

# Girls, Girls, Girls: Analyzing Race and Sexuality Portrayal in Music Videos

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**Abstract:** *For nearly thirty years, scholars have contributed immensely to the literature surrounding content analysis of music videos – acknowledging potential differences in genre, racial depiction, and gender performance. In considering the limitations of the currently available literature from the analysis of music videos, it is necessary to address the findings of the existing literature, address the gaps, then how to potentially incorporate the missing frameworks, those being Black feminist theory, intersectionality theory, and empowered sexuality. The inclusion of these theories can benefit researchers in considering the long-term effects of these portrayals as well as some nuances they may highlight.*

**Key words:** race, sexuality, gender, intersectionality, Black Feminist Theory, music videos, popular culture

Immediately following Beyoncé's halftime show at Super Bowl XLVII in February 2013, fans across the country lauded its electrifying choreography, high energy, and deeply feminist message. However, a number of viewers criticized the performance as an agent for promoting hyper-sexuality via Beyoncé's excessive crotch thrusting. Deadspin actually filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Federal Communications Commission to obtain copies of complaints sent in by viewers, and many referenced the aforementioned pop star's showing of "her vaginal area to all the world." Deadspin gathered and posted the 48 formal complaints from the public, and highlighted some of the most shocking.

“Words like ‘crotch,’ ‘stripper,’ ‘prostitute,’ ‘erotic’ and ‘dominatrix’ appear throughout the irate and decidedly huffy messages. We are told that ‘the middle of her front torso [was] barely hidden,’ that she was ‘opening her legs multiple times right in the cameras so we could see

her crotch in tight leather undergarments,’ and that this is all quite ‘too provocative for the general population’” (Petchesky, 2013).

In conjunction with my interest in music and popular culture, this backlash presents an interesting question as to the prevalence that themes of raunchiness and hyper-sexuality have within popular music. For the entertainment industry, the fact remains that sex sells; there is a call for bodies, specifically female bodies, to be on display to increase record sales and other revenue streams, whether that of the artist or models and dancers. Women simply remain the object of sexual desire, the selling point, and the figures on exhibition. Music plays a significant role in our lives, with nearly 70% of people age 13 and older actively listening to music at least once a day and 90% of people actively listening to music at least several times a week (Bakula, 2012). Furthermore, thirteen percent of 11-to 14-year-olds regularly watch music videos, consumption habits that are comparable to those of other television genres such as reality television, talk shows, and news programs (Roberts & Foehr, 2004).

Although showing music videos is no longer MTV’s primary programming strategy of MTV (Sharp, 2008), music videos are readily accessible through MTV.com and on its sister network, MTV2, as well as other platforms (e.g., VH1, BET, iTunes, YouTube). As evidenced in part by the performance, sexual objectification is commonplace within media culture; however, music videos provide the most potent

examples of it, with viewers clearly given the message that romance, sexual desirability, and sexually evocative activity are fundamental human activities (Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993). Furthermore, music videos provide substantial ability for examining how gender and sexuality are portrayed in media because love and sex are principal themes (Andsager & Roe, 1999; Greeson & Williams, 1987), but also because they can contain rather potent messages and evidence of stereotypes with regard to race, gender, and sexuality (Arnett, 2002; Jhally, 2007). In considering how to draw further conclusions from the analysis of music videos, it is necessary to address the findings of the existing literature, address the gaps, then how to potentially incorporate the missing frameworks.

When MTV went on cable in 1981, the popularity of music videos exploded (Hansen & Hansen, 2000), raising questions for many about the potential antisocial effects of prolonged exposure to the medium. Thus, the notion of music videos and their respective social implications is not a new field of study; in fact, scholars have conducted research in the field since the advent of MTV thirty years ago, finding data to substantiate the powerful influence of popular music and music videos on adolescents, especially vulnerable to gender role input as they develop attitudes toward violence and sexuality (Greeson & Williams, 1986; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993). Early content analyses have indicated that approximately 40% to 75% of music

videos contained sexual imagery (Baxter, DeRiemer, Landini, Leslie, & Singletary, 1985; Gow, 1996; McKee & Pardun, 1996).

