Cathartic Chords: Exploring Gender Differences in the Creation and Critique of Breakup

Albums

For years, both artists and listeners have used music as a form of emotional release. Artists piece together personal stories, anecdotes and experiences to share with an eager audience. The songs can strike a chord with the listener, reverberating through their hearts and connecting with them personally. Such is the 'Breakup Album'. It is an album built on a foundation of heartache and despair, fueled by a desire to creatively experience closure from the demise of a relationship. Heartbreak is personal and so is the music that artists create as they channel their pain into art. The popularity of the 'Breakup Album' is evident as some of the best-selling records of all time, like Adele's *21* and Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black*, were inspired by a break-up. Whether it is coming to terms with the end of a relationship and bidding the previous paramour farewell, or relentlessly questioning the conscience of a cheater, a 'Breakup Album' is where the artist is arguably at their most intimate and vulnerable. The following research focuses on the gender difference in the lyric creation and album review of a 'Breakup Album'. How does the expression of heartbreak differ between men and women? Furthermore, how is it perceived?

Methods and Tools

The first step of this process was to obtain a dataset of lyrics to analyze. Through extensive research using several news articles, I compiled a list of 'Breakup Albums'. The criteria for this list ensured that the albums were standardized. In order to be placed on the list, the album had to explicitly be about the demise of a real relationship experienced by the individual writing the lyrics. Songs that were not written by the artist of the albums were removed from the dataset to ensure that the results were valid for the particular artist. If the

album was by a band, the lyrics of the songs had to be written by the individual who went through the breakup. The next step was to scrape the lyrics for each song in each album. Genius.com is a giant online repository for the lyrics of English songs, with some tunes dating back to the 1950s. Using the GeniusAPI, I built a Python scraper that allowed me to simply input a song and their artist and scrape the lyrics from the website. The scraper was built in such a way that the scrapes would populate a CSV file made previously in a format that assigned each lyric to their respective artist, album and song title. After scraping 10 male albums and 10 female albums, I was left with a 'Male' dataset of 122 songs lyrics and a 'Female' dataset of 120 songs lyrics to analyse. Each CSV file was cleaned to remove lines dictating song structure and amened to include any missing lyrics. In order to find the most frequent words and any clustering, I imported the data onto VOSviewer and utilized a Python package called 'Cowo' from GitHub to generate clusters and density maps to uncover the words with the greatest frequencies in each dataset.

The next data set I wanted to uncover was album reviews for each album, if they were available online. I used MetaCritic, a site that aggregates reviews pertaining to an album from various sources. I scraped the abstracts of each review for the albums that were available to uncover a 'Male' data set of 132 reviews and a 'Female' data set of 158 reviews. Again, I utilized the VOSviewer to identify clusters and densities of highly frequent words.

Continuing my analysis to uncover trends in the topics sung about, I conducted a topic modeling for the female lyrics using SumUp as the network analysis could not drill the topics down to a coherent trend and overarching theme.

Relation to Other Scholars

The earliest album to detail a breakup dated back to the 1970s with Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*. In this album, he candidly details the end of his relationship with Bette Davis who allegedly cheated on him with Jimi Hendrix (Baker, 2012). Over time, the number of albums based on broken relationships rose, with multiple artists choosing to document their pain and healing in song. However, there is dearth in the analysis of the lyrics of these albums, therefore, the literature review for this research focused on how different genders deal with the aftermath of a breakup and also looked at the portrayal of a single woman in music.

Orimoto et al. looked at gender differences in coping mechanisms following a break up. Historically, women have been stereotyped to experience more emotions after a breakup and are said to be more expressive. The researchers surveyed over 200 college undergraduates to determine how they thought they would react after a breakup and how they actually reacted. They were able to uncover several differences between men and women when it came to coping mechanisms and reactions. There was little difference in the emotion they felt but women felt that they should have been angrier after the breakup than they actually were. Furthermore, the researchers were able to uncover three principle emotions that individuals go through after a breakup: depression, anger and relief. Love was not an emotion or component they believed individuals would experience towards their former partner. Furthermore, they highlighted four cognitive coping strategies: cognitive emotion management, reflection, physiological dampening and distraction. People generally tend to deal with adverse situations by reframing them to a positive experience. According to their research, women were more likely to go through the rumination strategy than men.

