

Images of Sexual Stereotypes in Rap Videos and the Health of African American Female Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study sought to determine whether perceiving portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos was associated with adverse health outcomes among African American adolescent females.

Methods: African American female adolescents ($n = 522$) were recruited from community venues. Adolescents completed a survey consisting of questions on sociodemographic characteristics, rap music video viewing habits, and a scale that assessed the primary predictor variable, portrayal of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos. Adolescents also completed an interview that assessed the health outcomes and provided urine for a marijuana screen.

Results: In logistic regression analyses, adolescents who perceived more portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos were more likely to engage in binge drinking (OR 3.8, 95% CI 1.32–11.04, $p = 0.01$), test positive for marijuana (OR 3.4, 95% CI 1.19–9.85, $p = 0.02$), have multiple sexual partners (OR 1.9, 95% CI 1.01–3.71, $p = 0.04$), and have a negative body image (OR 1.5, 95% CI 1.02–2.26, $p = 0.04$). This is one of the first studies quantitatively examining the relationship between cultural images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos and a spectrum of adverse health outcomes in African American female adolescents.

Conclusions: Greater attention to this social issue may improve the health of all adolescent females.

INTRODUCTION

A GROWING BODY OF LITERATURE exists describing the diversity of psychosocial factors that can adversely influence the health practices of

African American adolescent females.^{1–7} However, few studies have examined one of the most pervasive influences, namely, the influence of the media.⁸ One genre of media that is attracting considerable attention is rap music videos.²

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Prevalent social themes in rap music videos include economic deprivation, racial injustice, social isolation, dysfunctional families, violence, hopelessness, pain, and struggle for survival.⁹ Some rap music videos, however, illustrate sexually disparaging and negative depictions and treatment of women, particularly young African American women.⁹ Several recent studies analyzing the content of rap music videos have found them to contain more descriptions and depictions of violence, guns, sexuality, eroticism, alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, profanity, and inappropriate touching compared with other forms of music videos, such as rock, country, and rhythm and blues music videos.¹⁰⁻¹² Closer examinations of rap music videos have shown that African American women are often portrayed as hypersexual, materialistic, and amoral. Further, their depiction often overemphasizes their sexualized, physical appearance and places them as decorative objects rather than active agents, in the videos.¹³⁻¹⁵ For instance, a content analysis of 203 hip hop music videos on Black Entertainment Television (BET) reported that 42% of videos depicted fondling, and 58% of videos featured women dancing sexually.^{15,16} There is evidence that African American adolescents watch approximately 3.3 hours of music videos per day.¹⁵ This suggests that African American adolescents are regularly exposed to music videos that portray negative, stereotypical images of African American women. Exposure to stereotypical sexual imagery in music videos is associated with adolescents' sexual identity development, sexual behaviors, and sexual experiences.¹⁷ Negative depictions of young women in rap music videos and the potentially deleterious effect of viewing this medium have prompted groups, such as the National Political Congress of Black Women, to seek legislation to control access to rap music.¹⁸

Although there is considerable concern regarding the themes and images expressed in rap music videos, there is limited empirical research examining the impact of these portrayals on African American adolescent females' health.¹⁵ In an experimental study conducted among African American female adolescents, relative to the control group, youth who viewed rap music videos illustrating female teens in sexually subordinate roles reported an increased acceptance of teen dating violence.¹⁹ In a study of adolescent high school students, exposure to music videos with stereotypical content led to the endorsement of

stereotypical beliefs regarding gender and sex.²⁰ A review paper by Ward found that exposure to sexually oriented music videos was associated with more permissive and stereotypical sexual attitudes, a greater number of sexual partners, and greater sexual experience among girls and women.^{21,22} However, few of these studies examined health outcomes in representative samples of African American girls and women.^{20,22}

Studies examining the effects of music videos, other than rap music videos, also suggest a relationship between watching music videos and negative health-related beliefs and behaviors.²³ Cross-sectional surveys of female adolescents' exposure to music videos have observed associations between high levels of music video viewing and unhealthy body image beliefs²⁴ and greater premarital sexual permissiveness attitudes.^{25,26} An experimental study with college students found that even a brief exposure to music videos with antisocial content can lead to increased acceptance of antisocial behaviors.²⁷

