonstrates that performers compromise to the “socially constructed gender hierarchies” (p. 169) rather than challenging this gender order to a great extent. However, there is no doubt that some artists are trying to break down the gender stereotypes in the music industry (Wallis, 2011). More and more performers are fighting for gender equality, especially female performers, such as Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Alicia Keys, P!nk and so on. For instance, Lady Gaga joined in the National Equality March which called for equal protection for LGBT people in

2009 and gave a speech as a popular singer and bisexual-identified LGBTQ activist. In 2017's International Women's Day, popular star Beyoncé, Madonna and John Legend singed an open letter on behalf of the feminist organization Chime for Change which co-founded by Beyoncé and other celebrities (Renshaw, 2017). Beyoncé even wrote a short journal entitled "Gender equality is a myth" in her full name Beyoncé Knowles-Carter(2014), she demonstrated the reality of unequal pay between working women and men in the U.S., and speak for equal pay for men and women:

Today, women make up half of the U.S. workforce, but the average working woman earns only 77 percent of what the average working man makes. But unless women and men both say this is unacceptable, things will not change. Men have to demand that their wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters earn more—commensurate with their qualifications and not their gender. Equality will be achieved when men and women are granted equal pay and equal respect. (para #1)

Furthermore, there are many actions that promote gender equality in the music industry. For example, Canadian singer Lindsay Kay's debut album was made by an all-female team, including producers, performers, music video directors and promotional staff (Friend, 2018). In 2018's Grammy Award, dozens of pop stars were wearing white roses on the red carpet to support the Time's Up movement, which challenges sexual harassment and fights for gender equality. Thus, messages about gender in popular music not only appear through the lyrics and music videos, but also through the performers themselves.

### **Integrating Popular Music into Introducing Gender Equity**

Given the importance and challenge of teaching gender equity education in schools, this suggests the need for a new way of introducing gender equity. Combining the importance of the popular music to teenagers, the education value of the popular music and the gender information contained in it, incorporating popular music into introducing gender equity can be regarded as a feasible method. There are at least four implications of this approach will benefit students, educators, and gender equity education in schools.

**Arouse interest and emotions.** According to Cosenza (2005), students are more interested in one subject which is interdisciplinary with visual arts, drama or music. When performing music combined with social studies, it generates greater interest (Drake, 1998). Interest is one of the important motivations for students to learn. Everyone is able to express their opinions on gender equality in daily life, but when the topic is introduced seriously in class, students may feel uncomfortable or afraid of making mistakes, which can put the class in an awkward situation. Using popular music, which adolescents often love, to introduce gender equity can relax the atmosphere and avoid uncomfortable silences. Also, popular music tends to resonate emotionally with teenagers. Adolescents may easily recall their own experiences and relate emotionally when listening to popular music. Additionally, researchers indicate that emotional experience is important to learn and remember knowledge (Jernström & Lindberg, 1995).

**Motivate expression.** When popular music is related to education, several questions are relevant: does popular music have educational value? Is it appropriate to invite popular music into the classroom? According to DeNora (2000), popular music contains important social and aesthetic values. Campbell, Connell, and Beegle (2007) also illustrate that popular music not only has its own social values and relates to adolescents' lives but also motivates the educational experience of adolescents (p. 222). Lebler (2007) further analyzed the implications of popular music pedagogy;

he took popular music making into practice and gained reflections from students. During his research, students found learning and making popular music is good to enhance their collaboration and critical thinking, achieve high scores on assessments and realize connections between courses. For instance, if educators want to organize group work involving playing classical music, some students who do not have experience playing instruments or have little familiarity with classical music will be isolated. If educators create a teamwork project based on pop music for students, all of the students are able to express their perspectives and participate in the project. Students will propose different kinds of strategies when they solve the musical problems of composing a melody, chord progression or lyrics (Abramo, 2011).

**Develop self-identity and cultivate critical thinking.** The book *Sexing the Groove* reveals the social aspects (e.g., masculinities, femininities, identities) in popular music and explores the relationship between popular music, gender, and sexuality (Whiteley, 1997). According to Whiteley (1997), “In adolescence, music makes a major contribution to the development of self-identity” (p. 280). In other words, music can be helpful for young people to recognize their genuine selves. Zillman and Gan (1997) illustrate that music can be a mood regulator and invisible support when young people have negative emotions, help young people relieve their pain and find their belonging and community. Therefore, it is necessary for educators to be aware and understand the importance of popular music in adolescents’ social and psychological lives.

