

The Sounds of Sex: Sex in Teens' Music and Music Videos

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Popular music and sex have gone together like a horse and carriage ever since the days of the horse and carriage. Early in the 20th century, jazz and blues were noted (and vehemently criticized) for the sexual intensity of both their music and lyrics. ("You can't keep a good man down," Mamie Smith sang in an early blues song, and her meaning was not lost on her listeners.) In the 1950s, jazz and blues gave way to rock and roll, and the explosive sexuality of Elvis, Little Richard, and others. From the 1960s to the present, sexual themes have increasingly permeated popular music (Christenson & Roberts, 1998), in genres ranging from ballads to rock to rap. The portrayal of sexuality in popular music has become less subtle, more explicit; by the 1980s, George Michael was singing "I Want Your Sex," and we had moved a long way from the subtlety and playfulness of jazz and blues.

Popular music has always been most popular among the young, who are attracted to the sexual intensity of both the music and the lyrics. Today's teens spend a considerable amount of their time immersed in popular music. In fact, listening to music is their top activity outside of school (Horatio Alger Foundation, 1996). In one survey, 92% of teens (aged 14 to 17) said they had listened to music on the radio during the previous day; 88% had listened to recorded music (Chadwick & Heaton, 1996). Integrating a variety of studies, Christenson and Roberts (1998) concluded that during their high school years, American teens listen to music about 3 to 4 hours per day, on average (compared to 2 to 3 hours per day for TV watching). Music is frequently a secondary activity, a background to some other primary activity, often one that has sexual overtones: dancing, parties, going to nightclubs or other social events (Lull, 1987). But teens listen to music in many other contexts as well. For example, over half of teens listen to music while doing homework (Roberts & Hendricksen, 1990).

In this chapter we begin by looking at portrayals of sexuality in songs and music videos popular among teens. Then we present a theoretical framework for understanding teens' uses of sexually themed songs and videos. Finally, we suggest directions for future research, advocating a more teen-centered approach.

SEXUALITY IN SONGS

Themes of the songs most popular with teens are diverse, ranging from social and political issues to loneliness and alienation. However, for many decades the most common themes in popular songs have been related to sexuality: love, romance, gender, and sex itself (Christenson & Roberts, 1998). Various content analyses have shown that from the 1940s to the present, between 70% to 90% of popular songs have contained themes related to sexuality. In one analysis, Edwards (1994) classified the lyrics in popular songs

from 1980 to 1989, using the top 20 singles from each year. (Because songs in genres such as heavy metal and rap tend to be purchased in albums rather than as singles, these genres are underrepresented in this analysis as in most other content analyses). Phrases in songs with themes related to sexuality were classified as optimistic or pessimistic and as physical or emotional. Eighty-five percent of the songs were found to have references to sexuality, and sexuality was the dominant theme in 72%. Sixty-seven percent of the songs had one or more optimistic phrases, but 77% had one or more pessimistic phrases. Phrases were evenly balanced between physical and emotional aspects of sexuality. Lyrics rarely reflected any hesitancy about entering into a sexual relationship, despite the threat of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). As Edwards (1994) dryly noted, "there was more concern about broken hearts than about disease or pregnancy" (p. 243).

Although songs with themes of sexuality have been consistently popular with teens over the decades, there has been a steady increase since the 1950s in the explicitness of the sexual lyrics in popular songs (Christenson & Roberts, 1998; Strasburger, 1995). Content analyses indicate that there has been a trend toward emphasizing the more physical aspects of sexuality, and less emphasis on its emotional aspects. However, casual sex tends to be portrayed as resulting in unhappiness (Edwards, 1994; Leming, 1987). Emotional themes remain frequent in current songs. Both males and females are often portrayed in popular songs as fools for love—needy, vulnerable, anxious, sad. "Show me how you want it to be," Britney Spears pleads in a recent example of this, her "Baby One More Time"; "My loneliness is killing me."