By and large, studies examining the effect of music videos on attitudes and behaviors focus on exposure to music videos as the main predictor of interest. However, individual differences in the perception of music video content may affect the extent to which music videos impact health.^{15,20} Few studies have explored the role of perception in the impact of music videos on health.^{20,28,29}

A prior study published by Wingood et al.³⁰ demonstrated a positive association between exposure to rap music videos and negative health outcomes in African American girls. Girls reporting greater exposure to rap videos were more likely than those with less exposure to have multiple sexual partners, test positive for an sexually transmitted disease (STD), and report drug and alcohol use. The current paper seeks to extend the prior analysis and the literature by moving beyond exposure to examine the relation between perceptions of sexual stereotype portrayal in music videos and health outcomes in the same population. Thus, this investigation sought to determine whether perceiving portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos was associated with adverse health outcomes among African American adolescent females.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

From December 1996 through April 1999, project recruiters screened 1130 female teens in ado-

lescent medicine clinics, health department clinics, and school health. Recruitment sites were in neighborhoods characterized by high rates of unemployment, substance abuse, violence, and STDs. Of those screened, 609 adolescents were eligible to participate in the study. Adolescents were eligible to participate in the study if they were African American females between the ages of 14 and 18 at the time of enrollment and provided written informed consent. Five hundred twenty-two eligible adolescents (85.7%) were enrolled and subsequently completed baseline assessments. The majority of eligible teens who did not participate in the study were unavailable because of conflicts with their employment schedules. The Institutional Review Board Committee on Human Research approved the study protocol prior to implementation. Adolescents were reimbursed \$20.00 for their participation.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted at the UAB Family Medicine Clinic and consisted of a self-administered survey that assessed adolescents' sociodemographic characteristics, rap music video viewing habits, and psychosocial scales (images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos and perceived attributes of an unhealthy relationship). The survey was conducted in a group setting, with monitors providing assistance to adolescents with limited literacy and helping to assure confidentiality of responses. Adolescents also completed a face-to-face interview that assessed the health outcomes. Trained African American female medical school and public health students administered the interview. Interviews were conducted in private examination rooms.

Additionally, data were collected to test for marijuana use. Adolescents provided urine samples that were tested using the EMIT II assay for the presence of cannabis.³¹ The EMIT II assays can detect the presence of marijuana use, even very small amounts, for up to 30 days. EMIT II assays are homogeneous enzyme immunoassays intended for the analysis of specific compounds in human urine. Specimen collection was conducted using standardized procedures. EMIT II assays were performed at the UAB toxicology laboratories.

Measures

Predictor variables. Images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos, the primary predictor vari-

able, were assessed using a 9-item scale ($\alpha = 0.72$) that asked about the perceived frequency with which rap music videos portrayed sexual stereotypes of African American women and the frequency with which the portrayal of women in rap music videos influenced behavior. Women responded using a 6-item Likert scale ranging from never = 0 to always = 5. The distribution of scale scores ranged from 6 to 45 ($\text{skew} = -0.054$). Adolescents were classified as perceiving either fewer or more portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos based on a median split of the distribution of scale scores. Adolescents with scale scores <28 were categorized as perceiving fewer portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos, and adolescents with scale scores ≥ 28 were categorized as perceiving more portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos.

Sociodemographic characteristics assessed adolescents' age, employment status, family composition, families' receipt of public assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and parental monitoring.

Rap music video viewing habits were assessed by asking three different questions. First, adolescents were asked if they had ever viewed rap music videos. Adolescents responding affirmatively were asked about the number of hours they viewed rap music videos during an average day and the number of days in the week that rap music videos were viewed. The two items were multiplied together to create a measure of frequency of exposure to viewing rap music videos.³⁰

Perceived attributes of an unhealthy relationship were assessed by a 5-item index asking if participants perceived certain partner attributes (e.g., having a boyfriend who gets angry when you don't do what he wants, having a boyfriend who makes decisions about what you wear) as characteristic of an unhealthy or healthy relationship. Responses ranged from 1 = unhealthy to 5 = healthy ($\alpha = 0.68$).

