# Undressing the Words: Prevalence of Profanity, Misogyny, Violence, and Gender Role References in Popular Music from 2006-2016

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Are degrading sexual references more prevalent than non-degrading references in music popular with adolescents? The purpose of this study was to perform a content analysis of contemporary popular music with particular attention paid to the prevalence of violent, misogynistic, profane, and/or demeaning colloquial references. Billboard magazine was used to identify the top popular songs appearing on top music charts from 2006 through 2016. Data show songs with justified violence themes were most commonly found in hip-hop music, whereas songs with unjustified message themes were most often found in Pop music. The present study suggests that pop and hip-hop/rap music, genres popular with most adolescents today, use frequent references involving profanity, violence, and misogynistic themes.

Keywords: Misogyny, body image, ethnicity, gender, objectification, music lyrics, violence against women

In film, television, videos, and music, sexual messages are becoming more explicit in dialogue, lyrics, and behavior. Too often, these media messages contain unrealistic, inaccurate, and misleading information that contributes to young people's gender and sexual development. Adolescents have ranked the media second only to school sex education programs as a leading source of information about sex (Gow, 1993). Studies have shown a direct correlation between risky adolescent behaviors and exposure to/preference for music lyrics (Hansen & Hansen, 1991; Klein, Brown, Childers, Oliveri, Porter, & Dykers, 2009). However, what is less clear is whether or not music lyrics have become sexually explicit across all genres or whether sexually explicit lyrics are associated with particular musical genres popular with adolescents. Moreover, how gender and violence contextualize sexualization in lyrics remains understudied.

A content analysis of 409 popular songs was conducted in order to describe and make inferences about the characteristics of song lyrics and anti-social message themes found in a wide variety of musical genres popular with adolescents. Data obtained from this study are used to offer suggestions for future research on the possible effects of exposure to these references and messages on adolescent attitudes and behaviors.

Music lyrics have undergone dramatic changes since the introduction of rock music more than 40 years ago. This change is an issue of vital interest and concern for parents, pediatricians, counselors and psychologists, educators, and to some extent teenagers. During the past 40 years, research has provided evidence that rock music lyrics have

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become increasingly explicit- particularly in terms of references to sex, drugs, and violence (Ballard & Coates, 1995; Dixon & Linz, 1997; Greenfield, Bruzzone, & Koyamatsu, 1987; Hansen & Hansen, 1991; Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995; Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995; Strasberger, 1995; Strasberger & Hendren, 1995).

Recently, heavy metal and "gangsta rap" music lyrics have elicited the greatest concern among research. And, in some cases, research suggests that rap music's lyrics often communicate potentially harmful health messages (Binder, 1993; Johnson et al., 1995; Strasberger, 1995; Wester, Crown, Quatman, & Heesacker, 1997). Content analytic work must be done incrementally over time in order to establish patterns and changes. Further, there is a need to examine multiple genres of music rather than studying only one genre such as rap (e.g., Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to examine the depiction of women across musical genres/formats. The gap this study fills, by using a systematic content analysis to describe and make inferences about the types of messages communicated in today's popular music. Additionally, the study provides a discussion on the possible effects and theoretical implications of exposure to the message themes on adolescent attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, this research analyzed: (i) profanity in music lyrics; (ii) violence referenced in music lyrics; and (iii) frequency of objectification of women in music lyrics.

## Literature Review

Examining the influence of popular music on adolescents does not preclude the appreciation of music as an art, freedom of expression, and as a site of empowerment and identity exploration. However, research suggests that we should consider the nature of music lyrics and potential influence on adolescent development. Objectification theory and models of social learning provide theoretical support for the idea that music may influence adolescent development. First, objectification theory is used in the presented study because it offers a framework for understanding how women and girls may be objectified through music lyrics and the consequences of this sexual objectification. Second, social cognitive theory of gender development suggests that music – along with other media – are a system-level socializing force that contributes to gender-related development.

### Objectification and Gender Stereotyping

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) proposes that 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. Media contribute to the culture of sexual objectification (Aubrey, 2006) by sexually objectifying bodies, which "occurs whenever a person's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from his or her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing him or her" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 175). Based on this idea, the present research explored the frequency that song lyrics included references to female body parts, reducing women to instruments, or objects.

Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) further offers a framework for understanding how exposure to mediated models may impart gender lessons to consumers, influencing attitudes and beliefs about gender and their own gender-related self-concept. According to Bussey and Bandura (1999), media messages serve as one source for "the development of gender-linked knowledge and

competencies," (p. 686) influencing perceptions of appropriate gender-based conduct, normative gender roles, self-evaluative gender-specific standards, and self-efficacy beliefs.

Media are important sources of information about gender roles for boys as well as for girls. It is possible that media content that primarily refer to men in dominant roles and or portray the "manly man" may negatively influence boys' perceptions on the role of women in society. Steinke, Lapinski, Zietsman-Thomas, Nwulu, Crocker, & Williams (2007) conducted a study of middle school-aged children and discovered that boys who indicated the media were very important had more negative attitudes toward women portrayed in positive roles (i.e., scientists) than those who indicated the media were less important. The findings obtained in the Steinke et al. (2007) study are important to note in that they show that consumption of media may influence boys' perceptions of women's roles developed during childhood.

Past research also demonstrates the influence of music lyrics on adolescent health and development, which underscores the significance of examining the content of popular lyrics. Primack, Douglas, Fine, and Dalton (2009) demonstrated in an experiment with U.S. high school students that exposure to sexually degrading music lyrics was related to increased adolescents' sexual activity in comparison to their peers exposed to non-degrading lyrics.

Although music is only one socializing force among a host of sources of information in an adolescent's life, music listening is a popular adolescent activity that can have powerful anti-social as well as pro-social influences. Prior research supports the idea that anti-social themes about gender, sex, and violence present in song lyrics may have subtle but exacting effects on adolescent attitudinal and behavioral development. The current study advances literature by conducting a systematic content analysis of representative lyrics from all genres found on popular music charts and provides a broader framework for understanding the portrayal of women and violence in contemporary popular music.

## Women, Violence and Contemporary Music

Although studies have documented the sexualization of women in music videos (see Aubrey & Frisby, 2011 and Frisby & Aubrey, 2012), sexualizing content in the lyrics that accompany these videos has not been documented as extensively. One study found that references to relationships, romance, and sexual behavior are more commonplace in popular music lyrics and videos (Christenson & Roberts, 1990). More recent research found that sexual content appears more frequently in adolescents' musical choices than in their television, movie, or magazine choices (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005).

Content analyses have provided some support for the notion that most popular hip-hop/rap music appears to contain objectionable lyrics reference themes related to aggressive/violent behavior, and attitudes that condone and perpetuate misogyny (Ballard & Coates, 1995). In fact, many scholars note that hip-hop/rap lyrics tend to objectify, devalue, or subjugate women through the inclusion of insulting and subordinating words such as "bitch, ho, and skeezer" (Ballard, Dodson, & Bazzini, 1999; McLeod, Evelant, & Nathanson, 1997; Pinn, 1996; Powell, 1991; Rose, 1994; Watts, 1997; Wingood et al., 2003). As part of a study of the effects of listening to popular music on sexual behavior, Martino et al. (2006) coded the content of 164 songs from 16 artists popular with the adolescent market. Overall, 15% of songs contained sexually degrading lyrics. However, the study concentrated on songs and lyrics contained solely in rap and R&B music. What is not known is if sexually explicit and violent lyrics will be found in other genres.

One analysis of hip-hop and heavy metal songs from 1985 to 1990 found that hip-hop was more sexually explicit and graphic whereas heavy metal's allusions to sexual acts or to male domination were fairly subtle (Binder 1993). Binder's (1993) study, however, has an important limitation. First, her comparative analysis was limited to only 20 songs that were deemed "controversial." The sampling frame was based on songs identified as popular rather than a more objective measure of popularity.

Armstrong (2001) conducted a content analysis of 490 rap songs during 1987–1993. Lyrics featuring violence against women were found in 22% of the songs, and the violence perpetrated against women included assault, rape, and murder. Although Armstrong's study makes a valuable contribution to the literature in its systematic focus on violence against women, it does not discuss other (non-violent) depictions of women and provides little indication of coding procedures. Although these studies appear to document that hip-hop/rap music contains violent and misogynist themes and that these themes can have an impact on viewers, the vast majority of the studies do not fully investigate the depth or breadth of the anti-social themes found in other genres. Is it possible that violent and misogynist themes are referenced and evident in other musical genres?