Although emotional neediness is more commonly attributed to females than males in popular songs (Seidman, 1992), this appears to have become less true over time. In a content analysis of songs from 1945 to 1976, Cooper (1985) found that over this period females in popular songs were portrayed less often as dependent and submissive, more often as powerful. However, as they became more powerful they also became portrayed more often as threatening, evil—dangerous seductresses. A recent example of this can be found in Ricky Martin's "Livin' la Vida Loca:" "Once you get a taste of her you'll never be the same/She will make you go insane."

SEXUALITY IN MUSIC VIDEOS

Music videos have become highly popular among teens since the early 1980s, especially among younger teens (Christenson & Roberts, 1998). Teens watch music videos for about 15 to 30 minutes per day, on average. Although this is much lower than the 3 to 4 hours a day typical among teens

for music listening more generally, watching videos tends to be a primary rather than a secondary activity. The proportion of music videos with sexual imagery varies by genre, from about 50% of pop and rap videos to just 8% of heavy metal videos (Tapper, Thorson, & Black, 1994).

One of the most striking features of music videos is the sharp demarcation of gender roles, especially in relation to sexuality. One analysis of 1,000 music video characters found that males are more often depicted as adventurous, aggressive, and dominant; females, in contrast, are more often depicted as affectionate, fearful, and nurturing. Another analysis, comparing videos in different musical genres, found that rap videos were especially likely to be sexist, with females depicted as sexual objects (Utterbach, Ljungdahl, Storm, Williams, & Kreutter, 1995).

Although music videos are fairly diverse in themes and scenes, if there is a such thing as a typical music video it features one or more men performing while beautiful, scantily clad young women dance and writhe lasciviously. Often the men dance, too, but the women always have fewer clothes on. The women are mostly just props; not characters, not even people, really. They appear for a fraction of a second, long enough to shake their butts a couple of times, then the camera moves on.

A prime example of this is in the recent video for Ricky Martin's "Livin' la Vida Loca." Throughout the video, the mostly naked women shake and dance sexily. Ricky dances too, but he never shows any skin. This double standard reaches absurd proportions in "La Vida Loca." The song contains the line "She'll make you take your clothes off and go dancing in the rain," but when this line is sung, Ricky is depicted dancing in the rain with all his clothes on, while a circle of women dancing around him strip theirs off.

Why doesn't Ricky take at least some of his clothes off? Why are women depicted in so much more sexually alluring ways than men in music videos? For the same reason that there are more strip clubs featuring naked female dancers than naked male dancers, and more pornographic magazines featuring naked females than naked males: Because it is more acceptable to reduce females to their sexuality than to reduce males to their sexuality. The sexual double standard of music videos reflects the sexual double standard of the larger society. Ricky does not take his clothes off—not because he would not be even more sexually alluring if he did, but because he would never submit to the indignity of being depicted as a sexual object. For women, however, such indignity is expected to be a standard part of their gender role.

Although the depictions of sexuality in "La Vida Loca" are typical, music videos are diverse, and there are important exceptions. One of the most interesting of these exceptions is a recent video by TLC for their song "Unpretty." In contrast to most other videos, which implicitly confirm gender stereotypes, "Unpretty" directly challenges the cultural pressures that

young women face with regard to sexuality. In the primary story line, a young woman considers breast enlargement at the urging of her boyfriend. She is shown going to a cosmetic surgery clinic and being prepared for surgery, but at the last minute she tears off the hospital gown and flees. Next she is shown with her boyfriend, angrily rejecting him for coercing her into the surgery. In a secondary story line, a plump adolescent girl is shown in her bedroom gazing at the thin magazine models she has pasted on her wall. She cuts out a picture of her own face and tapes it onto the body of one of the models, clearly aspiring to look like them. At the end of the video, however, she tears the models down off her walls as she decides to accept herself for what she is. Thus, in both story lines young women are shown rejecting the cultural influences that make them feel "so damned unpretty."

Another striking feature of music videos is that the visual images are often much sexier than the music. This is partly because visual depictions of sex are inherently more arousing than auditory depictions of sex, but also because the videos sometimes take a nonsexual song and make it highly sexual. One recent example of this is Lenny Kravitz's "Fly Away." The lyrics of the song have nothing to do with sex ("I want to get away/I want to fly away/Yeah, yeah, yeah."). The video, however, shows a club scene with Kravitz and his band playing the song as young people—especially the de rigueur scantily clad young women—dance lasciviously. At one point, one of the young women even takes her shirt off, although her bare breasts are censored by blurring them.