Health outcome variables. Binge drinking was assessed by asking adolescents, "How many drinks do you usually have at one time?" Adolescents who reported drinking four or more drinks at one time were defined as binge drinkers. Marijuana use was defined as having a positive marijuana test result from the EMIT II assay. Sexual practices assessed included whether the adolescent had sex with more than one partner in the prior 30 days and the frequency of condom use during the prior 30 days.

Body image was assessed using a modified version of the Ben-Tovim Walker Body Attitudes Questionnaire.³² An example of a scale item is, "I usually feel physically attractive." Scale scores ranged from 12 to 35 (skew = -0.165). Adolescents were classified as being more or less satisfied with their body image based on a median split of the distribution of body image scores. Adolescents with body image scores ≤ 28 were categorized as being less satisfied with their body image, and adolescents with scale scores ≥ 29 were categorized being more satisfied with their body image. We calculated the average measure intraclass correlation for the body image scale; this measure was 0.71 (95% CI 0.67–0.74, $p = 0.0001$).

Data analysis

Data analysis comprised several sequential steps. First, descriptive statistics were used to characterize the primary predictor variable, images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos, and the sociodemographics of the study sample. Second, the data were analyzed only for those adolescents reporting a history of watching rap music videos. Subsequently, bivariate analyses examined the relationships between images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos and the health outcomes (binge drinking, drug use, sexual practices, and negative body image). Variables observed to be significant in bivariate analyses ($p < 0.10$) were entered into logistic regression models.³³ To identify potential covariates, bivariate analyses examined the relationships between images of sexual stereotypes in rap music

videos and sociodemographic characteristics, exposure to rap music videos, and perceived attributes of an unhealthy relationship. Variables observed to be significant in bivariate analyses ($p < 0.10$) were entered into regression models as covariates. Logistic regression models were constructed, and adjusted odds ratios (ORs), the 95% CI for the OR, and the corresponding p values were calculated to examine whether associations between images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos and health outcomes persisted after adjustment for covariates.

RESULTS

Between December 1996 and April 1999, 522 single African American females, 14–18 years of age (mean 16 years), participated in the study. Most (81.2%) were full-time students. Less than one fifth (17.8%) reported having a paying job, 18.4% reported living in a household that received public assistance, and 52.9% of parents worked less than 20 hours. Most adolescents reported living with their mother (57.5%), with fewer living with both parents (21.6%).

Scale scores for the primary predictor variable, images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos, ranged from 6 to 45. The mean, standard deviation (SD), and median for each of the nine scale items are shown in Table 1. The majority of adolescents, 95.4% ($n = 498$), reported a history of viewing rap music videos. All subsequent analyses were conducted with this subset of adolescents who reported watching rap music videos.

TABLE 1. PERCEPTION OF PORTRAYALS OF SEXUAL STEREOTYPES IN RAP MUSIC VIDEOS

Scale item	Mean	Standard deviation	Median
In rap music videos, how often . . .			
1. Are black women portrayed as people who use sex to obtain material possessions, like expensive clothes, cars, money, and entertainment?	3.24	1.2	3.0
2. Are black women touched or fondled by black men?	3.47	1.2	4.0
3. Are black women treated disrespectfully by black men?	2.99	1.2	3.0
4. Are black women portrayed as sex objects?	3.37	1.2	3.0
5. Are black women being controlled by black men?	2.82	1.2	3.0
6. Are two or more black women surrounding a black male artist?	4.04	1.0	4.0
7. Are the black women like black women in real life?	2.91	1.4	3.0
8. Do the black women influence the way you dress?	2.52	1.6	3.0
9. Do the black women influence the way you act around black men?	1.87	1.6	2.0