Primack, Gold, Schwarz, and Dalton (2008) conducted a content analysis of 279 songs found on Billboard's 2005 top song list. These researchers found that of the 279 unique songs identified, 36.9% contained references to sex, and more than 60% were found to be degrading and demeaning. References to sex differed, however, by musical genre. Degrading and demeaning lyrics were most commonly found in rap and hip-hop, but not in country music (Primack et al., 2008). The Primack et al. (2008) study focused on one year of popular music. One research question was left unanswered: are there other trends and references in musical lyrics, and if so, what are they?

Lastly, Hall, West, and Hill (2012) examine associations between artist gender and race and presence of sexualization in lyrics. Their analysis, however, abandons looking at differences between music genres and reports differences only at the artist level. Further, their research has a narrower focus in examining only one type of questionable content in music lyrics that reach adolescent audiences. The present study improves on this prior research by examining how music genre and artist gender are related to instances of profanity, violence, and misogyny in song lyrics. This examination undresses the words of popular music to uncover the ways that gender, violence, and sexualization converge in lyric content.

## Method

### Sample Selection

A quantitative content analysis of music lyrics was conducted. To gain an adequate and unbiased sample of songs and artists, an inventory was taken of the Top 100 charts, selecting the top 50 of the most popular songs from years 2006 through 2016. This time period was selected primarily because it includes years that have not been examined in previous research on this topic. Top ten songs taken from years 2006 through 2016, specifically those songs that attained a platinum status (selling at least 1 million copies) were identified (N = 409). Sampling only the top platinum songs ensured that the music had reached a substantial segment of the population.

To make every attempt to obtain a representative sample of artists, the researchers identified top selling artists and releases on the website ARTISTdirect (http://

www.artistdirect.com). Because ARTISTdirect is a comprehensive online network of resources that provides, among other things, detailed information about artists/groups, it was assumed that this comparison process would help ensure that the sample was diverse and represented all musical genres. Artists are often cross-listed in genre, thus the researchers referred to and used the above-mentioned website to ensure that the breath of genres as well as musical artists were represented in the sample. The goal of the research is to broadly look at the influence of music on adolescents, therefore ARTISTdirect helped the researchers to identify the top artist across different genres and compare the list obtained here with the list obtained from sampling of the top 100 songs from 2006-2016.

To alleviate bias, the researchers looked at the top artist from each genre of music to get a wider scope and then identified the top songs found on the pop, hip-hop, rock, heavy metal, and country music charts.  The principal investigator then typed in the name of each artist/group and musical genre classification identified on this website. iTunes also served as an initial source and was used to confirm classification and placement of a song's genre.

Few, if any, studies have been conducted that determine if controversial themes and profane language may be found in other musical genres like pop and R&B, rather than rap and hip-hop music, which is why a diverse sample size (a listing of all tops songs which included songs/artists from all genres) rather than just hip-hop music was selected. Using SPSS, a sample of 150 songs was randomly drawn and then analyzed (after checking for duplication on the various lists, a total of 409 songs was identified and included in the study). Each song was listened to twice in its entirety by the coders, while simultaneously reading the lyrics. The lyrics were obtained from Lyrics.com, a social media music community described as having the largest searchable lyrics database.

Each line of the lyrics in each song was coded to identify major themes. For example, coders were instructed to code the number of occurrences of the theme; and if the song included lyrics that encourage, condone, or glorify the objectification, exploitation, or victimization of women.

## Coder Training

Three undergraduate students served as coders, two females and one male.  Training took place over three weeks; each weekly session lasted between one and two hours.  Coders were familiarized with the codebook and operationalization of the variables under investigation. During these sessions, the coders practiced on several songs so that they and the investigators could identify and resolve problems with the coding scheme. Diagnostics were run in order to determine when coders were prepared to begin coding individually.  After the coding scheme was modified on the basis of these practice rounds, coding was independent.   Final coding took place over the course of two months, with weekly checks on coder fatigue.

Inter-coder reliability was based on the coding of the three undergraduate coders plus the primary investigator. Reliabilities were computed based on the coding of 20 additional songs (not included in the final sample in order to not reduce the sample size; two from each genre). After reliability on each of the variables was achieved, coding the final sample was done by the three coders.