The focus of the meaning behind popular music lyrics is particularly useful for educators (Bosacki et al., 2006). Linn (2005) supports that educators should encourage children to become more critical of media, which includes popular music. This reveals the necessity of integrating critical media literacy programs into schools to enhance children and adolescents’ critical thinking and acknowledge their popular music habits (Giroux, 1996, 2004). The critical media literacy

program may bring educators and parents a platform to have a critical discussion with adolescents about the lyrics and the impact of popular music (Tappan & Brown, 1989), and “may help adolescents to use popular music as a tool to help their emotions, attitudes, and values, and their developing sense of self” (Bosacki et al., 2006, p. 382). Using popular music to introduce gender equity can not only help students think critically about popular music and distinguish the gender context contained in the song, but also help students think more deeply about gender equity.

In addition, students from the religious group which mentioned above in the challenge of teaching gender equity, can start to think about their personal views on gender equity through thinking critically on the gender message in popular music, instead of blindly following rigid attitude. Nevertheless, when students with homophobic tendencies are exposed to a song that contains LGBTQ messages, it is possible that it is the first time they earnestly listen to the voice of LGBTQ group, which can help them gradually understand and respect the group.

**Support gender minority group.** Gender minorities are also a huge group that has been suffering gender inequity in schools and society. Bergonzi (2009) points out that youth sexual orientation and gender minorities, which refers to the students who self-identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), are still “developmental wastelands” in high schools (p. 21). Bergonzi (2009) also analyzed a recent report and showed two discoveries: “nine of ten LGBT high school students were verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation”; and “60 percent of LGBT students feel unsafe because of personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation or race/ethnicity, compare to one out of five students in the general population” (p. 22). Hence, many LGBT students tolerate the harassment and conceal their sexual orientation in schools. They sustain both mental and physical damage.

Schneider and Dimito (2008) found that “most educators believe their jobs to be at risk if they address LGBT issues in spite of the lack of substantive evidence that this is so” (p. 68) and proposed the question of what methods can be used to overcome the hurdles and help educators to address these issues in an easy way. Albers and Bach (2003) performed a process called “impression management” in the classroom (p. 239). In this process, students are able to choose music to contribute to their impression and encourage them to be true to their own identities rather than to be a “disembodied intellect.” Albers and Bach (2003) also mention that a common understanding between students and educators can be established through the musical selections because one symbol of music is sharing (p. 240). When the process is in practice, students must seek a reason why they chose a particular song to express themselves; they look up the connections and their reflections on the song. Implicitly, “songs take on new significance when students try to step into the role of sociologist” (Albers & Bach, 2003, p. 240). Popular music advances the relationship between social aspects and young students, giving them support and strength to heal their negative feelings.

Overall, integrating popular music into introducing gender equity for grade 9- 12 students is an effective way to arouse adolescents’ interest of gender equity, cultivate their critical thinking skills on media literacy and social studies, develop their self-cognition and self-regulation, help students who are marginalized because of sexuality and gender identity to find a sense of belonging, and even contribute to reducing sexual violence in schools.

### **Discussion**

Popular music is a powerful tool that educators can use in social studies education (White & McCormack, 2006). When educators integrate popular music into introducing gender equity, the song choice is a crucial factor. Educators need to make sure that “the message in the music is a



powerful medium for engaging students in meaningful learning experiences” (White & McCormack, 2006, p. 126). I will analyze six popular songs that can be utilized for gender equity education in grade 9 – 12, and a sample of a class activity will be provided.