Other scholarly research has looked at the representation of the single woman in music. Anne Karpinnen studied Joni Mitchell, one of the artists discussed this essay, in her book, 'The Songs of Joni Mitchell: Gender, Performance and Agency'. Mitchell's album, *Blue,* is considered a lyrical masterpiece and is almost entirely about her breakup from her longtime boyfriend (Karpinnen, 2016). Karpinnen notes that the reason the album is so highly regarded especially amongst women is because of Mitchell's departure from the professing of conservative values that was permeating in most female music at that time. Mitchell instead wrote about breakups, as opposed to serial monogamy. Her breakup songs were able to sooth as well as emphasize the coping strategy of reflection and growth. For that reason, her music became extremely popular amongst younger women and ushered in a new generation of female lyrics that openly spoke about independence, self-assurance and counterculture.

<u>Hypotheses</u>

After analyzing the literature review, a few hypotheses can be drawn. Firstly, I anticipate the breakup albums for both groups to undergo the cognitive coping mechanisms that Orimoto et al. stated. The lyrics would be able to reflect their journey while navigating through their emotions. Research also showed that women were more expressive than men and thus, I hypothesize that the female lyrics will center around the artist's emotions as opposed to commenting on the partner. On the other hand, the male lyrics might be focused on the partner that left them as opposed to a reflection of their own feelings. In terms of how the albums will be perceived, the female albums would be regarded as a highly emotional and empowering, particularly because of the fact that the artist, as woman, is speaking so openly about heartbreak.

Furthermore, the male albums might not be considered as emotional as the female albums, due to stereotypical views of men displaying limited emotion in adverse situations.

Data and Findings

The lyrics of the following albums were analyzed:

Male	Female
'Sea Change' by Beck	*'21'* by Adele
'Last Year Was Complicated' by Nick Jonas	*'Red'* by Taylor Swift
'Life is Good' by Nas	*'Flavors of Entanglement'* by Alanis Morissette
'808s & Heartbreak' by Kanye West	*'Blue'* by Joni Mitchell
'For Emma, Forever Ago' by Bon Iver	*'Back to Black'* by Amy Winehouse
'Blood on the Tracks' by Bob Dylan	*'Body Talk'* by Robyn
'Heartbreaker' by Ryan Adams	*'Boys for Pele'* by Tori Amos
'Here, my Dear' by Marvin Gaye	*'Jagged Little Pill'* by Alanis Morissette
'Tunnel of Love' by Bruce Springsteen	*'Vulnicura'* by Bjork
'Waxing Gibbous' by Malcolm Middleton	*'Extraordinary Machine'* by Fiona Apple