The reason for sexualizing music videos even when the topic of the song is nonsexual is not hard to discern: Sex sells, in music videos as elsewhere. Studies of college students have found that they tend to rate videos with sexual imagery higher than other videos (Hansen & Hansen, 1990; Zillmann & Mundorf, 1987). High school students, especially males, respond to sexually explicit videos even more favorably than do college students (Christenson & Roberts, 1998; Greeson, 1991).

TEENS' PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUALITY IN SONGS AND MUSIC VIDEOS

What do teens make of the sexual images in songs and music videos? To what extent do they perceive as sexual the themes and scenes that academics code as sexual in content analyses? Studies on this topic concur that young people interpret song lyrics and music video imagery differently, based on a variety of factors, including social class, ethnicity, gender, interests, and experiences (Christenson & Roberts, 1998). The most important factor influencing their interpretations is age (Strasburger, 1995). In particu-

lar, preadolescent and early adolescent children tend to be highly literal in their interpretations, so that they often miss the implied sexuality in the song. For example, Greenfield et al. (1987) examined responses to song lyrics and music videos among college students as well as children in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades. The fourth and eighth graders often missed the meaning of the lyrics, especially when the lyrics involved sexuality. Reviewing studies of age differences in responses to song lyrics and music videos, Christenson and Roberts (1998) concluded that for children and early adolescents, "their ignorance helps preserve their innocence. . . . it is not so much a case of 'you are what you hear' as 'you hear what you are' " (p. 179).

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given that young people spend a great deal of their free time listening to music, that their music has a high degree of sexual content, and that sexuality is a key area of development during adolescence, it is surprising that there has not been more research devoted to the relation between music and sexuality in adolescence. Far more research has been conducted on adolescents and television (Strasburger, 1995), although adolescents spend more time listening to music than watching TV and they watch less TV than persons in any other stage of life (Arnett, 1995).

Furthermore, a substantial proportion of research on adolescents and music has been conducted using study designs of questionable validity. The most common design for studies in this area involves having college students respond to songs or music videos in a laboratory situation, in return for credit for a psychology course. The problems with this approach are many, including the facts that (a) college students are too different developmentally from adolescents for findings to be generalizable from one group to the other (Arnett, 2000); (b) college students are not representative even of their age-group; and (c) college students volunteering to take part in a study for course credit are not representative even of other college students. More importantly, the studies are frequently conducted in university classrooms or laboratories, and as a consequence may lack contextual validity. That is, it is difficult to assume that watching preselected music videos in a professor's lab or a university classroom is the same as watching music videos with friends, family, in the dorm, at a bar, or alone.

This design also ignores that adolescents make choices of which music and music videos to consume, based on their own preferences. A researcher might show music videos containing images of sexual violence to 20 subjects, and claim to find an effect of the music videos on the respondents' attitudes about violence toward women, when in reality only 2 of the 20 would ever watch such music videos of their own volition. The effects of the

videos on those 2 respondents may be different from the effects on the other 18, yet this would not be apparent in the data analysis or the report of the results. The data from the only 2 individuals who would actually choose to watch these music videos would be lost in the noise from the 18 who would never be exposed to them in real life. This design treats people as blank slates, having no important differences among them that would lead them to make different choices about their music consumption or that would cause them to respond in different ways to the music and music videos that they do consume.

We believe that research on sex and teens' music would benefit from the application of a theoretical framework that focuses on what young people themselves say about the meanings of the music. Specifically, we propose a model based on the uses and gratifications approach to media research (Arnett, 1995; Rubin, 1994). At the heart of this approach is the idea that people make choices about the media they consume, and that their choices are guided by the uses they believe they can make of media and the gratifications they gain from their media experiences. Rather than viewing people as passive and easily manipulated targets of media, the uses and gratifications approach views them as active agents who determine to a large extent the media to which they are exposed, through the choices they make in an environment in which a vast range of media content is available (Arnett, Larson, & Offer, 1995).