### **Song Analysis**

**Independent Women – Destiny’s Child.** The song “Independent Women” by American girl group Destiny’s Child (2000) first appeared on the soundtrack of the movie *Charlie’s Angels*, and it also included in Destiny’s Child’s album *Survivor* (2001). Furthermore, the term “independent women” was widely explored and used in popular culture; it was defined as a woman who is proud to be able to support herself on her own and keep her self-confidence without men’s influence (Moody, 2011). The lyrics of this song mainly emphasize the material independence of women:

*The watch I'm wearin', I've bought it*

*The house I live in, I've bought it*

*The car I'm driving, I've bought it*

*I depend on me, I depend on me*

“Independent Women” not only shows women’s material independence but also delivers the message that women are able to depend on themselves and work and earn a good life independently. Also, the song encourages women to be strong and independent out of self-esteem, rather than making a good impression on men:

*Tell me how you feel about this*

*Who would I want if I would wanna live*

*I worked hard and sacrificed to get what I get*

*Ladies, it ain't easy being independent*

*Question, how'd you like this knowledge that I brought*

*Bragging on that cash that he gave you is to front*

*If you're gonna brag, make sure it's your money you flaunt*

*Depend on no-one else to give you what you want*

According to the song, educators can teach adolescents that women should be prepared and be able to be financially independent if needed, and that women have equal access to work and can be as successful as men. Women cannot be underestimated and disrespected in any case. Likewise, the idea that every “independent woman” is unique (Moody, 2011) needs to be addressed with adolescents because thinking independently is also important. However, educators cannot make female students believe that they have to live up to the ideal of “independent women”; they need to choose on their own.

**Can’t Hold Us Down – Christina Aguilera (feat. Lil’ Kim).** “Can’t Hold Us Down” is a feminist anthem recorded by singer Christina Aguilera (2002) and rapper Lil’ Kim, and it was nominated for the Grammy Award for Best Pop Collaboration with vocals in 2004. The lyrics of the song confront and criticize double standards of female sexuality (Heller et al., 2010), and doubt a common phenomenon that men are praised for their sexuality while women who behave similarly are despised:

*The guy gets all the glory the more he can score*

*While the girl can do the same and yet you call her a whore*

Moreover, Hadley and Yancy (2012) reveals that “Can’t Hold Us Down” conveys encouragement and empowerment to women and girls. The song encourages girls to “shout out loud”:

*This is for my girls all around the world*

*Who have come across a man that don't respect your worth*

*Thinking all women should be seen and not heard*

*So what do we do girls, shout out loud*

*Letting them know were gonna stand our ground*

*So lift your hands high and wave them proud*

*Take a deep breath and say it loud*

*Never can, never will*

*Can't hold us down*

Research shows that girls argue that boys hold more power and higher prestige because boys appear more aggressive in school (Osler, 2006). In addition, the verbal abuse and psychological violence among girls is admitted implicitly by peers and teachers and is not often prioritized by schools (Osler, 2006). Thus, many girls are afraid to speak up for themselves when they have been treated with inequality and have been bullied. The song can encourage girls to be confident for equal rights and power, and “shout out” the violence and inequality they have suffered.

Besides, words that are disrespectful to women, like “bitch” and “whore” are also included in the song’s lyrics. Despite that these words carry irony in this song, educators need to tell the students that the words are discriminatory and remind students the terrible power of verbal abuse, so they do not use these words causally.

**Flawless – Beyoncé.** “Flawless” is a song from Beyoncé’s fifth album that was released in 2013 and is a controversial song about feminism.

The first part of the song called “Bow Down,” incorporates a sample from a 1992 television talent show, Star Search, in which the host Ed McMahon introduces the performance of Beyoncé and her friends in the female rap group “Girl’s Tyme.” Then, Beyoncé sings about the tremendous

pressure society puts on women to be perfect and how society views marriage as a major goal in life. She encourages girls to not forget their own dreams and do not live life just as someone's wife:

*I know when you were little girls*

*You dreamt of being in my world*

*Don't forget it, don't forget it*

*Respect that, bow down bitches*

*I took some time to live my life*

*But don't think I'm just his little wife*

*Don't get it twisted, get it twisted*

Following, an audio sample from a TEDxEuston Speech “We Should All Be Feminists” by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is featured over the background music:

We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, 'You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise you will threaten the man.' ...

Now marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support. But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don't teach boys the same? We raise girls to see each other as competitors – not for jobs or for accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing, but for the attention of men. ... Feminist: the person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.

