

Views of gender and sex in music videos

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Abstract

Discussed is scholarly research on the sexual content in music videos, particularly the gender distinctions in the sexuality displayed in the visual imagery. Among those articles are conflicting research that support the claim that women's images are progressing through evidence of sexual agency and power through their displayed sexuality. This literature study examines how the highly sexual suggestiveness and objectification of women's bodies influences video viewers' opinions on sex and the function of women's bodies. The problem, which is evident from the research, is that the highly sexual content in music videos across genres specifically illustrates traditional masculine ideologies of sexuality while objectifying women and using them as decorative models. A critical analysis of what further research can be done about the traditional views of gender and sex in music videos concludes the paper.

Views of gender and sex in music videos

The initial purposes of music videos were to create an outlet in which artists could expose their music to a wider audience and establish themselves as distinguishable public figures (Andsager & Roe, 2003). Yet the visual imagery, itself, in music videos has increasingly become as popular and important as the music it portrays (Andsager et al, 2003). Music videos of all musical genres have superseded their original purpose to serve as publicity for the artist and now influence and reflect much of young culture. Despite the variation within lyrics, genres, and audiences, music videos continue to exhibit a one-dimensional sexual content that heightens American conservative and traditional ideals of sex and gender. Most music videos are highly saturated with sexual content that exceedingly focuses on the masculine perspective and male pursuit of sexual satisfaction (Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). A females' body is often used as decorative props or trophies to illustrate masculine sexual desire or his power over a sexual situation. Furthermore, women's bodies are hyper sexualized far more than males' bodies as a result of the music videos' primary focus, which is to display a masculine sexual drive and mainstream male sexual preferences (Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2006).

American adolescents are consistently exposed to the music videos that portray women as sexual objects and view their body parts with the single faceted purpose of pleasuring men. In a study by Ward, Hansbrough, and Walker (2005), a sample of African American high school students reported viewing a mean of 3.33 hours of music videos per day, similarly to Rivadeneyra, Ward, and Gordon's (2007) research in which Latinos students reported watching an average of 3 hours per day of videos as well. The increased demand and accessibility of videos by means of the internet and cable channels

with high music video content such as BET, MTV, MTV Tr3s, and VH-1 ensures that American adolescents and young adults are constantly retrieving misguided information which establishes and reaffirms sex and gender bias. As they gain exposure to masculine focused sexual content and gender bias, there is a greater demand for scholars to study the affects of the kinds and amounts of exposure to music videos. The study of music video content and its portrayal of females are undoubtedly essential to gaining a better understanding of adolescents and young adults' perspective on their physical and sexual self-conception as well as their perceptiveness on each other. Therefore, it is significant to track the perpetuating cycle of music videos in young popular culture, in which it informs our youth about sex and gender, which they internalize as truths, and use to respond to the environment.

Sexuality is exploited in both male and female music videos to promote an identity or attract media and different audiences. Andsager and Roe's (2003) three-component topology consists of extensive research on the studies done in the last two decades of the twentieth century about sexual content and violence illustrated in music videos. The first topic of the topology is *Sex as Metamorphosis*, "the idea of using sexuality as metamorphosis is designed to create the illusion that an artist has evolved into a different being, generally a more mature and edgier version of his or her former self" (Andsager et al, 2003). Yet, this metamorphosis portrays more explicit sexuality than adulthood or womanhood. Andsager and Roe (2003) chose Britney Spears, titled the Princess of Pop by the media, as an example of using sex as metamorphosis in the music video "I'm a Slave 4 U" by wearing a scarf as a top, revealing her muscular torso and cleavage, with low-cut jeans. Her sweaty body, moist hair, and suggestive

choreography support the idea that Britney Spears was displaying her sexuality and selling sex rather than showing maturity. The problem that arises from masquerading maturity for sexuality is that viewers receive a false perception of adulthood. Young girls are constantly exposed to their favorite young artists rapidly metamorphosing into adulthood through the use of sex and sexuality. How exactly does sexual content portrayed as maturity or adolescent transformation affect young girls? Even though this question is not inquired in the study, the topology offers themes within music videos that can be use for further research that includes young women's internalization of the concepts.

