

Contradictions of the Body: How Billie Eilish Negotiates Gender, Power  
and Embodiment as a Teenage Pop Icon

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## **Abstract**

Billie Eilish is creating a new image for women's embodiment. The aim of this thesis is to understand how Eilish's competing desires and the social factors which influence them impact the choices she makes as it relates her embodiment. I explore how Eilish's image can be seen as a navigation of power, one which simultaneously reproduces and resists normative ideals for female embodiment. I also analyze how this negotiation of power is entrenched in capitalist logic, as factors of marketability and consumerism impact her relationship to her "branded" body.

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## **Introduction: Why Billie Eilish?**

I remember having a conversation with a friend in my dorm room one evening that felt a little like fate -- a Billie Eilish song came on from one of my playlists and he instantly got excited, proclaiming his love for Billie Eilish. At this point, I had already started working on the concept of doing a thesis on Billie Eilish, and I responded with equal enthusiasm. A paraphrase of what he said to me is, "I can't think of any other artist that feels so 'this moment' as she does...she's like the world is ending and we're just all gonna wear black and do whatever we want...I'm so excited about her."

So, I became interested in Eilish first as a symbol of generational anxieties and desires -- Eilish rose to fame in 2019 and was lauded as an icon of the up and coming Generation Z. Generation Z is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as "the generation reaching adulthood in the second decade of the 21st century, perceived as being familiar with the Internet from a very young age"

"What does this mean for the next generation of young people?", I wondered, that our pop culture icon is this brooding young woman, who speaks of death and insomnia and romance and climate change, dresses in oversized dark clothing and designer sneakers, and makes music videos where she cries ink and gets her face burned by cigarettes.

Billie Eilish definitely has struck a note with the current state of the world -- addressing climate change in her song "All the Good Girls go to Hell" ("Hills burn in California/ Don't say I didn't warn ya") and teenage drug addiction in her song "Xanny" ("What is it about them?/ I must be missing something/ They just keep doing nothing/ Too intoxicated to be scared") as well as several references to mental illness and teen suicide which is the focus of her song "Bury a

Friend” and which she also references in her song “ilomilo” (“All the friends I’ve had to bury/ They keep me up at night”).

In order to give the reader a sense of her art and insight into how she is portraying herself and her view of the world, I will provide a brief look into the content of her songs and music videos. Many of Eilish’s music videos contain violent imagery and body horror - a bodily manifestation of much of the lyrical content of her songs. Examples of this are her music videos for “bury a friend”, “when the party’s over” (Fig. 1) and “all the good girls go to hell”. She described the song “bury a friend” in a press release as being “from the perspective of the monster under my bed. If you put yourself in that mindset, what is this creature doing or feeling? I also confess that I’m this monster, because I’m my own worst enemy. I might be the monster under your bed too” (Eilish, 2019).



Fig. 1. An image from Billie Eilish’s music video for “when the party’s over” in which Eilish cries black ink

Excerpts from the song “bury a friend” are as follows:

**What do you want from me? Why don't you run from me?  
What are you wondering? What do you know?  
Why aren't you scared of me? Why do you care for me?  
When we all fall asleep, where do we go?**

**Come here  
Say it, spit it out, what is it exactly  
You're payin'? Is the amount cleanin' you out, am I satisfactory?  
Today, I'm thinkin' about the things that are deadly  
The way I'm drinkin' you down  
Like I wanna drown, like I wanna end me**

**Step on the glass, staple your tongue (ahh)  
Bury a friend, try to wake up (ah ahh)  
Cannibal class, killing the son (ahh)  
Bury a friend, I wanna end me**

The video is reminiscent of a recurring sleep paralysis episode, which Eilish has described as the inspiration for the album. The video begins with a man jolting up in bed at night, before lying back down and going to sleep - he utters the name “Billie” with his eyes still closed as the camera pans to show Eilish lying below his bed with black eyes as she begins to sing. The video then features Eilish standing over his bed before chaotically running around, seemingly possessed, in the house where the man is sleeping - the lights flicker on and off throughout. Billboard describes what happens next as “a mob of hands clad in black rubber gloves [manhandling] Eilish, pulling the teenager’s hair and ripping her shirt before injecting her in the back with unmarked syringes” (Rowley, 2019).

“I wanna end me” the singer whispers with a tired look on her face, before the hands inject her back. Her back pulses with grey veins before the hands are shown pulling her upright by her hair “I wanna end me” she repeats with yellow irises this time as the lights flicker on and off. Her back is shown convulsing with the syringes still protruding from her skin, she is in a

white hospital nightgown in a sterile white room with fluorescent lighting (Fig. 2). These images repeat themselves until the end of the music video, where she levitates upside down in the hallway of the building. The gloved hands continue to pull Eilish's hair and smother her face in a violently erotic fashion, one of the hands opens her mouth and strokes her lips. The video ends with Eilish back under the bed below the man who is now sleeping soundly, the song ends and the beginning of the song "ilomilo" (which features the aforementioned line about burying friends in reference to suicide) begins to play before the video goes black



Fig. 2 An image from Eilish's music video for "bury a friend"

Her song "all the good girls go to hell" along with the accompanying music video focuses on the existential threat of climate change. Before the release of the music video Eilish posted on her Instagram that good girls go to hell because "our earth is warming up at an unprecedented rate, icecaps are melting, our oceans are rising, our wildlife is being poisoned and our forests are burning" (Eilish, 2019). In the music video, "Eilish is injected with a plethora of syringes, transforming the girl into a crow who gets spat out into a gloomy world. She sits in a pool of oil, symbolizing the threat of wildlife when human waste escalates. As the fires on the ground spread, they catch the oil trails Eilish created and set her ablaze" (Mamo, 2019). The music video was released on September 4 before the 2019 Climate Action Summit hosted by the UN in New



York City on September 23, which Eilish also promoted on her Instagram story. An excerpt from the lyrics for “all the good girls go to hell” is as follows:

**Standing there, killing time  
Can't commit to anything but a crime  
Peter's on vacation, an open invitation  
Animals, evidence  
Pearly gates look more like a picket fence  
Once you get inside 'em  
Got friends but can't invite them**

**Hills burn in California  
My turn to ignore ya  
Don't say I didn't warn ya**

**All the good girls go to hell  
'Cause even God herself has enemies  
And once the water starts to rise  
And heaven's out of sight  
She'll want the devil on her team**

**My Lucifer is lonely**



Fig. 3 An image from Eilish’s music video for “all the good girls go to hell”

We can get a deeper sense of the emotions and anxieties Eilish is tapping into through the music she is producing. Connecting Eilish's art with her resonance with youth culture might signal a very dark and disturbing truth about the way in which Generation Z sees the world -- but is it so simple? Obviously one person cannot speak for an entire generation, but it can certainly point to certain cultural phenomena. However, what I also wanted to interrogate is this notion of the self and the many different factors that go into making the self and the choices that we make. Can any celebrity be a symbol of a generation if each person's individual choice is so wrapped up in a myriad of factors that are both personal and societal, practical and impractical? Eilish's navigation of fame, gender, capitalism and fashion don't simply illuminate truths about Western society at large but illuminate how individuals navigate identity and the investment in the idea of the individual.

As I moved along with my research, I learned more about the internal workings of Billie Eilish's world (or at least the ones which she conveys to the public) and how she navigates taking these emotions and embodies them - making the intangible tangible through fashion and art, all the while creating a sellable product to her fanbase. Perhaps Eilish does illuminate some trends about Generation Z, but they are far deeper than that Generation Z is afraid of climate change, or that Generation Z deals with high rates of teen suicide -- they are representative of a generation's way of knowing and experiencing the world. This way of knowing is reflected in Eilish's relationship to fashion, the body and consumerism and the way in which young Western people are constructing ideas of the individual in relation to the world.

But what other issues can an analysis of Billie Eilish reveal? Conversations with friends usually all turned to the subject of her clothing choices, more specifically the fact that she chooses to wear baggy clothing, the reasoning behind which the media has speculated about, and

to which she herself has given varying answers. Eilish has spoken of experiencing body dysmorphia and has said that wearing baggy clothes is a way for her to feel comfortable. Many news outlets have speculated that it's a defiant protest against the sexualization of women, to which Eilish has had a couple of responses, some being a denial of protest, some being resistance to constant talk about her body and some going as far as to say that she rejects the praise of her modesty and would herself like to be desirable one day. Therefore, discourses around Eilish's body, as well as her response to such discourses, can be helpful sites of analysis for ideas surrounding the embodiment of women, resistance and submission and how women learn to navigate bodily power through the knowledge of the gaze.

Another issue that I was fascinated by is the issue of clothing, Eilish's style goes way beyond simply wearing baggy clothing – her method of dress has become iconic, inspiring fashion trends and Halloween costumes alike (Fig. 4). Part of her signature look is the donning of visible designer labels, gaudy colors mixed with shocking accessories. A few sections from her Instagram give insight into her classic look (Fig. 5-7). My senior spring, I took a class on fashion theory which sparked my interest in looking deeper at Eilish's clothing choices and gave me the tools to understand how clothing functions at the intersection of identity construction and consumption. Eilish's clothing choices also intersect with ideas of gender – the choice to dress in baggy clothing, or wear sneakers instead of heels is not a choice that needs to be taken lightly, but rather has implications for ideas about how women should dress. Eilish's clothing choices promote comfort and mobility, but are also deeply tied to gaining attention, and therefore to the appeal of the gaze.

The interplay between identity and consumption is central to this analysis. The theme of the branded body runs through both of my chapters and is a factor which complicates each of my

analyses. Eilish's body is not only that of a woman's, which is traditionally seen as something to be looked at and perfected for the gaze of others, but her body is also a product which is central to her career. The actions that Eilish takes with her body correlate to monetary gain, as well gains in respect, status and fame. Therefore, in any analysis of the way she dresses and navigates gender, we must take this factor into consideration: her body is central not only to her identity, but to her *career*. The idea of the body as a product is fascinating to me and I believe its analysis reveals implications for such professions where the body is seen as an object of consumption, not directly (as with prostitution) but through the gaze of others (as with models or even politicians).

Therefore, an analysis of Billie Eilish holds several different stakes, which relate to my original question about the state of a generation, and also reveal important points of exploration for broader issues. This analysis of how Eilish navigates the active process of embodiment will thus underscore how body projects are deeply tied to gender, consumption, and matters of agency and identity.