With respect to teens, music, and sex, the uses and gratifications approach suggests the questions: What uses do teens make of songs and music videos with sexual themes, and what gratifications do they gain from them? We address this question, using a framework that has been employed previously as a general framework for understanding adolescents' uses of media (Arnett, 1995). Here, we apply it specifically to adolescents' uses of songs and music videos with sexual themes, using current examples for illustration. The three uses considered are entertainment, identity formation, and coping. These three uses are not meant to be exhaustive, but to be considered examples of the uses that teens may make of sexually themed songs and music videos.

Entertainment

Adolescents use sexually themed songs and music videos as daily entertainment, as a way of pleasantly passing the time. Music provides an almost constant background to their activities outside of school, and most of the music they like best contains sexual themes (Christenson & Roberts, 1998). They listen to music while doing their homework, while driving a car, and while walking or jogging, but especially in contexts where the focus is on leisure; no teen party would be complete without music (Lull, 1987). For mu-

sic videos, too, teens state that one of their top reasons for watching them is entertainment (Sun & Lull, 1986).

A substantial proportion of the songs and music videos that appeal to teens have entertainment as their evident aim. The songs and music videos of Madonna have provided good examples of this over the years. Neither the lyrics nor the music in her songs are very distinctive or original. The topics tend to be sexual—dancing, flirting, boys and girls meeting and pairing up and parting again—all long-standing, well-worn themes of popular music; the lyrics are also laden with clichés. But to teens, the appeal of the songs may be precisely the fact that they are so predictable and demand so little from the listener. They are like a tasty confection, easy to consume and quickly forgotten, but pleasant to experience for the moment—to dance to, to tap your foot to, to sing along with, to fantasize with.

Many music videos have elaborate dance routines that add to their entertainment value. Recent videos by Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, and Christina Aguilera are in this vein. For example, in "Baby One More Time" Britney Spears and her supporting cast engage in elaborate synchronized dance routines throughout the video. The setting is a high school, and they are shown dancing mainly in the hall and the gymnasium. The dancing is mildly provocative, and Britney is dressed in a revealing outfit. The lyrics of the song are actually rather somber and brooding, but the music and the dancing change the spirit of the video to pure entertainment, a celebration of youthful vigor and sexuality.

Identity Formation

Identity formation has long been viewed as one of the key developmental challenges of adolescence. It consists of gaining a clear sense of one's interests, needs, desires, and abilities with respect to love, work, and beliefs (Erikson, 1968). With respect to love, it includes both developing a sense of one's sexuality and developing a gender role identity, that is, a conception of oneself as a man or woman in relation to the gender role requirements of one's culture.

Music and music videos can play an important part in both love-related aspects of identity formation. The portrayal of sexuality offered in popular songs can best be described as recreational. Sex is often portrayed as light-hearted fun. A recent example is Lou Bega's "Mambo Number Five." This song consists mostly of Lou describing, or at least fantasizing about, his sexual adventures with a long list of women. He describes how he desires "a little bit" of each one of them—"a little bit of Sandra in the sun/A little bit of Mary all night long," and so on. In the video, Lou sings and dances in a snazzy suit and hat, while the women who are the objects of his desire dance around him, scantily clad. They all seem to be enjoying themselves immensely.

Thus, adolescents may learn from this that sex is a source of recreation, pure fun, not requiring commitment, not to be taken seriously. The sex of popular songs like "Mambo Number Five" is sex in a world without unwanted pregnancy, STDs, or even the complications of emotional relationships.

With regard to the gender role aspect of identity, songs and music videos often portray stereotyped gender roles, with males as aggressive and tough, females as vulnerable and needy or as seductresses. For example, in Limp Bizkit's recent "Nookie," the first part of the song is a hip-hop-style account of the singer's rejection by his girlfriend; this soon turns into an angry rant, as he shouts at her contemptuously, "I did it all for the nookie/The nookie/So you can take that cookie/And stick it up your (yeah!)." The male gender role, as portrayed in this song, means reacting to love-induced pain with anger.

