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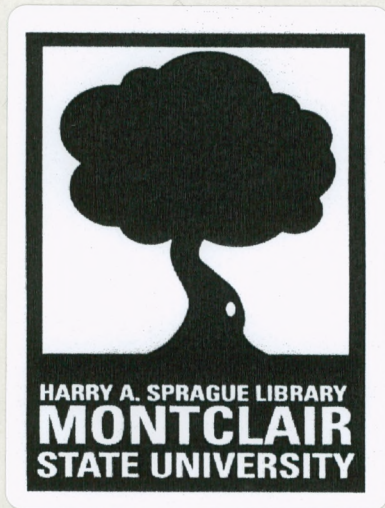


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ABSTRACT

Musical Mystique: How Today's Pop Music Can Be Interpreted by Young Audiences

by

Amy Melissa Young

Music is everywhere and so is its influence. Like all media, music can help us express ourselves, but it also can impact our lives. The following study investigates pop music by female artists and how this genre impacts the lives of young audiences. The research asks what images of women and relational scripts are offered through this genre, but this study also asks what audiences are doing with it.

Media studies have taken us from "The Magic Bullet" to "Uses and Gratifications" and almost everywhere in between. Somewhere in the middle of all of these theories lies Hall's view of encoding and decoding (1980). From a critical/cultural studies background, he describes how audiences can be empowered by their interpretations, or readings, of media. Specifically, he illustrates the value of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings.

Here we asked which readings are most prevalent and also how audiences can enact and benefit from different readings. We also raised the question of reflexivity within audience members. The results show that young audiences can be reflexive of their consumption and the products, production, and byproducts of media. Specifically, they are aware of both positive and negative images. Though hesitant to admit the influence of media, participants were also able to identify relational scripts within this genre and beyond.

The most prevalent readings among all participants were dominant. While this may seem discouraging, we have to remember that many of pop music's messages are negotiated or oppositional in themselves. Therefore, a dominant reading does not have to be disempowering. The second most prevalent readings were oppositional. It was interesting that these readings outnumbered negotiated readings, but it makes sense when we consider the amount of reflexivity that goes into these processes.

We concluded this study with an overview of results, a summation of pop music today, and a look toward the future (both of pop music and media studies). Results indicate that while we should be cautious of the ways in which media influence us, the media and young audiences are moving in the right direction.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Musical Mystique: How Today's Pop Music Can Be Interpreted by Young Audiences

by

Amy Melissa Young

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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College of the Arts

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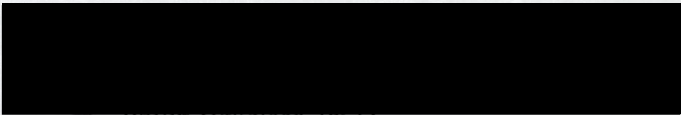
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MUSICAL MYSTIQUE: HOW TODAY'S POP MUSIC CAN BE INTERPRETED BY
YOUNG AUDIENCES

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

COMMUNICATION STUDIES

by

AMY MELISSA YOUNG

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2007

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Though today's popular music may no longer tout the message *Stand By Your Man*, we still have to question what is being said, and what is being read, in the lyrics sung by contemporary female pop artists. Indeed, we have come a long way, but we have miles to go before we rest. For a young music enthusiast, it is easy to believe that messages today are more empowering and freeing than those of the past. A quick listen of Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone" or Avril Lavigne's "He Wasn't" leads us to think that young women are on the right track. No longer are women longing for "the one" man to make all their dreams come true. No longer are young girls sitting home at night, crying and waiting for "him" to call. Mariah Carey's "Shake It Off" and Beyoncé's "Irreplaceable" anthem show that women are learning to move on and be strong, selective and independent women. Or so it seems.

There will always be songs about heartache and feminine wiles, but is this new brand of heartening hymns taking a lead or making a difference? In order to answer this question we must do much more than a quick listen. We must take a critical look at music and women (and men) today, and listen to what media and gender studies have told us through the years.

A Preview of Media

We live in a media-rich society. Some might say we are bombarded with media images, but most of us are used to it. From the moment we wake up, often with an alarm clock/radio, media are all around us. We might tune into the news as we get ready for our day or on our commute to work or school. Between the news, sitcoms, and radio-shows, we see and hear all kinds of advertisements. Even at work or school, media surrounds us. Though media can be professional or educational, more often it is for entertainment purposes only. In most cases, we are being sold something, be it a product or an idea.

Each form of media provides us with a text. The texts we view and use do not always prescribe particular meanings. It is our readings that determine what meanings a text will have. These vary across audiences, texts, and time. Ricoeur sees texts as divorced from their

production (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 129). Through his interpretation, the author's intent does not determine meaning. Rather, an intimate interaction between the text and the interpreter can speak to and change the reader. Still, interpretations are limited, because they are constrained by the language and context of media.

Fish takes another stance, with his reader-response theory. He denies that any meaning can be found in the text. Instead, the meaning lies strictly in the reader. The question then, is not "What does a text mean?" but "What does a text do?" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 130). Meaning is not a solitary confinement. One must use social definitions to find meaning, and often texts are inferred in interpretive communities. These groups interact with one another and construct common realities and meanings (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 130). Therefore, you cannot ask just one person to define the ultimate meaning of a message. "If you subscribe to Fish's theory," write Littlejohn and Foss (2005), "you will not search for a single meaning" (p. 131). According to this interpretation, there is no correct reading of a text, because it depends on the audience. In short, meaning is not objective, "so don't look for it in the features of a text" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 131).

Hall takes an integrative approach. He sees meaning as being in both the text and the reader. For Hall, meaning is a result of a dialogue between our meanings and those embedded in the language of the text (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005, p. 132). Combs and Nimmo (1993) give us another way to interpret meanings. They suggest that it is not what the music is, or what it says, but what it means to different people.

While music is not the only media present in our lives, this study will focus mostly on this form of media. The influence of media everywhere, and though we might not attend to it, its omnipotence is unquestionable. Although we may only "read parts of sports reviews, skim through magazines and zap from channel to channel when we don't like what's on TV" (Ang, 1996, p. 126), we cannot help but hear the messages directed at us. Though music may always be in the background, its influence is certainly not.

A Preview of Gender Studies

Before discussing the intersection of media and gender studies, it is important to see what progress has been made by feminism alone. While feminism has historically spoken for the 'silent majority,' work today gives a voice to all others. It is understood now that "feminism cannot presume to possess the one and only truth about women" (Ang, 1996, p. 114). McRobbie criticized this assumption because it overestimated the women's movement and underestimated the "resources and capacities of 'ordinary' women" (1982, p. 52, as cited in Ang, 1996, p. 114).

It is important to realize that not all women are the same. This may sound very basic, but we have a tendency to fuse individuals when looking at particular groups. It is important at the onset of this study to avoid such a shortcoming. Women may have similar interests, but it does not make their interests universal – or natural (Ang, 1996, p. 129). Further, while gender is always interesting, it is not always relevant to what one experiences, feels, or acts (Ang, 1996, p. 124). Therefore, we should not focus on people as women or men first, but as people first.

A Brief Intersection of Media & Gender

According to Ang (1996), feminist work has evolved significantly since its early emphasis on the "unrealistic images" and "inevitably conservative effects" of media on women audiences (p. 114). A major thrust of post-1960s women's liberation movement indicted mass media for representing women in false and demeaning ways (Steiner, 1998, p. 10). Still, in the 1980s, ads portrayed women in mostly traditional modes, as sex objects, housewives, mothers, and homemakers, while men were shown in positions of authority and dominance (Strinati, 1995, p. 185). Around the same time, however, some changes were taking place. *Ms.* Readers, for instance, were cataloging the ways in which major institutions were "unabashedly" treating women as less intelligent, creative, and worthy than men (Steiner, 1988, p. 10).

Feminist researchers claim that their criticisms of media have influenced social movements, but the question remains: has the women's movement really changed media?

Media Use in a Nutshell

Media might appear to be for our entertainment only, but we use media in many different ways. Media can inform us, keep us company, give us something to talk about, shape our culture, and even help us to express ourselves. The news is one content of media. Whether on television, radio, or in the papers, it keeps us up to date on the world around us. News programs inform us, but they also help us stay connected to the world. What's more, they set an agenda for what we talk about. The media do not determine what we think, but media influence what we think *about* (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005, pp. 279-281). News media cannot possibly report all that happens in our world (though we can see virtually every current event on the television), so those in control of media must choose which topics are most newsworthy. This is just one way that media shape our cultures and identities.

We interact with media in a multitude of ways. According to Murdock (1989), "viewers not only enter the world of *the* text, but the world of texts" (p. 238). Most viewers relate to the programs they watch, and many make judgments on characters as they would their friends and acquaintances. Often media allow us to experience relationships without the dark side of conflict and other challenges. This can also provide us with a model, albeit idealistic, of how to live our lives. This is but one reason we so frequently engage ourselves in the magic of media.

Another reason we become so involved with media is that they relieve our tension. Our everyday work may require a great amount of effort and brain power, but media use does not have to. Likewise, there are fewer constraints and more freedoms. One activity in particular, reading romance novels, has proven to be a great escape. Women find solace in this private act, because it provides a literal escape from the demands of their social roles (i.e., housewife and mother). If only in a book, women can get the nurturance and caring that they lack in their real lives. According to Radway, this is a therapeutic experience (Ang, 1996, p. 98).

Images in media are rarely realistic or politically correct. While this can sometimes lead to tension, more often than not readers are inclined to suspend judgment and wallow in the

“stylistic and emotional excesses” (Sontag, 1967, as cited in Murdock, 1989, p. 238). So more often than not, people tune into media for pleasure, not politics. The pleasure we find in media, however, is only temporary and it is not real (even if we are suspended in *disbelief*). Romance reading in particular is inadequate, according to Ang, because it is just an illusion. Indeed women might find pleasure in these novels, but their real situation may remain unchanged. Ang sees this as an “imaginary solution” to the real problems in our world (Ang, 1996, p. 104).

Consumption

Media effects are quite powerful, not only in our thoughts, but also in our behaviors. Media influence our consumption, in more ways than one. Active audiences buy into the hype and the programs, even before the programs are aired. Entertainment magazines and Web sites offer plot outlines, interviews, star profiles, and behind-the-scenes gossip about production (Murdock, 1989, p. 239). These media build our appetite for more media, and build our expectations. Even when the show is over, we can relive the moments in commentaries, reenactments, and reruns. In addition, most programs have an “afterlife” or “parallel existence” through products (Murdock, 1989, p. 239). For example, viewers of a popular television show or movie will purchase clothes, cosmetics, toys, music, and videos that emulate the story’s characters. Even music can encourage consumption, through product placement in videos and lyrics.

Generally, men and women consume media in different ways, and those in control of media are sure to take advantage of the disparities. While women are encouraged to work in the home, men are encouraged to relax. The commodities sold to women may seem shiny and new, but they are designed to make women work harder – to be more feminine or to perform more household chores. Ads for products like cosmetics and clothes and even dish detergent and washer machines “conceal the labour” which produces the commodity, and also the “*work* of femininity which women carry out as they use commodities” (Winship, 1980, p. 218). For men,

products are designed for leisure, and leisure is defined “in relation to *completed* work for *capital*” (Winship, 1980, p. 218).

Ang (1996) asserts that these differences start in the home, which is a site of leisure for men and a sphere of work for women - even those who work outside of the home (p. 123). At home, women typically have a difficult time enjoying media like their male counterparts. Because of their domestic responsibilities, they can only do so distractedly and guiltily (Morley, 1986, p. 147 as cited in Ang, 1996, p. 123). There is nothing inherent about these differences, but they exist nonetheless.

Media Effects – The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Media can have detrimental effects, but it does not have to be this way. Feminists have historically battled and appropriated with media because of the ways women have been represented and entertained. Though there are changes on the horizon, we still have a lot of work to do. For Radway, fantasy is too easily equated with illusions about how life really is. Reading romance novels, for instance, gives women a false sense of hope “that men *are able* to satisfy women’s needs fully” (Radway, 1984, p. 201 as cited in Ang, 1996, p. 106). For most women, there will be no Prince Charming riding in on a white horse, so why should we torment ourselves with such fantasies? Besides, we should realize that women can fulfill their own needs with or without a partner in life.

While media consumption is precarious (Ang, 1996, p. 110), its effectiveness is conditional and contingent on contexts and meanings (Ang, 1996, p. 114). Women can decide for themselves, how to enjoy and interpret media. A more optimistic stance reminds us that women do not have to be “cultural dupes” or “passive victims” of media (Ang, 1996, p. 114). Alternatively, media can be empowering, especially when we take the opportunity for symbolic resistance. As Ang (1996) is quick to point out, media can disarm social change – unless, of course, we evaluate and listen with a critical ear (p. 102). If we are to follow this path, we need to listen closely and delve deep into the work of feminists and media studies.

The Rationale (and Need) for Research in Gender and Media

Despite the entertainment and pleasure we glean from media, we must be critical of what we are seeing and hearing all around us. Messages that are demeaning to women are everywhere. As Steiner (1988) points out, the menaces are not limited to pornographic magazines. "Rather, 'political pornography' is ready available, in rural newspapers, family magazines, and mail-order catalogs" (p. 12). Items that demean or limit women support the feminist argument that mass media do ideological work, and that "mainstream content must be contested" (Steiner, 1988, p. 12). Of course, we should not simply assume that women and girls absorb these messages passively and indiscriminately, as Ang (1996) suggests. Women are not necessarily "unconditional victims of sexist media" (Ang, 1996, p. 111), and there is still room for improvement.

While each woman should decide for herself which media suit her best, some forms could be more damaging than others. Soap operas and romance novels, for example, have a distinct way of reinforcing women's subordinate position in society (Ang, 1996, p. 111). These media constantly idealize patriarchal relationships, portray women in dangerous dichotomies (i.e., the villain or victim, the virgin or the whore) and give women a false sense of romantic reality.

Why the attack on media? Feminists, and other critical scholars, see the mass media as just one place to seek radical change. Since media have such an impact on us, changes in media could influence positive changes in our society. As critical theorists see it, all of mass media's messages have the potential to disempower the masses. If we believe everything we see and hear, we might be inclined to think "'that's all there is' so 'Que sera sera'" (Combs & Nimmo, 1993, p. 211).

Perhaps the best solution is for women to reclaim media messages. Steiner (1988) describes how *Ms.* readers did just this. Even the most insulting texts, when shared in a new context, gave new meanings to women, by reconfirming their convictions (p. 11). Such an example reminds us that media studies are "no longer the academic prerogative of one

discipline,” and it is due time we all take a closer look at media and their impact (Hardt, 1996, p. 109). Research conducted in media studies illustrates that people are influenced by products of mass media, but it does not necessarily explain which messages are most powerful. This study will inquire specifically into what messages and themes are created by pop music and what interpretations are available.

Media theories express different views about how influential media can be. This study will illuminate just how much influence popular music has on young adults. This research will be both academic and pragmatic. For instance, if this new trend is empowering, perhaps more people will listen to this music and more artists will produce it. If, on the other hand, negative themes are present, listeners can make a conscious choice of whether they want to continue to listen to, and internalize, these messages.

Summary

This section introduced music by contemporary female artists as an interesting topic of study. There seems to be a new style of lyrics that empower and reinforce women, and this study aims to see whether this style is indeed empowering, or just a new style of ideologies.

We must look further into research before we can analyze, through textual analyses, focus groups, and interviews, what the music is really saying. Therefore, the next chapter is dedicated to a review of literature from media and gender studies. The previous chapter provided just a glimpse of the topics we must study, and the next will illuminate further what specific questions should be asked in pursuit of this study.

CHAPTER 2: APPROACH & DIRECTION, AS DRIVEN BY THEORY

In order to answer the question set forth, we need to first evaluate what lessons the theoretical literature has taught us. This involves a look at several theories in media and gender studies, and then an intersection of these. After the literature has been reviewed, the direction of this study, along with all its questions, can form. More questions will be asked, and some may go unanswered, but this is all in the spirit of such research.

Media Studies: From the Magic Bullet toward Readings without Guarantees

Early in media studies, theorists tended to believe that consumption was passive and that audiences were shaped with little resistance and effort. The magic bullet model, which was popular among early theorists, describes media as almighty sources of influence. The relationship between media and behavior is seen, under this model, as linear and causal.

The History of the Magic Bullet

It is tough to trace the exact origin of the “magic bullet,” because it has since been so heavily dismissed, but its tenets and times are reminiscent of Marxist ideologies and philosophies of the Frankfurt School (Negus, 1996; Strinati, 1995). This fatalistic theory started with a critical look at Nazi propaganda, developed with the Payne Fund Studies of movies and children, and gained some credibility with the panic that was mass-produced by the *War of the Worlds* broadcast (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998).

Since media had been so powerful in shaping public opinion, theorists believed that individuals were directly, heavily, and in many cases immediately, influenced by media (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998, p. 374; Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 2003, p. 267; Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 284). It was assumed too that media messages could “shoot” or “inject” all audience members with the same impact (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998, p. 431; Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 2003, p. 267).

In the case of the Payne studies, Blumer asserted that all children learned from and imitated disturbing and violent behavior from the movies. His findings, however, were later

dismissed as “merely anecdotal and retrospective” (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998, p. 435) and fell short of reliability and validity criteria. And though the *War of the Worlds* broadcast had caused quite a stir, it did not affect everyone the same way, so theorists could no longer assume strong messages would have an undisputed impact.

Critics of the magic bullet theory see it as simplistic and uni-directional and they are quick to point out that, since there are so many other factors at work, this is not the case. Still, the magic bullet has had its proponents. One of its most popular advocates was Theodor Adorno.

Adorno's Stance on the Magic Bullet

Adorno arrived in the United States at a time when the Nazi party was making the most of media. Likewise, here in America, media were being used to produce a commercial culture. Seeing an international connection between media effects, Adorno argued that the production of mass culture was dominating and manipulating the masses (Negus, 1996, p. 9).

In response to claims that modern mass culture was harmless entertainment, Adorno labeled most media “mind-numbing” and he stressed the “vacuity, banality, and conformity fostered by the culture industry” (Strinati, 1995, p. 63). He saw the masses as completely powerless, and he saw media as tools which ensure “obedience to authority” and the “stability of the capitalist system” (p. 64).

Interestingly enough, Adorno is most known for his analysis, or rather criticism, of popular music. While Adorno felt that all art forms should provoke critical listening, he saw popular music as inadequate and responsible for social passivity (Negus, 1996, p. 10). His obvious preference for avant-garde productions led him to believe that audiences were duped and doomed by media.

It may seem that Adorno was overly critical of media and unimpressed by audiences, but quite possibly his motive was to save us from ourselves, or worse, from another holocaust. He wanted audiences to wise up and realize the dangers of media and propaganda so that we would not be victims of the elite. The problem with his approach, and other models of the Frankfurt

School, is that it privileged high culture, by contrasting a “monolithic mass culture” against an “ideal of ‘authentic art’” (Kellner, 1995, p. 29). Adorno (and his contemporaries) had good intentions, but their theories are problematic because they assume all mass culture products are ideological and all audiences are taken in.

Dodging the (Magic) Bullet

Subsequent research led researchers to more critically evaluate the limited and selective effects of media. The degree of media’s influence was then considered a combination of factors, including the characteristics of the message and the personality of the receiver (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998, pp. 374-375). Though the magic bullet lost its momentum, DeFleur and Dennis (1998) urge us to appreciate this ideology, because it “opened important lines of research we still follow today” (p. 435).

Models of limited and selective influence began to thrive. Agenda setting theory argued that while media tell us what to think about, they do not tell us what to think (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 2003, p. 271; Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 279-280). Similarly, theories such as “uses and gratifications” surfaced and portrayed audiences as active and selective consumers of media (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 286; Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 2003, pp. 277-279).

Adorno’s model of “passive easy listening” was no longer popular with theorists (Negus, 1996, p. 27). Chambers, for example, argued that those in control of media were not in control of the meanings produced. Listeners could use music for leisure, expression (of identity), creativity, and even symbolic resistance. Popular music, and all media for that matter, became viewed as “polysemantic” and audiences were empowered by various appropriations (Negus, 1996, p. 27).

Beyond the (Magic) Bullet: Psychoanalysis, Uses & Gratifications, and Semiotics

The psychoanalytic approach views media in correlation with the thoughts and motivations of audience members, particularly the unconscious ones. It is presumed here, that if media can channel the unconscious, its effects are inescapable. Capturing this magical realm of the mind becomes the goal of media moguls, because they think that “dominant discourses must

colonize the unconscious to be truly effective” (Murdock, 1989, p. 237). We might question whether media can be as effective if we are conscious of their effects, but no matter how conscious we are, we are impacted by images in media. The psychoanalytic approach can be useful, with its focus on gender differences, but it tends to neglect other crucial dimensions of power, like class and race (Strinati, 1995, p. 199).

In contrast with the magic bullet and psychoanalytic theories, the uses and gratifications model places power in the audience. According to this approach, people choose media to fulfill their needs and desires.

Indeed audiences can be selective, but they are subjected to countless media in their everyday activities. People do not have an absolute choice, but a variety of selections to choose from (Murdock, 1989, p. 236). Even if consumers are satisfied, these gratifications are only temporary, and perhaps worse, not real (Ang, 1996, p. 104). If people’s needs are not being met, we have to wonder how much power they really have. Even in this empowering model, the audience becomes disempowered.

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, provides yet another interesting view. Using this approach, research seeks to find patterns in texts which give meaning. Often we believe that the images in media are realistic, because we lose sight of how images, and thereby meanings, are manufactured. Since we so often equate language with reality, we often fail to recognize/realize that reality exists outside of language (Hall, 1980b, p. 131). This is confusing to some because reality is mediated through language, and the only way to communicate our realities is through language. Media provide limitless forms of virtual reality, but none of them real. What we see in media are signs, which symbolize (but are not equal to) their referents.

We tend to get wrapped up in signs, thinking they are the real thing. Visual signs appear most real, so we take for granted that they are just signs. Linguistic signs, however, are more arbitrary, so we are inclined to read more into them. Using Hall’s example (1980b, 132), the

word 'cow' represents a cow, but it possesses none of the qualities of a cow. On the other hand, the visual sign for 'cow' looks like a cow, so then the audience thinks, it must be a cow.

Since linguistic signs are more arbitrary, more meanings can be read into them. Signs do not just relate objects but also values, qualities, and inferences (Hall, 1980b, p. 133). Media messages are more than what they seem, and this is why we should pay special attention to how people decode the messages media present. The ways in which audiences put media to use will be discussed later, after a review of postmodern and feminist inquiry and a synopsis of cultural studies.

Postmodern Ideas

As the research grows there is a general transformation, "from structuralism, semiology and Marxism, to neo-hegemony and postmodernism" (Strinati, 1995, p. 216). This move is generally theoretical, abstract, and difficult to understand (Strinati, 1995, p. 225). Still, it is a useful challenge, because it encourages us to appreciate ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity (Ang, 1996, p. 128). This variation of theories makes research more difficult, but it is essential, because the dangers of "easy categorization of generalization" are all too tempting.

Postmodernism sets forth the idea that signs and media messages dominate our sense of reality. Our "media-saturated" society impacts the way we define ourselves and our world (Strinati, 1995, p. 224). Whereas media were once thought of as a mirror for reality, we are now seeing that mirror as a looking-glass. We've come to have a "designer ideology" where surface and style are most important. Media are beginning to rule our world, as we continue to consume images and signs "precisely because they are images and signs", while we disregard utility and value (Strinati, 1995, p. 225). We value entertainment more than substance and meaning. Qualities such as authenticity are now undermined, for the sake of playfulness and jokes (Strinati, 1995, p. 225). Art and popular culture are blurred into a frenzied world of fun and games, so it is important – perhaps now more than ever – to take a critical look at what is going on.