Fig. 4 Actress Nina Dobrev (left) dressed up as Billie Eilish (right) for Halloween in 2019



Fig. 5-7 A selection of photos from Billie Eilish’s Instagram. The bottom caption reads: “if i only dressed normal I’d be so much hotter yeah yeah come up with a better comment im tired of that one”

## **Positionality and Methodology**

I first discovered Billie Eilish during my Sophomore year of college on a late-night walk back to my dorm when her breakout song “ocean eyes” (released in 2016) came on shuffle. The song had a dreamy quality to it that felt hypnotizing and I was intrigued by the album cover image of Eilish: a silver-haired girl sitting beneath a red ladder, clad in a red jumpsuit and gold chains against a pastel yellow background (Fig. 8). That song led me to later discover another hit song of hers, “bellyache” which I liked even better. The song had a hazy feeling which built up to a chorus with an amazing bass drop. What was really striking to me was the lyrics, the song starts, “Sitting all alone/ Mouth full of gum/ In the driveway” which immediately drew me into the storyline unfolding. As the song went on the content became hazy but gave a general feeling of thrill, suspense and unease -- “Where’s my mind?” repeated in the pre-chorus followed by “Maybe it’s in the gutter/ Where I left my lover/ What an expensive fate/ My V is for vendetta/ thought that I’d feel better/ But now I got a bellyache”. I imagined what the lyrics and story could be about, and later read online that it is a story about a sociopath who murders her friends. Eilish described the song as being about guilt, something I didn’t originally tell from the songs overall feeling - a fitting introduction to Eilish and her ability to balance the disturbing with a feeling of lightheartedness.

However, beyond my intrigue and enjoyment of those songs on my journeys around campus, I didn’t look too much into the artist, thinking perhaps she’d rise to greater fame or fade away into the woodwork. It was only until later that I realized that it would unequivocally be the former.

It had been a while since I thought about Eilish and those songs when the single that would skyrocket her to stardom came out, “bad guy”. Suddenly Billie Eilish was being played

everywhere – on the radio and at parties and notably being made into memes on the youth targeted video platform TikTok. Billie Eilish was making waves across popular culture, and I was excited to see it. I listened to the album that featured “bad guy” at the beginning of my senior fall and that is when my questions around Eilish started to arise – who is this girl, and what is she thinking? What role is she playing in the creation of youth culture? What is it that she has to say, and how is it an important symbol about youth culture? How is what she is saying influenced by different factors? The more I looked into it the more I realized the intrigue she created for the public, with a flashy and weird sense of style and irreverent personality, I realized she would be a great site of sociological analysis.

In this analysis I approach Eilish as a cautious and critical fan – I am intrigued by her and enjoy her music and fashion, but also know that there are a myriad of factors that go into the creation of a celebrity persona, and I will investigate some of those factors in my thesis.

Central to my research are the following questions:

- 1) How do theories on gender complicate the way in which Eilish perceives herself and the image she projects to her audience? I’d like to look at the ways in which gender perceptions impact how she chooses to show her body, using ideas of power and choice to further complicate binary ways of thinking about oppression and subversion.
- 2) How does Eilish navigate the use of her body as a product with which to accrue fame and wealth? As a pop star, Eilish must be embodied in a way that is sellable to her audience. I am interested in the impact that this knowledge has on the way in which she presents her body.
- 3) What do her fashion choices say about the notion of “the self” and how she constructs and views identity as an inherent phenomenon which must be expressed through the body.
- 4) How does Eilish use the concept of “the subversive” and subcultural to market her product?

None of these questions can be answered in a vacuum and of course interact with each other in different ways. For example, the impact of her body being marketable interacts with societal conventions and theories around gender as well as ideas of the self and how she must use the self as a vehicle to present her identity to the public.

The first part of my research included looking up background information on Eilish and learning about her early life and rise to fame. Additionally, constructing a picture of the image she is creating and projecting to her audience through reading interviews, her social media, advertising campaigns, music videos and lyrics. This included compiling different articles which spoke to different facets of her career (for example dress, body, fame) and sorting them in an Excel spreadsheet.

The second part of my research was theory based, doing readings of theories of gender, power, fashion, the body and the self. It is through these theoretical frameworks that we can understand the seemingly simple choices that Eilish makes in her self-presentation and art. I started first with feminist theory, that I had been exposed to via previous classes on gender and the body. I then looked into theory on fashion, which I compiled from a class on fashion theory.

My methods rely on both textual analysis of interviews with Eilish as well as a visual analysis of her clothing and music videos. I provide an analysis of these primary sources through the existing literature – drawing on feminist scholars Judith Butler and Susan Bordo, which I complicate and extend via analyses of power and choice through Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Iris Lopez's work on agency and constraint. I also touch on the subject of identity formation through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus. Additionally, I use theories on fashion and consumption including work from George Simmel and Thorstein Veblen's economic



theories on gender and dress. I also analyze Eilish's fashion choices through scholarly research on sneakers by Yuniya Kawamura as well as Fred Blake's work on foot-binding.

One major benefit of my analysis was that I was able to gain a lot of information about what media and fans are saying about Eilish via the internet. I also had access to interviews as they are freely available on the internet. Additionally, social media is a source for understanding Eilish's interactions with her audience. These sources are very helpful for understanding the big picture of who Eilish is, and the public conversation that exists between the media, Eilish and her fans which provided ample content for my analysis. However, one cannot take the things that Billie Eilish says during interviews at face value and another level of analysis must take place to speculate on the factors that contribute to, and the consequences of, her public words. Additionally, content on the internet often doesn't allow for in depth understanding of her fan's perspectives as it is often limited to social media posts and brief interviews for news outlets. Being able to directly interview some young fans of Eilish about some of my questions would have been a valuable addition to this thesis.



Fig. 8 Album cover for Billie Eilish's debut album *Don't Smile at Me*

## **Chapter Summary**

My thesis will be divided into two chapters, the first chapter addresses how Billie Eilish navigates being embodied as a female public figure and will address specifically feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and Susan Bordo. I will look specifically at her choice to wear baggy clothes so that people do not know what her body looks like, as well as her desires as it relates to the viewing and sexualization of her body. This section will analyze her choices, statements and public actions through the lens of feminist theories in attempt to make sense of an often cacophonous and contradictory narrative about why she chooses to dress in baggy clothing, which has recently culminated in her choice to strip down to her bra in a video shown for the first stop of her United States tour. I will also be putting these feminist theorists in conversation with theories of power and subversion, as well as theories about the ideology of choice, and the factors which shape and limit individual's choices, even when a choice is viewed by an actor as one of free agency.

In the second chapter, I look at the role of her body as a marketable product and how that influences the dynamic of power which flows throughout her choices and actions as it relates to her embodiment. The second chapter looks at how Eilish uses both her art and her clothing as physical manifestations of an internal world. I look at the gory lyrics and content of some of her music videos and deconstruct the idea of fashion as a way to make a stable internal self through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus. This chapter will also make use of fashion theory, and the ways in which clothing interacts with consumption and the idea of the individual. This chapter also addresses how Eilish appropriates ideas of subversion, combined with the donning

of designer labels, to craft the perfect contradictory yet alluring aesthetic that appeals to her fans.  
I will look specifically at her use of sneakers as a mechanism of conveying identity.

## **Literature Review: What Does it Mean to be Embodied?**

Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim (1858 -1917), who are considered founders of the field, wanted to establish sociology as a discipline that was differentiated from that of the natural sciences and focused strictly on the social influences which make us human. “This view had an enduring effect on the discipline, meaning that the natural/biological was frequently ruled outside of, and unimportant to, legitimate sociological investigations” (Shilling, 26, 2012). Sociologists originally believed that the mind should be the main focus of sociological study, without consideration of the connection between consciousness and embodiment. “Leaving the mind/body relationship in the realm of philosophy, sociology focused on other conceptual dichotomies central to its studies such as the structure/agency and subject/object dilemmas” (Shilling, 27, 2012). In my thesis, I would like to bring the subject of the mind/body into conversation with central concepts sociology, particularly that of agency.

Despite the ideas of some initial sociologists, the body still made its way into foundational sociological work. “In being concerned with societies, sociology could not avoid exploring how embodied subjects externalized, objectified and internalized social institutions” (Shilling, 21, 2012). Therefore, though the body was not being explicitly analyzed, it seeped into sociological discourses, as a testament to its pertinence in any analysis of society. For example, “Marx and Engels were concerned with the corporeal conditions surrounding consciousness, the condition of the English working class, and the detrimental consequences of a division of labor that deformed the bodies of workers” (Shilling, 28, 2012). The body would continue to be an important site of analysis for much sociological study.

In order to do an analysis of an embodied individual, it is necessary to first look at how the body came to exist in the framework which it does in modern society. Chris Shilling, in his

book *The Body & Social Theory* which was originally published in 1993 (I am utilizing the third edition published in 2012) describes the cultural and historical shift from adherence to religious values and towards science which led to a “gradual privatization of meaning” as individuals were left with the task of making sense of their own lives (Shilling, 3, 2012). As Shilling explains, this increased sense of individuality paired with “the growth of cosmopolitan cities, the spread of global media...and increased internationalization of consumer culture that valorizes the body as a bearer of symbolic value [has] encouraged people to become increasingly reflexive about their embodied identities” (4, 2012). Therefore, the body is seen by much of Western industrialized society as a marker of who one is as a person, a window into the self that facilitates our interactions with the world around us.

A particularly helpful lens which Shilling offers is that of the body as a project. Shilling describes the tendency for the body to be seen as “a project to be worked at and accomplished as a part of an individual’s self-identity” (6, 2012). Shilling notes that viewing the body as a project involves the “practical recognition of the significance of bodies as both personal resources and social symbols that ‘give off’ messages about identity” (7, 2012). Therefore, bodies serve as a vehicle for making tangible that which is intangible -- for showcasing the uniqueness of the individual, conveying to the viewer that “je ne sais quoi” without having to use words. The body is seen as a symbol of an individual’s success and an indicator for an individual’s personality. One is able to project inward feelings succinctly through outward facing manifestations of the body. For example, if one is seen wearing all black, that can be viewed a marker of one’s personality, one might assume that such a person belongs to the subset of people known as “grunge” or “goth”– or perhaps that they listen to heavy metal. One who visibly appears to be physically fit may be perceived more favorably, as it is a physical manifestation of the diligence

and hard work which comes with frequent exercise. Therefore, the body becomes extremely important to the individual as they come to understand that it conveys important “truths” about who they are as a person.