After the audio clip, the song goes to the third verse, “Flawless” in which Beyoncé sings that ladies are flawless. At the end of the song, it returns to the sample from Star Search in which Beyoncé's girl group loses the competition to a boy band. It is an ironic ending. According to

Beyoncé's (2013) video commentary of the album on her YouTube channel, she claims that she never imagined losing before Star Search, and after that she understood that failure happens, but not because you are not good enough. In 2016, although Adichie states that Beyoncé's type of feminism is not hers, she thanked Beyoncé and appreciated that the singer put a clip of her speech into the song, otherwise some people might never know the word "feminist."

In grade 9 to 12 classrooms, some students may have heard a little about feminism and some may know nothing about feminism. This song contains both the insightful idea of feminism and trap music style, which is popular currently among young adolescents. Using this song in class will be an effective approach to help teenagers build an impression of feminism and help delve into the topic of gender equity.

**Born This Way – Lady Gaga.** Lady Gaga (2011), who is a gender equity promotor and an icon of LGBTQ community, regards "Born This Way" as her freedom song. The song was inspired by much empowering music for women and the gay community in the early 1990s. Many hidden meanings and metaphors toward sexuality issues are included in today's popular songs, but Lady Gaga wants to be more straightforward and attack the core of these issues. She also defined "Born This Way" as a song that "anyone could sing" about a figure that "could have been anyone" (2011). Therefore, the lyrics directly and overtly discuss sexual orientation minorities' self-identity and self-empowerment:

*There is nothing wrong with loving who you are.*

*Don't hide yourself in regret,*

*just love yourself and you are set.*

*A different lover is not a sin.*

*No matter gay, straight, or bi, lesbian, transgendered life.*

*I was born to survive.*

The LGBTQ community cannot be left out in gender equity issues. Williams (2014) states that the lyrics of “Born This Way” “underscore a relation of continuity between civil rights struggles of the past and LGBTQ activism today” (p. 36). She also comments:

“Born this Way” implicitly references a cultural progress narrative that marks the contemporary campaign against homophobia as the latest frontier in an ongoing struggle to finally deliver on the egalitarian ideal of “liberty and justice for all.” (p. 36)

Listening to “Born This Way,” students who belong to the sexual orientation majority can directly comprehend the main idea of the lyrics, which is that every sexuality and orientation is equal and should be respected. LGBTQ students may find power and a sense of belonging to a community, and also students who are struggling with gender identity and sexual orientation may get inspired to accept themselves.

**Same Love – Macklemore & Ryan Lewis.** “Same Love” is a performed by hip-hop duo Macklemore & Ryan Lewis (2012) featuring Mary Lambert. The core of the song is about LGBTQ issues, and it was released around the time that same-sex marriage was legalized in Washington. It is a song that speaks out for the equal rights of sexual orientation minorities. Hip-hop music is a stream of popular music that cannot be ignored; however, words with misogyny and homophobia frequently occur in the lyric of hip-hop music. In this song, Macklemore and Lewis breaks the stereotype of hip-hop music in the topic of gender and sexual orientation, delivering meaningful reflective lyrics of the cruel status quo of sexual orientation minorities, and promoting legal rights for LGBTQ community:

*Have you read the YouTube comments lately?*

*"Man, that's gay" gets dropped on the daily.*

*We've become so numb to what we're saying.*

*Our culture founded from oppression.*

*Yet we don't have acceptance for them.*

*Call each other faggots.*

*Behind the keys of a message board.*

*A word rooted in hate.*

*Yet our genre still ignores it.*

*Gender to skin color, the complexion of your pigment.*

*The same fight that led people to walk-outs and sit-ins.*

*It's human rights for everybody, there is no difference.*

*Live on! And be yourself!*

One of the crucial powers of popular music is that life moments can be retold by the narrative lyrics. According to the lyrics, students can reflect on the situation of everyday life. For instance, LGBTQ students who suffered harassment by discriminatory words in schools, may feel connections with this song and try to be strong and live on. In contrast, the heterosexual and cissexual students will realize the pain and suffering of their LGBTQ peers from the lyrics. According to Klein (2006), "Social acceptance of this abuse and resistance to intervention help to normalize the harassment" (p. 49). Relating to gender issues in schools, one of the reasons that intensifies these issues is that LGBTQ students' oppression by others is ignored by teachers. If educators, the adults in school, do not take any measures to stop the teasing among the students or just ignore the teasing, the language attacks will have a huge possibility to evolve into physical bullying, which will give rise to tragedy and become more difficult to hold back. Also, the

teacher's disregard will implicitly convey the attitude that the teasing is permissible to students. In addition, harassment of LGBTQ students afflicts not only those students but also heterosexual students who are perceived to be gay if they act outside of normative gender roles. If educators ignore the harassment, the LGBTQ students will receive unfair treatment and heterosexual students who are perceived as homosexual may continue to receive harassment (Klein, 2006).