These particular albums were chosen for a variety of reasons. Most of them had been featured in several articles (Baker, 2012) as some of the best breakup albums of all time. Furthermore, younger artists, such as Nick Jonas and Taylor Swift, who have openly dictated that their albums are about a breakup, are included to show how the art has changed over time. The following clusters and density frequencies were created for each dataset using VoxViewer, along with the topic models generated through SumUp for the female lyrics.
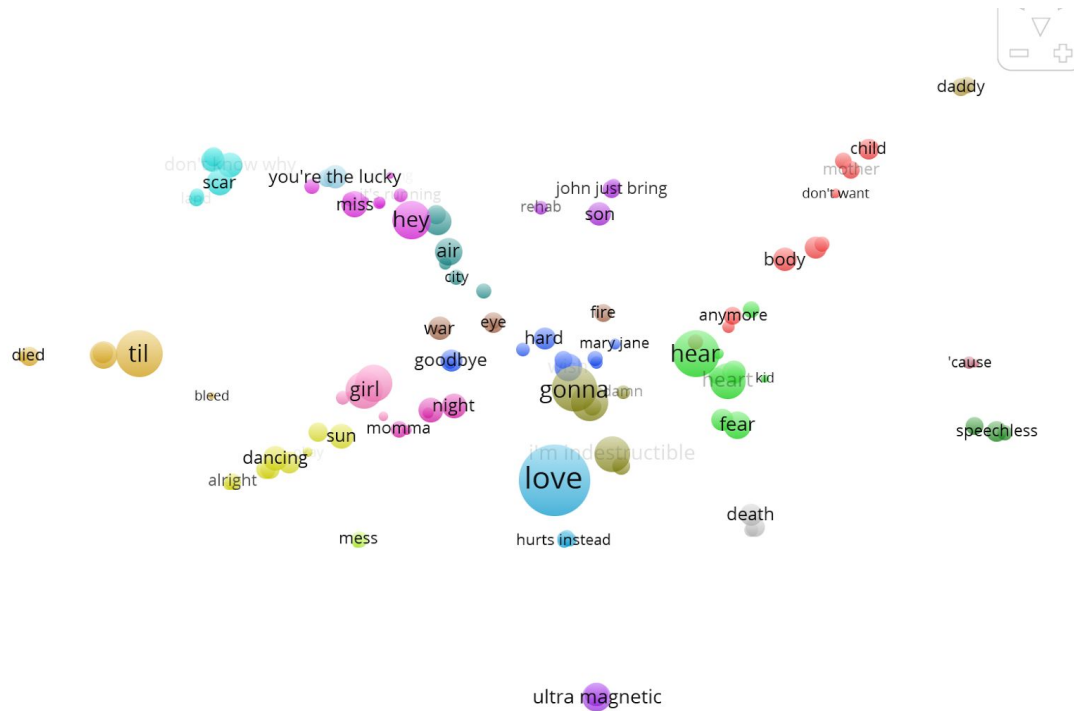
Male Lyrics
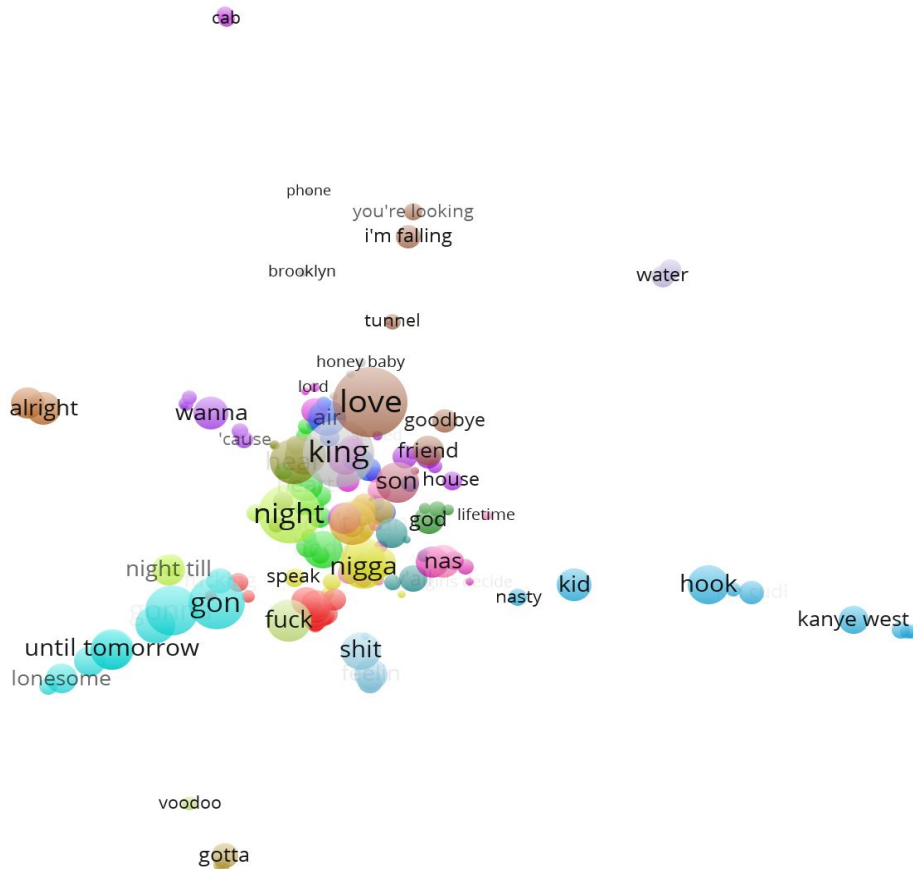
Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Babe	'Til	'Bout	Buck
Benz	Big jim	Air	Died
Bitch	Body	Father	Fake
Bitches	Chick	Gal Gangsta	Nigga
Cash	Diamond	Hard	Niggas
Champagne	Door	Lily	Rap
Ghetto	Fire	Rocking	Salaam
Hood	Head	Rosemary	Speak
I'd rather	Heart	Swore	Tryna
Killer	I've seen		
Lady	Mess		
Money	White		
Pop	Wife		
Touchin			