Sociologist George Simmel, in his analysis of the rise of the metropolitan and its effect on human psychology, offers an additional explanation to why the body is such an important site of identity formation. In his book *The Metropolis and Mental Life* Simmel details how the fast-paced and overstimulating environment of the metropolis affects socialization, he underlines “the difficulty of asserting [ones] own personality” under such circumstances (420, 1903). Therefore, the body becomes central to one’s perceived identity, “the temptation to appear ‘to the point’, to appear concentrated and strikingly characteristic, lies much closer to the individual in brief metropolitan contacts” (421, 1903). Therefore, through both Simmel and Shilling we can understand how, in modern western society, the body has been invested with a great amount of responsibility in the process of “making one’s mark” in a highly competitive, individualistic and fast-paced society.

Our bodies are the vehicle through which we interact with the world, and therefore their importance in sociological and anthropological work cannot be stressed enough. As Shilling states, “the capacities and senses, experiences and management of bodies are implicated in human agency and constraint, and in the formation and maintenance of social systems” (29, 2012). Therefore, the analysis of bodies and how we manage them can illuminate a lot about the replication of social systems in our daily lives. Feminist theory is one good example of how the discipline of sociology has come to appreciate the value of the body in understanding sociological structures. In my thesis I draw upon two such theorists, Judith Butler and Susan Bordo. Judith Butler theorizes that gender is an active performance that is not based in reality,

rather gender is something that one must do repetitively, and through this action gender is actively performed.

“Butler’s ideas are complex and nuanced but the basic insight is that there is nothing essential to the body that marks out our genitals, or our chromosomes, or our reproductive organs (rather than, say, our eye color, or the length of our femur, or the size of our heart) as the appropriate markers by which to construct an entire system of social division” (Chambers, 3 2017).

I will be using Butler’s ideas of gender performativity to analyze Eilish’s performance of the female gender in the public sphere. Her body is of course deeply implicated in these performances, and we see her navigating the active construction of her gendered identity in a haphazard way which indicates an understanding of the socially and politically mediated nature of normative gender practices.

Butler asserts that there is no biological basis to gender, it is a social institution within which political power is invested in the construction of normative roles for the performance of the male and female genders. Therefore, gender and the body can be analyzed through Foucauldian understandings of power and discourse, as her theory is based in the idea that gender is constructed through both power and discourse, which Foucault discusses in *The History of Sexuality*. In my thesis, I extend my analysis of Billie Eilish’s gender performance through a Foucauldian understanding of power. In his book *The History of Sexuality* Foucault criticizes the conception of power as something that is merely repressive. He instead puts forth that power should be seen as productive force, as it is actively producing discourses, for example around sexuality and gender norms. Power to Foucault is also omnipresent and emerges in all directions. Thus, sexuality isn’t something that power represses, but a medium of power.

Therefore, Billie Eilish's navigations of her gender and sexuality are also investigations of power, and how she can use the gaze that rests upon her body as a source of power and resistance, while also *reproducing* normative power structures.

In addition to Butler, another feminist theorist who I will draw on in my thesis is Susan Bordo. I will focus on the chapter in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* that discusses female pathologies such as anorexia. Bordo analyzes the way in which being embodied as a woman is a constant performance for the gaze of the onlooker. This performance necessitates constant monitoring of the body which leads to pathologies such as anorexia. Anorexia, which takes the social pressure for female slenderness to an exorbitant level, is a negotiation of bodily power and control. It is a reaction to subjugation which replicates the power systems that have caused the pathology in the first place. Such a mode of embodiment can be seen as a negotiation of power, as the woman carefully controls her body in a world of impossible bodily standards, even though in the process she is internalizing and producing these normative ideas about how the female body must look. As Shilling states, and I repeat later in my thesis in reference to Eilish's body practices, "If one feels unable to exert influence over an increasingly complex society, one can at least affect the size, shape and appearance of one's body" (Shilling, 9, 2012).

As we discussed with Foucault, we see the production of power through narratives on slenderness in popular discourse. However, the anorexic woman also produces a form of power by being able to control the body and the reactions of those around her to her embodied form. However, this mode of producing power comes from within the scope of limited choices and the pressures put on the woman by societal norms. We see here that the body and power are implicated in a conversational way. This framework is helpful when understanding Billie Eilish



and her decisions to cover her body. Eilish, as mentioned in the introduction, has a history of body dysmorphia due to pressures on women to attain unachievable bodily standards of slenderness and sensuality. She responds to this by wearing clothes which do not expose her body. This is a choice that can both be compared and contrasted to the reaction of anorexia, which de-sexualizes the body as the woman loses her natural curves.

Feminist theory gives us foundational insight into how Billie Eilish is embodied and how discourses in the field of sociology have shifted to understand the importance of the body. In my analysis I will be complicating these theories of gender through the inclusion of theories of consumption, in order to understand how capitalism and consumerism impact this gendered navigation of the body. One foundational theory that I will be using is from Thorstein Veblen's *The Economic Theory of Women's Dress*. Veblen defines fashion as a visible marker of financial success as it is "the visible ability to spend, to consume unproductively" (Veblen, 68, 1894). He situates women's bodies as the main vehicle for showcasing this wealth – "Woman...originally because she was herself a pecuniary possession, has become in a peculiar way the exponent of pecuniary strength of her social group" (Veblen, 68, 1894). This is especially achieved through dress which immobilizes women, as in the case of skirts or high heels, which is a mechanism of showcasing wealth as it shows the woman does not have to work. This is linked to his theory that women are objectified and treated as chattel in this way.

These theories are interesting when considering Eilish and her choices – as she cites fashion as something which is central to her identity, almost on par with her musical career, and has discussed wanting attention on her when she enters a room. Eilish might also be considered the poster child for what Veblen views as "unproductive" consumption in her head-to-toe Louis Vuitton and Gucci outfits and sneakers which cost hundreds of dollars. However, her dress, as I

touched upon earlier, does not immobilize but brings comfort. She still, however, ties her identity up with the gaze of others on her body, which certainly correlates to her choice to wear visibly expensive clothing and showcase her newly acquired wealth and status.

Two theorists that give insight into Eilish's relationship to fashion are George Simmel and Edward Sapir. Simmel in his article "Fashion" for the *American Journal of Sociology*, explains fashion as mechanism through which the upper class can have an outward expression of unity. This additionally serves as a physical marker which separates them from lower classes. Simmel, like Veblen, roots fashion in economic concerns. Sapir, however, focuses more on fashion as a mediator of individual taste. He provides a definition of fashion for an article for the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* that explains that fashion chooses what colors, textures, styles etc. are popular and that taste is what facilitates one to choose among these styles. This notion of individual taste seems to be what Eilish rests her fashion identity in. The ability to attract the gaze of others though a "unique" taste allows her to reaffirm her identity as special, a concept which we can remember Simmel addressed in his theories on the metropolis.

This brings me to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus:

"[Habitus] serves to systematize the behavior of persons sharing a common set of experiences. It exists within, not outside of, the historical process, and as class or group alignments change in response to changed external circumstances, the habitus changes accordingly" (Littleton, 181, 1979).

Habitus is a way of understanding human behavior and choices, through Bourdieu's habitus we can understand that behavior is influenced by external factors, as opposed to one's self standing individual personhood. Personhood and identity are born from the cultural and societal factors in which we exist, it does not exist a priori.

Therefore, Bourdieu's theory of habitus helps to ground the reader in the knowledge that fashion and other bodily practices are not simply a window into an individual self. It complicates the idea of individual expression in which Eilish and many others seem to root their formation of knowledge and self. Bodily practices are born out of a set of social and cultural discourses, as we see in Judith Butler's theories on gender, as well as Foucault's assessment of power.

“[Bourdieu] applies the concept of habitus in an analysis of power relations and the ways in which groups and persons achieve dominance” (Littleton, 181, 1979). Therefore, we can view Eilish's navigations of power, consumption, gender and embodiment are situationally located. This concept underpins the framework of my analysis, which draws on theories about gender but makes a wider analysis on consumption, power and identity and looks at how these factors interact with gender to shape the production of the body.

## Chapter 1: Billie Eilish and the Navigation of Gender, Fame and Power

Billie Eilish is an American singer and songwriter, born on December 18, 2001 and raised in Highland Park, Los Angeles. Her parents, Maggie Baird and Patrick O’Connell are both musicians and actors. Eilish has spoken openly about growing up in the now very gentrified neighborhood: "Highland Park has become popular now but growing up there, it was not like that at all...there were gunshots and shit, y'know — it was really sketchy" (Eilish, 2019). Around 2007, her parents were working other jobs to make ends meet and they were struggling financially - her dad worked as a handyman and her mom taught acrobatic aerial classes. Eilish, who was six at the time, said “We were poor as fuck” (Eilish, 2019).

Eilish and her older brother Finneas were both homeschooled, and their mother taught them the basics of songwriting. Eilish said she wrote her first song at age 11 for her mother’s songwriting class. Her brother would go on to be her songwriter and producer. Eilish gained a following at 14-years-old in 2016 when she uploaded her single “Ocean Eyes” onto the streaming platform, SoundCloud. The song was originally written by Finneas for his band, *The Slightly*s. The song went viral, though she says it was not her intention for anyone to hear it. Finneas' manager reached out to him after the release of "Ocean Eyes" to discuss Eilish's potential. In a deal arranged by Finneas, Apple Music signed Eilish to A&R company Platoon. A&R stands for Artist & Repertoire, and these companies scout for talent and help “package” artists before they get a major label deal, which usually includes aiding the artist with the commercial and artistic development. Eilish then got a publicist, who connected her to the fashion company Chanel, and a stylist, Samantha Burkhart both of whom helped shape her image.

Eilish released her EP *Don't Smile at Me* in 2016, which reached the top 15 in the US, UK and Australia. However, she surged to fame in 2019 following the release of her debut studio album, *When We All Fall Asleep Where Do We Go?* which became the best performing album of 2019 in the U.S. The lead single of the album, “Bad Guy,” made her the first person born in the 21st century to have a single reach number 1 in the US. Eilish has won 5 Grammy awards, winning the 4 main Grammy categories in the same year, 2020, becoming the youngest person to do so and the 2nd person ever.