Critical Perspectives on Structure, Production, and Consumption

Critical work goes beyond the external observation and interpretative experience of audiences. It builds on the concepts of consumption and it attempts to analyze underlying structures (Murdock, 1989, p. 227) that determine meaning for people. As the critical approach is known to do, it examines how unequal distribution of resources affects power and influence. Murdock suggests the important question to ask is not “what kinds of pleasures do these technologies offer?” but ““who has the power to control the terms on which interaction takes place?”” (Murdock, 1989, p. 234)

Another way to look critically at media is through the concepts of production, consumption, and access. While it is easy to see how gender influences media use, there are many more elements at work. Again access has a huge impact on audiences.

The production process often goes unnoticed, as do class distinctions in advertisements. In recent times, people more often identify with the products they consume, rather than the products they create (Winship, 1980, p. 217). While advertisements may seem to put us all on the same level, our income determines what we can really have. Further, ads gloss over “the capitalist moment of exchange” (Winship, 1980, pp. 217-218) by exhorting us to use products (the fact remains that we have to buy products to use them).

The organization of texts can both constrain and facilitate audience activity (Murdock, 1989, p. 237). Researchers might then think of consumption as a form of subordination, but Strinati (1995) warns us not to draw this conclusion. Consumption is not just the “power of hegemonic forces” acting on audiences, but it can be a “site of negotiated meanings” (pp. 217-218).

Structure also plays an important role in our consumption. It can be enabling, but more so constraining (Murdock, 1989, p. 227). Structure is inevitably tied to power, domination, resistance, and quiescence (Murdock, 1989, p. 228). Murdock points out the difference between closed and open texts. Closed texts arrange a distinct hierarchy that presents ideas as more

rational. As Murdock (1989) explains “this does not mean that it goes uncontested, simply that the contest is rigged” (p. 236). The definitive plot makes superior claims about the discourse, which demonstrated “beyond the reasonable doubt” (Murdock, 1989, p. 236). Open texts, in contrast, are more egalitarian and ambiguous, so they let readers determine their meanings and endings.

According to Murdock, our society is wrapped up in commodity fetishism. Consistent with Marx’s writings, Murdock writes that while media have value, it is seldom use-value (1989, p. 232). We are sold pleasure, and we happily pay the price. We are entertained by mere commercials, because commodities have become so valued.

Murdock encourages us to look critically at how pleasures are structured by producers. Most often, images are manipulated simply for profit. Value is expressed as a price, and we in turn, empty our pockets for this enjoyment. Murdock (1989) points out, however, that this connection is only a disguise for exploitation (p. 232). Popular culture is almost inseparable from the economy, because we so heavily invest in our popular media. These commodities can also serve as communication, as when people furnish their homes with a certain “look,” including particular books and television sets. It is easy to see how people might also use the commodities of music to communicate.

In our capitalist society, advertisements are all around us. While we can zap through the commercials on television and radio, we cannot ignore the products placed in movies and other programs. Advertisers have found a way to mix almost every program with promotional material (Murdock, 1989, p. 232). So we are being sold products along with ideologies. The connection between production and consumption becomes automatic. Since economics play a role in consumption, gender and class mediate experiences with media (Murdock, 1989, p. 230).

Consumption varies among all groups, but it differs especially between men and women. In traditional homes, women continue to work, even if they have a full-time career elsewhere. Therefore, while some see home as a “release from labor,” most see it as another workplace. The

“shadow work” of shopping, cleaning, cooking, and nurturing has consequences for media activity (Murdock, 1989, p. 231). Men in patriarchal relationships can easily sit down and watch their favorite programs on television. Women, on the other hand, more often divide their attention between the screen and their motherly and/or wifely duties, and they have less choice in what they watch.

Structures of production, consumption, and access do not ultimately determine audience activity. Newer research tends to accentuate the creativity and playfulness of audiences, but in doing so it “skates around the questions of power” (Murdock, 1989, p. 228). We should be cautious, for when we privilege advertising, public relations, and the ideology of consumerism they promote, we marginalize the voices, perspectives, and identities of many others (Murdock, 1989, p. 229).

Now that issues of structure, production, and consumption have been highlighted, we can focus on how gender relates to these topics.

Starting with Gender

Gender might be an obvious place to start, but other structures play an essential role, because men and women have different roles in our society, and thus different experiences. Men and women generally have different preferences and experiences with media. Customarily, women’s domestic roles have led them to favor genres such as the soap opera and situation comedy (Murdock, 1989, p. 231). These media allow women to engage, if only vicariously and temporarily, in personal relationships and emotional expression.

Conversely, the news and other male-dominated media typically have been less popular with women. Since women’s roles have changed dramatically through the years, their preferences might also. Unfortunately, women are still typically given more domestic responsibilities than men, so these preferences could still be intact. Situation comedies and soap operas are also popular with women because they give us “time out.” Radway (1984) points out that when women “buy a romance, they are purchasing personal space and vicarious attention”

(as cited in Murdock, 1989, p. 231). Indeed, whether we are career women, students, housewives, mothers, or any combination of these, we need time out, and media can give us this.

Women may enjoy time with media, but we also feel the need to justify it. Women point out to friends and family that there is value, often educational, in exchange for the time and money spent consuming media. We also feel obligated to justify media use to ourselves and others by saying it enables us to change for the better (Radway, 1984a, p. 66 as cited in Murdock, 1989, p. 231).

Feminist Movement(s)

Feminism has been critical of several aspects of media and popular culture, but we are beginning to see some positive changes. Before we consider a renewed feminist optimism, let us first look at the criticisms feminist have waged against media.

Popular culture has routinely represented women and minorities in marginalized and stereotyped roles, excluded these groups in production, and neglected audience needs. Even critical studies of media have failed to seriously consider the positioning and oppression imposed by media, at times as much as media themselves (Strinati, 1995, p. 179). It is an easy trap to fall into.

Early feminist work focused on how popular culture ignored, excluded, marginalized, and trivialized women. When women were present in media, they were placed in stereotypical roles which placed emphasis on sexual attractiveness and domestic labour. Tuchman called this "symbolic annihilation of women" (Strinati, 1995, pp. 180-181).

Feminism has taken three approaches to making changes in media: liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism (Strinati, 1995, p. 178). Liberal feminism criticizes the unequal positions men and women hold in society and discusses how these lead to different representations of women in media and culture and argues for ways to rectify the situation. Radical feminism sees patriarchy as the most crucial form of social division and oppression, and

it argues for female separatism. Socialist feminism sees capitalism as an even greater force of inequality.

Liberal feminists see legislation as a way to liberate women from their subordinate positions. Radical feminists contend that media privilege men because they are in control. They argue that women need to share in production in order to effect change. Socialist feminists take other factors into account, like class and race. They reject notions that gender and other social structures are biologically determined (Strinati, 1995, p. 200), and assert that people from all walks of life need to get involved in order to make a change.

Each of these forms of feminism has been criticized for condemning media. A key problem is the assumption that the mass media should reflect reality (Strinati, 1995, p. 191). We should not assume that unrealistic images automatically harm (especially female) audiences. Alternatively, Strinati (1995) argues that media do not become a simple "conveyor belt" of ideology, and audiences are not merely a "mass of passive consumers imbued with false consciousness" (p. 201). Strinati (1995) also points out that media do not always represent men and women in a direct and uniform manner, and that men's interests are not uniform (p. 200).

Feminists have moved away from liberal feminism for several reasons. First, its use of content analysis proved inadequate. It also seemed to ignore the wider structures of power, like economics and politics. As a result, feminism has relied on a variety of theories like semiology, structuralism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis (Strinati, 1995, p. 187).

Other factors that should be included along with gender include socioeconomic status, race, education, and religion, among others. We cannot assume that all men or all women are equally disadvantaged (Strinati, 1995, p. 198), and we cannot assume that all people in a group view media in the same ways. Therefore, class and other factors should not be seen as isolatable variables (Ang, 1996, p. 117).

Images of Women in the Media

Even today, women are trivialized throughout advertisements and media. Women are often "symbolized as child-like adornments who need to be protected" or held within the "protective confines of the home" (Strinati, 1995, p. 182). They are preferably young and beautiful, but education is not important. Women still are frequently shown in subordinate, passive, submissive, and marginal roles (Strinati, 1995, p. 184).

Even today, ads limit the roles of women to housewife, mother, homemaker, and sex objects (p. 183). Working women are condemned, while married women are appreciated. Whereas work is shown as crucial to men's lives, relationships are a top priority for women (Strinati, 1996, p. 186). It seems that according to media, a women's most important job is to be beautiful enough to get the perfect man, and raise a perfect family.

Though the images of women have begun to vary, we still are witness to a dangerous dichotomy. A woman is either the passive, innocent virgin waiting for the perfect man, or she is aggressively feminine, dressed to kill, and aiming to catch a man (Winship, 1980, pp. 219-221). Some advertising agencies incorporate criticism into their ads, by showing an alternative stereotype - the cool, professional, liberated woman. These images may seem more enlightened, but they are still constrained to their sexuality. As Dyer (1982) pointed out, they often miss the mark by equating "liberation" with aggressive sexuality and "unliberated coy sexiness" (pp. 185-186, as cited in Strinati, 1995, pp. 187-188).

Women are gradually asserting more power, but if this power is simply sexual, then women are again seen as mere sex objects. It would be interesting to see if the alternative messages present in today's music help to liberate women and multiply their roles or if these messages simply add to the ways in which women can be constrained.

When questioned, producers argue that the media are simply falling in line with society's social strata, reflecting reality, in order to attract audiences (Strinati, 1995, p. 182). Either way this is not a good position. As Gamman and Marshment (1988) point out, "Between the market

and ideologies...between what things mean is a perpetual struggle for control” (p. 2, as cited in Strinati, 1995, p. 216). Language is power and women need to speak up if we are going to make changes.

Areas to Focus on from Feminist Perspectives

If all of us consume media, then why are masculine and feminine images in media so polarized? Tuchman’s reflection hypothesis implies that mass media simply reflect social values already in society (Strinati, 1995, pp. 181-182). Alternatively, Ang (1996) suggests that we separate femininity and masculinity so that we can more easily categorize differences (p. 120). All the while, we tend to forget that gender is a social construction, and not a biological creation. Problems arise because we insist on our expectations, confining certain people to certain roles.

In research we should be especially careful not to do this. Results cannot predict for all people, so we should be wary of generalization. Women are not all alike, and we need to be clear on this, if we are to avoid further stereotypes. Typically the differences that divide women (class, ethnicity, age, and education) are less significant than the unifying qualities attributed to them (i.e., the inability to know or say what they want, the preoccupation with romance and relationships, the ability to care for, and nurture others) (Nightingale, 1990, p. 25 as cited in Ang, 1996, p. 117). We need to be careful making such assumptions. Taking everything into consideration indeed makes the process more difficult, but it is crucial.

Ang (1996) reminds us that gender is “multiple and partial, ambiguous and incoherent, permanently in the process of being articulated, disarticulated, and rearticulated” (p. 125). Females should not be presumed feminine and males should not be presumed masculine, because gender is constantly reproduced and transformed: “Being a woman can mean many different things, at different times and in different circumstances” (Ang, 1996, p. 119). Therefore, we should not assume that gender always mediates media consumption and use (Ang, 1996, p. 125), and we should be critical of our own criticisms.

Feminism: Moving (Media) In the Right Direction

The good news, as Tuchmann points out, is that women are becoming less stereotyped in various forms of media (Strinati, 1995, p. 183). We just need to make sure that all media are following the lead. While television advertisements still seem to “banish” females to limited roles, images in magazines are becoming more responsive to the changes implemented by feminists (Strinati, 1995, p. 183). Strinati suggests this difference results from the smaller, more segmented audiences of magazines. Musical preference can also constitute more varied audiences, so perhaps music is also responsive to change. Though Strinati reminds us that “popular media culture does not show us women’s real lives” (1995, p. 184), we should not forget that media does constitute many realities for its audiences.

Like media, feminists are making strides, especially in their outlook. New feminist approaches parallel cultural studies (which will be discussed shortly) and other critical perspectives. Now, feminists refuse to see audience members, particularly women, as victims of media. Media do not necessarily dominate women, because even consumption can be empowering, as when it offers opportunities for symbolic resistance (Ang, 1996, p. 114).

While most communication research focuses on the relationship between texts and authors, feminist inquiry investigates the relationship between texts and readers (Steiner, 1988, p. 1). Feminist theorists, much like their critical contemporaries (de Certeau and Hall, among others) see the audience as a central part of meaning. Steiner, in particular, argues that texts are not set into place because they are set into print. Her study (1998) showed how women can make new texts simply by making “No Comment.”

Studies like Steiner’s, which make use of reception analyses, reveal any number of interpretations. Feminist findings show that audiences “indeed actively negotiate” with texts (Ang, 1996, p. 113). For feminists, meaning is in the audience and the text, as they relate to one another. Such a premise is similar to what the cultural studies have developed. Advances made under this tradition will be discussed now.

Cultural Studies Emerge

Historically, media studies focused on the relationship between texts and authors (Steiner, 1988, p. 1). Things began to change with the development of cultural studies. Starting in Britain at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, Stuart Hall and many others worked to evaluate media and the masses from new perspectives.

As cultural studies emerged, research took on a mixed perspective (Morley & Chen, 1996). While audiences were seen as active, theorists acknowledged that their interpretations were done within the confines of the text and the culture. Hall (1980) suggested that while audiences could creatively read texts, possibilities were limited by preferred or dominant readings. Morley, whose work developed with Hall's, was quick to point out that being an active consumer is not the same as having power (Negus, 1996, p. 33). Their ideas fell somewhere in the middle of the debate between the magic bullet and uses and gratification theories.

Out of cultural studies many principles were developed. Two are central to this project. First, meanings are much more diverse than the magic bullet theory would predict. Second, audiences do have power (even if it is limited) over their interpretations and, in turn, media.

Meanings are as diverse as the audiences that form them. People interpret texts differently, for one thing, because they have different experiences and positions (i.e., class, culture, gender, and other characteristics). Meanings also vary because "meaning is not in the text itself but is the active product of the text's social articulation, of the web of connotations and codes into which it is inserted" (Grossberg, 1996, p. 157). Meanings cannot be guaranteed by texts alone, because most signs are "multiaccentual" (Grossberg, 1996, p. 157) and "polysemantic" (Negus, 1996, p. 27).

Certainly, media influence us, but we do not always accept their impacts in a passive manner. We, the masses, can form meanings which are different from the dominant/hegemonic readings intended by the elite. De Certeau sees consumers as having the ability, not to be shaped by media, but to shape what they've received from media into their own schemas (1988, p. 166).

While others might see our “only freedom” as feeding on whatever media has to offer, de Certeau might see media as buffets which the masses can feast on until we are full, or pick at in healthy moderation (1988, p. 165).

Strinati (1995) agrees with de Certeau, but he contends that consumption is not simply subordination, because negotiated meanings, resistance, appropriation, subjection, and exploitation are all possible (p. 218). And since we can consume on our own terms, we have the power to influence media.

Though the masses have been denounced from the beginning, they have made strides and now have an influence on media, and in turn, the elite. Hall respects these social groups whom are often lumped together as “the masses” and he refuses to believe that they are passive. Despite everything, says Hall, they are “still alive and kicking” (Fiske, 1996, p. 219). Hall says, “It is as if the masses have kept a secret to themselves while [*sic*] the intellectuals keep running around in circles trying to make out what it is, what is going on” (Grossberg, 1996, pp. 140-141).

Readings without Guarantees

The interpretation, or reading (as it will be referred to hereafter), of any text involves the identification and decoding of signs, as well as creative interpretation (Hall, 1980b, p. 135). In order for messages to have effects they must be decoded, so they can be put to use (Hall, 1980b, p. 130). Once decoded, these once arbitrary signs can take on a life of their own. The product is “not of nature but convention” and it requires the intervention of codes (Hall, 1980b, p. 132).

For Hall and others in the critical approach, “Reading’ is itself an active, though not free, process of construction of meanings and pleasures, a ‘negotiation’ between texts and readers whose outcome cannot be dictated by the text” (Hall, 1982; Gledhill, 1988 as cited in Ang, 1996, p. 113). Meanings are not determined by the text, but there are often preferred or dominant readings encoded into a text (Hall, 1980, p. 134).

In simple terms, when we read, we construct meanings. The meanings may be constructed (or encoded) for us, but we deconstruct (or decode) and reconstruct (recode) the

meanings for ourselves. The meanings vary between people, but meanings can also vary for an individual, in different times and positions.

While production constructs the message (Hall, 1980b, p. 129), an audience is needed to decipher it. Texts are not finalized when put into print (Steiner, 1988, p. 13), but new texts can arise out of an audience's meanings. This is not to say that texts are infinitely open, but texts can take on a variety of meanings with different audiences (Murdock, 1989, p. 236).

The reader "invents in texts something different from what they 'intended'...He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings" (de Certeau, 1988, p. 169)

As de Certeau would say, "the text has a meaning only through its readers" (1988, p. 170). The meaning is not in the author or the text, but in each reading. The process of encoding produces meaning, "which is thus not defined by something deposited in the text" (de Certeau, 1988, p. 170). As a result, "reading frees itself from the soil that determined it" (de Certeau, 1988, p. 176).

Codes are the messages constructed within texts. Decodings determine how messages will be perceived. Often codes seem natural, but they are, in fact, an articulation between signs and referents (Hall, 1980b, p. 132). When codes seem natural it is because they are decoded just as they were encoded, most often in a habitual, unconscious manner. Ideology conceals the coding process, so we assume things to be just as they are, and we perceive messages to be reality.

Codes transmit ideologies and power. They turn signs into "maps of meaning" which classify cultures, and "maps of social reality" which share a range of meanings, practices, and uses. A prime example is McRobbie's "code of romance," which involves the girl who is searching for the perfect boy. This code romanticizes relationships, but it also sets girls in competition with one another. Sadly, it also cancels the possibility of friendships between boys

and girls (Strinati, 1995, pp. 204-205). This code creates a lot of lonely people, in the name of romance.

According to Hall, meaning is not in the text, but an “active product of the text’s social articulation” (Grossberg, 1996, p 157). He sees audiences, not as pawns in a game, but as the players. “The silent majorities *do* think,” Hall argues, “. . .if they do not speak, it may be because we have taken their speech away from them” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 140).

Misunderstandings or misinterpretations, then, arise when decodings do not match up with the messages encoded. This can be unfortunate in interpersonal communication, as when people cannot come to a common understanding. With media representations, however, this is not so bad. Though producers are frustrated when audiences do not decode messages as prescribed, this means the audience is thinking more critically about the messages given. When broadcasters are concerned that the audience does not “understand” the intended message, they are really disappointed that the audience is “not operating within the ‘dominant’ or ‘preferred’ code” (Hall, 1980b, p. 135). Those in control of media would prefer that their messages are transparent.

Hall disputes claims that media are all-encompassing, and he denies that any one ideology can pervade over all others. Instead, he suggests that ideologies say different things to different people. He dismisses the monosemic view that signs correspond with their meaning, but offers “articulation” as a route to meaning (Grossberg, 1996, p. 142). Since articulations are not preordained, they can be transformed by their users. In fact, Hall sees all the components of communication (the sender, receiver, message, meaning, etc) as articulations, “without essential meanings or identities” (Slack, 1996, pp. 123-124).

Privileged readings do not always dictate the response (Steiner, 1988, p. 2). Distortions, misunderstandings, and various other interpretations result because encodings do not automatically equate with decodings (Hall, 1980b, p. 131). Dominant meanings are preferred, but meanings are not guaranteed by the text or author.

While this grants audiences some degree of power, the possibilities are not endless. Decodings are limited by the text and context of the reading, and to some degree we need limits. There has to be some amount of correspondence between encoding and decoding, because without that correspondence, we could not communicate effectively (Hall, 1980b, p. 135). Of course, it is important to realize the correspondence is not given but constructed. There are no guarantees in coding. If there were, communication would be seamless and “perfectly transparent” (Hall, 1980b, p. 136).

The (Limited) Power of Reading (Over Ideologies)

Hall's ideas have given us a new way to look at audience activity. As Fiske (1996) observes, “the notion of an ideology empowering the subordinate rather than the dominant may seem, on the face of it, a surprising one” but this allows us to see the potential of the subordinate, “for their power to resist the dominant, and to maintain awkward social contradictions” (p. 219).

Hall describes three positions for encoding (possible readings): dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. From the dominant-hegemonic position, the reader operates within the dominant code. In essence, he/she is a victim of the *magic bullet* (Hall, 1980, pp. 136-137). A dominant encoding makes signs appear natural so media effects would seem to be a given. In this case ideology conceals the coding process, for things appear “natural” when encoding is equivalent with decoding (Hall, 1980, p. 132).

Readers not only decode messages but recode and decode again (Steiner, 1988, p. 13), so meanings multiply. This sometimes leads to “distortions” or “misunderstandings,” when the messages produced “fail to get across” to the audience as intended (Hall, 1980, pp. 131, 135). Those in control of media want to avoid these “distortions” and “misunderstandings,” and they prefer not to be analyzed (Steiner, 1988, p. 6). The “magic bullet” is their desired outcome. Fortunately, this is not always the case. Using Hall's model of encoding and decoding (1980), there are two other possible readings: negotiated and oppositional.

Movement toward Non-Dominant Readings

Negotiated and oppositional readings result when people “fail” to see dominant meanings as “transparent” or “natural” (Hall, 1980, pp. 131, 135). While non-dominant readings require some effort, they are empowering. Such readings can make digesting a dominant message more palpable, because they allow people to read “on their own terms” (Hall, 1980, p. 137). In effect, they alter the intent of the text by giving the reader alternatives for interpretation.

Negotiated readings. When one understands the dominant messages but makes his/her own ground rules, the reading is negotiated. Here the reader operates with “exceptions to the rule” (Hall, 1980, p. 137). He/she recognizes that the producers’ “intentions are themselves slippery, that the complex texts cannot be reduced to a single meaning (Steiner, 1988, p. 6).

Negotiated codes combine adaptive and oppositional elements, but in doing so, they acknowledge the legitimacy of dominant codes. While negotiated codes privilege dominant definitions, they allow for some deviance (Hall, 1980b, p. 137). As Steiner would say, the reader “gets the jokes” but decodes the messages in a radical way, discovering oppressive structures. Readers in this situation might also see more than one way to interpret texts (p. 6).

Oppositional readings. Oppositional readings involve a struggle over meanings, or as Hall (1980b) would say a “class struggle in language” (p. 133). Here readers understand the literal and connotative inflection of a message, but in a “globally contrary” way. They interpret the messages within an alternative framework. Essentially, the readers “go against the grain” (Hall, 1980b; Steiner, 1988, p. 12). Using oppositional reading, audiences can transform messages to “solve problems in ways that are very different from those suggested by the media” (Robinson, 1983, p. 332 as cited in Steiner, 1988, p. 3).

According to Steiner (1988), this is something we all do, from time to time, when we do not want to hear the messages as we think they are intended (p. 3). People might react by resisting media they do not like, and withdrawing from the images they perceive and the roles they are assigned as consumers.

By the same token, audiences can read even “dominant” media in oppositional ways. For example, women can read romance novels, which are usually pegged as supporting patriarchy, in an oppositional manner, if they refuse the roles assigned to them by the dominant culture (Steiner, 1988, p. 12). The time alone spent reading can be oppositional in that women are refusing (at least momentarily) to nurture others, and instead putting their own needs first.

Oppositional reading is natural for some, but it is most often a political stance, and not necessarily enjoyable. “To call attending to nasty insults ‘enjoyable’ trivializes both political commitment and the notion of pleasure” (Steiner, 1988, p. 12). One of the most significant political moments is when “events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading” (Hall, 1980b, p. 138).