Content analyses of network television programming have consistently revealed the prevalence of stereotypical portrayals of race and gender, without necessarily looking at the prevalence of both. Thus, early content analyses of music videos expectedly have indicated that young White men are most recurrently the focus of such videos and are commonly portrayed as powerful, aggressive, and hostile (Brown & Campbell, 1986; Sherman & Dominick, 1986). Previous content analyses have also consistently found that music videos place a great deal of emphasis on women's appearance and sexual appeal (Seidman, 1992; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan & Davis, 1993; Vincent, 1989; Vincent, Davis, & Boruszkowski, 1987). Similarly, other studies have revealed substantial emphasis on men's posturing, attitude and sexual appeal to attractive women (Orange, 1996; Sandusky, 2002). Portrayals of masculinity heavily underscore the importance of virility, strength, and power; while for women, analyses indicate principally condescending and sexist treatment, with a focus almost exclusively on their physical form and sexual appeal (Andsager & Roe, 1999; Seidman, 1992; Vincent, 1989). Music videos today still support that an attractive appearance and a sexy body rank high among the most important goals young people can achieve, especially women (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011).

In addition to highlighting the prevalence of these sexual stereotypes, both dated and more recent content-analytic work have substantiated the idea that liberal sexual attitudes, exploitation, objectification, and degradation are prominent in music videos (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; Gow, 1996; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993). These findings reflected even earlier research showing that women in music videos often are placed in positions of sexual submission to their male counterparts (Baxter, DeRiemer, Landini, Leslie, & Singletary, 1985). Similarly, content analyses have suggested that women are also portrayed as sex objects by the use of revealing clothing; women's skimpy dress typically reveals a high degree of skin exposure (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; King, Laake, & Bernard, 2006; Seidman, 1999).

The available body of research documents these portrayals of gender roles across different genres. Prior research of rock music videos has found that 57% presented women in a "condescending" manner (e.g., unintelligent, sex object, victim) and 20% ascribed them a conventional gender role, while 8% displayed male violence against women (Vincent, Davis, & Boruszkowski, 1987). Country music similarly casts women in subordinate roles, with a study of 203 country music videos featuring male performers having found that only 9% cast women as fully equal to men (Andsager & Roe, 1999).

Although many early studies in the field focused on MTV programming and rock music, other scholars have delved into the stratification of stereotypical representations by race and genre of music. Prior research has suggested that rap and hip-hop particularly

promotes negative behaviors; however, findings in previous research have also indicated the presence of both controversial and community promoting themes (Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995; Zillmann, Aust, Hoffman, Love, Ordman, Pope, et al., 1995). Existing research has not analyzed the possibility that both themes are present simultaneously in music videos.

Existing literature similarly siloes the study of race with respect to music video analysis. Black artists and performers dominate rap & hip-hop music, unlike other genres (Kubrin, 2005). That dominance is significant because of rap & hip-hop videos inherently feature colorism, an issue that Black viewers face whereby individuals with lighter skin may experience advantages or preferential treatment over those with darker skin (Kubrin, 2005; Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Oliver, 1994). Studies of colorism in rap music videos have shown males as more likely than females to have Afrocentric features and females more likely to have Eurocentric features, including thinner noses and lips, and straighter and longer hair (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009). Negative associations with darker skin tone and Afrocentric features also happen recurrently in media (Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Oliver, Jackson, Moses & Dangerfield, 2004). Indeed, Blacks with more Afrocentric features, such as darker skin tone, thicker lips, and larger noses, are more likely to be associated with stereotypical or negative assessments (Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Oliver, Jackson, Moses, & Dangerfield, 2004). This association often equates

Black individuals, especially men, with criminal behavior, which differs considerably from the representation of Whites.