Cluster 5	Cluster 6	Cluster 7	Cluster 8
Dem	Fucking	Damn	Friend
Girl	Gon	Hear	Gon' keep
Lord	Gonna	Heartless	Goodbye
Miss	I'm gonna	Janey	I'm falling
Mister	I'm gonna stay	Real Bad	Love
Tonight	Lonesome	Sparrow Sing	Tunnel
Wanna die	Tomorrow	Woman	You're looking
York girl	Until tomorrow	Women	
Young	You're gonna		

Analysis:

The most frequently used word in the albums was 'love' which was most associated with 'goodbye', 'tunnel' and 'i'm falling'. This is emblematic of loss and a sense of isolation where the male artist does not know how he will be able to continue without his partner. It is interesting as the coping process here moves from distraction to physiological dampening to reflection to cognitive emotion management. It is almost as if these clusters resemble the progression of the artists into their final state of reflection. Initially, alcohol and other women are used at distractions while they experience their principle emotion of anger. This continues into cluster 2 but now comes a realization of the messy state they are in. The subsequent clusters display a distrust in other individuals, another display of a downward spiral. This culminates into a reflection in Cluster 6 when the realization of them being alone comes in. Eventually, they move into the last stage of cognitive emotion management where they accept the partner leaving and wish them goodbye. A lot of the male perspective seems to focus on the former partner, where it is ridiculing or missing them. This spiral of emotion is indicative of a confusion and complicated understanding of emotion and change.

Female Lyrics

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Anymore	Ain't easy	Cold Hard	Alright
Body	giving	Goodbye	Dancing
Child	Fear	Gotta	Don't wanna dance
Don't want	Hear	Hard	I'm not dancing
Father	Heart	Love Kill	Keep dancing
I'm willing	Kid	Mary Jane	Mister
I've learned	Melt	Skate	Okay
Money	Mend	Turning Table	Sun
Mother	Screaming	Wish	Wanna
Nobody's perfect	Unconditional		
Rumour	Voice		

Cluster 5	Cluster 6	Cluster 7	Cluster 8
Ache	Don't know why	Ended Bad	Damn
Darling	House	Hurts Instead	Gonna
Door	Land	Love	I'm gonna
Hey	Scar	Really used	I'm gonna love
It's running	Scared	Really want	I'm indestructible

Miss Scratch Traveling White	Why I'm	You're ready	Tonight

Topic Models:

Love - Time - Gonna - Friends - Fool - Crumbling

Eyes - Feel - Baby - Thing - Star - True - Pretend - Head

Man - Inside - Dies - Pacify - Heart - Stole - Mister

Taking - Rewind - Day - Machine - Track - Delorean - Stupid

Trouble - Knew - Hard - Walked - Places - Shame - Flew - Cold

Dance - Beat - Dancing - Loud - Wanna - Door - Tonight - Crowd

Learn - Live - Recommend - Lose - Cry - Pre - Bleed - Scream

Killing - Smoking - Nagging - God - Mother - Hours - Flight - Ease

Analysis:

Similar to the dataset of the male lyrics, the most frequently used word is 'love'. However, it seems to be most notably associated with 'hurts instead', emphasizing almost a rejection of love and displaying Orimoto et al.'s principle emotion of anger. Furthermore, it displays the cognitive emotion management process. Other notable clusters revolve around 'hear', 'fear' and 'heart', perhaps detailing the daunting but exciting challenge of living life with the shackles of a partner. In this sequence, the reflection comes in the beginning. The distance from the former partner is set in the beginning of the recovery process, after which begins the cognitive emotion management leading into the physiological dampening with all the dancing. There are fluctuations in emotions where the female artist begins to feel concerned about the male partner

she had. This is further exemplified by the topic models generated with SumUp where one model is centered around time travel and rewinding time. As the male artist has the complications of dealing with the loneliness, the female artist has the complication of letting go of the past and moving onto the future. While the distraction for the male artist is from the loneliness, the female artist wants to be distracted from caring for her former partner. This is where she comes full circle to the reflection where she realizes she is indestructible.