Oppositional reading cannot change everything, but it is more powerful when it is done collectively. Socialized reading allows groups to communally repudiate the language they are opposed to (Steiner, 1988, p. 12). Oppositional strategies can strengthen and shape a group’s social identity, making them stronger and more willing to put up a fight.

Negotiated and oppositional readings can empower individuals, groups, and society, if they are put to use. Now that the different readings have been described, let us consider the many different uses people have for media.

Media Use

Though media can impact us any number of ways, it is important to acknowledge that audiences can use media as well. We do not just consume media, but we create our own meanings and purposes. We use media to express ourselves, our ideas, and our cultural definitions. We do this not just by displaying and commenting on media, but also creating new media from texts within our culture. In such instances, we deconstruct media to reconstruct stories of our own.

Steiner (1988) studied a silent commentary on media, by examining the “No Comment” section of *Ms. Magazine*. This showed that silence can be a very powerful thing. Readers would

simply submit advertisements and other forms of oppressive and demeaning media, and by making no comment, make a statement all their own. Their silence indicated several things. For one, they were not dignifying these media with a response, because explanations might only compound the injury. Steiner suggested this made readers feel superior at times, because they were noticing things outsiders missed. These women were showing that they could be educated and critical evaluators of media. Ironically, Steiner pointed out that they were probably overestimating the power of media, since the messages could be determined any number of ways by different audiences (1988, p. 4).

Media Use(d) for Self Expression

Another way to use media is self-expression. Murdock (1989) points out the difference between commodities that can be customized (such as standard automobile models that can be turned into hot rods and 'low riders) and those that cannot (p. 234). Those that cannot be changed force audience members to conform to their style. Consumers can combine different forms of media to identify their own eclectic style, but still within the constraints of the media they are using. Artists recycle media as well to express new meanings, when remaking classics or rapping remixes over other tracks. Rapping can elaborate on the song, but also add a commentary on life (Murdock, 1989, p. 235). Media use and musical taste are not just a matter of style, for they reflect self-image and social affiliation.

In expressing ourselves through media, we are also expressing our interpretations or readings. While reading is technically a private, solitary act, we tend to participate in interpretive communities. Whether subscribing to a magazine such as *Ms.*, participating in a book club, or enjoying music with friends, we are joining others in interpretation. These communal activities are important because they let us express ourselves, but more importantly, because together we can reject images of who we are not and, in turn, reject a world we do not want. Cultural expression can be positive, but most often it is reactive, and it involves a struggle over communication and power (Steiner, 1988, p. 13).

Disengaging Media

While we are often immersed in media, at times we are also detached. Popular programming (such as reality TV) tends to remind us of its artificial nature. Postmodern programming, with its references to other shows and images, refers not to the world 'out there,' but the world within media (Murdock, 1989, p. 242). In this way immersion and detachment are inclusive of one another.

Since audiences can be empowered by different readings, could they also be empowered by rejecting or ignoring images? This is but just one question we could ask. At this time, then, allow me to present the research questions for this project.

Research Questions

The topics addressed by this study will be informed by Hall's encoding/decoding approach. While several other useful theories have been outlined here, Hall gives us a unique perspective which falls somewhere between the "Magic Bullet" and "Uses and Gratifications" paradigms. Hall, through his work on encoding and decoding, has shown us that while there are certain restrictions brought on by media and our society, we can reclaim some power in our interpretations.

This study will not only examine the lyrics themselves, but also, how these lyrics are being read by audiences. The purpose of this study is to see if we are moving in the right direction, and five research questions in particular will help us get started.

RQ1: What images of women and relational scripts are most prevalent in popular music performed by female pop artists today?

For years, the majority of feminist inquiries have painted a picture of demeaning images throughout media. A closer look might reveal a more optimistic viewpoint. More and more songs today talk about moving on (from breakups and other disappointments) and standing strong (with or without a man), but what other messages are prevalent? Do stories told in music help women work through relationships, or do they give women false hope? What are songs telling

women about how to build and maintain relationships? What messages do songs give us about conflict? Are songs telling us to work through our struggles or wallow in our defeats? Are songs telling us to work with our partners, or win the fight?

To adequately answer these questions, a number of methods must be used. A content analysis will reveal images and scripts within the text, but the use of focus groups and individual interviews will show what audiences are doing with these messages. Answering these questions is just the beginning.

RQ2: Are young women and men interacting in a reflective way to images and relational scripts offered through popular music performed by female artists?

Regardless of what artists are saying in their songs, audiences need to decide what to do with the messages. If audiences are simply consuming media and messages without thinking about their impact, we are in fact falling prey to what Murdock calls commodity fetishism. This would indicate a need for change, not only in media, but in the audience as well.

Young adults, who quite possibly consume the most media, may be pigeonholed as an unsuspecting audience, but further investigation could surprise the greatest of skeptics. College students in particular, who will be studied in this research project, are indeed critical of media messages, whether they know it or not. Strinati (1995) points out that it is natural, even for teenage girls to demonstrate a "self-conscious" and "reflexive" approach towards texts (p. 214), so why would we doubt that other young adults are doing this?

If college students were not interacting with media in a reflective way, they would be as good as illiterate. Without a doubt, college students are reading the texts (listening to music), but the question remains: to what degree? Young people may elaborate on the messages they hear in their favorite songs, but how critical are they of what they are hearing and reading?

RQ3: What type of readings are most prevalent (dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional)?

Though preferred readings are most often encoded into media messages, audiences always do some amount of negotiations in their readings. Another way to look at this question is to ask whether audiences are internalizing or rejecting messages prescribed by media.

Many factors come into play here, and more questions result. Does internalization/rejection correlate with the amount of exposure or the evaluation (positive/negative) of the lyrics? What we do know is that each individual's reading will depend on his/her experience and situation within culture. While gender might show obvious differences, there are more subtle factors, as mentioned earlier.

If we like particular artists, we tend to be more receptive to their messages. We also tend to listen more to messages we agree with, so it is likely that people who listen to popular music performed by female artists agree with the messages presented. This would present a strong case for dominant-hegemonic readings, but even preferred codings can be read in negotiated and oppositional ways. Steiner (1988) would remind us that even the most patriarchal texts, romance novels, can be read oppositionally, so it is quite possible for romantic songs to be read in different ways too.

Simply singing along with songs which defy the status quo can be an oppositional act in and of itself. Discussing such songs with friends and acquaintances can increase the message, spreading more positive influence. Likewise, we can change the station, or refuse to purchase music and its ideologies, when we don't like the messages we are hearing. Perhaps then people can become more active in their own consumption, buying media that support them, and boycotting media that suppress them.

Before the completion of this study, I assumed that oppositional readings would be present, but not as much as dominant-hegemonic or negotiated. For even when people go against the grain, they may be hesitant to admit it. This popular phenomenon is explained through the "spiral of silence" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, pp. 290-291). Since media are a "primary source of information about social norms, customs...and even what to think," (Infante, Rancer, & Womack,

2003, p. 286) audiences are pressured by the media as well as their peers to stick with the story. Dominant readings are thus reinforced, because people with less popular views often refrain from voicing their opinions.

Negotiated readings were assumed to be most common, with the participants in this study, because the focus groups centered on music that is less dominant. While fans of pop music are likely to be reflective, anyone with knowledge of this genre (even those who detest pop music) can provide unique insights.

Women (and men) can see for themselves what images media are projecting, and while some seem natural, others are being evaluated. Negotiated readings are popular too, because they allow us to engage with popular media, while making our own ground rules for interpretation. If we cannot change what we are hearing, we can at least alter our own thinking.

RQ4: How can audiences enact and benefit from oppositional and negotiated readings?

For even the most rebellious of audiences, negotiated and oppositional readings may lead to cognitive dissonance. A listener might love a song, but not love its message. It is up to the listener to decide what to do with the reading. One can change his/her thoughts about the song or artist, or change how he/she feels about the message or the topic. A listener can only deal with this tension by changing his/her perspective on something.

Recall Strinati's (1988) suggestion that audiences transform media messages for their own use. Alternatively, people can resist media, by refusing to consume or actively struggling against media. In Steiner's opinion, "we all recode messages we contest, dislike, or do not want to hear as we think they are intended" (p. 3).

Anytime a listener reads a text in a negotiated or oppositional manner, he/she gains some control of his/her media use. It can be empowering to the individual, but when done collectively, negotiated and oppositional readings can take on new meanings, and even lead to political movements. If nothing else, the discussions prompted by this study can urge young listeners to

take a more active role in their media consumption. If this happens, participants will see why progress in this field is so essential.

RQ5: Has women's popular music truly evolved? What steps can we take to get us (or keep us) moving in the right direction?

Before going any further, I should clarify my notion of evolution. I recognize that this question could be addressed by an infinite number of interpretations and paradigms. In accordance with the critical tradition, I choose to see progress from a moral standpoint. While I aim to keep a critical inquiry in mind, I realize that my role as a researcher in many ways influences the process. In the spirit of qualitative studies, I chose to embrace this. Therefore, I make no claims to being objective.

The progress I speak of cannot be objectively determined, because my point of view is existential. Of course, when I talk of evolution, I am talking of just one path of progress. For me, this is a path where women are rarely degraded and often empowered.

It is clear that media, and more specifically music, are always changing. Many female performers are putting forth a new agenda, urging women to stand strong and be independent, even in relationships. But is this the norm, or the minority message? Further, how are women reading and reacting to these messages? Is this new brand of music responsive to women's needs? Furthermore, are women responsive to the messages presented?

If we are not happy with the messages in media, we can do something about it. We may never eliminate all dominant and/or negative messages, but we can become more literate, and we can control our consumption, if we become more aware of the issues. Before we can make changes, we have to ask: is music today providing us with enough positive images and useful scripts? If not, how can we get moving (or keep moving) in the right direction?

All methods contributed to answering these questions. A simple textual analysis revealed the most common themes in today's popular music and these were developed for focus groups and interviews. Focus groups aimed to highlight what audiences are hearing and reading, and

individual interviews elaborated on individuals' experiences with this genre. These methods will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

Summary

This chapter discussed theoretical literature within the fields of media and feminist studies. Theories in media abound, including direct-effects, psychoanalytic, uses and gratifications, and semiotics. Postmodern work has taken a turn towards a more critical approach, and as a result, we look at how culture and media are structured through language.

Gender becomes an important topic of study, as do other sociological factors. It is important to see how production and consumption structure power and interpretation. Three types of feminism (liberal, radical, and socialist) explain how differences in gender are constantly constructed. The images of women in media have been criticized, and media has changed as a result. This study aims to gauge that difference.

The approach that will be used in this study stems from the work of Stuart Hall. His *Encoding/Decoding* provides the basis for evaluation. Codes and reading were defined in this chapter in a way that will inform this research. This study will assess how college students are reacting to popular music by contemporary female pop artists, and discuss how their readings are dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional.

The research questions set forth seek to determine where music is at, with respect to its definition of women and their relationships. Answering each of these questions will rely on a triangulation of methods. The next chapter will examine which approaches are best combined in methodology.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

A Brief Introduction of Methods

This study used a triangulation of methods, which are mostly qualitative. These methods included focus groups, and individual interviews, and a textual analysis of lyrics and interview transcripts.

A very basic content analysis developed in the early stages of this project, as lyrics were selected from seven female pop artists. These artists (which included Ashlee Simpson, Avril Lavigne, Beyonce Knowles, Christina Aguilera, Jessica Simpson, Kelly Clarkson, and Mariah Carey) were selected as a convenience sample, since they had albums released between 2004 and 2006, and since I was most familiar with their lyrics.

I printed lyrics out from each of the artists' albums (most were retrieved from artists' Web sites or www.wowlyrics.com) for participant use during individual interviews and focus groups. Prior to this, I conducted my own informal content analysis to look for what themes were clear from the start (at least from *my* standpoint). I was careful to skim for surface elements, so that I could give participants cues to work from. The lyrics were not analyzed completely, however, because I did not want to bias participants' observations.

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted simultaneously to explore what happens when the texts come to life. The focus groups gave audiences a collective forum for expression, and also brought to light how audiences are reading the codes prevalent in popular music performed by female artists. The individual interviews, on the other hand, provided a more in-depth look at how individuals interact with music.

Rationale for Triangulation

Traditionally, media studies have focused mostly on the relationship between texts and authors, rather than the texts and readers (Steiner, 1988, p. 1). It is necessary to include audience members as participants because audience response cannot be determined from the text itself. At the same time "an analysis that operates with an underdeveloped view of texts is bound to

oversimplify the complexity of potential reactions” (Murdock, 1989, p. 237). Audiences and texts are not uni-dimensional, so the research certainly should not be. As Murdock (1989) recommends, a project like this requires a multi-methodological approach.

Without a doubt, triangulation is a necessary component of research. If nothing else, triangulation adds to the depth of the study, giving us a variety of perspectives. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), “No single method can grasp all of the subtle variations in ongoing human experience,” (p. 19) so we need to use a variety of methods. Since people are complex, one method will not do. So the best approach is triangulation because it uses a number of techniques toward inquiry (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 668).

Though semiology is useful, by itself it cannot account for a multitude of meanings, because there are no fixed or universal codes (Strinati, 1995, p. 107). Since audiences have different meanings for words, they inevitably develop different interpretations of text. Furthermore, signs never exist in isolation, but within contexts (Strinati, 1995, p. 125). With its emphasis on signs, semiology might miss out on what other methods realize. In Strinati’s words, “it is impossible to interpret signs adequately unless their context of use and the social relationships which confer meaning upon them, are taken in consideration” (1995, p. 126).

While textual analysis is an important part of critical inquiry, it cannot substitute for audience analysis, because “responses cannot be ‘read’ off directly from texts” (Murdock, 1989, p. 237). Having one form of analysis without the other would oversimplify the relationship between audiences and the text, and thus neglect the true meanings.

Rationale for Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods in general work best for this study because statistical measures cannot reveal the many meanings of a text. Nor can quantitative methods show the value of multiple readings. Qualitative methods allow us to appreciate the ambiguity, ambivalence, and multiplicity of media and audiences (Ang, 1996, p. 128). As media studies gain prominence, so too do qualitative studies. Since the effects paradigm has shifted to show how audiences interpret

media messages in different ways, we are less apt to use methods that “presume audience passivity and strong media effects” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 61).

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) point out that since qualitative studies are rarely based on random probability, the results cannot be legitimately generalized to the general population. They do not see this as a problem, however, because (1) the data from qualitative studies is not usually subjected to the same statistical procedures as data from quantitative studies, and (2) qualitative studies lend themselves more toward the social practices and meanings of specific populations, rather than the quantities of a whole population. Lindlof and Taylor continue, “because social phenomena are studied for their unique qualities, the question of whether they are normally distributed in a population is not an issue” (2002, p. 122).

Textual Analyses

Textual analysis is important to critical inquiry. It cannot substitute the need for audience analysis, but it is a good place to start. Textual analysis alone cannot reveal what the lyrics are saying, and since lyrics can relate any number of ambiguous and contradictory messages (Strinati, 1995, p. 195), other methods are required. In the present study, a brief content analysis was conducted before focus groups and individual interviews to inform these processes, but not bias them.

Ideally, content analyses are not a simple quantification of content, but rather an examination of surface meanings and an extraction of concealed messages. Semiology offers more than traditional content analysis, because it is concerned with more than “the numerative *appearance* of the content, but with the messages, which the contents signify” (Strinati, 1995, pp. 203-204). It is important not to dismiss surface meanings, because they are the most recognized by audiences. Strinati implores us, “Why presume that once the ‘preferred’ meaning is discovered, there are no more meanings to be found which are even more ‘hidden’?” (1995, pp. 203-204)

In analyzing the text, it is important to realize human limitations, and embrace them. While aiming to be explanatory and objective, it is important to realize that at best, some interpretations remain “arbitrary and subjective” (Strinati, 1995, p. 207). We should come to terms with ideas that cannot be confined to “smooth, finished and coherent Theory” (Ang, 1996, p. 100).

Likewise, it is important to appreciate the polysemic nature of a text (Strinati, 1995, pp. 208-209). Each text will contain a number of different messages, and this makes it open to a number of different interpretations. Still, texts do not contain an infinite number of meanings, so limits must be set at some point. Strinati (1995) reminds us that a text’s polysemic nature can limit “ideological effectiveness” (p. 213).

Focus Groups

Focus groups are essential to this research, because they allow us to see how different audiences interpret texts, especially within interpretive communities. The texts themselves are instilled with messages, but it is the audience that brings new life to these messages. Focus groups give us insight into how groups might rework a text together (in interpretive communities).

Steiner recommends looking to the social group, instead of the individual, because as groups audiences publicly challenge preferred readings and uncover hidden structures (1988, p. 3). It is as if we help each other to better understand media when we discuss them. After all, in groups, people are more empowered to challenge preferred readings and uncover “hidden structures, implicit mythologies, and naturalized ideological operations” (Steiner, 1988, p. 3).

Similarly, Morgan (1988) suggests that the use of groups allows us to see data and insights we would not see without interaction (p. 12 as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 182). Other researchers confirm this, saying that audience members can stimulate each other with shared ideas and experiences (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p. 182; Hall, 2006, p. 207).

While focus groups usually produce results that are not generalizable, Fontana and Frey (2000) endorse their use because they produce rich data and provide a flexible format, which stimulates respondents and aids in recall (p. 652). Especially when combined with other methods, focus groups give us valuable insights which can propel further discovery. Focus groups can also benefit the participants, because they can see and hear things they've not yet experienced on their own, and they are given a safe space to elaborate.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews round out the methodological approach. Textual analysis and focus groups have their own merits, but by themselves they fail to see individual differences between readers. Textual analysis, according to Radway, is "sealed off from the very people" it aims to understand (as cited in Ang, 1996, p. 112). Focus groups are useful, but without individual interviews, they might oversimplify group differences.

By interviewing individuals, we can truly understand intersubject differences. Further, readings will depend on factors such as cultural structure, context, and personal experiences, and individual interviews can allow a deeper investigation of these.

If we want to know how or why audiences are impacted by media we can't afford to ignore them. To use semiotics independent of other methods can cause confusion about the audience's role. Questions remain: "are audiences determined in the 'readings' by a universal structural principle, or are the 'readings' determined by the social cultural and historical circumstances of their audiences?" (Strinati, 1995, p. 107). After all is said and done, audiences do form different meanings from the same media, so we cannot dismiss them, as semiology might suggest (Strinati, 1995, p. 122).

Interviews allow us to go beyond the parameters of a survey. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), interviews have the "ability to travel deeply and broadly into subjective realities" and that is why they are the "preeminent method in communication and the other social sciences"

(p. 170). Interviews provide us with rich data, which when transcribed, can provide us with a whole new text to analyze.

A valuable feature of the interviews from this project is that they were conducted using a protocol. The interview protocol served as a guide for the interview, not a script. If participants chose to deviate, this was allowed (even encouraged), because this can often take us into new territory. This method is valued in qualitative research, because we know that often the participant is more an expert (at least of his/her experience) than the researcher.

An interview protocol is an informal, flexible approach which does not dictate the order or delivery of questions, because the social dynamics of interview change from one participant and context to the next” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 195). If the participants went down an untrodden path, I followed (with questions in that direction), in order to enter a new world of inquiry. Whereas the quantitative methods help us *explain* differences, interviews help us to *understand* differences (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 654), and so individual interviews were viewed as an essential part of this project.

Participants

Participants included undergraduate students from Montclair State University and Ramapo College of New Jersey. These schools were chosen for convenience, since I am a student at Montclair and an employee of Ramapo College. Additionally, both colleges provide a diverse population of students, and they are located in suburbs close to the New York metropolitan area. Though I had contact with students at both schools, I did not interview anyone I knew personally (the IRB did not permit this, but I agreed this was a good principle, so that results would not be skewed or influenced by my presence).

Though this study concentrates on popular music performed by female artists, males were not excluded as participants. Their experiences and opinions were as much valued by this project as responses from female participants. As Ang (1996) would suggest, “limiting ourselves to women audiences as the empirical starting point for analysis would risk reproducing static and

essentialist conceptions of gender identity” (p. 110). To exclude men would also take for granted that gender is socially constructed (Ang, 1996, p. 117). Men and women should not just be labeled as separate entities, but as people with “multiple feminine and masculine identifications” (Ang, 1996, p. 119).

Initially, the single criterion was that participants listen to music performed by contemporary female pop artists. A familiarity and interest with this genre was at first favored, because it seemed that a preference for this genre would provide fruitful discussion on this topic. However, since those who volunteered to participate did not all favor pop music (in fact, in some cases they despised it), data were collected from any participants with some knowledge of pop music. It is in the spirit of qualitative research, after all, to remain open to new findings and include, instead of exclude, all others.

Sampling Issues

Participants were recruited using a number of avenues. First, I created a generic e-mail for faculty members (at both Montclair and Ramapo, typically in the Psychology, Communication, Music, and related departments), asking them to help recruit students (see Appendices A1 and A2). My advisor also helped recruit participants from her Persuasion classes, by offering extra credit. This was probably the most practical method, since participants were compensated for their time with extra credit.

Another useful method for recruitment was the popular Web site, www.facebook.com. I started by searching for participants who liked particular artists and sent them individual e-mails (see Appendix A4). This helped me find a few participants, but when I created a group on Facebook (see Appendix A5), this gave students more incentive, because they had more information about the project.

Of course, I utilized traditional media, by hanging flyers (see Appendix A3) around campus and invited people in person to participate. These methods, however, provided meager results at best. One-on-one invitations were a great way to recruit participants, but this was

extremely time-consuming. The flyers did not result in any participants. Sadly, it seems that students don't look at flyers like they used to, because there are so many other technologies available. I learned that if you want participants, you have to go where they are, and these days it is online.

One last method that was used was snowballing. If participants knew others who would be interested, they could invite their friends or acquaintances to join in this study. This method served its purpose for this study, after all, because it is "well-suited to studying social networks, subcultures, or dispersed groups of people who share certain practices or attributes" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 124).

Regardless of sampling, it is important to remember that the goal here is not to make a generalized statement about all young music enthusiasts, but to describe the experiences of those surveyed. As Patton reminds us, "The sample is illustrative, not definitive" (1990, p. 173 as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 128).

Instruments & Data

Instruments included a Music Consumption Survey (see Appendix C), a focus group protocol (see Appendix D), and an individual interview protocol (see Appendix E). The surveys provided descriptive data, while the protocols served as guidelines for discussion with participants.

While the majority of data were in qualitative format, quantitative data were also collected. Quantitative data collected include demographics (such as age and sex) and music listening self-reports (via the Music Consumption Survey). Music listening self-reports indicated where, how, and how often participants listen to music. Qualitative data included themes evident from content analysis, open-ended responses on the demographics/consumption survey, and transcripts composed from focus groups and individual interviews.

All future themes, types, and taxonomies introduced in the following chapters were developed through repeated exposure to the data and recurrent key words and ideas..

Issues of Reliability & Validity

A method is valid if it measures what it intends to measure. A method is reliable if the results reoccur each time the method is used. The methods described should prove valid. The questions asked in the focus groups and interviews were constructed with the research questions in mind, so they should measure what they are intended to. The good thing, too, about qualitative measures, is that they are open to alteration and interpretation. Should respondents give us new insights, we can apply their contributions to subsequent groups. This is not to say that the responses will determine the interviews, but that will add to the quality of results. Therefore, questions will not be eliminated from the protocol, but supplemented with rich data.

While the validity of qualitative measures seems strong, the reliability cannot be guaranteed. If anything, these measures would probably prove unreliable, since no two people will respond in exactly the same way. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) would remind us that this is not necessarily a weakness, because qualitative studies are not aimed at making generalizations, but at understanding the social practices and meanings of specific groups and contexts (p. 122).