The second component in the topology is *Sex as a Fantasy Fulfillment*, which is the use of "sexuality in ways that fulfill a fantasy for everyone" (Andsager et al, 2003). Female artists and women in male artist music videos portray different sexual fantasy, which are often stereotypes of a women's role. Andsager and Roe (2003) do state that there are women that maintain a constant image or identity, yet females are more likely to portray different fantasy roles than males. For example, a female artist or a video vixen, which is a woman that has appeared in several popular music videos, may have the roles of a nurse, dominatrix, school girl, or cop, which are considered by society fantasies that males enjoy (Andsager et al, 2003). Music videos, such 2010's *Bottles Up* by Trey Songz, depict women as objects and trophies to stare at as they are displayed in a clear cage, with their hands held by ropes (Trey Songz Videos, 2010, 2:04) . Musical artists such as Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, Drake, and T.I express themselves in music videos as strong and wealthy, and their image is consistent through out each video. Yet female artists adopt roles and wear hyper sexualized costumes, giving the impression that they can be

anything desired or anyone in a fantasy. Yet who is the owner of these desires and fantasies? The sexual content displayed in the fantasy role is meant for the enjoyment of average heterosexual men. Even though, there are other viewers of distinct identities, the music is meant to arouse the attention of the heterosexual male.

Lastly the third category of study in the topology is *Sex as Power*, which is elaborates the research of French (1987), who explains that music artists use sexuality to exude power. Specifically, male artists often use sex as a way to show power over women and their bodies in their music videos. For example, this occurs in Bow Wow's "You Can Get It All" video, in which the majority of the models are wearing bikinis that reveal parts of their buttocks as they stare and cater to Bow Wow as he raps (Bow Wow VEVO Channel, 2010, 1:38). Although Bow Wow's lyrics are about having a special woman as his girlfriend in his life, he visually expresses power over the women's bodies in the video. He is clearly the person in charge in the video. Another current example is Drake's "Best I Ever Had" music video, which has women, dressed up in basketball uniforms that look more like lingerie or sexy pajamas than traditional team uniforms, receiving directions and motivation from their head coach Drake (Geryl, 2010, :18). Similar to Bow Wow's music video, Drake is expressing his interest for a woman, but his music videos is objectifying the video vixens by focusing the lenses on their breasts jumping as they run on the court and directing the females to stretch in provocative positions in the locker room (Geryl, 2010, 1:21). Both rappers are extremely popular in the Hip-Hop industry, and their music videos reflect the kinds of things depicted in videos by multiplatinum selling artists that started before them such as Snoop Dog, Jay-Z, and Lil Wayne, who had done the same in videos before them.

Further research on sex use to illustrate power, Roberts (1991) and Andsager (1999) particularly state the idea of the *power to*, which certain female artist process by controllably parading their sexuality within their terms. Female artists such as Lady Gaga in “Poker Face,” “LoveGame,” and “Telephone featuring. Beyonce” display explicit sexuality and sexual content, yet they always demonstrate authority over their bodies through dance movements and being the centers of focus in the video lenses (Lady Gaga VEVO Channel, 2010, 1:04) . For example, the camera gaze constantly follows Lady Gaga and shows her entire body even though in the scene in Lady Gaga’s “LoveGame” video where she is caressing two guys each representing Fame and Love respectively while nude (Lady Gaga VEVO Channel, 2010, :15) . Although she is pleasuring them, she continues to be in control by displaying agency in doing the touching and looking at the camera as the men watch look at her (Lady Gaga VEVO Channel, 2010, :17). Yet what message is the audience receiving? Do they realize that she has control of her sexuality, or is her body only viewed in relation to giving the male models pleasure?

In order to find any evidence that may bring what her viewers are saying about the video to light, I visited a posting of her official “LoveGame” video on the YouTube VEVO channel, which had 60,650,644 views as of 1pm on December 1, 2010. The video had comments such as “I want to ride her disco stick,” “lovely ass,” and “I want to Fuck Lady Gaga” (Lady Gaga VEVO Channel, 2010). Other YouTube users called Lady Gaga a “slut,” “bigger whore than Britney [Spears],” and, “this is about sex lol” (Lady Gaga VEVO Channel, 2010). These comments respond to her display of sexuality and sexual content but do not explain how the viewers internalize her sexual images and sexual

power. Furthermore, it is difficult to make accurate assumptions based on these responses without knowing anything about the users and the motivations behind the comments.

None of the comments describe Lady Gaga as a strong sexual female artist who knows what she wants sexually and has the power to go after it. Further research should be done to gain a deeper understanding of whether these women that try to display power over their sexuality are actually perceived in that light.

More insight about women exhibiting power through their sexual agency is provided by Emerson's (2002) study, which investigates the presence of Black womanhood in music culture through an in-depth analysis of 56 music videos including female performers. Reasserting earlier studies that claim the objectification and exploitation of the black female's body along with the reinforcement of stereotypes, her argument consists of examples of black women asserting their independence and sexual agency (Emerson, 2002). Her examples include women artists such as Lauren Hill, Erykah Badu, and Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott, who display their independence, sexual agency, and autonomy through their music and the visual imagery within the music videos (Emerson, 2002). The study expands on the idea that female performers in music videos are increasingly defying the gender norms in the music videos by actively participating in the creative path of the music videos and reclaiming the focus of the camera lenses to portray women in a variety of Black womanhood roles. Emerson (2002) states that artists such as Toni Braxton and groups like En Vogue and TLC express their opposition to be viewed as sole objects in a male gaze by exhibiting males for their fans, and their pleasure, and establishing a mutual ground of sexual desire. It is not substantial enough, Emerson (2002) would agree, to state that the Black women are passively portrayed as the target of

men's power and sexual desire without taking into account that a woman's desire does become a key factor lyrically and visually, to the extent that their sexual fulfillment is often more important than the sexual drive of the men. This provides a vehicle through which female performers, like Janet Jackson, assert what they want and exactly how they want to receive it.