Krippendorff's alpha was used to assess reliability.  Krippendorff's alpha ($\alpha$), according to research, is the most reliable. Unlike Scott, Cohen, and Fleiss statistics, which measure observed and expected agreement, Krippendorff's equation measures observed

and expected disagreement (Krippendorff, 2004; Kirppendorff, 2011). Krippendorff's alpha ranges between 1 and 0. According to Krippendorff (2004), "when observers agree perfectly, observed disagreement Do = 0 and $\alpha$ = 1, which indicates perfect reliability. When observers agree as if chance had produced the results, Do = De and $\alpha$ = 0, which indicates the absence of reliability" (2011, p. 1).

Nominal data had a raw agreement of 86% or above, and a Krippendorffff's alpha of .80 and above. All of the variables' reliability coefficients are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Intercoder reliabilities

| Thematic variable | Krippendorff's alpha |
|---|---|
| Musical genre | .97 |
| Name of artist | .98 |
| Ethnicity of artist | .99 |
| Violence | .99 |
| Profanity | .80 |
| Misogyny/Objectification | .91 |
| Sex role | .88 |
| Female image | .89 |

### Genre

A song's genre was operationalized as the lyrical style of the music. For purposes of this analysis, genre was broken down into eight different categories of lyrical style: pop, R&B, hip-hop/rap, alternative, Latin, folk, rock and country. Initially, a song's genre was obtained through a search of the iTunes music store.

### Descriptive Variables

Identifying information was obtained about each song from the website, which included song name, the name of the main artist, the year, popularity or ranking of the song, gender of the main artist, ethnicity of the main artist, and genre or category the song was listed under.

In addition to the lyrical style of genre and style (see preceding section) coding was also performed at the thematic level for each song (see following paragraph for themes; profanity, violence, and misogyny). Most of the variables were coded using a categorical scale that allowed coders to choose the occurrence of the themes from (1) present, (2) not present. Each of the following themes was coded for each variable and theme. The coding scheme was adapted from Aubrey and Frisby (2011).

**Description and Operationalizations of Themes**

*Profanity:* According to the United States' Federal Communications Commission, words such as "shit, bitch, and ass" have been deemed as inappropriate for broadcast (see Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004b). The frequency of these words as well as other strong profane words was coded. Coders were instructed to include in the analysis excretory words (e.g., asshole), sexual words (e.g., pecker), and other words that evoke strong emotion and offense (e.g., bitch) in this category (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004a).

*Violence*: Violence was defined as any overt depiction of a threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm someone (Smith & Boyson, 2002). Violence was coded as "justified" when it was presented as morally correct, right or sanctioned, and 2= "unjustified" when violence is mentioned as morally incorrect or consequences of using violence are emphasized (Smith & Boyson, 2002). The first example is from the song titled, "How We Do," from the album The Documentary (2005), by The Game:

> Don't try to front,
> I'll leave yo' ass, slumped
> Thinkin I'm a punk
> Get your fuckin head, lumped

This particular excerpt would be coded as justified violence as the artist is promoting violence to maintain his tough, masculine, gansta image. The violence, therefore is justified, because if one tries to "front" or thinks he is a punk, then getting your head "lumped" or ass slumped would be considered justified violence. The second example is from the song, "Hollaback Girl," from the album Love, Angel, Music, Baby (2005) by Gwen Steffani:

> Both of us want to be the winner, but there can only be one
> So I'm gonna fight, gonna give it my all
> Gonna make you fall, gonna sock it to you
> That's right I'm the last one standing, another one bites the dust

Similarly, this song would be coded as justified violence because the artist is portraying the necessity to use aggression to win and be on top.

*Misogyny*: The occurrence of misogyny in songs was defined as the hatred or disdain of women where they are reduced to objects or expendable beings (Adams & Fuller, 2006). Included in the analysis were instances or statements about women in relation to sex or references of women causing "trouble" for men as "users" of men.
Using theoretical definitions of misogyny and objectification of women, coders were instructed to look for instances in which women were beneath men and referred to as usable and expendable (Adams & Fuller, 2006). Lyrics were coded as either containing misogynistic lyrics or not.

Here is an example from a song titled, "Lovers and Friends," from the album Crunk Juice (2005), by Lil' Jon and The East Side Boyz:

> Be a good girl now, turn around, and get these whippings
> You know you like it like that,
> You don't have to fight back,
> Here's a pillow-bite...that

## Data Analysis

Because all variables were regarded categorical/nominal variables, Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were conducted to determine if the distribution among categories was not equal.