Summary

This chapter outlined the methods used for inquiry. In short, these methods included the use of focus groups, individual interviews, and a textual analysis of lyrics and texts. Participants included undergraduate students from Montclair State University and Ramapo College of New Jersey. The following chapters will discuss the results of this study as well as conclusions and inductions for further studies.

CHAPTER 4: REFLEXIVITY

This next chapter assesses the reflexivity of participants. Reflexivity is more than just an observation or awareness of phenomena. It involves a critical mindset, where the audience assesses, evaluates, and even questions what they are consuming. When one is reflexive he/she asks questions about what the text means and what its implications are. I would argue that reflexivity gives us power over media. Hence, when one is reflexive, he/she has power. In contrast, when one is not reflexive, those in control of the dominant media have power.

There seem to be different levels of reflexivity. One can be reflexive, for instance, about his/her consumption, but not about the products and production of media. We see, too, that people vary in their amount, and depth, of reflexivity. For instance, one can be reflexive about the images and meanings of a song, but lack insight about where the images and meanings are coming from.

As we return to Research Questions #1 and #2, we have to ask how audiences are interacting with the lyrics. Are young audiences thinking about the music they hear, or are they just singing along? Do they recognize what images and relational scripts are present, and are they able to put them to good use (this of course is a precursor to other questions, regarding participants' readings)? While the individual interviews and focus groups aimed to answer these questions directly, useful data were also revealed by participants' responses on the Media Consumption survey (see Appendix G), which gave further insight about who these listeners are.

Participants & Consumption Patterns

Before we delve any further into these questions, we need to understand and appreciate who the participants are. Since this study included a small pool of participants ($n = 38$), we cannot generalize the findings, but we can discover valuable illustrations of how young audiences use and interpret music today.

The majority of participants were female (60.5%), but males were certainly not excluded ($n = 15$). Though participants ranged from 18 to 25 years old, half of the participants were

between 21 and 22 years old (31.6% and 21.1%, respectively), and two participants did not specify (since they were recruited from the same pool, they most likely fell within this bracket).

Most (89.5%) reported listening to music everyday, but there was a wide range of hours spent listening per day. While about one-third (34.2%) of the group listened to music 2-4 hours each day, participants reported listening to music as little as 1 hour each day, and as much as 12 hours. One participant reported listening to music "in the background all day" and other reported listening "unconsciously" for several hours, but participants did not otherwise discriminate between conscious or unconscious listening.

Participants varied greatly in the amount of money they spend on each year on music ($M = \$273.51$). While some would spend nothing ($n = 4$), or as little \$20 annually ($n = 5$), others spend as much as \$1000 or more ($n = 4$). One participant (a music major) reported spending as much as \$3,000, but these purchases included CDs, tapes, and records, as well as tickets to shows, gas money, and instruments. The majority of participants purchase music in stores (80.8%) like Best Buy and FYE and online (63.4%) with programs like iTunes and Limewire. Others purchase music at live shows, borrow music from friends, or download songs on other Web sites. Clearly, these are people invested in music.

Participants reported listening to music mostly at home and during a range of activities: while getting ready for work/school (84.2%), driving (89.5%), eating (55.3%), studying (63.2%), exercising (81.6%), and even sleeping (35.8%). Less often, participants listened to music while at school (47.3%) and work (44.7%) between 1 and 15 hours a day. The most popular mode for listening to music is the iPod/MP3 player (rated as the #1 mode by 26.3%), followed by the radio (rated as the #1 mode by 18.4%), CD players (rated as the #1 mode by 15.8%), and online (not rated by any participants as the #1 mode, but rated by 21.1% of participants as their second mode).

Some questions on the Media Consumption survey were designed to assess the degree to which participants think they are reflexive, but they also served to prepare participants for

discussion topics in the actual interviews. For example, participants were asked whether they most often listen to music selectively or music in the background, and likewise whether they most often think about and reflect on lyrics or “just enjoy the music.”

According to their responses, participants more often listen to music selectively (73.3%). Similarly, participants conveyed that they most often think about lyrics, but almost half of the group (44.7%) indicated that they most often “just enjoy the music.”

Participants were also asked to rank their favorite musical genres and list their favorite songs and lyrics (See Appendix C, #13). Their rankings (#1 being their favorite genre, with each succeeding number being less favored) allow us to examine their favorite genres in two different ways. We can see which genres were rated most often and also which genres averaged better rankings. Pop, Hip-Hop, and Alternative were rated most frequently (n=32, 31 and 29, respectively), while Christian music, Show Tunes, and other categories were least frequently (n = 3, 7, and 8, respectively). The genres which ranked highest (on average) were not necessarily those which were ranked most frequently. Alternative music, which was the third-most ranked genre among participants (n = 30), averaged a 3.7 rank-score by participants. Heavy Metal, which was only ranked by 9 participants, scored an average rank-score of 4.3. Rock music which was ranked by 27 participants, earned an average 4.3 rank-score from participants. Therefore, while pop, hip-hop, and alternative music were most commonly ranked among all participants, all genres varied in their individual rankings.

Themes of Reflexivity

Before we can understand how the images and scripts in pop music might impact us, we have to question how conscious audiences are of their own consumption. Are audiences aware of the elements and effects of media? Even the experts have yet to agree how powerful media can be. As we scour the history of media studies, we see that some felt media were all-encompassing, and that we were powerless to the domination. As research developed, theorists gave more power to audiences, citing their uses and gratifications as a way to combat the influence. Now, we stand

somewhere in between, but as we explore Hall's possibilities, we see that audiences can reclaim some power with their readings.

Obviously, different audiences have different understandings of media; some are quite aware (if not cautious) of the effects, while others are either unaware or dismissive. If audiences choose to ignore – or worse, dismiss – the possibility that media can impact them, are audiences then likely to have any power over the process?

From the results reported above, it is apparent that audiences are fairly aware of their consumption patterns. The concern then becomes what audiences are getting out of their consumption. You may recall that Research Question #2 asked “Are young women and men interacting in a reflective way to images and relational scripts offered through popular music performed by female artists?” While the primary concern here was whether audiences can identify images and relational scripts, participants revealed much more.

Response codes revealed a number of themes, which relate directly to media use. The first theme, consumption, describes participants' use and awareness of media. The second theme, the products, encompasses participants' awareness of the artists and texts. The third theme, production, highlights their awareness and insight with regards to the music industry, and media in general. The fourth theme, the byproducts, elaborates further on the influence and effects of media, as participants describe the images and scripts available and expand on their concerns of these effects.

Consumption

It is important for us to realize not only the amount of media we consume, but the ways in which we consume. This can include understanding how we are exposed to media, when and how we select media, and what our purposes are for listening. It is important to analyze our consumption, so that we are sure to use media to our advantage. For, if we don't make good use of media, media will surely make good use of us. As Hall (1980) and de Certeau (1988) suggest,

we should poach through various media and interpret them in our own ways. We should aim to fulfill our needs, but we should not dismiss the potential that media have to influence us.

Selection

For the most part, the participants of this study realize that media more often choose us than we choose them. Whether it is through radio, magazines, or TV we tend to receive a constant stream of the same messages (Focus Groups 3, 4, 5, and 7). As Participant B stated, the “main draw of a lot of these pop songs is that they’re played so much, everyone knows them . . . and . . . it’s sort of like a drawing point . . . (p. 12).

Most of the time, we choose what channels deliver our music (by turning on the radio, putting in a CD, or plugging into an iPod), but often we do not choose what those channels deliver. As several focus groups pointed out, many of the mainstream radio stations will play the same songs over and over. Participants realize that different forces in the music industry control the patterns of play, and this will be revisited later, in a discussion of the industry.

On the bright side, audiences can tune in and out easily through various technologies (most recently the iPod, Web sites, and satellite radio). We should not, however, mistake this for absolute alternatives, for we are always constrained by what is provided for us. As Participant A explained, “I think, how we get music now, is very reflective of how we get *anything* now . . . t’s individual, pre-packaged . . .” (p. 25). Indeed, nearly every form of music is pre-packaged, but it is very seldom individual. Still, we can pick and choose different songs and artists for different messages and reasons (Focus Group 6, p. 7).

Individual vs. Community Interpretation

Another interesting point can be made regarding individual and shared consumption. Participant A pointed out that “everything’s very individual” (p. 25) and that while we may share “links . . . to Web sites . . . or . . . Myspace . . .,” we do not share music (in its natural form) as often as we used to (p. 23). As we enjoy our own mix of music, it seems we become more and more isolated.

Participant B noticed a different phenomenon, pointing out that “If I put on, you know, Justin Timberlake, or Jessica Simpson . . . everyone knows the songs . . . it’s much better . . . everyone can sort of come together on those songs . . .” (p. 12). As was illustrated in the earlier review of literature, friends and peers can comprise interpretive communities, which define music on their own (collective) terms. This can be empowering for both the individuals and the group.

Purpose

Whether we have full control of the media we consume, we can decide what purposes listening will serve. Participants in this study identified a multitude of reasons they listen to their favorite music, and these were condensed into eight distinct purposes: (1) entertainment, (2) reflection, (3) relaxation, (4) mood enhancement, (5) expression of emotions/ideas, (6) motivation, (7) distraction/escape/filling silence, and (8) influence.

Surely, and perhaps most often, music is used for entertainment. Often, its entertainment value is a combination of other purposes (seldom are these purposes mutually exclusive), but it can also occur in and of itself. As one participant stated, “I like the beat I’m not gonna’ lie” (Focus Group 4, p. 7).

While entertainment is certainly useful, others prefer to apply their favorite music to their lives, because “it helps you think about things” (Participant B, p. 1). Music can also clarify thoughts and feelings, as Participant K was eager to explain, “Sometimes I don’t know how I really feel and then I go to my music, and by picking a song I want to hear, I learn [and] realize how I’m feeling” (p. 1). This is not always an enjoyable experience, but it seems it is usually useful. Participant C admitted that music sometimes “makes you think of your regrets . . . think of your mistakes” but it is something he always benefits from.

Of course, music is also relaxing (Participant C, p. 1), and it is used by many because it “calms” and changes emotions (Participant N, p. 1). Simply put, music is always valuable “‘cause you get a little stressed out . . .” (Focus Group 4, p. 21). At the same time, music can be used enhance one’s mood. “Personally, I think music can be healing and motivating

and...inspiring” said Participant A (p. 1). Likewise, many participants stated that they use music to suit their needs (Focus Group 1).

Music is used almost universally as a means of expression, by artists and audiences alike. “It’s a way of making yourself heard” (Focus Group 1, p. 5), but it’s also way “to have fun” and an “emotional outlet” (Participant F, p. 1). Some go as far as calling music “therapy,” and Participant K admitted that music is a way to for her to express how she feels deep inside and take a break from her thoughts (p. 1). This is but another example of how the purposes overlap. While music can help one identify and express his/her feelings to him/herself, it also becomes a form of interpersonal communication, like when “it’s your away message for that night” (Focus Group 2, p. 4).

When not used to soothe, music can excite or motivate. Participant J explained that he uses music for drive (p. 2) and Participant M exclaimed that she loves to work out with her iPod. In fact, she says “I can’t work out without it!” (p. 1). On the opposite side of the spectrum, some use music to “escape reality” altogether (Participant L, p. 1). For some, it provides that “extra little noise” or “distraction” (Focus Group 5, p. 5).

While it may seem that listening is a passive experience, it can also encourage certain behaviors. As Participant L explained, songs by Common (his favorite rapper) have taught him to “to respect women and be faithful to the end” (p. 2). Participant C was wary of such influence, declaring, “it influences you, naturally, but don’t let it lead your life” (p. 2).

From these statements, we can see that audiences indeed have some degree of understanding. They appear to appreciate the ways in which media can be selected by them, but also for them. Their insight in this area can lend itself to an understanding of the products, the production process and the byproducts.

The Products

Now that we have acknowledged how participants conceptualize their consumption, we can move toward their consciousness of the products. The products of media consist of the texts,

as well as the construction of the artists and other images within (and beyond) music. Though participants were not asked directly to elaborate on the artists' personal life, development, and image maintenance, they were well-versed on such topics, and their responses deserve attention.

Participants discussed the evolution of artists, whether the artists had been around for a decade or whether an artist is "the hottest new thing." Through other forms of media (music videos, MTV-style documentaries, newspapers, magazines, and Web sites), audiences can learn just about anything they want about their favorite artists. Just as frequently, audiences can learn minute details about artists they may not even care to be familiar with, as news magazines and other programs inform us of artists' successes and shortcomings almost instantly.

Of course, the texts themselves (the songs) and the genres are continually reconstructed, as the artists, songs, and genres converge. While fans and critics alike comment that it all begins to "sound the same," others appreciate the poaching (as de Certeau would call it) of media to create new hits. Even the biggest fans, however, are bound to question the artists' and texts' authenticity from time to time.

The Artists, the Music, & their Evolution

While this study does not aim to explain the entire evolution of women's music, it does broach the topic at a significant point in time. As it is noted in the introductory chapters, the current movement provides a number of alternatives for women. Women can be independent, in love, strong, and vulnerable (and so much more) all at the same time.

It may seem as if the possibilities are limitless. Participant B, however, points out that we may be retreating as fast as we progress. He notes, there was a "huge change ...Especially in the mid ...90s" where we "switched over from...the Madonna type to the... Britney Spears type" (p. 5). While Madonna's influence can be debated, we cannot argue that she had a "hugely positive image on women, for the most part" (pp. 5-6). Madonna taught us, for instance, that "you can dress how you want, and you can still be a *strong woman*" (Participant B, p. 6).

Participant B continues,

whereas, you know, after you switch to like 95 . . . somewhere around there where the Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears era started and . . . the Madonna era was sort of *over*, and the lyrics started meaning nothing and it was all about . . . you know, dressing scantily and . . . and . . . being a . . . sex symbol . . . rather than someone that can actually portray a message . . . (pp. 5-6).

This evaluation is but one of any number of interpretations, and reminds us that not all that glitters is gold. Though this new batch of young women may seem smart, sexy, and savvy, they may be finding new ways to put us “back in our place”. This is, if we are not careful to use their texts wisely.

We can see, too, individual artists emerge and grow with the music. One artist in particular is Kelly Clarkson. Participants continually sang her praises and evaluated her as an artist who has made it big, with us all watching. Audiences seem to have a kinship to her, because of their involvement with American Idol, whether they voted or just tuned in. Audiences can identify with her, because they have watched her “from the very beginning, as opposed to just seeing them [other celebrities], like, come out there. Like, those one-hit-wonders, you have no idea about their past, where they came from” (Focus Group 1, p. 1). While audiences question what struggles other artists had to overcome, they see Kelly Clarkson as a small-town girl who deserves her hard-earned fame.

Another artist participants discussed was Mariah Carey. A decade after her humble beginnings, she is now a diva, but we have seen her fight some battles in her personal life and career. Mariah Carey is Participant A’s favorite artist, and so Participant A provided us with some insight about her life, behind the music.

In the early 90s, Mariah Carey emerged with the “girl-next-door” type of image (Focus Group 2, p. 2). With her self-titled debut album and “Emotions,” she presented herself a wholesome young songbird, blasting us with beautiful ballads. In the hands of then Sony President, Tommy Mottola, Mariah became a young wife who then sang the splendors of love, with songs such as “Daydream,” “Fantasy” and “Always Be My Baby” (Participant A, p. 1).

Then in 1997, when she lived through a rocky relationship and subsequent divorce, Mariah came out with her “Butterfly” album, which featured more “heavy” (according to Participant A) themes like “Breakdown” and “Fly Away” (p. 1)

In 2001, when Mariah Carey allegedly had a “nervous breakdown” she wrapped up filming and recording on her first-feature film and soundtrack, *Glitter*. A semi-autobiographical story, it bombed at the theatres, and we did not hear much from Mariah Carey until the release of her “Charmbracelet” album in 2003. According to Mariah Carey, this album was full of some very personal tales, but it was not as successful as her others. Finally, in 2005, Mariah Carey broke free again – this time, from her record company. Participant A recalled “her record company dropped her” (p. 3). This album was entitled “The Emancipation of Mimi” because she was “breaking free” and no longer “a slave to the first record company” (Participant A, p. 3).

With more than a decade of hits, Mariah Carey has shown us many sides of herself, and as a result, many facets of femininity. She is not alone in this venture, as there are constellations of other images presented by many other female pop artists.

Managing Images

Whether it is because of the pressure on all women to be beautiful or the sheer vanity of Hollywood, all artists have gone to great lengths for their images. The two artists that garnered the most attention among participants were Christina Aguilera and Ashlee Simpson. Both artists have recently released albums, and while Ashlee is still considered a sophomore in the industry, Christina Aguilera is almost a veteran (with more than 7 years in the limelight).

We have seen Christina Aguilera go from bubble-gum pop (with “Genie in a Bottle” and “What a Girl Wants” in 1999) to a “Dirrty” “Fighter” (both titles released on her *Stripped* album in 2002), and now she seems to have come full circle as she goes *Back to Basics* with “Ain’t No Other Man,” “Candy Man” and “Hurt” (album and song titles from her latest release, in 2006).

Obviously, she has grown from a tiny teen, to a young vixen, to a married woman (Focus Group 2, p. 16), but she seems to have held on to all of her sexy images. While some might be

perplexed by her constant changing (someone in Focus Group 2, p. 16, cried out, “she’s dirty one minute and now she’s like this 1940’s [icon]! . . .”), others admire her elasticity and see it as a smart strategy. “I think she changes her image, like Madonna does Look at Madonna, the longevity of her career . . . so that’s what she’s trying to do . . .” (Focus Group 3, p. 5).

The critics (including fans) have not been so kind to Jessica Simpson’s little sister, Ashlee. While Ashlee skyrocketed to fame with her MTV reality show and *Autobiography* debut album, her fans still seem unsure what to think of her. Maybe it is because of her lip-synching scandal at SNL, or maybe it is because she constantly (and dramatically) changes her look, but fans are not so sure Ashlee is sincere (Focus Groups 2, 4, and 5).

Fans recall, “She went from this punk girl . . . who was blonde . . . to this freaky dark-haired punk girl . . .” (Focus Group 5, p. 13) and “now she has the perfect blonde curls and the perfect nose and smile” (Focus Group 4, p. 5). If nothing else, audiences are confused because “she was always about . . . she didn’t care what people would think of her, and now she has, like, the look” (Focus Group 4, p. 5). Though unconfirmed, many speculate that Ashlee went to extremes for her new look, and most are critical of what they see as a “Nose job, boobs . . . [and] whatever else she had done” (Focus Group 5, p. 18).

Texts & Genre (Convergence)

Just as the artists emerge and develop, so too do their texts and genre. While the texts and genres vary, they also, in many ways, stay the same (or worse, regress). As we see very similar artists and music come out, we have to wonder, are they all the same?

While some songs seem rich in cultured contexts and symbolism (Participant A, for one, recalled symbols used in Mariah Carey’s *Rainbow*, *Daydream*, *Butterfly*, and *Charmbracelet* albums) others seem void of rhyme *and* reason. Focus Group 4 (p. 20), for example, debated the pronunciation and meaning of Missy Elliott’s “tiesrevrednatiplfnwodgnaht” line in her “Work It” song, which is another line (“[I put my] thang down, flip it and reverse it”) backwards.

It seems that the less we listen, the more ambiguous the lyrics might get. As one participant noted, in Focus Group 5, "I've listened to so many songs, like, over and over again and . . . for some reason, it just, like . . . the words just hit me – what they're saying, and I'm like, 'Is that *really* what they're saying in this song?'" (p. 5). So there is reason to stop and pay attention.

At this juncture we should ask: are the lyrics and artists more similar or more different? And, either way, what does this mean? I am not attempting to answer this question definitively here, but I hope to begin exploring it. Participants have begun to examine how similar, and also how different, female pop artists are.

Ashlee Simpson and Beyonce, who on the surface are pretty different (especially when you consider their images, fan base, voices, and genres), are compared by Focus Groups 3, 4, and 5, because they both speak, through their music, of being independent (whether they are happily coupled or proudly single).

Participants seemed to have various views of Beyonce. While some praised Beyonce for being the "first artist" to bring out the "Independent Women" (Focus Group 3, p. 1), it seems Ashlee is not the only one they attacked. Beyonce is criticized for *not* struggling to become famous (Focus Group 3, p. 8), while fans recognize the great efforts Ashlee went through to distinguish herself from her pop-princess sister Jessica (Focus Group 4, p. 6).

While there is some debate about what female pop artists are putting out, many agree that Christina Aguilera's messages are stronger than most. As one participant in Focus Group 4 recalled, Christina's lyrics provide "a more toned-down, Spice-Girls . . . girl-power . . . women are strong [type of message] . . . (Focus Group 4, p. 10).

Perhaps worst of all, Mariah Carey is now accused of "trying to keep up with" the Christina Aguileras, Kelly Clarksons, and Jessica Simpsons of the world (Focus Group 6, pp. 3-4). One can only imagine how humiliating this might be, since Mariah Carey paved the way and,

most likely, inspired these artists. We have to wonder then, how long will it be before these pop-stars are washed-up?

It seems today's audience wants more variety, since participants claim that "almost every female artist . . . say[s] almost the exact same thing" (Focus Group 7, p. 5). Still, we have to give these artists some credit, for "they're trying to get their name out, trying to . . . stand on what they believe" (Focus Group 7, p. 5).

Whether we want more of the same or something different, we need to ask for it. The rest of this study will explore how audience members can be empowered through their interpretations, but of course, we all know how powerful the almighty dollar can be. If we want more than what female pop artists are giving us, we should hold out for more and, of course, continue to become more critical of all media.

Authenticity: Of Artists & Texts

As we consider the similarities and differences between artists and texts, we also have to wonder what is real and what is not. While we realize that no media representations are actually real, we can recognize their ability to stand for something of substance. Here is where we have to question the authenticity of the artists and texts.

Participants seem knowledgeable about the industry and its influence (this will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section). Participant A questioned the legitimacy of even her favorite artist, Mariah Carey. "If you start looking at . . . who wrote these songs" Participant A reveals (p. 16), you see many other artists at work (in addition to the performers). As artists collaborate with other writers and performers, politics can come into play and influence the texts that are produced (Participant A, p. 18). As she considers other artists, Participant A asks "but how can they say that that music is theirs? Especially if they didn't write it . . ." (p. 19). Along a similar line, Participant C (an astute music major/composer), points out ". . . a lot of people don't realize that the artist and the writer are two different things . . . most people don't even give the writer any credit . . . But it's *their* song . . ." (pp. 11-12).

Participants in focus groups also questioned the validity of those in the industry. Let us look at how a discussion of Ashlee Simpson's music unfolded in Focus Group 2.

Participant 1: "Yeah, her songs are catchy but they're not her songs . . . like, she just . . . someone writes them . . ."

Participant 2 (coming to Ashlee's defense): "That's not true, she wrote all of her first album!"

Participant 1 (still unconvinced): "Did she? I don't . . . I don't believe it" (p. 15)

As the discussion continued, Participant 1 led others to his perspective, "you have to be skeptical of the music industry . . . because artists will get . . . writing credits even if they don't necessarily write the songs because they get the royalties and it's a deal that they have" (Focus Group 2, p. 15). In a separate group, someone else remarked, "I mean, I don't even know if she [Ashlee Simpson] wrote any of her songs . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 16)

If we wonder why all this is important to fans, we should consider this: "It makes you think that she wasn't sincere . . . it makes me think she wasn't sincere from the beginning . . . like, it was just an act to become famous . . ." (Focus Group 2, p. 14). At least in this case, it seems that audiences want a celebrity who is real and shares something in common with everyday people. It is clear, from this excerpt, that fans want someone they can identify with, and not just idolize.