*Vox News* describes Billie Eilish as a “generational icon” with the majority of her fanbase being young women. An article written for the online publishing platform *Medium* collected demographic data from Billie Eilish’s Instagram, which showed that the majority of her followers were females aged 18-24 (Fig. 9). I am interested in the way Eilish utilizes her body and clothing to express the workings of her internal world, specifically as it relates to how she navigates existing in a body that is coded female. I am also interested in how she uses clothing and the body to brand herself and make a statement about her own identity, an identity that has pecuniary value. A 2019 article from *The Guardian* states that Eilish’s music “represents everything about Gen-Z pop culture that foxes adults: genre-less but image-conscious; extremely online, but private. It deals in anxiety, sincerity and emotional intelligence, mixed up with classic teenage apathy” (Ewens, 2019). It is her unique positionality on the pop culture stage, and her carefully curated narrative about her body, that draws me to Eilish as a site of sociological elucidation about how young women navigate being embodied in a public sphere. Additionally, using work from the theorists outlined in my literature review, I will look at the way in which Eilish uses the body and its trappings as a mechanism to express an idea of “the true self” and position herself as a unique artist to her followers and to the media.

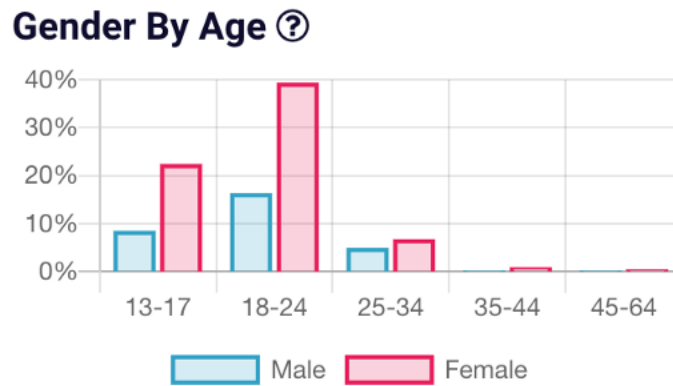


Fig. 9 Demographics of Billie Eilish’s Instagram followers. Source: *Medium*.

Much tabloid press about Eilish has focused on her body - from the beginning of her skyrocket to stardom starting at 14, people noticed the fact that she wasn’t showing her body, and questions surfaced about her choices to only wear baggy clothes. Australian pop-culture and news outlet *novafm* describes Eilish’s style as consisting of “a range of unique looks, from bright green to black, Gucci to Louis Vuitton. But one thing each of her looks have in common is their fit – they’re all very baggy on the body” (Merhi, 2019).

Seemingly in response to media commentary on her clothing choices, Eilish released an advertisement for designer clothing brand Calvin Klein in 2019 which elucidated the reason behind her fashion choices, the script is as follows:

“I never want the world to know everything about me. That’s why I wear big baggy clothes. Nobody can have an opinion because they haven’t seen what’s underneath. Nobody can be like, ‘she’s slim-thick,’ ‘she’s not slim-thick,’ ‘she’s got a flat ass,’ ‘she’s got a fat ass.’ No one can say any of that because they don’t know. I speak my truth in my Calvins.”

The advertisement begins with the melancholy sound of her song “*When the Party’s Over*” accompanied by Eilish looking at jewelry in front of a mirror in an oversized green

jumpsuit. It first cuts to her staring intensely into the camera and then to her kissing the mirror. She is then shown lying in a bathtub in her green jumpsuit laughing as she plays with a ring she has picked up from in front of the mirror. The ad finally ends with the slogan “I Speak My Truth In #MyCalvins” plastered above her head in capital letters as she slouches in the tub (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10 An image taken from the Calvin Klein advertisement

In this advertisement we are shown a Billie Eilish who is hyper aware of her visibility and the gaze that is directed towards her body. She seems to be trying to avoid the gaze, while also trying to gain success in in one of the most public facing careers. This dissonance is something which I wish to explore in this chapter. Additionally, the notion of “truth” is something which comes up throughout this thesis, and I will look at in more detail in the second chapter.

Billie Eilish’s choice to wear oversized clothing can be seen via the lens of “passing” provided by Sander Gilman in his work *Making The Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*. In his review of Gilman’s book, Grant Rich states that “Via surgery or careful dress, people have long manipulated categories such as hairy/bald, fat/thin, large nose/small

nose, and small breasted/large breasted in order to fit in with socially desirable categories” (Rich, 66, 2000). Therefore, by not wearing clothes which emphasize her figure, Eilish is able to avoid the judgement of the gaze: “It’s not like everyone is going to judge you, but they all do it in their head...even if you’re not even trying to. Anything you look at you judge...that’s how human beings work” (Eilish, 2019). These are statements Eilish gave to *Vogue Australia* when describing the reasons behind her clothing choices. Gilman’s book also reflects on how people are often judged based on appearances, and the argument that “outward physical appearance, in society’s eyes at least, often reflects inner moral value” (Rich, 66, 200).

This is something which Eilish is a point of view that Eilish is keenly aware of. In 2019, an image of Eilish in a tank top went viral on the internet, showing the public that Eilish had large breasts. An interview with *Elle Magazine* following the incident stated that “[Eilish] says her breasts have been an issue for as long as she can remember, which is why she covers them” (Barlow, 2019). Eilish told the interviewer, “Someone with smaller boobs could wear a tank top, and I could put on that exact tank top and get slut-shamed because my boobs are big. That is stupid. It’s the same shirt!” (Eilish, 2019). In addition to the knowledge of the judgement of the gaze, Eilish is aware that women in particular are subject to this scrutiny of the judgement of appearances.

Feminist scholars, such as Susan Bordo, have proposed that the fact of being embodied in a body that is coded as female is a performance in and of itself. This becomes even more complicated for a person such as Eilish, whose bodily performance is on a global platform and is motivated by both career and financial success. In her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo states that the construction of femininity “[insists] that all women aspire to a coercive, standardized ideal” (169, 1993). That ideal being one



founded chiefly on slenderness, as well as a slew of other bodily inscriptions of feminine ideals such as “delicacy” and “sexual passivity” (Bordo, 169, 1993). For Eilish, it seems that it is this described pressure to conform to an unattainable feminine ideal that makes her uncomfortable. She is thus seeking to avoid and subvert these expectations by wearing baggy clothing. As she states in the commercial, she does not wish to be judged on the perceived faults or strengths of her body. However, this act of concealing is not simply one of active resistance, but a response to social norms which have made her feel the need to strictly control how her body is seen, in this case, to make it so that her body is not seen.

Eilish has spoken of dealing with body dysmorphia from a young age. In an interview with Rolling Stone, she said “I’ve never felt comfortable in really tiny clothes.” Eilish joined a competitive dance company when she was 12, which made her very insecure. “I was always worried about my appearance. That was the peak of my body dysmorphia. I couldn’t look in the mirror at all” (Eilish, 2019).

It is through clothing that Eilish is able to enact a feeling of control over her body. In Bordo’s book, the female pathology of anorexia is described as a mechanism of control which goes to extremes to capitulate to the expectations of feminine beauty. This can be viewed as a negotiation of power, rather than within the binary of resistance or submission. Eilish’s decision to wear baggy clothes can be viewed in a similar light. An article by Dazed magazine stated that “the musician uses fashion as a way to protect herself from the world, never being seen in public not wearing oversized clothing” (Cadogan, 2019). While this could be seen as an empowering choice, it is still enmeshed within the limited scope of choices which Eilish feels she has as a woman. She must hide her body, or risk being made to feel uncomfortable, exposed and judged by her ability to enact a performance she does not necessarily wish to succeed in, and within

which it is difficult to even define success. We see this dilemma in Eilish's monologue in the Calvin Klein advertisement where she states that she doesn't want people commenting that "she's slim-thick,' 'she's not slim-thick,' 'she's got a flat ass,' [or] 'she's got a fat ass'" (Eilish, 2019).

Eilish also stated during an interview with Gayle King for *CBS* that the reason she wears oversized clothing is that her relationship with her body is "the most toxic relationship you could even imagine" (Eilish, 2019). Following this statement, a slew of articles came out discussing her statements, "revealing the truth" behind her fashion choices and offering condolences to the singer. *Buzzfeed* posted an article which stated: "The 17-year-old singer often wears baggy clothes, which many assumed was because she didn't want to be sexualized, but recently in an interview with Gayle King, Billie revealed the main reason is because of her relationship with her body" (Carter, 2019).

Eilish also said in an interview for *Vogue Australia* that the reason she wears such large clothes is because "It kind of gives nobody the opportunity to judge what your body looks like. I want layers and layers and layers, and I want to be mysterious. You don't know what's underneath and you don't know what's on top" (Eilish, 2019).

Bordo describes the facet of anorexia that is linked to the de-sexualization of the body "the anorectic discovers that her steadily shrinking body is admired, not so much as an aesthetic or sexual object, but for the strength of will and self-control it projects...as her body begins to lose its traditional feminine curves...she begins to feel untouchable" (Bordo, 178, 1993). The anorexic woman is producing power through her own bodily resistance while also reproducing power structures through her body.

In a similar fashion, Eilish is manipulating her body in a way that does not aim to subscribe to standards of beauty, she is covering her body in order to resist the judgement of the gaze. She is not shrinking her body but dressing it in such a way to make it appear less feminine. However, she ends up producing ideals of female modesty, which Eilish has also pushed back against. All of this makes for an interesting analysis of the production of power and subjugation in our analysis of the female body.

As Bordo theorizes, “to *feel* autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities” (179, 1993). We can see Eilish’s covering of her body as a form of obsessive body-practice – she follows her practice of wearing non-revealing clothes stringently and is almost never seen in public in an outfit which shows her figure. This is done because of pressures on women to conform to certain bodily standards that are often unattainable. This form of dressing does indeed limit her possibilities of dress and can be seen as similar to the case of anorexia which Bordo is describing.

However, there are other factors which are interesting to analyze in this case, and which can show her body practice to both subvert and support norms for female dress. As Veblen highlights in *The Economic Theory of Women’s Dress* women’s clothing has historically restricted women’s movement, such as with the case of high heels or miniskirts. Women’s dress is not meant for personal comfort but in order to meet the expectations of the male gaze at whatever cost. We can see an example of this in the case of the ancient Neo-Confucian Chinese tradition of foot binding. This practice involved a painful process of applying tight the binding to the feet of a young girls to modify the shape and reduce the size of the feet. Bound feet were disfigured and usually always covered, leaving only their smallness on display.

“Veblen cited foot-binding as an example of conspicuous waste in which women surrendered their usefulness as a gesture to signify status in a male world” (Blake, 676, 1994). Fred Blake theorized that “the girl's self-realization required her not merely to become, but to "overcome her body" by restricting the space it filled (Blake, 681, 1994). The woman must restrict the amount of space she takes up, through a painful and uncomfortable process as a rite of passage which underscores learning how to exist within the patriarchy.