**1-800-273-8255 – Logic.** Recently, the popular song “1-800-273-8255” by Logic (2017) attracted attention to the topic of suicide prevention, and it received a Grammy Award nomination for Song of the Year in 2018. “1-800-273-8255” is the phone number of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in the United States. The rapper of the song said many people told him that the song has saved their lives, even though he was not actually trying to save anybody's life (Logic, 2017); that is the power of popular music.

*They say every life precious, but nobody cares about mine*

*What's the day without a little night?*

*I'm just trying shed a little light*

*It can be hard*

*It can be so hard*

*But you going to live right now*

*You got everything to give right now*

The music video of the song depicts a successful young man's struggle to accept his sexual orientation and his father's reaction to his son's sexuality. According to Russell and Joyner (2000), one of the commonly discussed factors of adolescent suicide is sexual orientation. The unequal treatment, the discrimination against homosexuality and the dilemma of envisaging sexual orientation trigger depression and suicide among the LGBTQ community, especially the



adolescents under tremendous pressure in schools (Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995). Because adolescents who have depressive feelings and suicidal tendencies are afraid to be open about their feelings, they become good at hiding their real thoughts, which is why it is difficult for educators to deal with suicide issues among adolescents. Nevertheless, if educators play the popular song “1-800-273-8255” in classrooms and deliver the message of supporting and being concerned for students who intend to attempt suicide, implicitly the students who find emotional resonance with the song will be able to recognize that they are supported by the educators and community; gradually, perhaps they will consider talking about their confusion and express their concerns to the educator. At this point, popular music may be a useful instrument for educators to help teenagers to talk about their depression and even save their lives.

**A Sample of Integrating Popular Music into Introducing Gender Equity**

Participants	Students from social studies classes in grade 9 – 12
Preparations	<p>Song choice. (try not to choose song lyrics with sensitive words related to race and class, need to focus on gender message)</p> <p>Download the popular song or find the online resource.</p> <p>Print the lyrics of the song.</p>
Procedures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Play the song or the music video that contains gender messages.</li> <li>2. Ask student to guess the song title, the singer and year of the song. If students know the song or the singer, they can have a chance to briefly introduce what they know about the song or the singer.</li> <li>3. Ask the following questions to students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is the song about?</li> <li>- How is gender displayed in this song?</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

- What social issues or problems does the song touch on?

Through these questions, introduce the concept and the status quo of gender equity.

4. Pass out the lyrics of the song and play the song again. Ask students to highlight the lyrics that they think deliver gender messages individually. Then, ask them to combine their own experience and write down their point of view toward the highlighted lyrics. Educators can give some guidance for the students to consider:

- Do the lyrics resonate with you / remind you about some experiences?
- What is your own understanding about the lyrics?
- What is your feeling when you listen to this part of the lyrics?
- Do you agree with the idea that the lyrics convey?
- Who will benefit from the message that the song contains? Will anyone be hurt by the message?
- Whose voices are being heard / being left out in the song?

In this part, give students private time to listen to the song and think critically about the gender messages that the song contains.

5. Ask students to turn to their neighbour to share their opinions. After five minutes, ask students to volunteer to share with the class.
6. Group Discussion: Form the students into group of two or three. Each group should find a popular song they like that they relate to or conveys a gender equity message and another popular song that conveys a gender stereotype. Students should have access to online resources to look up the