The Production

Thus far, we have seen that participants are aware of the production of media, and so now we will consider to what extent they comprehend the mechanisms at work. Though the messages are usually packaged neatly with the artist, they change hands many times before they are released. These messages are then delivered to audiences, through the voices of performers, the images of music videos, texts of lyrics, and endless other avenues. The meanings are further multiplied as audiences apply their own interpretations, but this part of the process will be explained in more detail in the following section (The Byproducts). For now, we will consider what goes into the package of a song.

Marketing, Money, & Materialism

Some say “money makes the world go ‘round,” and certainly the music world is no exception. Artists’ music may be their claim to fame, but they also benefit from selling themselves (or at least their images) in other ways. As Participant A pointed out, Jessica Simpson is selling shoes and hair extensions (not to mention her latest commercials for Proactiv Acne solution), while Hilary Duff endorses her own lines of clothing, blow dryers, backpacks, and even furniture (p. 17). We do not know if these products are indeed promoted as reported by participants, but certainly confusion could arise since artists are selling so much of themselves. If it’s not a music video you see your favorite pop star in, it might be an infomercial. Participant A remarked:

“You have to be a slash now . . . you have to be a model/actress/spokesperson/dancer.”

Participant A continued by mocking recent pop stars:

Oh, if you don’t like my music, then maybe you’ll like my clothing . . . Oh, if you don’t like my clothing, well maybe you’ll like my home accessories line. If you don’t like my makeup, maybe you’ll like my shoes . . . (p. 18).

Even if artists are *only* selling their music, they have become shameless promoters of their products. Touring to promote an album is not a new phenomenon, but artists are also making money from sales on their Web sites. As Focus Group 6 surmised, “[Mariah Carey] tries to milk her songs for all they’re worth” (pp. 3-4).

Artists sell themselves and products not only when smiling for the camera or reading a script, but even when singing their hearts out. Lyrics, some of which are not written but merely performed by artists, are full of product placements. Many pointed the finger at rap songs, but Focus Group 2 drew attention to songstress Mariah Carey. In her song “Get Your Number,” she is selling more than herself (materialism, if not particular products) when she sings “I got a house in Capri / and my own G4 / and Benz with the doors / that lift up from the floor” and “I got a pimp penthouse with a sick hot tub / we can watch the flat screen / while the bubbles fill it up”. Participants might laugh at the lyrics, and we could argue that certain songs are “just for

entertainment” (and thus, not meant to be taken seriously), but it doesn’t erase the fact that these lyrics are, at least potentially, influential.

If some are duped by the product placement, others are disgusted. As a participant in Focus Group 3 complained, “I hate it A lot of the stuff on MTV, the popular music is it’s about the rims, and the women And this and that, and the money” (p. 3). It is interesting here that women are paired with rims. Even if subconsciously, participants realize that women too may be prescribed by media as products, or worse, possessions.

Different Media

As one participant pointed out, different media can lead to different consumption, and thus different effects. While his concern will be revisited shortly, as we consider relational scripts, and later readings, it is important here to consider that “. . . more visual forms of media create the more solid ideas and guidelines that make people do the things they do” (Participant J, p. 11).

Participant J was hesitant to admit the significance of media, but he realized that different forms of media can lend themselves to different interpretations. For instance, when watching a music video, we can clearly see the artists’ or industry’s’ story being told. When hearing a song, we can hear the inflection of certain words or verses, and this can be a significant factor in our interpretations. Alternatively, as Focus Group 4 reported, some lyrics are easily confused and this can lead to a whole set of other meanings: “half the time . . . you know, like, when you look up lyrics on like lyrics.com And you go “Oh! My lyrics are better” (p. 7).

If all you have are lyrics, the interpretation can seem entirely up to the reader. We must remember, however, that each reader is operating within a social context which bounds him/her. The reader is bound by the text, too, by its language and format (among other elements).

The Formula

The one element that all participants agreed on was “the formula.” While not all participants labeled it as such, this was the most evident theme of all. According to most

participants, to make it in pop music, an artist has to follow recipe for fame. Unfortunately, artists can become puppets (Participant B, p. 3), or even slaves, to this formula and lose a piece (or a large portion) of their art, and themselves. We've seen many a pop star self-destruct, and presumably their rise to fame usually has something to do with it.

We see many stars being made, especially with the rise of reality TV. Shows like *American Idol* and *Making the Band* can reveal raw talent from small towns, but they can also make us wonder, "What are we saying about talent?" (Participant A, p. 16). Though we can't seem to get enough, some audiences have had enough:

"They can put any idiot on stage, or any idiot in the recording studio, and make him sound *exactly* how they want, [no] matter how well they sing So . . . it makes no difference *who* they put in there As long as they can dance and they look good, who cares?" (Participant B, p. 4)

Similarly, Focus Group #4 compared how different artists either resist or give in to the formula. They felt that Christina Aguilera is a good example for women, because she refuses to play a part established for her by the industry. They weren't as happy with Beyonce:

. . . I think Beyonce is still following the *formula* and like, her manager is like, 'well this is the new song' and she's like, 'well, it says I hate black people, and I'm *black*,' and he's like 'sing it anyway,' and she's like, 'okay'" You know what I mean? Like, I . . . like, I *really think* she would do *that* . . . (pp. 15-16).

Many participants recognize, too, that some stars that fit the formula are really not all that talented. When discussing Paris Hilton's success (as a reality TV star, model, actress, and even singer) participants complained that "She's not even real" (Focus Group 4, p. 15). Others tried to be more critical. One participant recalled that when Paris' first song, "Stars Are Blind," was released, the radio stations would not tell who was singing it (Focus Group 5, p. 4). It appears that disc jockeys across the country wanted us to make up our minds about the music before judging Paris. Apparently, audiences loved it at first, "and when they found out who it was, they're like 'oh, I hate that.'" (Focus Group 5, p. 4). Perhaps the formula *didn't* work for Paris?

While the most successful artists become quite wealthy, they may still be slaves to their trade. According to Participant B, stars like Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears are “tools in an industry” used to “force a genre upon people” (pp. 4-5). Who really benefits? Probably, those in control of media, who create the images we hear, see, and recite. But how do we identify those people? While there may be a “front person” there are “all these people in the back, doing X, Y, Z . . . making the image possible” (Participant A, p. 16).

It looks as if audiences have more respect for artists who are less formulated. As was made clear in the discussion of authenticity (refer to pages 65-71) audiences prefer artists they can, at least in some small way, identify with. Focus Group #1 exemplified this, when they discussed our nation’s first *American Idol*, Kelly Clarkson:

Participant 1: I like how she’s, like, really different . . . I dunno, just from like seeing her on American Idol . . . sort of like influenced me . . . That’s where I first saw her – I just thought she was really good, from the beginning . . .

Participant 2: Yeah, I agree. Watching an artist start from the very beginning, as opposed to just seeing them, like, come out there. Like, those one-hit-wonders, you have no idea about their past, where they came from. I think American Idol really helped to tell, I guess the audience, where she [Kelly Clarkson] came from, what her style is, what she’s about, what her abilities are (Focus Group 3, p. 1).

As Participant B explains, “Any of the good pop music, or most of the good main-stream music . . . comes from people who, you know, started in their basement and worked their way up” (p. 4). Though the struggle is fascinating to fans, it is not worthwhile for all artists. Even those lucky enough to make it through the first rounds of *American Idol* have to audition for “hundreds of people” who tell them simply, “Yes, you’re good” or “No, you’re not good” (Participant A, p. 20). And a good voice is not the only predictor of success, for “you could have a voice better than Mariah Carey, but if you don’t have the connections . . . then you’re gonna’ fail” (Focus Group 2, pp. 19-20). More simply, “it’s who you know” (Focus Group 2, p. 2).

Maybe those who never “make it big” are the luckiest. If nothing else, they have respect for themselves and their art, as well as respect from their fans, and they are in more control of their messages. After all is said and done, “it’s so hard for up and coming new artists to find . . .

backing . . . It's *so hard* . . . It almost seems like people who get their biggest breaks are *formulated*" (Participant A, p. 20).

The Power of the Media Industry

Without a doubt, this industry we speak of is quite powerful. It controls both consumers and the artists. We could argue that consumers and artist can exert some influence over the industry, and hopefully that is the case. The only way we can exert any influence, though, is if we join together, for one individual cannot take on the industry alone.

Before we can try to make changes, however, we must understand its influence, and we can only begin to do that here. Participants show that they are indeed aware of the industry's power, and that is a start.

The power of radio. While most participants like to think of themselves as selective, they recognize that with the radio, they only have so much choice. ". . . I definitely select . . . but if it's the radio you don't . . ." (Focus Group 7, p. 7). While you can change the channel, you cannot necessarily choose what you are exposed to. And more and more often, radio stations have us all singing to the same tune. "The stations all play the same songs . . . they play the same songs in every state, every city . . . There's no . . . like, real . . . selection" (Focus Group 2, pp. 19-20). Or as another participant put it, "Have you noticed on Z-100, they'll play the same songs like every hour and a half?" (Focus Group 1, p. 9)

According to individual interviews and focus groups the radio is the most popular source of music. Statistics were not calculated for interviews, but according to the Media Consumption Survey, radio is quite popular (84.6 % report it is among their top sources of music). However, MP3 players and iPods, which give audiences much more choice, are becoming more popular (86.8% rate them as their top sources for music). While more and more people might be using this new technology, most still get exposed to new songs and artists by listening to the radio.

Radio gives us some options, but our choices are limited to what is currently on the airwaves. Who makes the decisions on what is played? We might assume it is the disc jockeys,

but as we become more aware of the industry, we realize the power is also in the hands of the few conglomerates that own the majority of stations. This is disconcerting to some: "I think the biggest problem is . . . terrestrial radio . . . It's all owned by the same corporation" (Focus Group 2, p. 19). This problem is compounded by the fact that radio station owners have a vested "*interest in the record companies . . . it's kinda' just like a pay-off deal*" (Focus Group 2, p. 219)

While many recognize the questionable influences, some say there is obviously corruption. "You can tell definitely . . . People are paying to have their songs put on the radio . . . Yeah . . . it's illegal, but it's done" (Focus Group 2, p. 2).

Why does this matter? Well, as noted in Focus Group #2, "you know, if you play a song on the radio enough, people are gonna' start to like it . . ." (p. 19). In effect, if audiences enjoy a song, they are likely to sing or recite its lyrics. Such lyrics are likely to get stuck in our heads, and depending on our interpretations, they are likely to influence us, whether we are willing to admit it.

It is encouraging that participants are analyzing their sources of exposure, and it is interesting that we are criticizing radio. Maybe we are on our way to some more (positive) changes. The following excerpt illustrates several of the dynamics mentioned in this section, but most prevalent is the influence of radio (and TV):

. . . lately I just can't even listen to the radio anymore, because it's gone so down hill . . . and it doesn't take much to be an artist – and get on TRL – anymore. It's the same thing, over and over again. How many times can you hear, like, about money? And . . . you know . . . cars . . . It's kind of disgusting . . . (Focus Group 3, p. 5)

The Byproducts

Now that we have an idea of how reflexive audiences can be about their consumption, the products, and production of media, we should consider how reflexive they can be about the effects of media. We have to ask, how reflexive audiences are, not only of the messages produced by media, but the consequences of consumption. The following section will bring our discussion of reflexivity full circle. Here we will see that participants in this study were reflexive

of the impacts of the music industry and, in general, byproducts of the industry which include images of women, relational scripts, and various other elements.

Resisting the Force

Some people refused to believe that media can impact them. While none said it directly, their mantra seemed to be “Surely, *I can’t be fooled!*” As you can see from the excerpts below, Participant J appeared (to himself at least) to be *above* the influence

Table 4.1.

Excerpts from Participant J

Excerpts
1. TV, radio, newspapers, video games, movies, they all influence people who are easily influenced. (p. 6)
2. . . . and then the same people complain that there exists such an influence, but they go along with it nonetheless. (p. 6)
3. We have media telling us how things should be. (p. 7)
4. . . . those who buy into something immediately. (p. 12)

Participant J sees himself as someone who has *evolved* and cannot be influenced by the shameful powers of media. While he admits to having identified with some music, he says now “if I were to be listening to that, it would be with a nostalgic ear, and not with the sense of it having relevance to reality as it is now . . . nostalgic to the way you were back the, before you grew up” (p. 10). He added, “If a song's lyrics have any realism to them, it's the context that we listen to them, I feel” (p. 10).

Though he believes he is reflexive, he is actually held back by his shrewdness. Shortly, in a discussion of relational scripts, you will see that Participant J is lacking reflexivity because he will not admit that there are least some significant scripts in pop music. He cautiously admits that there are some relational scripts, “but that's only in those who are easily duped by what they hear” (p. 13).

Participant J realizes that the industry is a powerful influence, and he sees money as an invincible influence, which can overcome even the best of us: "Probably billions are paid to find out how to influence even those of us who are not totally 'duped' by the media" (p. 6). He sees artists as anonymous, and therefore insignificant, imposters who should have no influence on audiences. When prodded to acknowledge the impact of pop culture (when asked "Aren't we all influenced somehow though?"), he responded:

. . . any influence that's not your own, or of friends and family who you can trust are negative because they come from an anonymous party who you have no interaction with what-so-ever. (p. 6)

We can be hopeful that Participant J will become more reflexive as he continues to ponder pop music. Though he thinks he is beyond the control of media, he admits "with media pushing ideas into our minds, it's become apparent that we are no longer the product of our parent's upbringing, if not by the messages that we get from all forms of media" (p. 6)

Surely other participants were bothered by the suggestion that media can influence them, but this is the most clear cut example of such opinions. While most participants were hesitant to admit defeat (or influence) by pop culture (or more specifically, pop music), they understood how it *might* influence those who are more vulnerable (at least in their minds) than themselves. Now, then we can move forward by assessing their concern for young audiences.

Concern for Young Audiences

Time and time again participants discussed the powerful influence media can have over young minds. Interestingly enough, this topic was never brought up by me, but always by participants. Participant A, Participant B, Participant F, Participant K, Participant L, and Participant M mentioned their concerns in individual interviews and Focus Group #5 spent some time dealing with their disappointments.

Whether it was concern with a younger family member or young people in general, participants expressed an awareness of how media can influence. Many pointed to particular

artists and how they dressed. Others addressed “morally questionable issues” (Participant A, p. 15).

Missing: Role models. Generally, participants addressed the lack of positive role models, but they acknowledged that there are opportunities for optimism. Just as there are negative images which can take hold of youngsters, there are artists and songs that provide positive messages. Participants showed great reflexivity in that they see how both the industry and the audiences have a responsibility to our youth. This foreshadows later reflections on how different readings can transform negative messages into positive effects, and how audiences can be empowered (and sometimes disempowered) by their readings (of even the most dominant or demeaning texts).

It is important to have positive role models, but they are far and few between, especially in pop culture. As much as we would like to, we cannot expect every artist to be a role model. Instead, perhaps, we should redirect our attention at how we as listeners can positively influence those who are younger than we are, by setting good examples and encouraging youngsters to be critical of what they see and hear too.

Not many artists were identified by participants as role models, and those who were seemed to be only tentatively positive. “For little girls I thought Hilary Duff was good, in the beginning, but now she’s like skinny, and she’s changing her [image and/or values]...” said a participant in Focus Group #4 (p. 19) Years ago, Participant A, saw Mariah Carey as innocent, while she sang sweetly on a tire swing in her “Dreamlover” video. A decade later, Mariah Carey has reinvented herself as a diva who does not seem so concerned with the valence of her influence. Focus Group #2 would agree. They explained that she was the “girl next door” type (p. 2), but they recognize that her “whole image [has changed]” (p. 14).

The trouble with negative messages and young audiences. Negative images are all around us, especially in music. While many single out rap lyrics and videos as most demeaning (Participant K and Participant M, and Focus Groups 2, 3, 4, and 5) even female pop artists give us

more than our fair share of harmful imagery. Participants seemed most concerned when lyrics and other texts (videos, for example) discussed sex and other topics not appropriate for young audiences.

Participant B pointed out that “the age of people listening to this kind of music is getting younger and younger” (p. 3). Participant A concurred with this view, reasoning “if you’re like an influential 13 year-old, you can be like ‘Oh, well it’s okay, because they’re singing about it . . . it’s *fine* . . .” (p. 15). Participant F was concerned about songs which “can teach people that sex is important” because this can lead to promiscuity (p. 3).

Participants in Focus Group #5 were nearly horrified to learn (from one of their co-participants) that even the Disney Channel is now giving dating tips to tweens. One participant explained her shock when tuning into “date night” shows on the child-centered station while babysitting: “and I’m thinking, date night? . . . How to go on a date and like, of course it’s all [sweet and innocent] . . . but still! Like, they’re 8!” (p. 19). Participants seem to question if any media are safe anymore.

Though we find ourselves most concerned about young audiences, we should worry about ourselves as well. Though Participant K was quick to point out that some songs are acceptable for adults (“Eminem’s ‘Superman’ . . . I love it but it’s not exactly what i would want my 10 year old listening to” - p. 6), there are times when we should all exert some caution. According to Participant M, we should be careful when children or teens listen to music “when they talk badly about women or use bad words (p. 1). But shouldn’t we *all* refrain from listening to such things (or, at the very least, be careful not to internalize such messages)?

I encourage us here to watch out for ourselves, but surely our youth need the most protection. As Participant B explains, there is certainly reason for us to be concerned, and therefore there is reason to act on behalf of children and teens:

. . . if you drive past the middle school parking lot, the girls are in tube tops and booty shorts . . . I think a big deal of it has to do with *music* that is being played . . . if they

dress like this, and they sing they're successful . . . I think sometimes a lot of people think, like, 'well, if I dress like this, maybe I'll be successful too. (p. 3)

Positive Messages in (and extending out of) Pop Music

Fortunately, not all the influences are negative. Participant K shed some light on the discussion when she suggested that pop music by female artists *can* be "good for girls growing up, trying to figure out who they are, learn about relationships, getting through teen troubles It's a good balance of anger, sadness, confusion, and empowerment" (pp. 3-4). Participant L defended even a rapper, whom he says is a positive role model: "[Common's] messages speak to the youth and encourages them to the 'right thing'" (p. 1).

Again, participants reminded each other that they, as listeners, are responsible for influencing younger generations. When asked if there was anything we, as an audience, can do to get pop culture moving in the right direction, a participant in Focus Group #5 responded,

On a small scale, I think. I have a younger cousin. She's 9 and she looks up to me as, like, you know . . . so she's starting to get into music right now and having her own little identity...so, I feel like on a small scale there... I can, you know...not so, like, push her into certain music tastes, but you know, kinda' keep her away or show her stuff that's a little more (p. 18)

Participant K put it perfectly, when she offered her view on young audiences: "We don't want to raise girls thinking all they have to offer is their bodies or that they should be submissive or protected by men . . . of course it wouldn't be very good to raise a girl to be so independent to the point where she hates men either" (p. 2).

Images of Women in Pop Music

It may already be clear to us that we can only try (and never be completely successful in our attempts) to isolate the images and scripts of music performed by female pop artists. Though noble, such attempts are difficult, if not impossible, if for no other reason than the mutual influence genres have on each other. Many artists are now collaborating, giving a new flavor to their music and, in turn, a new array of messages to audiences.

Mid-way through her career, Mariah Carey began performing songs with R&B artists (Boyz II Men), and now the majority of her tracks include rappers like Jay-Z and Snoop Dogg. Christina Aguilera has already done her share of collaboration with rappers like Method Man (on "Dirrty") and P. Diddy. Beyonce had done several singles with her boyfriend Rapper Jay-Z, and now she's expanding her horizons with Shakira's Latin sound on "Beautiful Liar." Collaborative efforts like these likely increase our tastes for genres and generate more attention for all of the artists involved. They also give us new perspectives.

It would also be a mistake for us to assume that all female pop artists (or even the same artist on different tracks or albums) deliver the same messages. Though this is a common phenomenon for those who dislike pop music, we should remind ourselves to be open to the almost infinite possibilities this genre offers. Indeed, some songs are "for entertainment only," but all deliver a message, whether we like it or not.

Before we explore the themes which surfaced, we have to acknowledge that any number of constructs could have been built. Though we have attempted to isolate variables, the themes here are not all-encompassing. At any point the data could be revisited and reveal an entirely different spectrum of findings. This is, in part, the beauty of qualitative analysis.

Surprisingly, participants mentioned more positive images than negative images. For years, critics have pointed out the negative images of women in the media, so it is encouraging that we can still identify positive images. Of course, participants were urged to think of positive images, so while they were mentioned more often, we should not be fooled into believing that the positive images outnumber the negative ones.

Figure 4.1 illustrates what images were most prevalent in focus groups. While images were also discussed in individual interviews, focus groups gave participants a way to collaborate and decide as a group what images were most salient and significant. I do not claim to account for all accounts of imagery, but to serve as a count of the most significant descriptions.

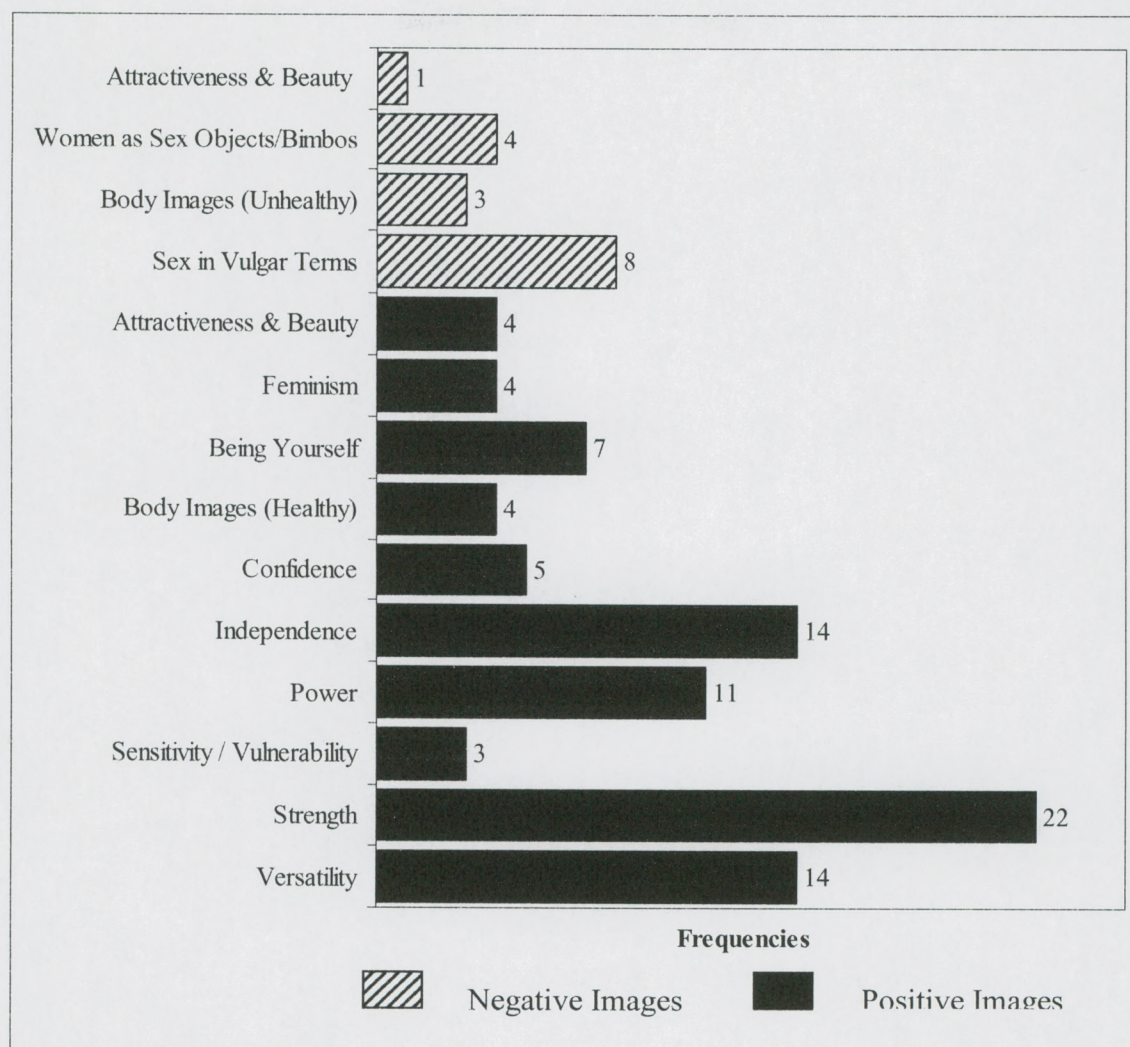


Figure 4.1. Significant Images Mentioned in Focus Groups

Negative Images

The negative images which were revealed are ones that have always been a part of criticism. Obviously, the depiction of women as sex objects or bimbos is an eternal struggle, and the fact that women's music reinforces this is disturbing. Negative body images have been another prevalent problem, specifically in our Western society, where young girls face constant pressure from the media to be thin yet perfectly proportionate. In addition to body image, we see that attractiveness and beauty are valued over all other characteristics. Fortunately, participants were well aware of this, and many were critical of this phenomenon.