## Results

To provide context for the results, first demographics of the artists were assessed. Male artists (58%, n = 229) were more frequent than female artists (42%, n = 180) in the sample. The sample consisted of 31.1% (n = 127) white/Caucasian artists, 45.6% (n = 187) black/African-American artists, .8% (n = 1) Asian/Pacific Islander artist, 1.5% (n = 6) as Hispanic/Latino, and 21.2% (n = 87) mixed/Biracial artists. The race of two of the artists could not be identified. Also, because our results examined genre differences, we also consider the genre breakdown. Of the 150 songs included in the study, 54.7% (n = 82) was classified as Pop, 10.7% (n = 16) was classified as R & B, 21.3% (n = 32) was identified as hip-hop/rap, 1.3% (n = 2) as belonging to the country genre, 9.3% (n = 14) as alternative, .7% (n = 1) was identified as Latin music, 1.3% (n = 2) as Country music, and .7% (n = 1) Folk music.

Artists included in the sample ranged from Akon, Alicia Keys, All American Regects, Beyonce, Linkin Park, Katy Perry, Lil Wayne, Chris Brown, Fergie, Jordin Sparks, Ne-yo, Natasha Bedingfield, Rihanna, Pussycat Dolls, Gwen Stefani T-Pain, Timbaland, Maroon 5, Usher, One Republic, Leona Lewis, Panic at the Disco, Daughtry, Coldplay, Carrie Underwood, Jonas Brothers, and Gnarls Barkley, to name a few. For a complete list of the artists included in the study, see Table 2.

Table 2. Sample of male and female top musical artists 2006-2016

| Name of Artist | Gender |
| --- | --- |
| Adele | Female |
| Akon | Male |
| Alicia Keys | Female |
| All American Rejects | Male Band |
| Avril Lavigne | Female |
| Beyonce | Female |
| Black-Eyed Peas | Musical group |
| Britney Spears | Female |
| Bruno Mars | Male |
| Carly Rae Jepsen | Female |
| Carrie Underwood | Female |
| Chamillionaire | Male |
| Chris Brown | Male |
| Christina Perri | Female |
| ColdPlay | Male Band |
| Daniel Powter | Male |
| Daughtry | Male Band |
| Drake | Male |
| Ed Sherran | Male |
| Eminem | Male |
| Fall Out Boy | Male Band |
| Fergie | Female |
| FloRida | Male |
| Gnarls Barkley | Male |
| Gwen Stefani | Female |
| Hilary Duff | Female |
| Jay-Z | Male |

| | |
|---|---|
| John Legend | Male |
| Jonas Brothers | Male |
| Jordin Sparks | Female |
| Justin Bieber | Male |
| Justin Timberlake | Male |
| Kanye West | Male |
| Katy Perry | Female |
| Kelly Clarkson | Female |
| Leona Lewis | Female |
| Lil Wayne | Male |
| Linkin Park | Male Band |
| LMFAO | Male Band |
| Mariah Carey | Female |
| Maroon 5 | Male |
| Mary J. Blige | Female |
| Meghan Trainor | Female |
| Mims | Male |
| Natasha Bedingfield | Female |
| Ne-Yo | Male |
| Nelly | Male |
| Nelly Furtado | Female |
| Nick Lachey | Male |
| Nicki Minaj | Female |
| One Direction | Male Band |
| One Republic | Male Band |
| Pharell Williams | Male |
| Plain White T's | Male Band |
| Pussy Cat Dolls | Female Band |
| Ray J | Male |
| Rihanna | Female |
| Robin Thicke | Male |
| Sean Kingston | Male |
| Sean Paul | Male |
| Shakira | Female |
| Shop Boyz | Male |
| Soulja Boy | Male |
| T-Pain | Male |
| Timbaland | Male |
| The Fray | Male |
| Toko Hotel | Male Band |
| Usher | Male |
| Young JOC | Male |

A summary of all results on differences in pop music genres and frequency of profanity, misogyny, and violence is presented in Table 3. Information in the table shows that significant findings were found for profanity, violence, and demeaning messages in music lyrics for specific pop music such as hip-hop and rap and pop music.