Going against that framework, Eilish described her choice to wear large clothing as being for her own mental comfort. She stated in the *CBS* interview with Gayle King, “It’s less about ‘My body is ugly, I don’t want you to see it, it’s more about, ‘I’m not comfortable wearing this. I’m comfortable wearing [baggier clothes].’ (Eilish, 2019).

Therefore, by dressing for her own comfort, Eilish can be seen to be subverting norms for how women dress, even though she is making this decision due to the immense pressure put on women to conform to certain bodily standards. In this way, we can see that Eilish is both subject to and subverting female gendered norms through dress.

Returning to the issue of her simultaneous subversion and subjection, one can see that by remaining covered Eilish is both supporting and subverting ideals for women as this mode of dressing subscribes to traditional ideas which celebrate female modesty. Eilish has addressed this duality, and it shows that singer herself may be unsure where to situate herself in terms of which norms she wants to subvert. Eilish is faced with the conundrum that if she remains covered, she is subverting one set of ideals, but subscribing to another. If she undresses, she is subverting a different set of ideals, but she is subjecting her body to the gaze and thus subscribing to another set of normative ideals for women. Therefore, we see Eilish’s choices to be a complicated

navigation of power as power is emanating from different loci depending on which mode of embodiment she chooses.

An example of Eilish grappling with this duality exists in an interview with *V Magazine*, where she said “I wear what I want to wear. But of course, everyone sees it as, ‘She’s saying no to being sexualized,’ and, ‘She’s saying no to being the stereotypical female’ It’s a weird thing because I know a lot of what I hear is a positive or people trying to be positive about how I dress; how I am never really out there wearing nothing, or wearing dresses. I’ve heard that. [Even] from my parents, positive [comments] about how I dress have this slut-shaming element. Like, ‘I am so glad that you are dressing like a boy so that other girls can dress like boys, so that they aren’t sluts.’ That’s basically what it sounds like to me. And I can’t [overstate how] strongly I do not appreciate that, at all.”

It is clear that Eilish is coming to terms with the implications of her bodily choices, and the complexity which her actions hold as she comes of age. On March 9, 2020 in Miami, the first night of her world tour for her album *When we All Fall Asleep Where do we go?* Eilish manifested these complicated feelings in an act that shocked and excited her fans.

She shocked and excited fans by showing a video of herself stripping off her layers of baggy clothing to reveal her bra. The video was uploaded on YouTube by a fan with the title “Billie Eilish Strips Down to Bra for Powerful Message While On Tour”, and proceeded to go viral among her fan base. As she slowly strips off each layer of clothing, Eilish narrates the video: “Some people hate what I wear, some people praise it. Some people use it to shame others, some people use it to shame me. But I feel you watching, always, and nothing I do goes unseen. Would you like me to be smaller? Weaker? Softer? Taller? Would you like me to be quiet? Do my shoulders provoke you? Does my chest? Am I my stomach? My hips? The body I

was born with, is it not what you wanted? If what I wear is comfortable, I am not a woman. If I shed the layers, I am a slut.” As the video ends, the screen goes black and the following words are narrated and projected: "If I wear more, if I wear less, who decides what that makes me? What that means? Is my value based only on your perception? Or is your opinion of me not my responsibility?"

So just how subversive is Billie Eilish being? We can analyze the different facets of Eilish's attempts at subversion through the theoretical lenses offered by Judith Butler and Susan Bordo.

Judith Butler sees gender as performative. Therefore, woman is not merely something that one “is” but something that someone becomes. Butler understands gender as a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid and regulatory frame (Butler, 1990). That highly rigid regulatory frame can be seen as the social norms to which persons conform in the construction of their gender. Butler also argues that “identity, including sex/gender identity, is always the *result* and not the *cause* of power, discourse, and politics” (Chambers, 2, 2017). This helps in our understanding of Billie Eilish's complicated and often contradictory acts of embodied resistance. Eilish is enmeshed in the varying discourses which have produced her gender. These discourses wish to sexualize and gaze upon women's bodies, there is a desire for Billie Eilish to uncover that which is covered. However, discourses around gender simultaneously shame women for showing their bodies. Therefore, she is attempting to oppose both of these ideas, by simultaneously physically concealing her body and by putting her body in the spotlight in a very direct and sometimes (as we see with the video she played before her concert and much of her music) overtly sexual way.

What is especially interesting in this case is the way in which Butler analyzes subversion. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler analyzes drag as a mechanism of subverting gender. “[Butler’s] claim is ... that drag is subversive simply because it makes explicit the essential performativity of gender, and there is subversion inherent to making explicit that which is usually concealed” (Chambers, 6, 2017). Billie Eilish’s attention-grabbing act of stripping down to her bra, after only having appeared publicly in oversized clothing, draws attention to the fact that her persona is indeed an elaborate performance. The fact that this persona is hinged on multifaceted ideas about gender could reveal that gender is a performance. Looking at this performance through the lens of Butler’s use of Derrida’s “citationality,” which demonstrates how signs can be manipulated based upon the context in which they are used, Billie Eilish’s “protest” strip tease can be seen as having subversive qualities. As Butler explains in *Bodies that Matter*, when gender performances are cited and implanted into other contexts, they reveal the “citationality” and therefore the lack of substance behind all gender performances (Butler, 1995). Here, Eilish is redefining the action of stripping for an audience to convey a message about how women’s bodies are objectified and held to unachievable and conflicting standards of both modesty and sexuality – whichever performance a woman chooses she will be scrutinized for it. Her stripping is not meant to provoke sexually, but to provoke onlookers to question why they invest so much meaning in whether or not Billie Eilish shows her body.

Eilish is confronted with a vortex of competing discourses on the female body, which reifies Judith Butler’s theory that there is no “true” gender identity and therefore there is no substantiated gendered reality behind any of Eilish’s performative acts. Butler argues that “[the] idea of a true identity, not any particular version of gender identity, [should] be disrupted” (Chambers, 6, 2017). This can explain the difficulty that Eilish faces in constructing a coherent

narrative behind her gendered bodily performance and also perhaps aids in our understanding that Eilish is creating discourse in the media, which shows that each of these contradicting performances of the body (wearing baggy clothes or stripping) have no foundation in reality, and are a haphazard response to different ideas about femininity that she is faced with.

Another way of seeing Eilish's stripping performance is through the lens of Bordo, who says, "the language of femininity, when pushed to excess – when shouted and asserted, when disruptive and demanding – deconstructs into its opposite and makes available to the woman an illusory experience of power previously forbidden to her by virtue of her gender" (Bordo, 179, 1993). While Bordo is addressing eating disorders in this excerpt, Eilish's concert performance can be seen as parallel in nature. Therefore, Eilish's action of stripping could be seen as a parodying of the media's desire and obsession with what her body looks like under her clothes.

However, Bordo theorizes that such a mode of subversion in fact capitulates to what is expected of a woman by social norms, and therefore only offers the woman an illusory sense of power. This can be seen firstly by virtue of the fact that she is proclaiming it is her "choice" to perform such an action, however any idea of free choice is illusory. Secondly, in order for the woman to be the figure which holds a mirror to society, she must first put her body on the line. Eilish could be read as putting her body on the line in this way, as she previously spoke of the discomfort which she feels in wearing skimpy clothing and experiencing body dysmorphia from a young age which incentivized her to wear looser fitting clothing. Therefore, she is enacting a performance that both cedes to her audience's desires to see her body and runs the risk of causing her severe mental discomfort. Therefore, as Bordo hypothesizes, "the pathologies of female protest function, paradoxically, as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produce



them, reproducing rather than transforming precisely that which is being protested” (Bordo, 177, 1993).

In order to truly understand these ideas of subversion, we must understand the illusion of choice. Eilish’s aversion to the media’s praise of her clothing choices can be seen in light of Bordo’s discussion of female pathologies as she states that “potential for resistance and rebellion is pressed into the service of maintaining established order” (Bordo, 177, 1993). Eilish seems to have some beginning understanding that her choice is made within limited confines. Iris Lopez’s research on Puerto Rican women and their decisions to get sterilized criticizes the ideology of choice and offers a new way of looking at the way we make choices. The “ideology of choice” is based on the assumption that people have options and, that we live in a “free” society with infinite alternatives from which to choose. “By focusing on individual choice, we overlook the fact that choices are primed by larger institutional structures and ideological messages” (Lopez, 160, 2013). Similarly, to ideas put forth by Bordo, choices that Eilish and other women make are tied up with broader ideological messages that get sent to them from society, and from which they cannot escape in any decision which they make.

No matter what choice Billie Eilish ultimately picks, to cover up or to reveal her body, she is both maintaining and subverting some sort of female expectation, and she has made that choice with the knowledge of the restraints that have been placed upon her and the judgements that she will receive as a result. This can be linked to her confusion/contradictions on how she wants to dress and define herself. Eilish is in a bind.

Eilish said the following in an interview with *NME* "If I was a guy and I was wearing these baggy clothes, nobody would bat an eye. There’s people out there saying, ‘Dress like a girl for once! Wear tight clothes you’d be much prettier, and your career would be so much better!’

No, it wouldn't. It literally would not" (Eilish, 2019). On the opposite side of that coin, in an interview with *Elle Magazine* that took place a couple of months before her 18th birthday, she proclaimed that the way she dresses might change with her new adult status. "I'm gonna be a woman. I wanna show my body," Eilish told the magazine, "What if I wanna make a video where I wanna look desirable? I know it would be a huge thing. I know people will say, 'I've lost all respect for her.'" Her statements contradict and complicate the idea that Eilish is opposed to sexualization or uncomfortable with showing her body. It is worth noting that Eilish views being a woman as being subjected to the gaze of others. However, as stated above, the choice to show one's body can also be viewed as subverting ideas of female modesty.

It is also interesting that Eilish underscores "being desirable" with showing her body. As is the case with foot binding, that which is covered can elicit even more desire than that which is exposed. Blake in his article on foot binding describes "the mystification of the sexual object... [men] fawned over the appearance and disappearance of the tiny feet in an erotic context (688, 1994). We can see something similar occurring with Eilish in the media. By making her body mysterious, as she says in her interview with *Australian Vogue*, she has actually fueled attention to her body rather than evading it. This mystery is exactly what has fueled so much media attention on her body and the decision she makes around it.