	<p>songs they choose (teachers can set up different song collection themes, for example, collecting popular songs by time. Each group can be assigned a different era, such as 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. In this way, students can also see the changes of gender information in the songs by era, which can help explain the historical gender equity movements).</p> <p>7. Each group should investigate the relationship/connection between two songs they choose and gender equity. Choose the parts of the lyrics that indicate gender messages most from each song and write them down on two cards. Ask the students to consider the same questions as above for the songs they chose in their groups.</p> <p>8. The next week in class, put all the cards from all groups on the wall, then select a card. If time permits, play this part of the song. Ask students to identify the gender message of the song. Finally, the group who chose this song can give a short informal presentation about their reflections to conclude.</p> <p>9. Gather final thoughts about gender equity from students. Have them reflect on what surprised them, what they learned, and take-away lessons.</p>
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### **Conclusion**

Teaching gender equity knowledge to adolescents in school is undoubtedly an important and difficult thing. Social studies educators demonstrate that the challenges of teaching social studies include providing students with an effective tool to examine sociological issues and helping students connect with the world (White & McCormack, 2006). Popular music, which adolescents

love and has a significant impact on adolescents' social and personal lives, is one of the effective tools to solve this challenge (Walczak, Alger & Reuter, 1989; Reuter & Walczak, 1993). Considering the challenge of gender education and the popularity of music among adolescents, as well as the fact that popular music is often permeated with gender information, using popular music to explore these topics is valuable. Given that interdisciplinary work is best performed in secondary school, the practical idea of integrating popular music into gender studies in grade 9 – 12 has been proposed.

Although popular music is hard to be defined precisely, the influence of popular music among adolescents is clear. The impact of popular music on adolescents can be attributed to the easy access to popular music, lyrics resonance with behaviour, value in coping with stressors, identity formation and idolization. Meanwhile, despite the fact that gender equity has become a growing concern in society, gender stereotypes and inequalities still exist. To reduce such stereotypes and inequalities, gender equity education in K-12 schools needs to be taken seriously so that students can understand the concept of gender equity and distinguish and reject gender discrimination and stereotypes from a young age. However, teaching gender equity also faces many challenges; gender equity is not suitable for a pedagogical approach that prioritizes memorizing key points and achieving high scores. That said, how should teachers arouse students' interest and emotional resonance with the gender equity topic? Incorporating popular music into introducing gender equity is a good way. Gender information is often hidden in popular music lyrics, music videos, and even in the performers' personas and performances. Teenagers are conditioned to accept these gender messages without delving into them. Providing adolescents with an opportunity to study and discuss their favourite pop songs in class and allowing them to unearth hidden information they had not noticed before, not only enhances their interests, but also inspires them to express

themselves, and discover self-definition and critical thinking. Moreover, sexual minorities can feel a sense of support and belonging, and gender equity education can even reduce sexual discrimination and violence on campus.

If popular songs are going to be incorporated into classrooms in practice, the song choice is a crucial part. After analyzing six 21<sup>st</sup>-century popular songs, it is clear that song content including feminism, the LGBTQ community and gender orientation is contributing to discussions on the gender topic in the popular music field. Despite the positive content of the songs being analyzed, education workers should be aware of some of the sexist, homophobic, and transphobic words in the lyrics, although they may be satirical, and should prevent students from abusing them. Some songs, though labelled feminist, are controversial and can also be a good tool for teaching students critical thinking along with gender equity and allowing them to express their own opinions. Based on the song analysis, a sample of class activities has been presented, but these are only written constructions that need to be backed up with practical actions in classrooms.

When introducing gender equity, male teachers, female teachers and LGBTQ teachers may have different perspectives; therefore, they may have different choices and focuses in song selection. How to balance or solve this problem is also a part of future research. In pop culture, live performances are also a part of the appeal. When students listen to the popular songs educators use in class, they may search for the live performance of the song when they return home. Some pop songs, however, may carry a message of gender equity, but singers may perform contrary to this message on the stage. The media can be a great education resource for cultivating progressive gender-role attitudes, but it can also perpetuate traditional gender roles among adolescents (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011). How to solve the possible negative effects of students after class also needs to be discussed in future practice and research.

Although the gender and sexuality issue are sensitive and difficult to address in educational institutions, incorporating popular music in introducing gender studies knowledge will narrow the gap and establish a communicate bridge between students and educators, enhance understanding and respect, and treating every sexuality equally. It also brings support and inspiration to the students who are suffering from gender inequity and discrimination over sexuality and provide a comfortable way for educators to discuss gender in schools.

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