Table 3.  Review of the statistically significant differences in the prevalence of profanity, misogyny, and violence references in popular music from 2006-2016

| Independent variable | Dependent variable | Statistical significance |
|---|---|---|
| Musical genre | Use of profanity | Yes*<br>*hip-hop/rap music was found to use profanity more than other genres while songs found on the Top 40 "pop" charts were not found to use profanity in the lyric. |
| Hip-hop genre | Demeaning/Objectified lyrics | Yes*<br>*hip-hop music continues to rely on lyrics that exploit, demean, and objectify women |
| Gender | Use of profanity | Yes*<br>*songs containing profanity were performed by male artists more often than female artists. |
| References to violence | Musical genre | Yes*<br>*pop music was found to reference violent acts more than lyrics found in other genres. significantly more than the occurrences of violent messages found in the other genres. |

Table 4 shows the percentages within columns.  In this analysis, we investigated whether the presence of profanity differed among several types of genres. The relationship between musical genre and the use of profanity was statistically significant, $\chi^2$ =6, N = 409) = 44.2, p≤ .0001. Thus, hip-hop/rap music was found to use profanity more than other genres while songs found on the Top 40 "pop" charts were not found to use profanity in the lyric.  There was also a significant relationship between gender and use of profanity, $\chi^2$ =31.2, df = 1, p≤ .0001. In the "hip-hop/rap" genre, 26.6% (n = 61) of the songs containing profanity were performed by male artists, in comparison to 5.6% (n = 10) performed by female artists.  This was a statistically significant difference.

Data obtained further shows the results of our data analysis after examining the extent to which today's music lyrics demeaned/objectified women. Were misogynistic themes found in other forms of music besides hip-hop/rap music?  The relationship between genre and the misogyny was statistically significant,  $\chi^2$ =44.2, df = 6, p≤ .0001, suggesting that hip-hop music continues to rely on lyrics that exploit, demean, and objectify women. Consistent with prior research, data show that lyrics/words found in hip-hop/rap music demean and objectify women 55.9% (n = 22) when compared to all other musical genres.

Table 4. Results of Chi-square test and descriptive statistics for language in music lyrics by musical genre

| | Pop | R & B | Hip-hop | Country | Alternative | Latin | Rock | Total songs (n) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Profane Language* | | | | | | | | |
| Present | 18 | 6 | 46 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 71 |
| | (9%) | (16.2%) | (34.8%) | (0%) | (2.9%) | (0%) | (0%) | (17.4%) |
| Not present | 181 | 31 | 86 | 4 | 33 | 1 | 2 | 338 |
| | (91%) | (83.8%) | (65.2%) | (100%) | (97.1%) | (100%) | (100%) | (82.6%) |
| $\chi^2$=44.2, df= 6, p $\leq$ .0001 | | | | | | | | |
| *Violence* | | | | | | | | |
| Justified | 1 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| | (.5%) | (0%) | (5.3%) | (25.0%) | (0%) | (0%) | (0%) | (2.2%) |
| Unjustified | 198 | 37 | 125 | 3 | 34 | 1 | 2 | 400 |
| | (99.5%) | (9.3%) | (94.7%) | (75%) | (100%) | (100%) | (100%) | (97.8%) |
| $\chi^2$= 19.9, df= 6, p $\leq$ .001 | | | | | | | | |
| *Misogyny/Objectification* | | | | | | | | |
| Apparent (lyric degrades and objectifies women by the use of nicknames) | | | | | | | | |
| Present | 29 | 22 | 61 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 113 |
| | (14.6%) | (59.5%) | (46.2%) | (0%) | (2.9%) | (0%) | (0%) | (27.6%) |
| Not present | 170 | 15 | 71 | 4 | 33 | 1 | 2 | 296 |
| | (85.4%) | (40.5%) | (53.8%) | (100%) | (97.1%) | (100%) | (100%) | (72.4%) |
| $\chi^2$=44.2, df= 6, p $\leq$ .0001 | | | | | | | | |

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages

Next, we investigated whether references to violence in the song lyrics varied by genre. The relationship between genre and the references to violence, justified and unjustified, was statistically significant, $\chi^2$ = 19.9, df = 6, p  .001. In particular, 99.5% (n = 198) of the songs in which the genre was identified as pop were found to reference violent acts, which was significantly more than the occurrences of violent messages found in the other genres.

In terms of gender differences, male artists were found to significantly differ in their use of misogynistic themes than female artists were, $\chi^2$ =25.6, df =1, p$\leq$ .0001.  As data presented in Table 5 shows, male artists were much more likely to not only have violent music themes in their lyrics, but the lyrics were also more likely to degrade and objectify women, as well as contain profane words.