Attractiveness & Beauty

One might not expect attractiveness and beauty to be negative aspects, but they are when they devalue other, more important, traits of women. While Participant A and those in Focus Group #4 commented on the extreme measures some stars go to for beauty (such as Hilary Duff's veneered teeth and Ashlee Simpson's unconfirmed nose job), others expressed their disappointment with the expectations of beauty. According to Participant H, "image and weight has become way too important in a relationship . . . it should be the person you are on the inside . . ." (pp. 3-4).

Participant H admonished music and videos that make "physical appearance mean more than inner connection and emotions", but she acknowledged that female artists are guilty of encouraging such values since they boast (in sweet melodies or hot hits) about men wanting and liking their bodies (p. 3). Women who sing about their bodies and sexual nature (i.e., Christina Aguilera with "Dirrty," Shakira with "Hips Don't Lie," Fergie with "Fergalicious" and "My Humps") can actually reinforce negative views, even if they are trying to show their power via sex. As explained earlier, we are at risk when women in media portray themselves as strong and sexy. Recall how Dyer (1982) pointed out, they often miss the mark by equating "liberation" with aggressive (pp. 185-186, as cited in Strinati, 1995, pp. 187-188).

Body Image (Unhealthy)

It is difficult to envision a day when body image will not matter, especially as artists continually reinforce unrealistic expectations. Most of us would agree with Participant A, who cried out, "Why does everyone have to be a size 4?" (p. 21). Participant A went on to describe how Kelly Clarkson's body is "so far gone . . . because you're . . . starving yourself, or over-exercising" (pp. 20-21). Others, in Focus Group #5, described Hilary Duff as a former role model, because she too seems to have given into the pressure and become too skinny (p. 19). A male participant in Focus Group #6 expanded on the topic. "It's almost disgusting . . . to see how the

media portrays women . . . ” (p. 4). The same group laughed when another participant jeered “Thanks to ‘America’s Next Top Model!’” (p. 4).

Sex in Vulgar Terms

Related to all of these assessments is the matter of sex in vulgar terms. There were no examples of female pop artists mentioned, but Akon’s song “I Wanna Love You” (which is really the censored version of “I Wanna Fuck You”). Focus Groups 2 and 7 talked at some length about this song.

“He talks about pretty much seeing a girl on a pole, like a stripper. So he’s talking about, like, wanting to have sex with a stripper, and then they turned it into “I Wanna [Love You]” (Focus Group 7, p. 13). Apparently, Akon is not the only one who sings about sex in such a brazen way. “. . . That reminds me of that song . . . where he was like ‘I’m luvin’ you,’ but it wasn’t really ‘loving’ you . . .” said a member of Focus Group 2 (p. 10) Participants in Focus Group 7 brought up the same song: “it was ‘I’m loving you tonight’ on the radio, but really it was like ‘I’m F’ing you . . . ” (p. 13). One participant, who was critical of other aspects of pop music, admitted that he actually liked the Akon song: “I think it actually sounds better with . . . with ‘F’ing’ in it . . . it almost is like romantic, in a really weird bizarre way” (Focus Group 2, p. 10). Perhaps he has an oppositional or negotiated reading of the song.

Positive Images

Fortunately, participants can also see many of the positive aspects of pop music. As noted in Figure 4.1, themes such as feminism, positive body image, and other qualities of women emerged (being yourself, confidence, independence, power, sensitivity/vulnerability, strength, and versatility).

While some see pop stars as tools of the industry, fans see them as powerful women who can speak their minds through their music. Many participants identified Christina Aguilera as that type of artist. Though she had her beginnings in bubble-gum pop, she has evolved and she seems to be showing her true colors. Focus Group #4 said that Christina is “about feminism

without saying it” (p. 9). She might wear next to nothing in her videos, but she exerts her power throughout. Some are offended by Christina’s “Dirrty” persona, but others see her as a positive role model for women.

While it is challenging to isolate images, it is important. You will notice that many of these qualities are entwined, but there is sometimes a need to distinguish between them. This is not to say that they are mutually exclusive, but that they are all important features that should not go unnoticed.

Being Yourself

Christina also establishes herself as an artist who is proud of being herself. She has come a long way from the Mickey Mouse Club, and she refuses to be constrained by the industry. As she says in her latest track “I’m *still* Dirrty!” (Focus Group 7, p. 4). Although she recently wed, she has not changed much. “she doesn’t want everyone to know her just as, like, a wife . . . but . . . you can tell, when she is with him, she’s . . . insane about him” (Focus Group 7, p. 4).

It’s unlikely that Christina will follow in Jessica Simpson’s footsteps (being America’s and sexiest and most ditzy housewife), because Christina takes orders from no one, and she makes a mark for others to follow (Focus Group 7, p. 2). Fans can be strengthened by her songs which rebel with “don’t tell me to behave / because I’ll never play that game” (Focus Group 7, p. 4). She shows that one can be in love and still be herself.

Body Images (Healthy)

Christina, however, does not seem to be the best model of a positive body image. She is back to her slim figure, but since we have seen her balloon up in the past, we have to wonder if she is healthy at her current weight. Mariah Carey, on the other hand (who has also put on and take off weight) is an inspiration to many, according to Participant A and Focus Groups 2 and 6. She’s “always taken the chance . . . I love that she’s not 6’1” and 100 pounds . . . she’s not trying to become any more slender than she is” said Participant A. Focus Group 2 would agree that “she doesn’t care what she looks like” (p. 17). Focus Groups 2 and 6 alike praised Mariah

because “she does not try to be a twig” (Focus Group 2, p. 17) and because “she’s not a stick figure” (Focus Group 6, p. 3). Mariah seems to put forth a new, more realistic ideal, because she is slim but not emaciated (Focus Group 6, p. 4).

Confidence

Mariah Carey is also very confident in herself. Luckily, many other artists portray this quality with their lyrics and their videos. Artists like Pink were described as headstrong (Focus Group 4, p. 11), while Fergie seems to say “I’m hot, I’m confident . . . and I don’t even care” (Focus Group 4, p. 10) with songs like Fergalicious. Ashlee Simpson does not exude confidence through her sexuality, but instead in her punk image. In her song “Boyfriend,” Ashlee shows fans that she does not cower to (female) competition and that she does “whatever she wants” and makes no apologies (Focus Group 4, p. 1).

Independence

Along with versatility, independence was the second most prominent image participants noted. This topic was much more salient in the focus groups than in the individual interviews. Since the groups focused on particular artists, this probably made it easier to connect artists with this quality. In fact, participants equated independence with every artist that was discussed.

Ashlee Simpson likes having a boyfriend, but she also loves her girlfriends. As was discussed in Focus Group #5, she sings “grab my bag / got my own money / don’t need any man in this room” in her “L.O.V.E.” anthem to friendship and fun (p. 1).

Beyonce has long been known for her songs like “Independent Women,” and many participants recognized her as the best examples of independence (Focus Groups 1, 2, 3, and 4). Her *Writings on the Wall* album with Destiny’s Child showed audiences that there are some women you cannot mess with. While they seem to have a thing for rappers and thugs, they will not stand for men who try to put them down. As a participant in Focus Group 3 stated, Beyonce is all about “being free and doing your own thing” (p. 1)

Participants did not say much about Christina Aguilera, but they brought up Mariah Carey's new hit "It's Like That," because "it's like, you don't need to have any boys to have fun. Like, you're just out with your friends, and just having fun. And that's how it should be" (Focus Group 2, p. 6). Mariah has been around for over a decade now, and she has expressed a number of views through her music. Fortunately, many of these can be empowering to young women.

New artists, like Kelly Clarkson, seem to be breaking into the industry with messages of independence. Kelly inspires listeners with songs like "Breakaway." When Kelly sings "I'll spread my wings and I'll learn how to fly. I'll do what it takes to touch the sky.' It's kinda like, you know, I can do things on my own without being, like, you know, someone holding my hand . . ." (Focus Group 6, p. 4) Clarkson also establishes that she's happy "being on her own" in "Since U Been Gone" (Focus Group 6, p. 5).

Why are messages of independence so important? As discussed earlier, women in media have long been depicted as helpless and passive, so these new themes are extremely empowering. We still have a mix of independent and codependent messages, but it is delightful to see that audiences are recognizing independence more and more in pop music today. Also, from a male's perspective, "I think a lot of girls tend to lean on their boyfriends, as a crutch . . . in some ways . . . and I think she's kinda' saying that . . . you know, like, I don't need [a man]" (Focus Group 6, p. 8).

Power

Power, which is very similar to independence, was raised as an issue in several individual interviews and in the majority of Focus Groups (Participant H and Participant K, Focus Groups 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7). Many songs were "just about girls being in power in general" (Focus Group 5, p. 1). While rap was seen as delivering a dangerous dichotomy -- "I think rap generally emphasizes either empowerment of women or women as sexual possessions" (Participant K, p. 2) -- female pop artists were recognized for their efforts in proving how powerful women can be.

Ashlee Simpson was said to “speak up for” girls and “how they feel” (Focus Group 5, p. 1). Beyonce was thought to make women strong and powerful (Focus Group 5, p. 1) with songs like *Irreplaceable*. Christina Aguilera was admired by Focus Group 4 because with her, “you don’t have to make a choice” because her songs say “I’m powerful *and* sexy” (p. 11), “so watch out” (p. 10). Her power is not necessarily derived from her sexuality, but these qualities certainly enhance one another. She is powerful, if for no other reason than the fact that she is “her own person” (Focus Group 7, p. 10).

Jennifer Lopez “tried to” exert her power (Focus Group 4, p. 10) but she is not necessarily known by participants for her power, though the world recognizes her power as a mogul in the film, music, clothing, fragrance, and many other industries. Alternatively, Kelly Clarkson is one of those artists who is known for her declaration of power. With songs like “Miss Independent,” “She makes women powerful. She gives them the upper hand” (Participant H, p. 2; Focus Group 6, p. 5)

Sensitivity/Vulnerability

Initially, we may be tempted to contrast power and independence with sensitivity and vulnerability. We should be cautious, however, because sensitivity and vulnerability can be different ways of expressing power and independence, if not strength. While feminists have been fighting forever to show women as strong and self-sufficient, we also need to realize that one of the best qualities women can possess is sensitivity.

Often expressed as longing for a man, or being broken-hearted by a relationship gone bad, sensitivity and vulnerability were not discussed as much in interviews and focus groups. This could be because we are seeing them more, but it could also be because of the direction of this study.

Some participants have a real problem with artists expressing this softer side. Focus Group 4, for instance, was annoyed with Beyonce singing “Independent Women” and “Irreplaceable” one moment and “Cater 2 U” and “Dangerously In Love” the next. They tend to

see these conflicting images as contradictions. On the other hand, they value these contradictions from other artists, like Christina Aguilera. In fact, they said that Christina is “multidimensional” because she expresses “the sensitive part of her too” (p. 14). Of course, much of this criticism was related to an aversion to the artist (Beyonce), and not the lyrics.

Mariah Carey’s “Heartbreaker” song talks about being strong, but also about how “he got the best of her” (Focus Group 2, p. 1). Even Britney Spears was recognized because she “can go back and forth” by being “tough, and then . . . vulnerable” (Focus Group 5, p. 2). Songs like “Overprotected” display this flawlessly. Other participants acknowledged that artists are in essence expressing versatility, and this will be discussed shortly.

Strength

While songs of old times, and even some today, constantly portray the “woman not being able to let go” (Participant H, p. 2), we see many other examples of women who are strong. When asked what they think female pop artists have in common, Focus Group #3 agreed that “all the women on this list [Ashlee Simpson, Avril Lavigne, Beyonce Knowles, Christina Aguilera, Jessica Simpson, Kelly Clarkson, and Mariah Carey] have songs about strength” (Focus Group 3, p. 5).

Perhaps female pop artists are singing about ideals like strength, because that is what the audience wants (Focus Group 1, p. 2). We want artists to tell the story of women who “can take the high road” and “don’t need to be . . . hurt” by men (Focus Group 3, p. 5). When asked what they like about female pop artists, fans agree that these women are “not all . . . submissive” and that they have a variety of songs about different topics which we can identify with (Focus Group 3, p. 5)

While Avril Lavigne, Ashlee Simpson and Jessica Simpson’s music exhibits other strengths, the term strength was not mentioned specifically by participants in relation to these artists (of course, though planned, focus groups were not conducted about Avril Lavigne and

Jessica Simpson). Participants had plenty to say, however, about the remaining artists in focus groups and a few others.

Beyoncé's new hit "Irreplaceable" was brought up a number of times. In this song, she sings about refusing to become a victim to infidelity. As participants observed, "she's still strong, and she says she can replace him . . . he's replaceable . . . So he has to stick with her, but she can just dump him" (Focus Group 3, p. 1). Another song that was cited was Beyoncé's "Survivor" song with Destiny's Child (Focus Group 3, p. 4). Though this song is about surviving struggles with friends, and not men/significant others, it speaks great lengths about this topic. This and most songs by Beyoncé and Destiny's Child have "a good beat, and good messages" and they encourage each of their female fans "to be a strong single woman" (Focus Group 7, p. 15).

Christina Aguilera is another artist known for her strength. Her music reflects growth not only in her personal life, but also in her professional dealings. Focus Group #7 remarked a number of times that Christina portrays herself, and women in general, as "strong as, you know, any man could be" (p. 7). This was exemplified best in her lyrics and the video for her "Fighter" song (Focus Group 4, p. 14).

Kelly Clarkson is yet another artist who is famous for her strong image and lyrics. As described earlier, her song "Breakaway" shows how resilient she can be. While some see it as a song about personal struggle and professional success (Participant C), others see it as Kelly's tale of "being strong . . . being able to move on after a big [breakup]" (Focus Group 6, p. 11). Her "Since U Been Gone" song is a little less ambiguous. In it, she tells the story of a man that hurt her (whether it was infidelity or some other offense we are left to wonder) and how "she is not letting him come back to her" (Participant H, p. 2). She is in essence standing up for herself, because she wants "someone who will treat her the way she deserves to be treated" (Participant H, p. 2). While many women would be afraid to do this, perhaps Kelly's music gives them some strength.

Mariah Carey shows some versatility (which will be described next) along with her strengths. In “Heartbreaker” she acknowledges that her man “got the best of her” (Focus Group 2, p. 1), but she tries to stay strong. “Depending on the song” Mariah can “make herself sound like a really strong woman” (Focus Group 2, p. 1), but she has plenty of ballads about heart-ache and frailty.

Other artists, who were not the original focus of groups and interviews, demonstrated strength as well. Nelly Furtado “shows her strength” in “Say It Right” when she sings “[No] you don’t mean anything to me” (Participant H, p. 5).

Pink is also said to be very “headstrong” because she knows “I’m hot” (Focus Group 4, p. 11). Her latest song “U and Ur Hand” tells the story of a woman who is not desperate for male attention, but one who calls the shots when dealing with ‘players’ in bars. The verses and chorus to this tune put it brilliantly (or some might say brashly):

Listen up, it’s just not happenin’ / You can say what you want to your boyfriends / Just let me have my fun tonight / Aight?
 [Cause] I’m not here for your entertainment / You don’t really wanna’ mess with me tonight / Just stop and take a second / I was fine before you walked into my life / ‘Cause should know it’s over / Before it begins / Keep your drink / just gimme’ the money / It’s just you and your hand tonight.

Versatility

Versatility can be seen in any number of excerpts, often as a combination of themes, but there are times when participants recognized this as a quality that female artists are representing. Versatility is something that is conveyed through messages in lyrics, but also a quality that artists possess, as their images constantly evolve.

Some participants see different qualities displayed by the same artist as contradictions or mixed messages (Focus Groups 3, 4, 5, and 6), but often this reaction is paired with a dislike for the artist. When participants reflect more on contrasting qualities, they often describe this phenomenon, but they do not necessarily label it as such (Participant A). This theme was derived when all of the data revealed this common premise.

Beyonce, Christina Aguilera, Kelly Clarkson, Mariah Carey and other artists were described as having this quality in a number of ways. According to one participant “they are just . . . showing a different way to . . . you know, [deal with] each situation . . .” (Focus Group 4, p. 14). What many participants liked about female pop artists is that “They’re not all, like, submissive either, and they have . . . they have songs about different things” (Focus Group 3, p. 5). In short, their versatility gives almost every fan something they can identify with. Even stars as contentious as Britney Spears were said to “go back and forth . . . between [being] tough, and then . . . being vulnerable” (Focus Group 5, p. 2).

Beyonce is popular among participants because strong and independent, but “she’ll also . . . sit there and write a song about how she, like, loves her man and how she wants to be . . . [there for him] . . .” (Focus Group 3, p. 1). Beyoncé’s music shows fans that “you can be strong, but at the same time, you can be . . . a loving person, and enjoy . . . a relationship” (Focus Group 3, p. 1).

Christina Aguilera is perhaps best known for her versatility. She is “Dirty” one moment, and a “Beautiful” blonde bombshell the next. She started as a slinky little pop princess, she tried her look as a curvaceous brunette, and now she’s “Back to Basics” with a 1940’s style. Likened to Madonna, fans think she does this in part for “the longevity of her career” (Focus Group 3, p. 5). “When she had this song ‘Fighter’ . . . [she] shows how, you know, she’s tough . . . and then “Dirty” . . . shows how she’s sexy and . . .” (Focus Group 4, p. 14). She’s a tough cookie, but she also has a sensitive side (Focus Group 4, p. 14). She’s a “multidimensional” artist who “puts, like, everything in one CD” (Focus Group 4, p. 14).

Kelly Clarkson, who is still establishing her image, has shown us a great deal of versatility. It will be interesting to see in the coming years how she changes. For now, her music says “I’m an independent woman, you know, I’m better than guys, I can live without you” but she is also one to sing “I love you’ blah blah blah blah . . .” (Focus Group 1, p. 1).

Finally, Mariah Carey, who has been around for more than a decade has shown us a multitude of emotions. As one participant put it “depending on the song she can...make herself sound like a really strong woman, or . . . like a really, like, hurt woman” (Focus Group 2, p. 1). Mariah has been through a lot, and through the years, her music has developed right along with her. Say what you will about her latest *Emancipation of Mimi* album, it has some good examples of this quality we call versatility.

In “Shake It Off,” (#29 on the Billboard Charts for 2005) Mariah plays the role of a woman scorned that refuses to settle for less than what she deserves:

I gotta shake you off / Cause the loving ain't the same / And you keep on playing games / Like you know I'm here to stay ...
 I gotta shake you off / Gotta make that move / Find somebody who / Appreciates all the love I give / Boy I gotta sh-shake it off / Gotta do what's best for me / Baby and that means I gotta / Shake you off ...
 I gotta get this off of my mind / You wasn't worth my time / So I'm leaving you behind yeah.. / Cause I need a real love in my life / Save this recording because / I'm never coming back home.

Here Mariah tells her ex-lover that he can't get away with her heart. She refuses to sit idly while he plays games. She knows she deserves better, and though it may hurt, she's willing to move on to find it.

Mariah has a slightly different take in her song “We Belong Together” (#3 on the Billboard Charts for 2005):

Verse 1: I didn't mean it / When I said I didn't love you so / I should have held on tight / I never should've let you go / I didn't know nothing / I was stupid / I was foolish / I was a lie to myself / I could not fathom that I would ever / Be without your love / Never imagined I'd be / Sitting here beside myself...

Bridge: Cause I didn't know you / Cause I didn't know me / But I thought I knew everything / I never felt / The feeling that I'm feeling now / Now that I don't / Hear your voice / Or even touch and even kiss your lips / Cause I don't have a choice / What I wouldn't give / To have you lying by my side

Chorus: When you left / I lost a part of me / It's still so hard to believe / Come back baby please / Cause we belong together ...

Verse: I only think of you / And it's breaking my heart / I'm trying to keep it together / But I'm falling apart / I'm feeling all out of my element / Throwing things / Crying /

Trying to figure out / Where the hell I went wrong / The pain reflected in this song / Ain't even half of what / I'm feeling inside / I need you / Need you back in my life baby

In contrast to her attitude in "Shake It Off," Mariah is pleading to get her lover back, and she regrets actions that separated them. She goes as far as calling herself "stupid" and "foolish" for letting him go, and she reveals how emotional a breakup can be. This is a theme song for many women who are aching from a recent breakup or wishing to have that old flame again.

"It's Like That," which was #65 on the same Billboard Year-End Charts for 2005, provides yet another side to Mariah. Here she is in a club, with her girls, just having a good time. We see a flirty Mariah, who is aware of her power of seduction, but just playing with it and the men surrounding her. This is a song, much like Ashlee Simpson's "L.O.V.E.," that young women can enjoy while having a night on the town with their girls in tow, and their boyfriends at home:

Verse 1: I came to have a party / Open up the Bacardi / Feeling so hot tamale / Boy, I know you watchin' me / So what's it gonna be? / Purple taking me higher / I'm lifted and I like it / Boy, you got me inspired / Baby, come and get it / If you're really feelin' me

Bridge: 'Cuz it's my night / No stress, no fights / I'm leavin' it all behind / No tears, no time to cry / Just makin' the most of life

Chorus: Everybody is livin' it up / All the fellas keep lookin' at us ('cuz) / Me and my girls on the floor like what / While the DJ keeps on spinnin' the cut / It's like that y'all (that y'all), that y'all (that y'all) . . .

Images of Men in Pop Music

As focus groups surfaced and individual interviews increased, more and more males were participating. You may recall that early in the planning of this study, we made the conscious decision not to exclude men. As said in Chapter 3 (see pages 53-54, *Participants & Text*):

Their [men's] experiences and opinions were as much valued by this project as responses from female participants. As Ang (1996) would suggest, "limiting ourselves to women audiences as the empirical starting point for analysis would risk reproducing static and essentialist conceptions of gender identity" (p. 110).

As the study developed, we chose also to include participants who were not necessarily fans of pop music. Recall again, from Chapter 3 (pages 53-54):

A familiarity and interest with this genre [pop music by female artists] was at first favored, because it seemed that a preference for this genre would provide fruitful

discussion on this topic. However, since those who volunteered to participate did not all favor pop music (in fact, in some cases they despised it), data were collected from any participants with some knowledge of pop music. It is in the spirit of qualitative research, after all, to remain open to new findings and include, instead of exclude, all others.