Nevertheless, her statements to *Elle Magazine* about wanting to show her body contradict her earlier statements to *NME* where she claimed to feel pressured to wear tighter clothing and states her gender as being a limitation on her freedom to dress in a certain way without being judged. However, if we look at the statements to *NME* in addition to her protest act of stripping before her Miami concert, it's clear that Eilish realizes that the choice to wear revealing clothing also comes with judgement.

As Butler theorizes, every individual is compelled by societal norms to live up to gendered norms that are impossible to fulfill (Butler, 1995). Eilish's particular conflict is based in the norm of dressing with the correct balance of femininity and conservativeness. These impossible gendered norms also help us to get a deeper understanding for the reasoning behind phenomena such as body dysmorphia. Eilish would like to live up to impossible bodily standards of femininity, chiefly those of slenderness, and since she does not meet these impossible goals, views her body as much larger and more grotesque than it would actually be seen to be by an outside onlooker. Therefore, she chooses to cover her body, an action which she has said brings her mental comfort but has also brought even more attention to her body. It is also an action which was made within a set of seemingly limited choices – as Lopez says, “all decisions are socially constrained and mediated when individuals confront them as active social agents” (159, 2013).

Eilish is in a complicated situation. As Chris Shilling states in *The Body and Social Theory* “If one feels unable to exert influence over an increasingly complex society, one can at least affect the size, shape and appearance of one's body” (Shilling, 9, 2012). Eilish, through avenues of covering vs uncovering, is creating a sense of control in what is a mostly uncontrollable and high-pressure environment entrenched in patriarchal ideas about what women should and can do with their bodies

## Chapter 2: Power and the Branded Body

Another important component in the analysis of Eilish's body project is that of power and consumption. In order to fully analyze power, we must first have a working definition of power and the role it plays in subversion. Eilish has stated that she doesn't see what she is doing as resistance, but rather as a personal choice, which has simply brought much speculation. However, it is important to understand that no action is made outside of the realm of power. Therefore, though Eilish may not view her actions as resistance specifically, her actions are nonetheless a response to power structures that critique and scrutinize the female body.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argues against the idea that power is merely one-sided and repressive, and instead he urges us towards a view of power that is multi-faceted, relational, omnipresent and as productive as it is repressive. Actors are not simply repressed by external forces but produce their own subjugation through self-regulation. Foucault's vision of power also asserts that nothing occurs "outside" of power because power exists within every relationship and action within society. Therefore, the female body cannot be seen as something which is merely repressed by social and gendered norms but should be seen as a conduit of power which can produce, respond to and manipulate these norms.

This framework also helps us to interrogate the relationship between Billie Eilish's body and her brand. Eilish's brand is a huge locus of power for her – she can manipulate her body in such a way to boost her career, increasing her wealth, fame and status. However, this also means that she must monitor the actions she takes with her body closely.

An example of this is the case of the video of Eilish undressing which she played before her tour in Miami. In addition to sending a feminist message, Eilish was developing her brand image and increasing her symbolic and material profits while doing so. In an article for *The Hill*

titled “Billie Eilish takes off her shirt to protest body shaming”, the author writes that “The video set the tone of Eilish’s world tour starting in Florida and taking her across Europe, Asia and South America” (Srikanth, 2020). This video was a calculated move in the development of the plot of Eilish’s tour. She wants to be seen and known that is for sure, and while she has insecurities surrounding her body - she can profit and gain the notoriety she wants through this selling point, another nodule of power in her court. Of course, this form of power is still entrenched within broader power systems of gender and surveillance, which I analyzed in the first chapter.

With all this in mind, can one accurately answer the question of whether Eilish’s acts of embodiment are subversive or submissive? I would argue that they cannot be defined within such a binary. It is very complex, and the role of profit complicates her actions and adds the element of accruing monetary power to each of her decisions. We understand now that Eilish’s body project is not so simple as asking the public not to look at her, in fact it is quite the opposite. Eilish’s choice to discuss her body is decidedly a part of her marketing campaign. In addition to negotiating power in her internal world, Eilish is using a covered body to create power in the sense of capital and fame, which she is accruing through the “selling” of this “new” way of presenting the female body. In her creation of the narrative of wanting to stay hidden, she has fostered a seemingly never-ending discourse and obsession with her body that is tied to her brand. She is fanning the flames of desire from her audience through mystery. This is made plain by the fact that she used her body (and choice to keep it hidden) as a marketing strategy with Calvin Klein.

We can look at this advertisement as a mode of brand creation, not for Calvin Klein, but for Eilish herself. Calvin Klein is able to use the association with Eilish’s carefully crafted

aesthetic to appeal to her fanbase and get them to buy their products. However, in the production of this advertisement, it is Eilish who is asserting something key about her identity, and therefore, her brand. She is marketing “her truth” which is brought from the internal world to the external world and made tangible through clothing. This truth is marketed as one which can be accessed by the consumer through their clothing choices, most chiefly through the choice of buying Calvin Klein and listening to Billie Eilish. She is marketed as “the real” and “relatable” artist to consumers of her music, an identity which has contributed to her skyrocket to fame. After the release of the Calvin Klein advertisement, the desire to be covered up became a central part of the Billie Eilish “product”. Ironically, but almost certainly predictably, celebrity news outlets began to obsess over the singer’s body and her choice to cover it. Almost every article about her fashion choices or body mentioned the quote featured in the Calvin Klein advertisement. The “forbidden” nature of discussing Eilish’s covered-up teen body seems to fuel the obsession with talking about it. This is not to say Eilish is lying about her relationship to her body, but rather that using her fraught relationship with her body to accrue capital is just another way in which she is negotiating the link between the body and power.

We must remember that Billie Eilish’s image is a carefully constructed product – every action she does, every statement she makes in an interview, has been carefully planned by her and her managers, stylist, record label and the brands with which she is associated. Therefore, as with the case of the stripping video before her concert in Miami, she must continually provide new material for the media and fans to discuss -- give them something unexpected, something they have been craving to see, and assert a *new* kind of power and control over her body - the ability to *show* her body and get attention for it as opposed to the other way around.

Thus, the complicating role of branding and profit making in this analysis cannot be stressed enough. We see Eilish in the midst of negotiating what bodily control and power looks like for her, all while getting media attention towards her body, which will ramp up interest in her product. As I have discussed, Eilish has managed to draw attention to her body via the act of hiding it. There is a sense of anxiety, guilt and fascination in the gossip columns which discuss her body. The candidness with which she discusses her body image issues, and the front-and-center display of this via her highly visible style choices draw in fans and pop culture commentators alike. Celebrity gossip column “popbuzz” asserted that while “the sexualization of her body has kept her in baggy clothes” it is her relationship with her body that was “actually the reason she started wearing them (Duribe, 2019). Among the dozens of articles around the singer’s interview statements, *novafm*, an Australian celebrity news website, described her reason for wearing baggy clothes as “heartbreaking” in an article entitled “Billie Eilish Reveals the Heartbreaking Reason She Wears Baggy Clothes.” *Elite daily* cited statements she made about the fear of being “slut-shamed” as the reason behind her choice to dress in less-revealing clothing - describing it in the headline as “actually really upsetting” (Walsh, 2019).

I have discussed the complexity of Eilish’s choices when it comes to how she is embodied. However, whatever action she chooses implicates her body at the center of her brand and thus uses her body as a mechanism to gain power, fame and capital. Therefore, Eilish’s convoluted and contradictory approach must be understood as being intertwined in her attempt to create a brand image that will sell, but also connect and endear her to her fan base.

An example of the commitment of Eilish’s followers can be seen in an interaction on Twitter, in which fans brought up statements Eilish had made about her relationship with her body when someone tried to sexualize her online at the age of 17. An article from celebrity news

source *Insider* detailed fans' response to a male Twitter user who described the singer as "thick" after a picture surfaced online of Billie Eilish in a tank top.

**User @2020predicts commented:**

"billie eilish literally said she wears baggy clothes, so she doesn't get sexualized and the minute she shows some skin y'all sexualize her? gross"

**User @PoshAgabi added:**

"Billie Eilish says she wears baggy clothes cos what u can't see u can't body shame. And that's really sad. That's the world we live in. People now hide themselves to be free of you 21st century bullies."

**User @seitanwhore stated:**

"BILLIE EILISH IS 17 YEARS OLD. she's explicitly stated that she wears baggy clothing bc she doesn't want to be sexualized. and the one time she unzips her hoodie, the internet is on her like fucking vultures. im sick. y'all are depraved."

Following the Twitter incident, there were several articles discussing what happened, as well as Eilish's choice to hide her body. After this, Eilish presented herself as being fed-up with the media's attention on her body. An interviewer with *Elle Magazine* stated that "respect is an issue when it comes to the discussion of Eilish's body. She physically yawns when the subject is raised." Eilish said of the Twitter incident, "'My boobs were trending on Twitter! At number one! What is that?! Every outlet wrote about my boobs!'" (Eilish, 2019).

It is interesting to see Eilish's seeming shock and repulsion towards the media's attention to her body, which she has purposefully made central to her image. She seems here to be attempting to keep a coherent narrative, she must dismiss and show disdain for the attention the media is giving to her body, even if it benefits her brand in the long run, in order to maintain the



image of authenticity. As stated before, Eilish's relationship to her body, both in the public sphere as well as in her own private world, is a negotiation of power. She seems to be in conflict between wanting to hide her body versus the fact that her body is a vehicle for much of her popularity and success. Though antithetical, this outward projection of a hidden body which symbolizes a hidden self, crafts Eilish's specific brand of aloofness. This brand of aloofness and rebellion is what draws in her fanbase of adolescent women, who feel like they too are represented by the way in which Eilish presents her body. In an article for *The Guardian* in which reporter Hannah Ewens details her experience at a Billie Eilish concert, she highlights that "Notably, all the girls are wearing baggy shirts or hoodies with skirts and trainers, a freedom they attribute to Eilish's influence." (Ewens, 2019). They too, wish to "resist" ideas of being on display which confront women in their daily enactments of being embodied.

As Bordo underscores in *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity*, "With the advent of movies and television the rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through standardized visual images" (169, 1993). Therefore, Eilish is disrupting the standardized flow of images of what is acceptable for women, and in fact creating a new precedent for the way in which young women should dress, creating a new option, which overtime becomes a viable standard. "We learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression movements, and behavior are required" (Bordo, 170, 1993). Whether Eilish likes it or not, she is producing a set of images for women to look to in the construction of their bodies. It is these choices that connect her to her young female audience and gives them the "freedom," as *The Guardian* writer put it, to emulate her.