Table 5.   Results of Chi-square test and descriptive statistics for type of anti-social behaviors in music lyrics by gender

|  | | Gender | |
|  | | Male | Female |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Violence* | | | |
| | Present | 8 (3.5%) | 1 (.6%) |
| | Not present | 221(96.5%) | 179 (99.4%) |
| χ2 =4.04, df=1, p ≤ .05 | | | |
| *Degrading Language* | | | |
| | Present | 45(19.7%) | 1(.6%) |
| | Not present | 184(80.3%) | 179(99.4%) |
| χ2 =72.0, df=1, p ≤ .0001 | | | |
| *Misogyny/Objectification* | | | |
| | Present | 86(37.6%) | 27(15.0%) |
| | Not present | 143(62.4%) | 153(85.0%) |
| χ2 =25.6, df=1, p ≤ .0001 | | | |
| *Profane Language* | | | |
| | Present | 61(26.6%) | 10(5.6%) |
| | Not present | 168(73.4%) | 179(94.4%) |
| χ2 =31.2, df=1, p ≤ .0001 | | | |

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate   column percentages

## Summary of Key Findings

The primary goal in the present study was to measure genre and artist gender differences in inclusion of anti-social message themes in the lyrics of music popular with adolescents. This research adds to the literature on adolescents and media by exploring whether sexually explicit lyrics are associated with particular musical genres and how gender and violence contextualize sexualization in lyrics. Findings suggest that hip-hop/rap music contains more profanity, misogyny, and references to stereotypical sex roles than lyrics found in pop, R&B, country, alternative, Latin, jazz, and rock music. When compared to female artists, songs performed by male artists were found include more references utilizing the following: profanity, violent behavior, misogyny, and messages about the appropriate sex roles.

Of the eight genres, hip-hop was found to more likely use profanity, misogyny, and contain themes that show women as submissive, supportive, and beautiful. Our finding that about one-third of popular music contains references to degrading and demeaning lyrics supports findings found in previous published works conducted by Primack et al. (2008).  While the Primack study focused on one year, this study spanned several years and musical genres and found support for the idea that degrading lyrics were still most commonly found in rap and hip-hop, but not in country music.

It was somewhat surprising, however, to discover that lyrics obtained from a random sample of pop music from the top charts revealed that this genre utilizes violence in lyrics at a level similar to hip-hop/rap and more so than any other music formats. One wonders why pop music is not as maligned as hip-hop/rap for its communication of violence. It may

be that the cultural styling and historical roots of the hip-hop/rap musical genre elicit more scrutiny than the purportedly lighter "bubble gum" lyrics of pop music.

Our results further suggest that references to degrading sex were found predominantly in two genres – pop and hip-hop/rap. Thus, popular songs from these two genres are more misogynistic and violent than all other genres. Interestingly, these happen to be the most popular genres among young people today, regardless of demographic characteristics (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005).

Lynxwiler and Gay (2000) contend that hip-hop/rap music is a type of audio pornography that endorses sexist and violent ideas and behaviors. The present study shows that music popular with most adolescents today contains references to message themes centering around the use of profanity, communicate violence, demeans and objectifies women, and perpetuates gender stereotypes, supporting theoretical caveats of cognitive schema theory, objectification, and social cognitive theory.

Our finding also supports prior research that suggests that sexual content is frequent in popular music (Primack et al., 2008). This finding may also have implications for sexual health education. Considering the weekly estimates of music exposure among U.S. youth, music lyrics may teach adolescents lessons that may negate sexual health education courses in high schools simply because young people learn lessons regarding sex, gender roles, and sexualization simply through music lyrics' representations of sex and gender roles. Data obtained in this study might also be useful for health educators, health professionals, and high school health education curriculum professionals because the study allows them to become familiar with the messages young people are receiving about language, sex, violence, and gender roles. Results found in the present study can help those individuals working with young people in that they may have information that helps them effectively respond to those messages our young people are exposed to in popular music. Professionals may now be able to design effective interventions that will identify creative strategies that will educate young people about the messages they receive in music lyrics. One way of educating young people about the messages found in music lyrics and other related content may be to include media literacy in after school programming and in middle school and high school curriculums so that adolescents begin to understand, evaluate and engage in critical thinking skills that help them to clearly understand how media and music lyrics rely on sex, objectification, and violence.