Bivariate analyses

In bivariate analyses conducted among adolescents who reported watching rap music videos, adolescents who perceived more portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos did not differ from adolescents who perceived fewer portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos with respect to the sociodemographic variables assessed, including age (39.1% vs. 31.5%, $p = 0.17$), employment status (54.5% vs. 49.8%, $p = 0.30$), single parent family (78.2% vs. 80.3%, $p = 0.56$), family's receipt of public assistance (18.5% vs. 19.8%, $p = 0.73$), and parental monitoring (71.1% vs. 74.4%, $p = 0.40$). However, adolescents who perceived more portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos did differ from adolescents who perceived fewer portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos with respect to the mean number of hours they viewed rap music videos during the week (23.16, SD = 21.98 vs. 17.39, SD = 23.57, $p = 0.006$) and their scale scores of whether certain partner attributes were characteristic of an unhealthy relationship (60.4% vs. 48.0%, $p = 0.006$). Thus, we controlled for exposure to rap music videos, an important theoretical variable that could now be delineated from perceptions of sexual stereotype portrayal in rap music videos. We also controlled for unhealthy relationship characteristics. Additionally, in bivariate analyses, perceiving more portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos was associated with numerous health outcomes, including binge drinking, testing positive for marijuana, having multiple sexual partners, and

having a negative body image (Table 2). Thus, these variables were included in logistic regression analyses.

Logistic regression analyses

In multivariate analyses controlling exposure to rap music videos and believing that certain partner attributes were characteristic of an unhealthy relationship, adolescents who perceived more portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos were more likely to engage in binge drinking (OR 3.8, 95% CI 1.32–11.04, $p = 0.01$), test positive for marijuana (OR 3.4, 95% CI 1.19–9.85, $p = 0.02$), have multiple sexual partners (OR 1.9, 95% CI 1.01–3.71, $p = 0.04$), and have a negative body image (OR 1.5, 95% CI 1.02–2.26, $p = 0.04$).

DISCUSSION

This is one of the first studies quantitatively examining the relationship between perceptions of images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos and a spectrum of adverse health outcomes in African American female adolescents. Our prior research has demonstrated an association between exposure to rap music videos and African American female adolescents health³⁰; however, little quantitative research has sought to empirically explore a potential rationale for this observation.

Several authors have attempted to theoretically understand the mechanisms by which images of

TABLE 2. UNADJUSTED AND ADJUSTED ANALYSES OF ASSOCIATION BETWEEN IMAGES OF SEXUAL STEREOTYPES IN RAP MUSIC VIDEOS AND AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE ADOLESCENTS' HEALTH

Health outcomes	<i>Bivariate</i>				p	<i>Multivariate</i>		
	<i>More portrayals of gender insubordination (n = 243)</i>		<i>Fewer portrayals of gender insubordination (n = 254)</i>			OR	95% CI	p
	%	(n)	%	(n)				
Drinking								
Binge drinking	18.3	(19)	7.3	(8)	0.02	3.8	(1.32–11.04)	0.01
Drug use								
Test positive for marijuana	8.3	(20)	2.8	(7)	0.007	3.4	(1.19–9.85)	0.02
Sexual practices								
Multiple sex partners	12.4	(30)	7.5	(19)	0.07	1.9	(1.01–3.71)	0.04
Body image								
Negative body image	43.8	(105)	52.4	(133)	0.06	1.5	(1.02–2.26)	0.04

sexual stereotypes in music videos may affect women's health.^{34–36} We considered the work of Collins,^{35,37} who postulates that historical portrayals of sexual insubordination by African American women that appear in U.S. culture are frequently depicted in rap music videos. The popularity of cultural fictions of African American women as sexually promiscuous, predatory, and hypersexual heightens the credibility of these portrayals. Collins states that the normalizing of these cultural fictions in rap music videos may lead to a belief in the veracity of these images by African American females.^{35,37}