Despite early research findings of violence as a common negative theme in rap music, other analyses have seen it less likely to occur as often as themes of materialism and misogyny (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009). Similar to pop and rock music videos, rap music videos' portrayals of male and female characters promote more stereotypical gender attitudes (Ward, Hansbrough & Walker, 2005), with female characters often appearing in positions of sexual submission relative to their male counterparts. However, studies have also shown that this dissemination of misogyny via rap music videos can result in the degradation of Black women, but not necessarily White women by White audiences (Gan, Zillmann, & Mitrook, 1997). Furthermore, the significant consumption of rap music by White consumers suggests that these depictions can be especially deleterious to judgments made about African American women (Boehlert, 1995; Samuels, 1991).

Most of the existing literature does not take on the undeniably difficult task of connecting these portrayals to a larger social explanation for why music videos portray women as they do, beyond discussions of larger gender relations and the culture of the music industry. Researchers have identified the cultural valorization of a certain type of hegemonic masculinity, in which attitudes and practices that perpetuate heterosexual male domination over women are celebrated (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). For

this type of masculinity, to be a “man” requires the acceptance of attitudes objectifying women, subordinating them, and deriding men who espouse an egalitarian orientation across gender and sexual orientation (Connell 1987; Donaldson 1993; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). However, in more recent studies, some have argued that popular music over the past thirty years contributes to a larger cultural resistance to feminism, in attempt to block progress toward gender equality and resuscitate male domination (Weitzer, 2009).

Though many scholars have considered notions of race and sexuality within the analysis, there are significant gaps that exist in the available literature, primarily with regard to thinking about the interplay of female sexuality and race. In the analysis of sexual objectification in music videos, researchers have used objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) as a theoretical framework, in suggestion that the “sexual objectification of women’s bodies by the media teaches women to internalize an outsiders’ perspective on the self such that they come to see themselves as objects to be evaluated by others, a tendency called self-objectification” (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). Women who engage in this self-objectification have shown a higher likelihood to exhibit negative sentiments toward their bodies (Calogero, 2004; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001) as well as depression and eating disorders (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). This conceptualization of sexual objectification additionally highlights that women’s bodies are “valued predominantly for

its use to (or consumption by) others” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This notion is partially grounded in Laura Mulvey’s (1975) notion of the male gaze, often evidenced when camera shots linger on bodies and/or body parts rather than aiming at the face or the subject, more generally. The gaze conveys an asymmetric power relationship between the gazer and the individual(s) gazed upon, in that one forces an unwanted gaze upon the other. The emphasis on the body denies agency to the subject of the gaze and demotes him or her to the position of an object.

Though there is value in considering both objectification theory and Mulvey’s theory of the gaze, there are benefits in the inclusions of Black feminist theory as a theoretical framework. Mulvey argued that the gaze is inherently male; however, scholars in Black feminist theory have considered the ways that Black female musicians “returning the erotic gaze and re-appropriating the Black female body add an additional dimension to Black feminist theory by showing how Black women, in particular may use the sphere of culture to reclaim and revise the controlling images, specifically ‘the Jezebel,’ to express sexual subjectivity” (Emerson, 2002). An enduring theme in Black popular culture and the African American performance tradition has been the correlation between themes of sexuality and those of freedom (Davis 1998; Gilroy 1993). In the context of racial and sexual subjugation and marginalization, love and sexuality have begun to connote interpersonal relationships as well as the Black women’s larger struggles for emancipation. Through the lens of Black feminist theory, the juxtaposition

and concurrence of sexuality, confidence, and independence in music videos can be interpreted as the re-appropriation of the Black female form in response to its history sexual regulation and exploitation, emerging in the assertion of her own sexuality in order to gain her own sexual pleasure (Emerson, 2002). While this may seem at first glance like “selling out” to the dictates of patriarchy, it affirms the multifaceted quality of Black womanhood, through which a woman needs neither be asexual to maintain her assertiveness nor be a sex object available to satisfy the needs of men. The notion that a woman is thus able to champion the pursuit of pleasure without forfeiting her humanity can offer considerable insights into not only future studies, but also prior ones, as they have considered different responses to patriarchy.