Going back to the Twitter incident, the male user who described Eilish as “thick” highlighted the sexual nature of many of her lyrics after getting pushback from fans about his comments on the singer’s body. He noted that there is a disconnect between her perceived desire to not be sexualized and the content of her music and videos. An example of this is the song which the twitter user quoted, “Bad Guy”, which is her most popular song to date with over 1 billion streams on Spotify and over 720 million views on YouTube. An excerpt of the lyrics are as follows:

**Bruises, on both my knees for you  
Don't say thank you or please  
I do what I want when I'm wanting to  
My soul? So cynical  
So you're a tough guy  
Like it really rough guy  
Just can't get enough guy  
Chest always so puffed guy  
I'm that bad type  
Make your mama sad type  
Make your girlfriend mad tight  
Might seduce your dad type  
I'm the bad guy, duh**

**I like it when you take control  
Even if you know that you don't  
Own me, I'll let you play the role  
I'll be your animal  
My mommy likes to sing along with me  
But she won't sing this song  
If she reads all the lyrics  
She'll pity the men I know**

The video features Eilish dressed in a large white button down with several silver chains, repeating the lyrics with a monotone expression as blood drips down from her nose onto her white socks and white slides, after which she unflinchingly smears the blood on her face with her

hand. This is interspersed with cuts of her dancing dramatically in a bright yellow baggy jumpsuit. Throughout the video, it cuts back to her with the blood on her face, continuing to unthinkingly smear it around with a smirk. The video is full of bright colors, rambunctious outfits and nonsensical antics. For example, Eilish rides a bright red go-cart in front of a crew of men riding tricycles - she is dressed in large hoop earrings, a large red sweater and oversized red boxer shorts as she sings the line “might seduce your dad type.”

There is a cut to Eilish sitting on the floor in the same white button-down outfit, bruises on her knees looking up at the camera with provocative eyes as she asks, “so you’re a tough guy?” The video ends in a red-lit room with a close-up of Eilish seemingly levitating up and down as the camera zooms out to show her sitting cross-legged on top of a shirtless man doing push-ups. In this scene, she finishes the song with the following lines:

**I like when you get mad  
I guess I'm pretty glad that you're alone  
You said she's scared of me?  
I mean, I don't see what she sees  
But maybe it's 'cause I'm wearing your cologne  
I'm a bad guy  
I'm a bad guy  
Bad guy, bad guy  
I'm a bad-**

As the sexual lyrics and provocative content of “Bad Guy” make clear - Eilish may hide her body, but both her lyrical and visual content can be quite sexual in nature. This, in combination with her age and choice to cover up creates an enticing forbidden sexual product. In fact, the appeal to older men occurs in her song “My Strange Addiction”. It begins with the voice of an older man saying, “No Billie, I haven’t done that dance since my wife died.” An excerpt from this song showcases another example of her sexual lyrics:

**Take what I want when I wanna**

**And I want ya  
Bad, bad news  
One of us is gonna lose  
I'm the powder, you're the fuse  
Just add some friction**

Eilish's frustration with the media's attention to her body seems contradictory because her body (that is her clothing, hair and gestures) is the main selling point of her brand that Chanel and Samantha Burkhardt have worked on crafting. In her song "COPYCAT" she complains of someone trying to copy her signature style:

**Copycat trying to cop my manner  
Watch your back when you can't watch mine  
Copycat trying to cop my glamour  
Why so sad, bunny, you can't have mine?  
Call me calloused, call me cold  
You're italic, I'm in bold  
Call me cocky, watch your tone  
You better love me, 'cause you're just a clone  
By the way, you've been uninvite  
'Cause all you say are all the same things I did**

As the lyrics of "COPYCAT" show, she sees another person trying to steal her style as a threat – telling the offender to “watch your back” and reprimanding them by “uninviting” them since all they are is a copier. Therefore, there is a clear conflict here: Eilish says she wishes for her body to be concealed, forgotten about, but at the same time she has created a brand centered around her body and the uniqueness of her fashion choices. The lyrics of "COPYCAT" can also be interpreted as a little ironic, considering she now has a huge fanbase who emulates her style, and buys merchandise from her in order to do so. We have seen that the act of concealing her

body has created a new trend, brought her a huge amount of media attention, and a cult following of teenage girls who feel that dressing like Eilish makes them “free”. Eilish’s body is a productive one as her aesthetic is constructed to be marketable. Therefore, she has created an alternative “bodily discourse”, as Bordo put it, for women’s dress, which emphasizes comfort and the rejection of the gaze. She has also made large amounts of money while doing so. In addition to collaborations with brands like Calvin Klein and Chanel, Eilish started a line of clothing with the young adult targeted retail corporation Urban Outfitters called the “Billie Eilish Collection,” which sells merchandise and clothing that emulate her signature style. Eilish has created a new trend which teen girls now aspire not only to appear up to date with trends, but also so that they may feel a communal sense of bodily autonomy through association with her style. It is interesting to see this concept of dress as freedom. In addition to the fact that dressing to cover the body being a choice made out of a limited set of options, we should consider how Eilish has created an experience of bodily freedom and subversion that can be bought. The concept of the consumption of subversion is something I will expand upon later, with regards to her style.

It is important to understand the system of consumerism, which Eilish herself is embedded within. Eilish’s body is both a monetary and social resource, as she uses her bodily performances both to make money and gain social clout. A cycle of conspicuous consumption that is facilitated by the use of her body and style, which then makes her money, gets her free clothing and adds to her repertoire of fashion. Her devotion to consumerism is shown in her fashion and public persona. A look through her Instagram page shows her wearing shirts and jumpsuits with designer brand labels, such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci.

Economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen introduced the idea of conspicuous consumption in 1899 in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* in relation to the social class he referred to as the “new rich”. Many popular performing artists, including Eilish, fall into this social category, and therefore occupy a social space characterized by performative consumption of expensive goods. For Eilish, this specifically looks like dressing in gaudy designer brands, in her own iconic personal style of baggy clothing.

Veblen describes this form of consumption in an essay titled *The Economic Theory of Woman's Dress* as “The immediate and obvious index of pecuniary strength, [which is] the visible ability to spend, to consume unproductively” (68, 1894). This form of performative expenditure has historically rested in the fashion of women, “originally because she was herself a pecuniary possession [and] has become in a peculiar way the exponent of the pecuniary strength of her social group” (68, 1894). Though Eilish has risen to fame in the 21st century, the historical significance of women's fashion as an economic symbol remains, but in a different framework - she is an object of aspiration to her followers, while also aspiring to appear within a certain class. She is therefore a mechanism of the market and also entrenched in said market.

In response to a question about facing criticism on a global stage Eilish stated, “you wouldn't believe the shit people say about me. It's fucking funny though, because who's making money? Who's playing shows across the globe? Who's getting free shoes? Me... Not to be cocky or anything but fuck you.”

Georg Simmel, in his analysis of fashion for *The American Journal of Sociology* states that fashion “unites those of a social class and segregates them from others” (Simmel, 541, 1957). Therefore, by displaying physical indicators of wealth on her body, Eilish is asserting

herself as separate from those who may criticize her, but don't have the wealth and fame that she is now accruing. Therefore, Eilish can be said to be using fashion as a symbol of both class aspiration and class differentiation.

Eilish has not only aspired to wealth symbolically, with a net worth of approximately 6 million dollars, that is sure to only increase as her career develops, Eilish and her family are certainly not "poor as fuck" as she described them in reference to her childhood. In order to fully understand what makes Eilish function so well in the market, we have to first understand the mechanisms through which counter cultural elements of style serves the market. Eilish presents something new and defiant, with images and fashion elements which are reminiscent or appropriative of styles from the punk movement as well as from African American culture. As Dick Hebdige details in his book *Subculture: the meaning of style*, wherever novelty arises, capitalism finds a way to package it and make it profitable, even if that novelty was meant to rebel against the very system of capitalism or similar structures. Eilish's brand has benefitted from this notion - her edgy image appeals to consumers.

In his book, Dick Hebdige describes different case studies of this phenomenon in the Anglophone music industry. One such prominent case being that of the punk movement which arose in London in the 1970s, a subgenre born out of the coming together of diverse and seemingly divergent musical styles, which "found ratification in an equally eclectic clothing style which reproduced the same kind of cacophony on the visual level" (Hebdige, 26, 1979). He states that "punk reproduced the entire sartorial history of post-war working-class youth cultures in 'cut up' form, combining elements which had originally belonged to completely different epochs" (Hebdige, 26, 1979).

Hebdige outlines how hegemony functions to maintain power. Hegemonic entities exert authority over subordinate groups “not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by winning and shaping consent so that the dominant class appears both legitimate and natural” (Hebdige, 16, 1979). This is especially interesting to consider in the case of Eilish, a cultural figure who in many ways appropriates subversion in order to create a marketable aesthetic. She serves as a locus of desire for many people and is fueling desires in an impressionable youth audience for a purchasable bodily performance. For example, Eilish’s line of clothing with Urban Outfitters sells merchandise and clothing emulating her signature style. Her collaboration with the designer brand Chanel, who is aided her in the shaping of her aesthetic, further reveals a corporate strategy.

When Eilish attended the Oscars in 2020, she wore a baggy boucle Chanel suit, paired with fingerless black gloves marked with the brand name across them, long black nails and slime green hair (Fig. 11).





Fig. 11 Billie Eilish in Chanel at the Grammy Awards

Fashion and celebrity lifestyle writers applauded the singer’s bold revamp of the Chanel brand. *Instyle* proclaimed that the singer made “one of the most powerful French fashion houses on the planet bend to her preferences” (Reed, 2020). Kim Bhasin, a luxury reporter at *Bloomberg News* tweeted that the style choice was “great for Chanel” and a tweet which was featured in the *Instyle* article from user @sophiafara14 said that Eilish “makes Chanel feel fresher and younger”.

As stated earlier, Chanel is partly responsible for the construction of the Billie Eilish brand, and they helped to style her in preparation for a record label search. Therefore, the autonomy of Eilish in her styling choice at the Oscars is questionable. The singer represents a

youth market for the brand and is a symbol of an embodied reality which young people should now desire. The “subversive” nature of her outfit constitutes a co-opting of subversion stemming from within a hegemonic ruling class. This has been the case with Eilish since the start of her career - her ‘novelty’ was prepackaged and carefully curated, with the pre-existing knowledge of the style of edginess she needed to employ in order to be desirable and therefore marketable.