Although analyses of songs and music videos indicate that most of them promote stereotypical gender roles, it is important not to stereotype the songs and videos themselves. They are diverse, and there are many exceptions to any generalization about them. The songs and videos of male performers like the Backstreet Boys are as emotionally vulnerable and needy as anything by female performers. As for aggressiveness, one of the most aggressive recent videos is by a female performer. In "Heartbreaker," Mariah Carey sings about her pain over her unfaithful boyfriend. In the video, Mariah and her friends trail the faithless boyfriend and his lover to a movie theater; Mariah then follows the lover to the ladies' room, where she physically assaults her! No protests were raised over the violence in this video—although it is more violent than anything that can be found in recent videos by male performers—perhaps because Mariah's violence is a violation of normative expectations for gender roles, and so is not taken seriously as promoting violence.

Coping

Another use of media common among adolescents is coping, especially in response to issues involving sexuality. Love and sex can result in frustration, disappointment, and pain, and the songs and videos popular among teens portray this side of sexuality as well. There are songs about unrequited love, songs about unfaithful lovers, songs about being lonely and wishing for a lover. All of these themes have long been staples of popular songs. Why would adolescents want to listen to songs about the unhappy side of sexual relationships? Because they know this side of sexuality all too well from their own lives, and listening to the sad songs consoles them, expresses what they have difficulty expressing themselves, and makes them feel that someone else has experienced what they are experiencing and understands how they feel (Arnett, 1996).

In studies using the "beeper" method, Larson (1995) has found that adolescents spend a considerable amount of time in their rooms alone, listening to music. When they are beeped during these times, their moods are often low; they frequently report being lonely or sad. Afterward, however, they feel revived and strengthened. They use the music as a way of coping with and working through painful emotions and difficult relationship issues, often related to sexuality. Even though the music is often sad, listening to sad music in a state of sadness has the paradoxical effect of making them feel better.

WHERE TO NOW? TOWARD AN EMIC APPROACH

What can we conclude about music, sex, and adolescents on the basis of the research that has been conducted so far? First, we know that music is an important part of teens' daily lives, and that most of the music they listen to has sexuality as its theme. Second, we know that many of the songs and music videos most popular among teens portray gender roles in a stereotyped way, although there are notable exceptions to this rule. Third, we know that teens make use of sexually themed songs and music videos for a variety of purposes in their lives, most notably entertainment, identity formation, and coping.

These conclusions represent a solid foundation for future research on music, sex, and adolescents. Where should research be focused now, given this foundation? We would argue that more attention should be directed toward what teens themselves say about the songs and music videos that appeal to them. What we know at this point is based mostly on the judgments of scholars. It is scholars who have asserted that the songs and videos promote stereotyped gender roles. It is scholars who have made most of the judgments about the uses that teens make of songs and videos. Now we should turn our attention to what teens themselves say about why they listen to sexually themed songs and watch sexually themed videos. In anthropological terminology, we should move from an etic approach, in which outsiders make judgments about the meanings of symbols and rites and behavior in a culture, to an emic approach, in which interpretations of these meanings come from the members of the culture themselves.

Here are some of the questions that could be addressed:

- Which sexually themed songs and videos do they like most? Are there sexually themed songs and videos that they dislike or reject? If so, why?
- To what extent are they conscious of the gender stereotyping in songs and videos? Do they respond to this stereotyping positively, negatively, or with mixed feelings?

- To what extent do they believe that the portrayals of sexuality in songs and videos reflect real-life sexuality?
- Do they believe they are influenced in their sexuality by the songs and videos they listen to and watch? In what ways?

One good model of how to proceed with this line of research can be found in the work of Steele and Brown (1995). They used several methods to explore teens' views of sexuality in the media. In one method, girls were asked to record in journals whatever they witnessed in the media about "love, sex and relationships." After a month of journal keeping, each girl was interviewed about her media uses. Another method, called "auto-driving," was also used, in which each teen took an interviewer on a tour of his or her bedroom, describing into a tape recorder everything in the room that held special meaning or significance. Many of these special items were media related—posters, magazine photos, concert tickets. The focus of Steele and Brown's (1995) research was on media use generally, but these and other similar methods could easily be applied specifically to the topic of sexuality and music. Through such methods, we are likely to gain new insights into the uses that teens make of sexually themed songs and music videos.

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