While we made these adjustments to participant criteria, it was clear that the questions might also need to progress. Initially, this was done out of sensitivity for participants. I did not want males (especially those who were the minority in some focus groups) to feel excluded or insignificant. The initial question asked "How are women represented in this music?" but this evolved into questions such as "What is this music saying about women, men, and their relationships?" Participants still tended to talk more about the images of women, probably because they recognized the primary focus of the study, and likely because the images of women in this music are more salient than those of men.

Relational Scripts

While participants readily agree that there are both negative and positive images of women in music, they are not so apt to admit that there are relational scripts. It seems that participants are nervous because they think acknowledging these scripts equates with their surrender to the influence.

Surely, this is not the case. In fact, the opposite may be true. Those who are more willing to think about the scripts may be less easily influenced by them. This is just a hunch, but in all probability willingness to evaluative relational scripts is indicative of more reflexivity.

Not Reflexive

Indeed, there are "some songs you can just hear and appreciate" which may or may not "relate to your personal life . . ." (Participant A, p. 11). Nonetheless, this doesn't mean that "they offer no models" (Participant J, p. 12) as several participants claimed (Participant B, Participant F, Participant J, and Participant N).

Audiences Who Try to Be "Above the Influence" Are Really Missing Out

Even when participants admit there may be *some* scripts for relationships, they are still hesitant to admit that these have any relation to their own lives. As one participant said, "They [Artists] just express their feelings. I don't see any models" (Participant N, p. 2). Or, as another participant put it:

... I don't think any song has influenced my relationships. I mean songs have meaning and songs stick out to us, but I think it would be ridiculous if I let a certain song influence a relationship (Participant F, p. 5).

Perhaps because of social desirability, participants wanted to appear "above the influence." Instead of citing music as models, they claimed that their friends and family taught them about relationships. While this can be positive, it too has its negative consequences. For example, children whose parents have a hostile relationship are likely to repeat those same mistakes later in their own romantic relationships. Likewise, peers may not give the best advice, as they are not as experienced, or because they act on impulse rather than intellect when it comes to relationships.

This also denies the fact that media can provide us with useful models for relationships and life in general. Songs that express the positive qualities listed above can be useful. Of course, not all media representations are positive, so it is important to be critical. Part of that critical mindset, however, is to evaluate both positive and negative messages and use them to your own benefit (this is the essence of reading, which will be explained more fully in the next chapter).

Unreflective Audiences Can Miss Important Meanings (And Opportunities)

Another common occurrence involves participants who did not want to "get involved" with what they are hearing (Focus Group 7, p. 16). Many participants agreed, "I don't really go into depth with it . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 9) because "[she's just] dancin' around havin' a good time . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 1) or "she's just talkin' about love . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 2).

The vast majority of participants, even those who evaluate the messages, listen to music because they like the sound. As many point out, though, "Sometimes you just listen to listen . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 6). When they don't like the sound, they are highly critical of the artists and lyrics, but they are not critical in the sense of evaluation. "It's like, pathetic . . . the way they sound, I dunno' . . . Like whiny . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 17)

Often participants do not listen enough to get a meaning. If they don't like a song, they don't listen. As one participant in Focus Group #1 stated, "I don't . . . really . . . put 'em [the lyrics] together . . ." (p. 4). Others outright admitted, "I don't know what that means . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 20) when asked to summarize a song's message. Regardless of the confusion, they still enjoyed many songs because they are fun to dance to or party with. As one participant said, "Yeah . . . I dunno, I think it's fun. It's catchy . . . I think . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 2).

Some refused to elaborate when asked repeatedly about relational scripts. When asked, "Do you think these songs can still impact us?" one participant responded simply, "Yeah" and the other replied "I think so" (Focus Group 4, p. 2). Some participants seemed more concerned with the artists themselves (and their nose jobs, for example) than their messages (Focus Group 4, p. 1).

While we wonder why or how some people can listen to music without a reflective ear, we have to realize that music is entertainment, and different people have different uses for it. Surprisingly, several students who study music (as a major) feel that the lyrics are less important than the sound: "I'd say I really, mostly am into the music. The lyrics can get distracting . . . So, like the lyrics . . . are just buffers . . . or just something to put there. . ." (Focus Group 1, p. 4). Others seem to dismiss meaning entirely: "Yeah, I do like the meaning of the songs But see . . . I dunno' . . . I don't think the message really matters . . . nowadays, though, if you think about it . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 22).

Whether they made a meaning for themselves, some participants were reluctant to admit how powerful different interpretations can be.

I mean, I . . . just don't think that everything has to be so, like . . . 'Ashlee's a woman, so what does she represent with women? What do her lyrics mean?' And let's concentrate and focus . . . (Focus Group 4, p. 6)

Some seemed bored with the topic of this study, but they may just be rebelling against the impact of media altogether. Even those who don't like the sound or meanings of particular songs admit they will still listen. They say, "you might as well . . . just . . . embrace it . . . while they're still gonna' do it . . ." (Focus Group 4, p. 21). Such reactions will be revisited later, in the chapter on readings.

Toward Reflexivity of Relational Scripts

In individual interviews participants began to show more meta-reflexivity with relational scripts (Participant H, Participant J, Participant L, Participant M, and Participant N, for example). They could identify ways in which they were reflexive of scripts. Could this be because they are not influenced by pessimistic peers? Could it be because they do not feel the stigma of being influenced? This study cannot identify the cause of such experiences, but we can describe what is happening.

While Participant H identified several relational scripts, she discerned "it's important to look deeper into lyrics to decide for yourself if you connect with them . . . (p. 5). Participant L explained that "love and friendship are very prominent in most of the compositions" and that "relational scripts are very important" (p. 1). Participant M added that pop music tells us how we can handle "not just boyfriend relationships but friends as well" (Participant M, p. 2). Participant N said simply ". . . a lot of messages saying about relationships . . . some are sweet; some are brutal . . . (p. 1). Finally, Participant J expressed disappointment with pop music, which in his opinion tells us that "relationships are for pleasure and not for longevity or true love . . ." (p. 3)

Perhaps another reason that participants are unwilling to elaborate on relational scripts is because they are disappointed with what the media have to offer. In Participant F's words, "Relationships are a lot of work . . . pop music makes them seem easy..." (p. 3) He continues

by explaining that lyrics make relationships just seem petty and one sided . . .” (Participant F, p. 3).

Themes of Relational Scripts

Without a doubt, the list of relational scripts includes many positive and negative features. Instead of extracting them in this way, however, we can also consider how they reveal certain dynamics of relationships. The themes discovered in data analysis included (1) Relationship/Gender Roles & Status, (2) Relationship Types, and (3) Relationship Elements.

Gender roles. Women and men tend to fulfill roles prescribed to them by society. Media provide many such prescriptions for femininity, masculinity, and relationships. A common (but hopefully outdated) saying which participants pointed out is “Behind every great man is a good woman” (Focus Group 3, p. 3). Whether this is the exact quote, participants pointed out the inequity in this maxim, which labels men as great, but women as good.

Luckily, today the roles are almost endless, but that is not to say that anything goes. While women are granted much more freedom in recent times to be themselves, they are still expected to fit a certain role. Music by female artists is one way we can change these roles to suit ourselves. As Beyonce says, “You might be the block, but I’m the light that keeps the streets on” (Focus Group 3, p. 2).

Men are also restricted to a number of roles. As Focus Group 7 explained, a man might fall in love, but “he’s not gonna let his buddies know,” (p. 3) at least not right away. Unlike women, men are expected to hide their emotions and remain impervious to romance. Of course, we all know that “if you have a hot girl, then you’re ‘the man’” (Focus Group 3, p. 4) and that might be something worth sharing. Fortunately, males in this study were aware that such messages can be damaging to relationships. One explained his disappointment in pop music because “. . . that’s it . . . I mean, it’s not about what’s inside anymore, it’s about the outside . . .” (Focus Group 3, p. 4).

Another point of optimism is the fact that our roles are constantly evolving. “The role used to be men singing about women, and women crying over men now, it seems like a reversal” (Participant H, p. 3). With songs like “Irreplaceable” and “Upgrade U,” artists like Beyonce are showing how women have power in relationships and over men. As those in Focus Group #3 pointed out, “That’s the first song that shows women this way. It’s always the other way. It’s always men, upgrading the women . . .” (p. 2).

Whereas older songs typically show “the woman wanting the man back,” it seems the tables have turned a bit, especially with the emergence of Emo and other new genres (Participant H, p. 20). We, as women, should be cautious, however, that we do not turn back the clock or retaliate against men. As we gain independence and strength, we should not use such powers to dominate others.

Relationship status. It is conceivable that this distortion of roles causes confusion when it comes to relationship status. According to Participant C, a lot of people can identify with the situation Lindsay Lohan sings about in her song “Who Loves You?” He explains feelings of bewilderment and love: “Does he love me? Are we just dating? Are we friends? Are we friends with benefits? Are we friends with a one-nighter? You know?” (Participant C, p. 11)

We can also see a difference between artists when they are single and when According to Focus Group #7, Christina Aguilera’s *Stripped* CD represents her single (and crazy) life. Here most recent album, “Back to Basics” shows that she has grown up and settled down. “She’s married and she’s . . . so in love and so happy” (Focus Group 7, p. 2).

Being in love, or even in a relationship, can change anyone’s perspective. Beyoncé’s “Déjà vu” is a prime example. “She’s in love with her [man]” and “she can’t get him out of her mind” (Focus Group 3, p. 1). According to one participant “. . . that’s a typical part of being in a relationship, and no matter how strong you are, I think that’s what happens too” (Focus Group 3, p. 1).

If love changes things, so too does marriage. This type of relationship signifies not only immense feelings but a commitment (even if it is only a legal commitment). Therefore we would expect artists to change their image, at least slightly, when they get married. So we are not surprised to see that Christina Aguilera is crazy about her husband (Focus Group 7, p. 4) and that Avril is “not punk anymore” (Focus Group 2, p. 14).

When people get married or have kids, it is almost expected that things will change because “you’re not a 17 year old anymore...” (Focus Group 2, p. 16). This is an interesting time in pop music, indeed, because we are seeing many of our pop princesses get married, and even divorced.

Still, participants agree that marriage should not change a person altogether. “You don’t have to be, like, all of a sudden like, ‘well, I’m married now . . . ’” (Focus Group 7, p. 4). Christina Aguilera seems to have found wedded bliss and balance in her life: “she doesn’t want everyone to know her just as . . . a wife . . . but . . . you can tell, when she is with him, she’s . . . insane about him” (Focus Group 7, p. 4).

Relationship types. Romantic relationships are not the only relationships featured in pop music. Lately, female artists are singing a lot about friendships, specifically those with other women. Mariah Carey sends out a message to her fans with “It’s Like That” by saying “you don’t need to have any boys to have fun . . . and that’s how it should be” (Focus Group 2, p. 6). Ashlee Simpson sings about “L.O.V.E.” with her friends, and she speaks of the importance of friends when she sings the line “Will you be my girls for life?” (Focus Group 4, p. 2).

Romantic relationships can be categorized any number of ways. In the past, most artists portrayed relationships as sweet and innocent. Jessica Simpson shouted out to the world “I think I’m in love” in one of her first singles, while Mariah Carey showed the soft side of love, while on a tire swing, in her “Always Be My Baby” video. Today, we learn about many other aspects of relationships, and this will be discussed further in the next section (Relationship Elements).

In some cases, artists sing about unrequited love and/or strong desires for a partner. In “Say Goodbye” Ashlee Simpson grieves because she is not sure how her partner feels: “Maybe you don’t love me like I love you baby” (Focus Group 5, p. 7).

Relationship Elements. Pop songs, and all songs for that matter, describe different steps we tend to take in relationships. Participants noted that songs which depict the beginning stages of relationships are often superficial, since most songs talk about meeting people in clubs and at parties (Participant F, p. 3).

On the other hand, participants commented that pop songs can show us both sides of the story. While there are plenty of love songs, there are also ballads about heartbreak and breakups. Mariah Carey is said to give us a balance with songs like “Butterfly,” “Breakdown,” “Whenever You Call,” and “Honey” (Participant A, p. 4). Conflict in relationships is often a hot topic, because it is something that everyone can relate to (Participant F, p. 2).

Conflict exists within and beyond romantic relationships. The only conflict within relationships that participants discussed was that of insecurity and imbalance. Songs such as “Say Goodbye” are related to the theme of unrequited love, which was described above.

A more prevalent form of conflict among interviews was that of conflict women have with other women, because of competition for romantic relationships. Beyonce’s “Ring the Alarm” is cited by many as a fighting song many coupled women can relate to. This song tells the story of suspicion aimed at another woman. Beyonce tells us she is not willing to let go of her man without a fight: “Ring the alarm / I been going too long / But I’ll be damned if I see another chick on your arm” (Focus Group 3, p. 4).

Ashlee Simpson sings to a different tune when it comes to conflict. Instead of threatening other girls, she fights back with words in her “Boyfriend” song (Focus Group 5, p. 1). She is confident, and she claims she can do whatever she wants. She seems to say “just because your boyfriend’s fooling around your back,” (Focus Group 4, p. 1) “it’s not me you want to fight with.” She refuses to be defensive when another girl accuses her of being an unfaithful friend.

While many songs highlight the conflicts and struggles in relationships, some talk about the happier aspects, like supporting each other (Focus Group 2, p. 17). Ironically, participants struggled to think of such examples. One example of a mutually satisfying relationship is Destiny Child's "Cater 2 U," but other songs portray lead singer Beyonce as "Crazy in Love" and "Dangerously In Love" (Focus Group 3, p. 4).

An even more (co)dependent relationship is typified in Kelly Clarkson's "Addicted." She tells that her relationship is "like a demon" she "can't face down" and that she is "stuck." (Focus Group 1, p. 3). Though these songs talk about troubled relationships and individuals, they are positive in that they can validate a woman's experience (if a woman is in a codependent or abusive relationship, she might find understanding in these words). Also, these songs can teach us that such relationships are not healthy and that there are ways to escape them.

Another sad reality expressed in pop songs is infidelity. This element is discussed from several different angles. Beyonce, for example, talks about resilience in the face of infidelity. With "Irreplaceable" she tells her man, and all men for that matter, that they are *not* irreplaceable. Let it be a lesson to all men who cheat, your woman *can* replace you (Focus Group 3, p. 1). Another song, which does not exactly fit into the pop genre (but is worth mentioning), is Hinder's "Lips of an Angel." Focus Group #4 was disgusted with the implication of cheating in this song. By the same token, Participant B expressed dismay because "... people are getting that ... it's socially acceptable to have an affair ... or to cheat, or to lie" (p. 8).

Since there are so many negative aspects of relationships, it's no wonder that couples break up from time to time. "A lot of the music is about breaking up and moving along" (Participant F, p. 3). Fortunately, pop music provides us with a lot of scripts for recovering.

While Participant H reasoned that most times, songs are about "the woman not being able to let go" (p. 2), she recognized songs like Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone" which show women standing their ground and profiting from their negative experiences. This same song was cited by Participant F, who claimed "it teaches us that when things end sometimes it's best to take

what we got and move on, things can end badly but we can all just move on” (Participant F, p. 3). Other songs on the same album (“Breakaway”) provide more encouragement for people dealing with a breakup (Focus Group 6, p. 1; Focus Group 5, p. 7).

Ashlee Simpson’s music also encourages fans. Participants have taken a positive message from “Beautifully Broken”:

You wipe away your tears and you go through that phase . . . but you know that you’ll pick yourself up, and go through it, and then . . . when another situation comes like that . . . You kinda’ have that experience and then . . . [you can] use it toward [dealing with other problems]. (Focus Group 5, p. 7)

Summary

This chapter outlined findings with respect to participants’ reflexivity of their consumption and the music they listen to. Reflexivity is both awareness and a critical mindset, whereby audience members assess, evaluate, and question their consumption and the effects of media.

Reflexivity was categorized according to the consumption, products, production, and byproducts of media, specifically pop music performed by female artists. Participants showed a high level of reflexivity with respect to their consumption, the products, and even the production process. Participants could identify images of women, but they had some difficulty recognizing relational scripts. It seemed that participants were considerably constrained by their hesitation to admit that they were indeed influenced by media. The next chapter will discuss which types of readings were most prevalent and how audiences can enact and benefit from a variety of those readings.

Overall, participants tended to have dichotomous opinions. They either hated or loved pop music, and they saw its messages as positive *or* negative and realistic *or* unrealistic. It seemed that those who like pop music emphasize its positive images, whereas those who do not like pop music emphasize its negative images.

Those who do not like pop music say it is superficial. Those who enjoy it display either a complacent (thankfully this is not the majority) or positive perspective (saying there are strong role models and positive ideals in pop music). Still, it seemed that those who enjoy pop were more willing to evaluate both sides of the story (whereas those who do not like pop music dismiss it entirely). Those who enjoy pop music can also recognize its negative issues and unrealistic images. Some of these themes will be analyzed in more depth in the next chapter regarding types of readings.

CHAPTER 5: READINGS

Now that we have evaluated how reflexive audience members can be, it is essential that we return to Research Questions #3 and 4, so we can assess what readings were most prevalent and how audiences can enact and benefit from different readings.

Chapter 2 introduced Hall's theories of reading. Before we evaluate the participants' readings, we should remind ourselves what each type of reading looks like. A dominant reading is done when we understand and agree with the messages the text has laid out for us. Negotiated and oppositional readings both pertain to this definition of dominant meanings. They are responsive to what is dominant. A negotiated reading occurs when we understand the messages in a text, but we choose to interpret them on our own terms. Finally, an oppositional reading results when we refuse to accept the meanings (and often reject the texts themselves) and consequences given by a text.

Identifying what types of readings the participants choose is no easy task, for seldom will an audience member read from just one perspective. It is rare that someone would have an entirely dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading, for his/her readings will vary with the text. Within the same text, one can have a different reading for each section. Sometimes readings are mixed, but for the purposes of this study, we narrowed each reading down to one style.

A total of 266 excerpts were categorized into separate readings. Of these, the majority were dominant (126). The second most popular readings were oppositional (84), and the least frequent readings were negotiated (56).

In order to understand the distribution of these readings, it was necessary to develop another taxonomy. After a review of all excerpts, we began to see that readings resulted from the way in which audience members identified with the texts. Figure 5.1 illustrates the distribution of readings among identification themes which will be discussed next.

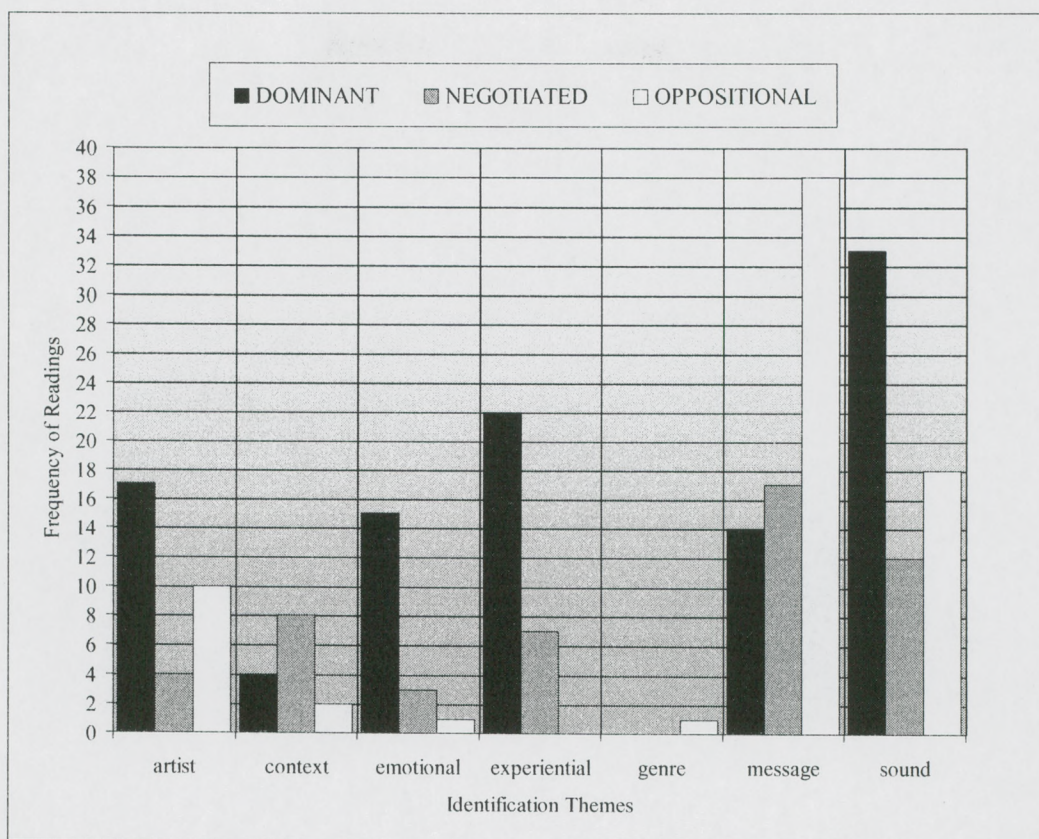


Figure 5.1. Readings and identification themes.

The Enactment of Readings through Identification Themes

Though a tally of readings is interesting, we must further investigate how these readings were derived. After a brief analysis of all readings, it became apparent that readings depended on the way in which each participant identified with the text. Six themes of identification were identified: (1) artist, (2) context, (3) emotional, (4) experiential, (5) message, and (6) sound. In each case, the most prominent identification factor determined the way in which the text was read.

If a participant liked the artist, and valued this factor the most over all others, the participant would make a dominant reading of the text. In contrast, if the same participant did not like the artist, but still valued this factor the most, the participant would enact a negotiated or oppositional reading. Whether the reading was negotiated or oppositional would then depend on other themes and factors.

The next factor, context, was identified after a scan of the negotiated readings. The context factor shows us that readings are not simply an isolated experience, but a practice which is influenced by the surrounding environment and community of other audience members. Context can include influence from the industry, peers, or even the location of consumption.

Emotional and experiential themes were ways in which participants related directly to the text. If one agrees with the message on an emotional level, or if he/she had an experience that relates him/her to the text, he/she will read in a dominant manner. If that same person disagrees with the message on an emotional level, or if he/she cannot identify with the experience, he/she will read in a negotiated or oppositional manner.

The message and sound are qualities of the text itself, from the reader's point of view. If the message is the most important factor, this will overpower the significance of the sound. Likewise, if the sound is most important to a listener, he/she may or may not listen for messages. Since the sound is most often the reason we listen to songs, this is always an important factor. The data will reveal shortly just how important it is. It is worthy to note here that some participants acknowledged that the only part of music they listen to is its sound or composition. This was often the case with music majors, who tend to focus on the composition of the song, rather than its literary meanings.

Much like readings, it is difficult to classify an excerpt into just one factor. This was attempted with all excerpts, but some remained a hybrid of themes. This is promising, because then it shows audiences are not "just listening" but considering the messages and meanings for themselves.

It is always difficult to classify the themes of reading, especially when an excerpt is analyzed in isolation. For example, many of the oppositional readings seemed to be about the song on first examination (readings where participants stated, "I just turn it off," for example, like in Focus Group, p. 11), but upon closer investigation of the full transcripts, it was revealed that they were talking about how they react to the lyrics, as opposed to the sound.

Readings in Focus Groups

Since readings do not occur in isolation, it is important to distinguish between the readings expressed in focus groups and those displayed in individual interviews. As you can see in Figure 5.2, dominant readings outnumbered negotiated and oppositional readings within focus groups.