Beyond the inclusion of Black feminist theory, the inclusion of intersectionality theory as a theoretical framework could improve content analyses of music videos looking into race and sexuality. Intersectionality studies the interactions between multiple systems of oppression with regard to groups of disenfranchised backgrounds, suggesting that—and seeks to examine how—various biological, social and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and other axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality. Intersectionality developed in the late 1980s as a experimental term to direct attention to the dynamics of difference and the solidarities of similarity within the field of

antidiscrimination and social movement politics. Over time intersectionality theory, as developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, has underscored the problems of single-axis thinking across a myriad of disciplines, such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, and anthropology as well as in feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, and legal studies. “Intersectionality’s insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power in a wide range of political discussions and academic disciplines, including new developments in fields such as geography and organizational studies” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Adopting intersectionality theory as part of a theoretical framework allows researchers to not only delve into issues of sexuality, but also consider relationships and broader context for how different identities interconnect.

Finally, yet importantly, it is important to consider the multidimensional nature of empowerment, with regard to female sexuality and gender performance. Feminists often are subjected to equally compelling but conflicting desires to shield adolescent girls from self-objectifying and misogynistic forms of female sexual expression or allow girls the autonomy to experience and express sentiments of sexual desire, pleasure, and agency (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006, 2007; Gill, 2007; APA, 2007; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). Lamb (2010) best explains this dichotomous association in the deduction that “The question is whether feeling empowered and being empowered are the same thing and

whether empowerment is merely a feeling or should be connected to power and autonomy in other spheres. Feeling emboldened sexually is not the same as empowered” (Lamb, 2010). Lamb (2010) also makes a case against a solely internal and subjective definition of empowerment, emphasizing that girls may emulate a version of sexuality that feels empowering but in fact replicates “very old exploitative scenes of male voyeurism and women’s victimization and/or oppression.” However, to dismiss girls’ individual experiences of sexual empowerment, even those influenced by pornographic media images or by male models of desire and pleasure, as a mistake or “false consciousness” seems invalidating to girls and thus contrary to the goals of empowerment (Peterson, 2010). To invalidate girls’ experiences of sexual empowerment inherently insinuates that their own opinions of sexual control and self-efficacy are incorrect. Before discussing potential conceptualizations of empowerment, it is essential to recognize first that denotations of empowerment are often culturally dependent. Nonetheless, one solution to clarifying the absence of a single definition of empowered sexuality for teenage girls is to acknowledge the multiple facets and degrees of empowered sexuality. This particular approach requires that we do not dismiss girls’ own independent perceptions of empowerment even if they do not fit into our ideals. Additionally, it requires a larger shift to view empowerment as a continuum and/or a developmental process, with hope that girls will become more sexually empowered with time and more experience. Consideration of this conflict can be incredibly influential as it allows for the

understanding of the more nuanced aspects of gender as it is performed for music video consumption.

Despite the vast amount of literature surrounding the study of music videos, it is important to continue to conduct research in the field. Advocates of cultivation theory contend that frequent viewing of media messages increases the likelihood of the adoption of ideas or beliefs reflected in media portrayals, which may influence subsequent behavior, in this case, gender performance. Social learning theory further suggests that exposure to problematic media messages by celebrities may encourage adolescents to observe, to acquire positive attitudes about, and later to emulate the behaviors of these mass media models (Gruber, Thau, Hill, Fisher, & Grube, 2005). The vast differences in the social construction of femininity, sexuality and power creates exceptionally difficult problems with regard to the values of adolescents, which are already conspicuously sexist, male-oriented, and violent. Findings have established that young women and men may form divergent meanings of the same image of femininity, therein reinforcing traditional understandings of gender and power and intensifying the sustained exploitation of female sexuality (Kalof, 1993). Incorporating Black feminist theory, intersectionality, and empowered sexuality into research practice with regard to music video analysis mirrors the complexity of social life and allows for deeper study of subtleties regarding the interplay of different variables. Additionally, it permits scholars

to truly delve into the notion of choice and revamps the way sexuality is framed in modern media discourse.

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