Another example of this cooptation of subcultural style is an article that was published by *footwearnews* entitled “How Billie Eilish’s Punky Tomboy Outfits Bring Attention to Streetwear for Girls.” The article states that “[Eilish’s] always-surprising looks — which often include hugely oversized sweatshirts and pants, clashing colors and patterns, bold accessories and rare-edition sneakers — are inspiring fellow teen girls to embrace streetwear in a fresh and edgy new way. She is showing that streetwear isn’t just for the boys and that comfortable, loose-fitting clothes can still have plenty of swag” (Clark, 2019).

In *Sneakers: Fashion, Gender and Subculture*, Yuniya Kawamura addresses sneaker subculture and the ways in which subculture evolves. She quotes David Muggleton, who offers the following analysis of style as “no longer articulated around the modernist structuring relations of class, gender, ethnicity or even the age span of ‘youth’” (Kawamura, 4, 2016). She agrees with Muggleton, stating that “stylistic heterogeneity has been pushed to its utmost limits as the outward appearance of rebellion becomes merely another mode of fashion. He implies that there is no sense of subcultural authenticity” (Kawamura, 4, 2016). The concept of “teenage rebellion” that Eilish capitalizes on is a recurring theme throughout modern history (20 and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries), and especially in subculture. However, rebellion is ironically a marketable trend, as we see in Chanel’s utilization of Eilish as a brand promoter to “revamp” its classic image to something more subversive.

In order to more deeply understand the way in which the market works to produce a pop cultural actor such as Eilish, we can analyze some aspects of bodily performance in greater depth. If we look at certain elements of her style, we can trace the roots of this mechanism of bodily/subcultural defiance and come to understand how Eilish has come to utilize this in her bodily presentation.

One such element of Eilish's bodily presentation is her sneakers. Eilish has professed her love for sneakers - she has appeared on several sneaker-fanatic blogs, and there are custom sneaker designs dedicated to the singer on Etsy and similar websites (Fig. 12). The singer also appeared on a sneaker shopping segment with *Complex* which Wikipedia defines as "an American New York-based media platform for youth culture [which] reports on trends in style, pop culture, music, sports and sneakers with a focus on streetwear, sneaker culture, hip hop, and graphic art." In the segment, Eilish stated that she is potentially collaborating with Air Jordan sneaker brand on a shoe for the women's line, as she expressed discontent with the women's sneakers that are available and claims to only wear men's sneakers. Sneakers here can again be seen as a testament to Billie Eilish's desire for comfort in female dress. We can contrast her donning of the shoes to high heels, which often decrease the wearers' mobility and comfort.



Fig. 12 A custom designed Nike sneaker created by an Etsy user selling for \$271

“Jordans specifically are a shoe with a very complex history, the cultural significance of which is demonstrated through its complex interactions with class, race and gender – as well as with ideas of performativity and perception. Sneaker subculture refers to the cross-class, cross-racial group of primarily male consumers of sneakers who are dedicated to the consumption of sneakers, and for whom the wearing of sneakers has an impact on their sense of identity. This formation of sneaker subculture has roots in the South Bronx in the 1970s, an African-American neighborhood which was the poorest in New York at the time. As sneaker subculture became more widespread and popularized, divisions such as race and class became increasingly obscured among consumers. However, the foundational element of procuring power through one’s own subcultural lens remained. As one interviewee from Kawamura’s ethnography of modern sneaker subculture put it, ‘When I’m wearing my fresh pair of sneakers, it puts me on a different level. I am who I am because of my sneakers’ (Anonymous quoted in Kawamura, 3, 2016).” (Walker, 2020).

As Jordans became more popular across class and race lines, people across class and race backgrounds were purchasing and enjoying the social status which expensive sneakers such as Air Jordan’s bring. “By the mid-1990s white teenagers became the primary consumers of hip-hop culture and fashion taking after and incorporating the black teens fashion and lifestyle” (Kawamura 77, 2016). In addition to Eilish using Jordan’s as a mechanism through which to convey identity, we see here that she is a part of a subset of consumers who associate with hip-hop culture in order to stand out and add a subversive element to their bodily presentation.

In a similar way to Kawamura’s interviewee, Eilish is using sneakers to state something about an internal identity by associating with a specific culture. She is also displaying her wealth

on her feet, in order to establish herself as having ‘made it’. Therefore, the proliferation of sneaker culture across race lines allowed Billie Eilish to integrate them as a part of her embodied identity. We see the obsession with perception and conspicuous consumption that is associated with Eilish’s persona reflected in the sneakers she wears. This desire for individuality that is expressed on the body is further conveyed in the previously mentioned interview with *Complex*, when Eilish is talking about custom sneakers, “I love the idea of having something nobody else has...you can’t go and buy that” (Eilish, 2020).

As Kawamura has highlighted in her book, styles which were once subcultural are now open for co-opting by celebrities to create the enticing allure of commodified subversion. Clothing is a safe way for young women like Eilish and her fans to feel as if they are resisting social norms while they are fueling the market. Vicki Karaminas in her book, *The Men’s Fashion Readers*, sheds light on the role that Eilish and pop icons in general play in selling subculture and identity. She states that “The fashion industry designs and *creates* garments, while popular music sells a *lifestyle* (aided by pop and rock stars), through the consumption of fashionable merchandise. Fashion and style are the visual counterparts to musical expression – the pose, the ‘look’ merge to create a subcultural spectacle that is coopted by the mainstream” (Kawamura, 99, 2016). Therefore, we see identity and consumerism in a symbiotic relationship because in modern Western society the body is seen as a locus of identity, a house for a free agent. Capitalism is able to profit off of selling people a product which reaffirms this outlook as one can buy a lifestyle to “wear” on the body to express this internal identity and sense of freedom. Popular culture icons such as Billie Eilish are a driving force behind this phenomenon, as they imbue the product with the “lifestyle” with which individuals would like to be associated.

This phenomenon is central to Eilish as she has closely associated the clothes that she wears with her identity throughout her career. Colin Campbell in his article *The Meaning of Objects and the Meaning of Actions*, discusses how individuals decipher the symbolic value behind the clothing that they buy and wear. He cites the common phrase “This *is* me!” upon finding a clothing item in a store, which suggests that individuals “approach products with the intention of finding confirmation of an existing image” (Campbell, 102, 1996). He asserts that objects “in general play an important part in creating and maintaining an individual’s sense of self” (Campbell, 102, 1996). Campbell’s theories shed light on the following statement made by Eilish in an interview on the website for Air Jordans: “Obviously, I make music, but without clothes, fashion and style, I’m not at all who I want to be. If I’m not wearing something that I’m comfortable in, then mentally, I’m not comfortable either. I want people to look at me when I walk into a room, you know? Even if they’re judging me or think that I look horribly ratchet, I’m like, ‘Ok good’” (Eilish, 2019).

Therefore, we see Eilish looking to clothing as a method of making her internal identity tangible, it also reasserts the fact that despite the fact that she wants her body covered, she does indeed want attention to her embodied form.

The “Billie Eilish” product is in large part built upon her bodily performance both in a sexual sense (even if that is represented by the resistance of sexuality) and as a vehicle for accruing capital in the fashion industry. Shilling describes the female body project often being “more reflective of male desires and fantasies than an expression of individuality” (10, 2012). I’d like to posit that this is simultaneously true and false for Eilish. While she subtly utilizes male desire to sell her “product,” she is also continuously reasserting the narrative of personal individuality and external expression of the internal through her clothing and art.

These concepts bring us back to the idea of fashion and art making tangible some sort of stable internal self. However, as Bourdieu's theory of habitus makes clear, there is no clear and stable internal self. Bourdieu's habitus teaches us that our tastes, habits and choices are all shaped by the sociocultural context in which we live. I hope that this thesis has shed light on the complex ways in which Eilish's choices as it relates to embodiment reify Bourdieu's theory of habitus, as we have gained insight into the various sociocultural factors and discourses which have shaped Eilish's choices. Through theories and discourses on gender, as well as theories on how fashion choices are made, we have gained insight into the various elements which factor into Eilish's choices and sense of self.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that Billie Eilish is embedded within a complex system of gender, power and capitalism that influences what modes of embodiment she chooses and influences her sense of self. These actions indeed interact in a dialectical fashion with Western youth culture as her audience is primarily female members of Generation Z, Eilish is creating a new image for women's embodiment. Eilish's image can be seen as a navigation of power, one which simultaneously reproduces and resists normative ideals for female embodiment. This negotiation of power is also entrenched in capitalist logic, as factors of marketability and consumerism impact her relationship to her "branded" body. We can see how Eilish's competing desires interact with contradictory norms for female embodiment and impact the choices she makes as it relates to dress.

There are many other avenues that one could explore through Eilish, namely this thesis did not go in depth about the art and music that she and her brother produce but rather focused on her appearance in the public sphere (interviews most chiefly) and her fashion choices. The inclusion of lyrics was mainly a stylistic choice to give the reader an insight into Billie Eilish's work. If someone were to extend on this work, it would be interesting to go more in depth about how Eilish's artistic choices work in tandem with her fashion choices to develop our understanding of how the "self" is constructed.

Another element which would have been valuable to this thesis is that of interviews with her fans. An expanded work on this topic could include interviews with her young fanbase, to go more in depth into the "generational icon" aspect of Eilish's current cultural position. It would be interesting to learn more in depth about what fans think of her work and dressing style, and how her presence has influenced how they view their own bodies/relationships with their bodies.



For a more in depth look at fashion theory, and the sociological and historical significance of understanding dress, I would recommend Edward Sapir's "Fashion" in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* 6 and George Simmel's article of the same title in *American Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 6. I would also recommend Herbert Blumer's article "Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection," in *The Sociology Quarterly* 10, no. 3 which for a deeper understanding on the relationship between taste formation and fashion.

For a more in depth look on the topic of subculture, and the impacts of market-based capitalism on its development, I would recommend the works *Subculture* by Dick Hebdige and *Sneakers: Fashion Gender and Subculture* by Yuniya Kawamura.

To understand more about gender theory and dress, I would recommend two readings on the topic of foot binding: Fred Blake's "Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor" and Dororthy Ko's "Bondage in Time: Footbinding and Fashion Theory." Additionally, I would recommend Saba Mahmood's article "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival" for an expanded look into the topic of subversion and subjugation in feminist theory. Though I did not include her theories in this thesis, her ideas about the what is defined as "resistance" and "subjugation" would have added an additional layer of analysis to my paper, as Mahmood asks us to rethink these dichotomies, and theorizes that the choice to follow certain norms does not necessitate a lack of agency, but rather can be seen as a different manifestation of agency.

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