Collins's theoretical heuristic can be applied as a framework for understanding the observed study results. The perception of portrayals of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos may cultivate a norm among African American females regarding the desirability of certain physical characteristics and sexual behaviors. African American female adolescents not possessing these physical attributes may perceive themselves as having a less positive body image. Perceiving these cultural images to be normative may also motivate young African American females to model the sexual practices observed in these music videos in their own lives. Modeling occurs more readily when the model is perceived as attractive and similar and the modeled behavior is salient, simple, and prevalent, has functional value, and is possible. Thus, the prevalent sexualized images of young, attractive African American females in rap music videos may serve as models for engaging in sexual behavior with multiple partners, an act associated with an increased risk of exposure to STDs, including HIV. For instance, Brown and Newcomer²⁵ found that adolescents who watched more sexually explicit content on television were more likely to initiate sexual activity during the course of their study than those who watched less sexual content.^{22,25} With few alternative depictions of African American female sexuality portrayed in the media, this effect may be heightened by the overemphasis of music videos on women's physical appearance rather than musical ability.^{13,38}

Rap music videos depict or discuss alcohol and drug use more than any other genre of music videos.¹¹ In rap music videos, the glamorized depictions of alcohol use are often portrayed in conjunction with sexually imagery, and portrayals of drug use are often depicted as normal. These im-

ages may influence African American female adolescents to engage in behaviors, such as drinking and drug use, that are related to participation in both undesired and unsafe sexual activities. Similarly, these images may influence African American girls to develop romantic affiliations with boys who model depictions of alcohol and drug use normalized in rap videos. Indirectly, this may influence African American girls to engage in substance use and, in turn, increase their risk of experiencing negative health consequences associated with this behavior. Additionally, African American female teens may identify with the themes of sexual stereotypes often depicted in the rap music videos, and this affiliation may reinforce teens engaging in these adverse health behaviors.

Although perceiving greater portrayal of images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos was the primary predictor of adolescents' health status, this study also examined the influence of other social variables known to affect adolescents health, including sociodemographic characteristics, perceived attributes of an unhealthy relationship, and rap music video viewing characteristics.^{39–42} Even after adjusting for these potential covariates, perceiving more images of sexual stereotypes in rap music videos was independently associated with a spectrum of health outcomes.

There are a number of limitations that should be considered. First, the sample was limited to African American females, 14–18 years of age, who reside in neighborhoods with high rates of unemployment, substance abuse, and STDs. Thus, the findings from this sample may not be generalizable to males, other racial/ethnic groups, younger, potentially more impressionable youth, or youth living in lower-risk environments. Also, some teens who were eligible for the study were unable to participate because of conflicting work schedules. It is unclear whether this group differed distinctly from study participants. This study was not accompanied by a content analysis of the rap music videos being viewed by adolescents, and it is difficult to ascertain the specific sexually stereotypical imagery to which participants were exposed. This information could have provided rich insight about the themes and images viewed in the rap music videos. Additionally, as this study did not use a longitudinal design, prospective studies will

have to be conducted to determine conclusively the temporal relationship between viewing cultural images of gender subordination in rap music videos and adolescent females' health. For instance, it is plausible that adolescents perceive stereotypical sexual imagery in rap music videos because they are situated within a social context in which they have more sexual partners or engage in more illicit substance use than adolescents who do not perceive such imagery in rap music videos. Their history of these behaviors may inform their interpretation of music video content, causing them to perceive situations that are closer to their lived experience.

CONCLUSIONS

As earlier studies have shown, exposure to rap music videos can have a negative impact on health in African American adolescent girls. However, the findings from this study suggest that girls' perception of stereotypical images portrayed in rap music videos may also contribute to some of the adverse health outcomes initially associated with exposure to music videos. This has important implications for public health practice. Practitioners may want to evaluate and counsel adolescents and their families about the potential effect of media on adolescent's health and provide specific strategies to help parents monitor exposure to videos featuring negative sexual imagery. In addition to educating and empowering families, public health practitioners are ideally suited to educate communities, schools, and advocacy groups about the potential public health risks associated with exposure to rap music videos. This education effort may be enhanced by the inclusion of media literacy training designed to teach African American adolescent girls to identify and deconstruct negative sexual stereotypes. Finally, a display of parental advisory warnings during television programs that broadcast rap music videos depicting negative sexual imagery, alcohol use, and drug use might also have a positive impact on the health of adolescents. Failure to understand the differential impact that the media have on female adolescents' health neglects the potentially deleterious effect of perceiving stereotypical portrayals of women in music videos. Greater attention to this concern may improve the health of adolescent females.

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