## Future Research Recommendations

Results from the present study suggest that concern about references to anti-social message themes should also include other musical genres. Findings obtained in the present study beg for future quantitative research on the effects of exposure to genres other than hip-hop/rap on young impressionable teens. Future research will need to clarify what impact this exposure has on sexual and other health-related behavior outcomes among adolescents. Although listening to music lacks the visual elements of music videos, film and television, there are reasons to speculate that references in popular music lyrics may be as potent in their relationship with sexual behavior. Research suggests that adolescents often imitate themselves in terms of dress, behavior, and identity after celebrities and musical figures. Therefore, it is possible that exposure to lyrics in popular music, rap and hip-hop is vast, especially given the fact that the average adolescent now listens to approximately 16 hours of music each week (Primack et al., 2008). Future research in this area might be used to determine how exposure to the anti-social messages found in song lyrics affects adolescent attitudes toward violence, use of profanity, sex, and feelings about gender

roles. In spite of the interesting work that has been done so far, much more research needs to be undertaken.

Music lyrics have also become increasingly explicit in the past two decades. The present study found that songs commonly make graphic references to sex, violence, and degrading and demeaning messages about women whereas such sensitive topics were cleverly veiled in the past. Rap/hip-hop has been clearly distinguished by lyrics that often involve references to sex, violence, and demeaning references to women and has often been accused of praising violent acts. Studies have found that exposure to rap music tends to lead to a higher degree of acceptance of the use of violence (Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995).

Many researchers believe that exposure to hip-hop lyrics are harmful to both youth and the society as a whole (Fried 1999; Rudman & Lee 2002). Consistent with prior research, data obtained in the present study also found that hip-hop/rap lyrics objectify, devalue, or subjugate women through insulting and subordinating words such as "bitch, ho, and skeezer" (see Henderson, 1996; Pinn, 1996; Powell, 1991; Rose, 1994; Watts, 1997). If young people hear (consume) profanity and/or sexist lyrics on a regular basis, does/will this exposure to the demeaning content shape their language and use of profanity? Social learning theory might be used to determine the effects of references frequently heard in song lyrics describing and referring to women as "bitches and ho's" on young girl's relationships with other girls. In a study by Johnson, Adams, Arshburn and Reed (1995) data revealed that women who viewed rap videos of women in sexually subordinate roles showed greater acceptance of violence than females who were not exposed to these videos. Thus, future research should explore if exposure to sexist language in music lyrics encourages young girls to identify with these labels more than the positive, more professional references, such as being called a woman versus girl.

As previous research shows, music can have a negative effect on attitudes. The present study found that of all the musical genres, pop and hip-hop/rap lyrics tend to convey negative demeaning stereotypes of women. This means that each time a listener is exposed to these representations in the music, effects of this exposure could result in unintended consequences such as desensitization toward sexual and domestic violence, increase in aggressive behaviors, negative attitudes toward women (African-American women in particular), increases in the use of profanity, and relaxed attitudes toward sexual promiscuity. Much of the early research in this area neglected to compare lyrics in hip-hop music to other forms of music, and few if any studies have examined how message themes and stereotypes in song lyrics differ by genre, gender, and ethnicity.

Researchers interested in the effects of deleterious song lyrics may want to also take into account gender differences in future work. Clearly, lyrics differ between genre and gender, however, little attention focuses on female artists and how their lyrics may impact their self-concepts, ideas about gender roles and attitudes toward misogyny, violence and sexual permissiveness. Rather, it seems as if media effects researchers spend much time and attention focusing on hip-hop music, African Americans and African American male hip-hop/rap artists or rap artists in general. Moreover, it seems that much of the literature published in this area presumes that all hip-hop/rap music is performed by African Americans and that all hip-hop/rap artists are male when clearly this is not an accurate reflection.

Few, if any, studies have documented a cause-and-effect relationship between violent or sexually explicit lyrics and adverse behavioral effects. While previous research shows that the preference for heavy metal music may be a significant indicator for alienation,

substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, suicide risks, sex-role stereotyping, or risk-taking behaviors during adolescence (Christensen & Roberts, 1990), it can only be hypothesized that teenagers already struggling with those issues may be attracted to heavy metal music. It is possible that preference to certain music might simply be explained by the fact that the lyrics express their own troubled feelings. Nonetheless, future research should explore if exposure to lyrics found in popular music contributes to the atmosphere of violence that some may argue is encouraged and condoned through exposure to popular media.

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