Male Reviews
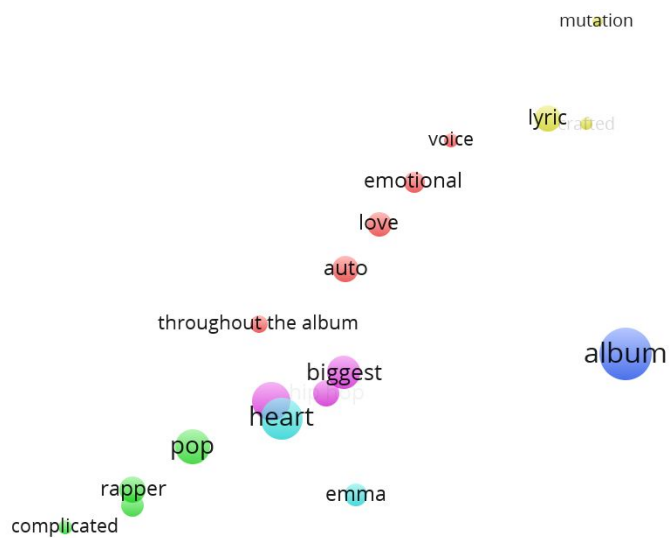
Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Auto Emotional Love Throughout the Album Voice	Complicated Maturity Pop Rapper	About Compelling Debut Illmatic	Crafted Lyric Mutation

For obvious reasons, the word with the largest frequency is album and therefore, it is omitted

from the analysis. However, there seems to be a focus on the emotion and maturity exhibited in

the albums. Conversely, it is interesting that 'auto' which was actually linked to 'auto-tune' was

notable in the frequencies and the cluster with 'mutation' and 'crafted' is present. This almost

makes the emotion mentioned before seem inauthentic and fake. Critics seem to be skeptical of

the subject matter and emotional capacity of the male artists. Furthermore, the mention of Nas'

debut album, *Illmatic*, is brought up several times to highlight his lyricism. As with the lyrics,

critics are able to pick up on the complicated relationship the male artists have with their

emotions, especially in the aftermath of a period of heartbreak.

Female Reviews

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Biophilia Emotional Heartbreak Journey Love	Crafted Lyrical Musically Voice	Lyric Songwriting Affecting Album	Ballad Jazz Vocal

<u>Analysis:</u>

These reviewers acknowledge the female journey, as detailed by the previous analysis. However, it is interesting that they use 'heartbreak' here and not in the analysis of the male lyrics. The female artists' lyrics deal with growth and moving away from heartbreak, so much so that it did not show up in any of the clusters and frequency distributions previously. In terms of musical ability, there is much greater focus here where the songs are said to be lyrical and musically crafted, adding to the authenticity of the emotion being expressed by the female artist.

<div align="center"><u>Larger Relevance and Further Directions</u></div>

From this research and the literature review conducted, we find that men and women grow through different stages of recovery from heartbreak. This is contrary to stereotypes that portray the woman as more emotional and attached to the relationship than the man. Perhaps both genders suffer equally in a break up. The larger significance of this finding is linked to the portrayal of women in media as the emotional centre of a relationship and the male as a stern figure. The reviews analyzed made the male display of emotion seem almost fake. Before Joni Mitchell, a lot of female music focused on serial monogamy and courtship. The Breakup Album works to break these stereotypes as women, on a more global scale, are speaking out candidly about their heartbreak. On the other hand, with men being portrayed as the more emotionally distant in the relationship. However, from the analysis above, they seem to be the least optimistic about their future without the partner and in fact, they seem a little lost.

For further research, it would be notable to see the age-related differences in the lyric creation. While I included various different ages in my sample set, it seemed to be more of a confounding variable that a homogenous part of the groups I was examining. Perhaps, the greater

difference in emotion regulation after heartbreak is an age-related interaction. In addition, the set I used was quite heteronormative and further research should explore the fluidity of gender in heartbreak.

References

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