Yet what exactly does it mean to have significant accounts of black women's sexual assertion and independence in music videos? How is it that research can support both claims that music videos can objectify black women's bodies and, under certain circumstances, provide a space for the exhibition of their sexual agency and pursuit of sexual fulfillment? Emerson (2002) declares that

“The results of this analysis and interpretation indicate that trade-offs are made in the construction of an artist's image. Black womanhood, as expressed through the Da Brat and Missy's performances, is the result of a process of negotiation in which objectification of the female body must be present in order for the performer to gain a level of autonomy, to gain exposure.”

According to Emerson (2002), the complexity between the give-and-take relationships exposed in the music videos emerges from the fact that the black woman does not hide her sexuality to reject exploitation but, rather, claims ownership of her body and her multifaceted womanhood instead. Although Emerson (2002) states this contradiction as showing “the multidimensional nature of Black womanhood,” there is a clear, superior masculine sexual preference that most female performers adhere to. Furthermore, if the music videos displayed the erotic sexual pleasures of both males and females, there would be a greater variation in sexual content. The issue lies in the fact that sexual content and gender is often one-dimensional and it's the traditional male traditional perspective of what is “sexy” and preferable that drives the music video projects.

Ciara, known for her Dance, R&B, and Pop music, in her “Ride it featuring Ludacris” music video is at the center of the camera’s gaze without anyone else for the majority of video in her music video (Drizzy798., 2010, :30). Her choreography, in which she moves sexually and suggestively, is controlled by how she wants her body to move (Drizzy798., 2010, :15). Her power is displayed by the way her dance moves not only imply a sexual nature, but they also express discipline (Drizzy798., 2010, :30). She is undoubtedly in control of her body, her lyrics, and the overall visual presentation that she wants to show, which shows that she knows how to sexually pleasure a man (Drizzy798., 2010, 1:00). Emerson (2002) may agree that she is in charge of her displayed sexuality. However, the moment Ludacris, the featured male rapper, appears in the video, the camera shoots multiple scenes in which they zoom into her crotch and legs, cutting off her upper body ((Drizzy798., 2010, 2:40). In addition, she is riding a mechanical bull with a wet white t-shirt, which is often labeled as heterosexual fantasy by American society (Drizzy798., 2010, 3:20). This music video is a great example of how complex the issue is in examining music videos that appear to display what the female artist wants as well as components of the video suggesting a contrasting interpretation. Yet some research suggests that it matters less what type of sexual content and more about the amount of it.

Pardum, L’Engle, and Brown (2005) make the claim that their sample 12-to-14 years old teenagers views of sex and self-conception were affected by the amount of consumption of sexual content units in their music videos as oppose to the kind of sexual content shown in the video. Moreover, Ward, Merriwether and Caruthers (2006) “Breast Are for Men: Media, Masculinity Ideologies, and Men’s Beliefs About Women’s

Bodies,” results also support the idea that male’s views of a women’s body function is primarily influenced by the sexual content regardless if the female is showing power over sexuality. There sample size, 656 undergraduate men aged 17 to 27, consumed an average of 21.5 hours of music videos in which women were constantly objectified and held decorative roles (Ward et al, 2006). Their findings show that the consumption of sexual content in these music videos did negatively affect their views of private and public breastfeeding and childbearing. Higher exposure to music video was related to views of breasts as sexual rather than functional body parts (Ward et al, 2006). These studies supports the idea that most viewers are not being influenced so much by women’s sexual agency but by the sexual content that is supply by the women’s bodies.

The social problem with highly sexual content in music videos is that it exclusively reflects the traditional masculine desire of sexuality and devalues women by constantly displaying them as sexual objects. Whether female artists are showing power over their sexuality is not as significant as the sexual content itself, which is affecting the viewers. Further research must be done to establish a better understanding of the topic of sexual content and gender in music videos and how it affects its viewers. There should be a clear definition on sexual content so that exposure can be calculated accurately and precisely in which a handful of studies utilize. In addition, future studies should investigate how the amount of exposure to sexual content and gender bias in music videos can limit the ways in which females and males of different age group view the functions of their body parts. Also more input by the artists other means and outlets and more input on the age groups that have the videos under their preferences.

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