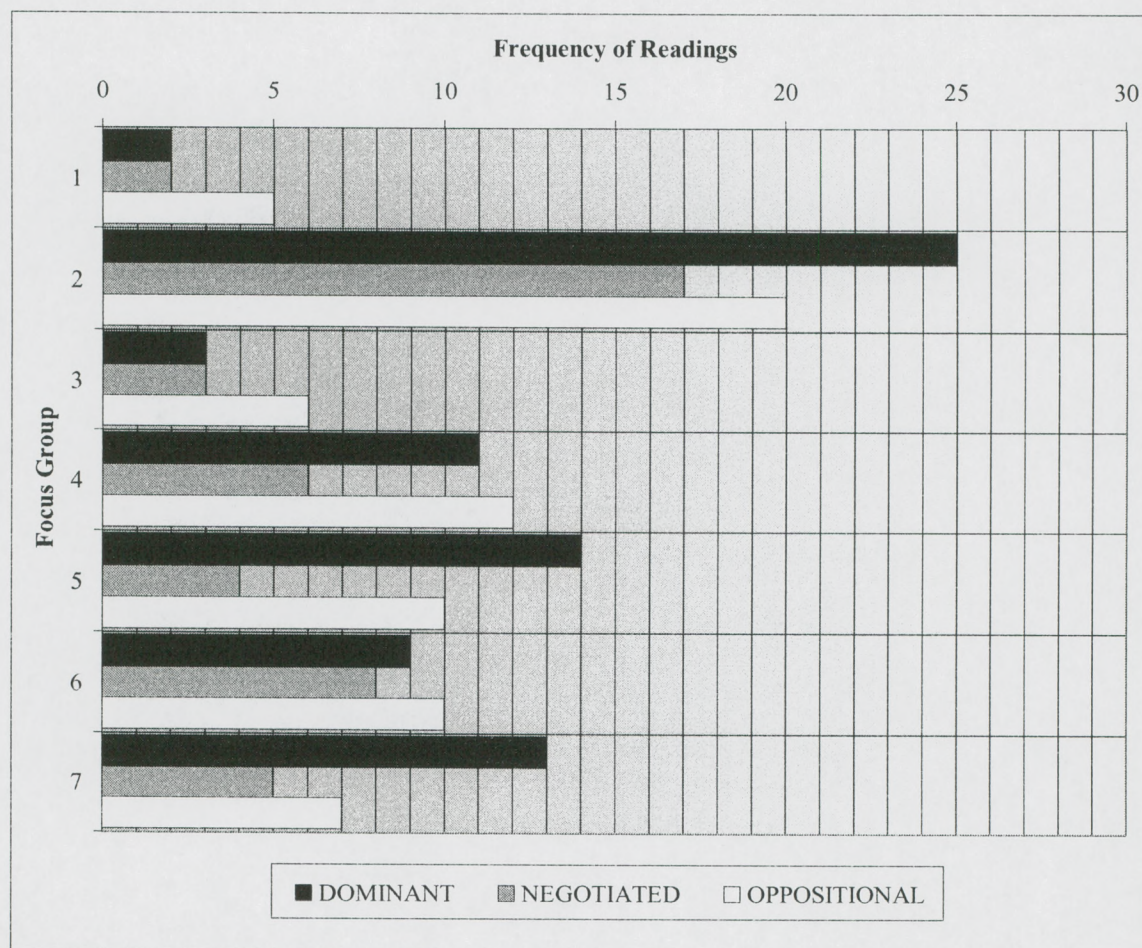


Figure 5.2. Readings in focus groups.

In each group all three types of readings emerged in varied patterns.. In Focus Groups #1 and 3 oppositional readings were most prevalent, and dominant and negotiated readings were equal. In Focus Groups #4 and 6, oppositional readings were again most prevalent, but dominant readings were more prevalent than negotiated. In Focus Groups #2, 5, and 7, dominant readings were most prevalent, followed by oppositional and then negotiated readings. While the table

shows a useful quantification of readings, we need to keep in mind that the significance of participants' contributions is more about the quality than the quantity of their statements.

Readings in Individual Interviews

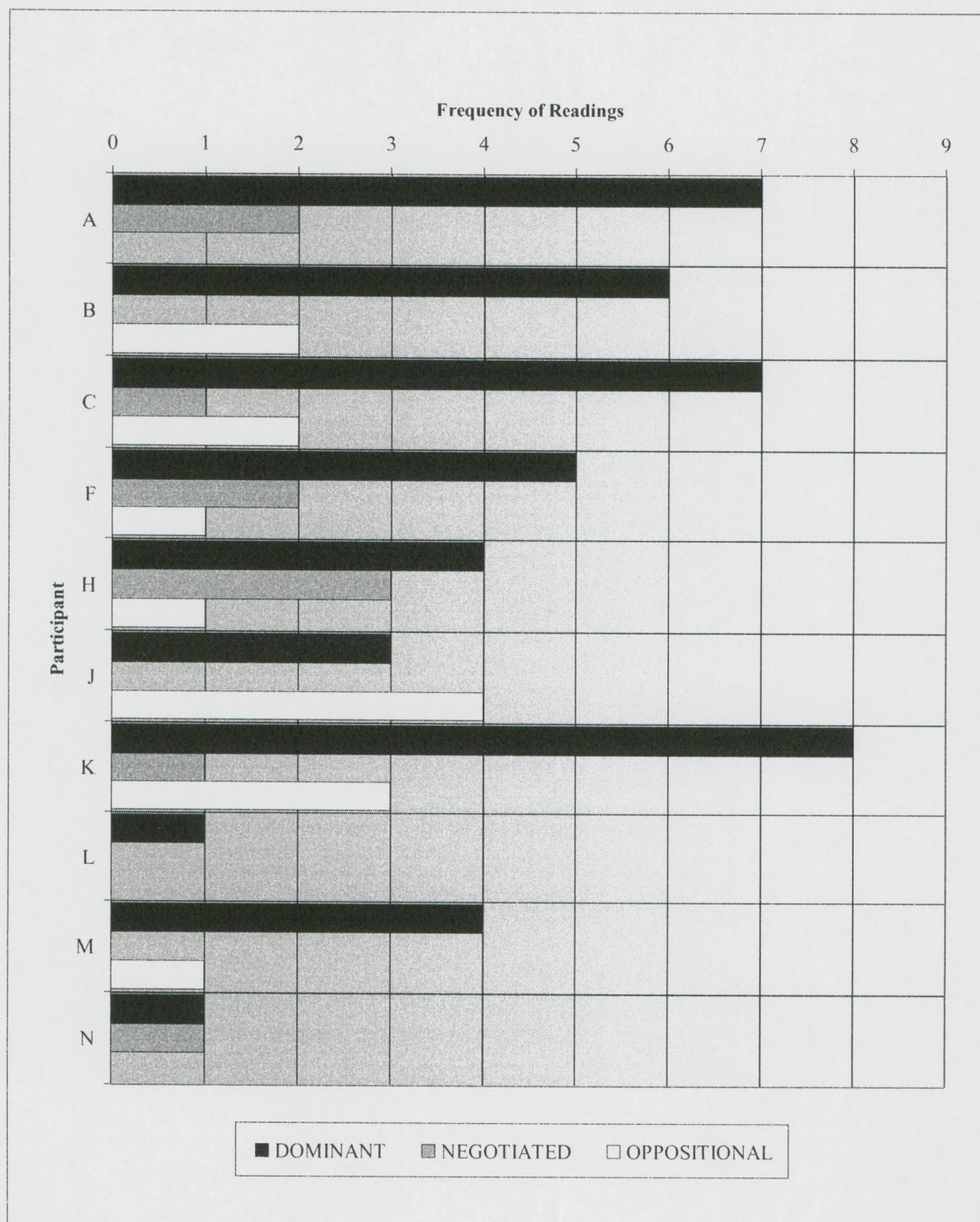


Figure 5.3. Readings in individual interviews.

In individual interviews, we see different patterns emerging. No longer do all participants display all different types of readings. Here, in the case of individual interviews, participants most often read in a dominant manner. Of course, there are several exceptions.

Only Participant J made more oppositional than dominant readings, and these will be discussed in more detail shortly. Participant K made almost as many oppositional readings as Participant J, but her dominant readings still prevailed. .

Participant K expressed dominant views in saying she “can’t listen to a song without personally connecting to it” (p. 3), but such statements also showed her ability to read in an oppositional manner. According to her, music is “an expression of emotions and ideas” and if she doesn’t like the lyrics, she will not like the song. She appreciates the sound, but for her “the lyrics are more important” (p. 6).

Participant H displayed the largest number of negotiated readings within the individual interviews. While she displayed more dominant readings, her negotiated readings can give us a clear picture of her more negotiated-style. In her words, “If you wanna’ hear a sad undertone, you will, but if you wanna’ see the positive, you will” (p. 6). She also said that if one pays close enough attention, “you will get out of it what you want to get out of it” (p. 6). It seems that this participant believed in her power as a critical consumer. She advised that people should look deeper into lyrics to “decide if you connect with them” (p. 5).

As we’ve seen, there are differences between the discussions and readings in individual interviews and focus groups. One of the most interesting differences relates to the emergence of all types of readings in all focus groups, whereas in individual interviews, often times readings are less varied. This could be the byproduct of the specific manner in which the discussion develops in focus groups. In the absence of that dialogic exchange of ideas with others, individual interviewees offer less variation in their readings. That is why we see cases such as Participant L, whom only provided dominant readings, or Participant A whom only provided dominant and negotiated readings.

Overview of Data

These are but a few examples of the different outcomes and connections between individual interviews and focus groups. The next few tables (Table 5.1, Table 5.2, and Table 5.3) provide excerpts which illustrate the identification themes audience members enact when they are reading media. The corresponding figures (Figure 5.4, Figure 5.5, Figure 5.6, and Figure 5.7) show us how different identification themes correlate and change with different readings. Certainly these diagrams give us a concise view of the data, but it is the transcripts that show us what is really unfolding.

Table 5.1.

Examples of Dominant Readings and their Identification Themes

Identification Theme	Excerpt
Artist	'cause the <i>pop</i> artists ...the corny ones will <i>never go away</i> , because like, most of the albums sales are from, like, young people. (Focus Group 2, p. 20)
Context	If I'm in a club setting, if I'm out at the bar, or something, that's fine...just havin' fun...good times...whatever...drinking. (Focus Group 6, p. 14)
Emotional	...when I am having a bad day or night, and I'm crying about something...usually guys, I listen to sad songs and it makes me feel like someone else understands how I feel. (Participant H, p. 5)
Experiential	What sucks about music...music helps you remember a <i>lot</i> ...A <i>lot</i> of things, and there's certain songs that, you know, you listen to, that brings up a really <i>bad</i> memory...or there are songs that will bring up really <i>good</i> memories and like "that was a really good point in my life..." (Participant C, p. 8)
Message	...it teaches us that when things end sometimes it's best to take what we got and move on, things can end badly but we can all just move on. (Participant F, p. 3)
Sound	I also think that a lot of these songs are more popular, you know, because dancing and clubbing is more popular.... I'm the same as the next guy or girl, I enjoy being at a party...And if "Sexy Back" comes on...you know, I'll dance. (Participant B, p. 11)

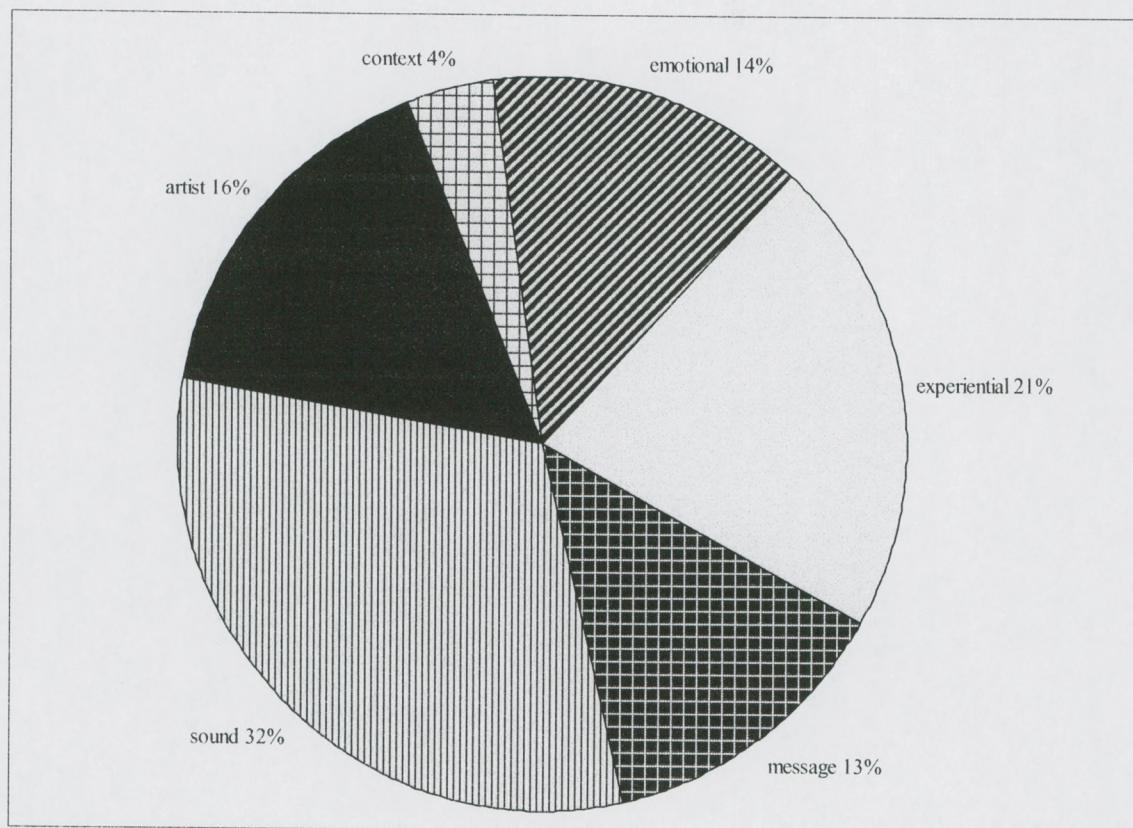


Figure 5.4. Breakdown of identification themes in dominant readings.

The results above indicate that sound is the identification factor most often associated with dominant readings. This makes sense, since it is the sound of music we first hear. The sound is what gets our attention, and from this we usually make a decision on whether we will keep listening.

The second most prevalent identification factor is experiential. This, of course, is intricately related to the meaning of the song, but only as mediated by the listener's own experience. It makes sense that a person will read such material in a dominant manner, because he/she is likely to agree with it.

The third theme is the artist. Much like the sound of a song, it is often the artist whom we initially identify with. If we like a particular artist, we are more likely to keep listening and read in a dominant manner. If we dislike an artist, or if we are unfamiliar with his/her work, we are less likely to exhibit dominant readings.

Table 5.2.

Examples of Negotiated Readings and their Identification Themes

Identification Theme	Excerpt
Artist	I almost, like, <i>laugh at it</i> . . . they've got all this money, but they're idiots, so (Focus Group 5, p. 16)
Context	. . . like, if I'm in the car with a few people, and they're listening to something they, you know, enjoy, I'll leave it on . . . I'm not gonna' argue. (Focus Group 6, p. 14)
Emotional	I think if you pay close enough attention, you will get out of it what you want to get out of it. (Participant H, p. 6)
Experiential	And sometimes I think that even if you haven't had a relationship like that, there's some way you can feel it. But definitely moreso if you've had that experience. (Focus Group 2, p. 6)
Message	"Drinks start pourin', and my speech starts slurring, everybody starts lookin' real good . . ." (citing lyrics from Fergie's London Bridges) . . . but I love that like, that little line, you know from that to that, and then I really hate the rest of the song So I really don't like listening to it . . . (Participant A, p. 1)
Sound	You know, if there are 4 lyrics about smoking pot, but the song is really really good, I'll listen to the whole song...or even Sublime . . . like, "Smoke Two Joints" – I love that song, but I've never smoked in my life (Participant A, p. 14)

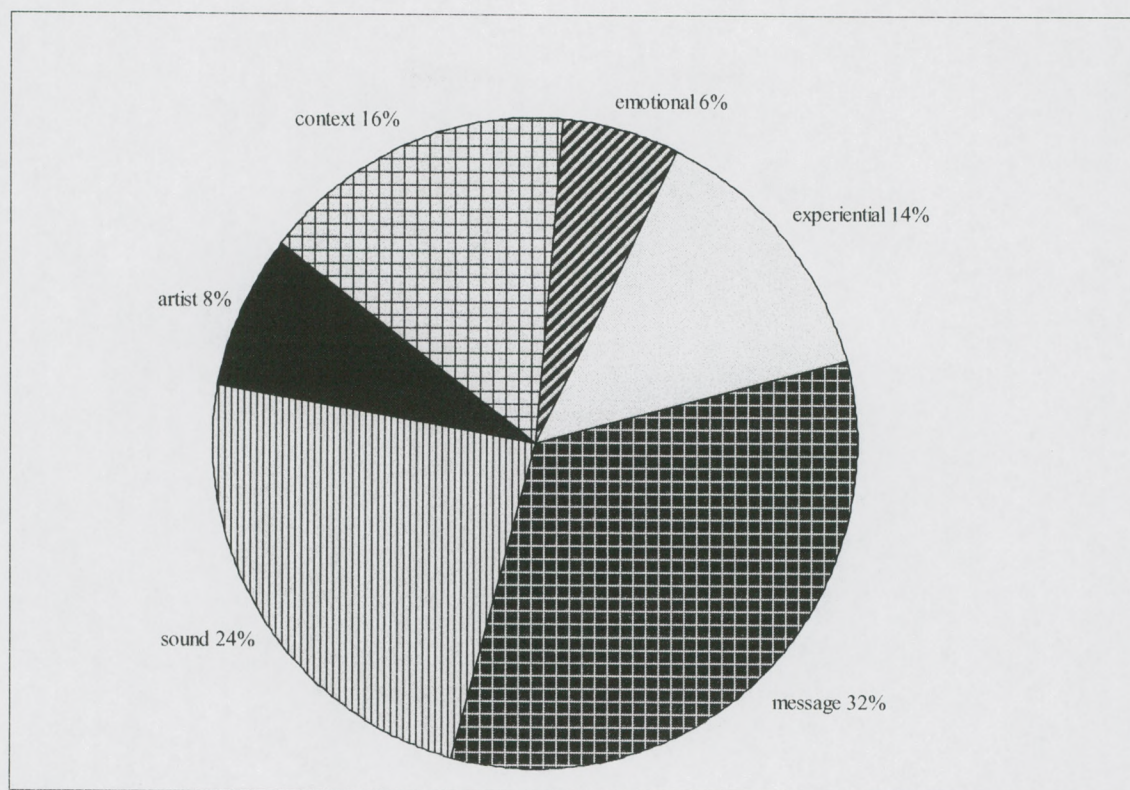


Figure 5.5. Breakdown of identification themes in negotiated readings.

When it comes to negotiated readings, the message becomes more prominent. The sound is still an important factor, but it is now second to the message. Presumably, this occurs because the audience is now going beyond the surface elements of the text. The song has already captured the listener's ear and now it is on his/her mind. At this point, the listener can appreciate a different way of identifying with the music.

A new identification theme emerged during the analysis of negotiated readings: context. This evolved because we were seeing listeners identify with music because of larger contexts. These include peers and the social interaction, the physical environment in which he/she is listening, and even the influence of the industry and various other media.

The artist seems less significant here, and this will be explored in some detail later.

Table 5.3.

Examples of Oppositional Readings and their Identification Themes

Identification Theme	Excerpt
Artist	I don't think she ever really shows her true colors. I think she's a little more fake. And, um, I don't think she represents uh . . . <i>females</i> very well, or female artists well at all. (Focus Group 7, p. 5)
Context	Pop music and all its messages can easily be found somewhere in Orion's belt . . . but not on the stars that compose it, 'cause then you'd still take it into consideration as existing . . . That's how far removed I am from most pop music females and the messages that fill their wallets and bank accounts, whilst they pretend they actually have something to say. (Participant J, pp. 7-8)
Genre	I'm not really into rap . . . that kinda' stuff . . . talking about killing people maybe . . . like I'm gonna' kill your mother and . . . (Focus Group 1, p. 8)
Message	You know what song, like, quite frankly pissed me off? Ummm, "Let Me Cater 2 U" . . . " <i>Baby, this is your day?</i> " (Focus Group 4, p. 12)
Sound	As much as it has a <i>good message</i> , I <i>hated that song</i> . Like, it has a really good message, it's against stupid girls . . . (Focus Group 5, p. 10)

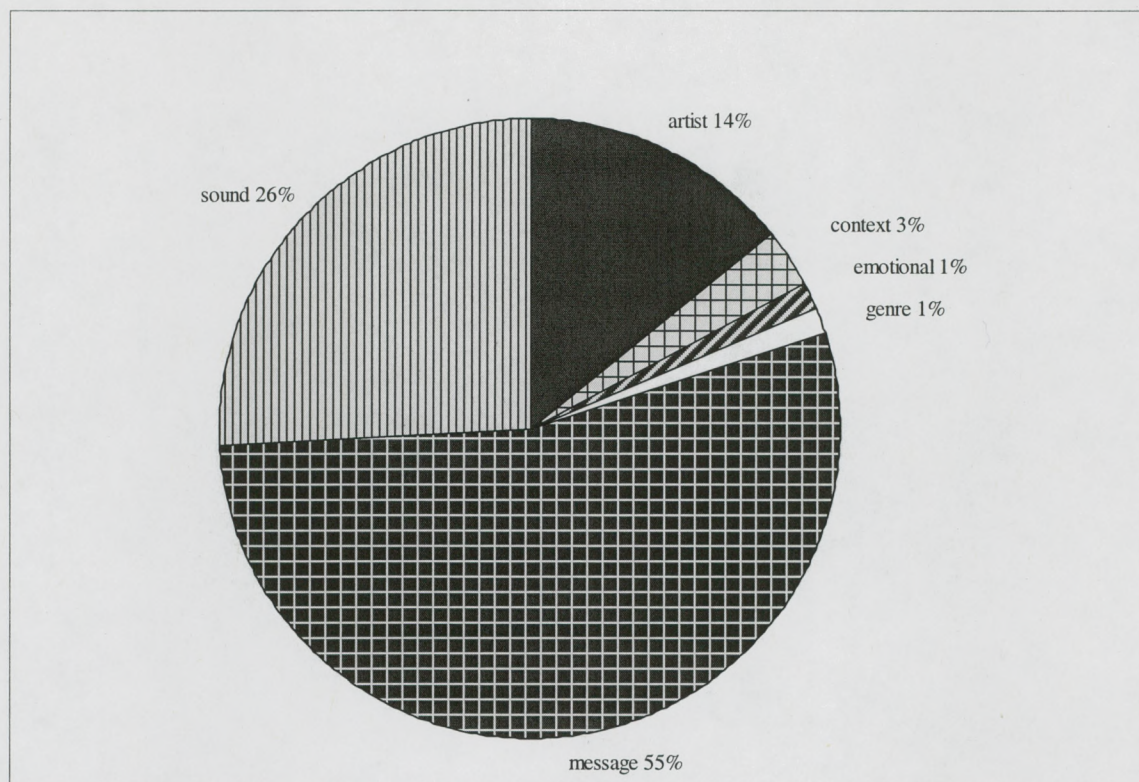


Figure 5.6. Breakdown of identification themes in oppositional readings.

The message becomes the most significant identification theme in oppositional readings. Interestingly enough, the sound and artist gain prominence again as we get closer to oppositional readings. Once again, if one does not like the sound or artist, it is difficult to have a dominant, or even negotiated, reading of the text.

While we can assume that negotiated readings are full of reflexivity (because it takes an amount of reflexivity to see both sides of the picture), this is not necessarily the case with oppositional readings. Sometime we do not like the music, and once we have made up our minds, it is difficult to be anything other than oppositional. This is demonstrated well by those participants who have a deep disdain for pop music and the values they say it extols.

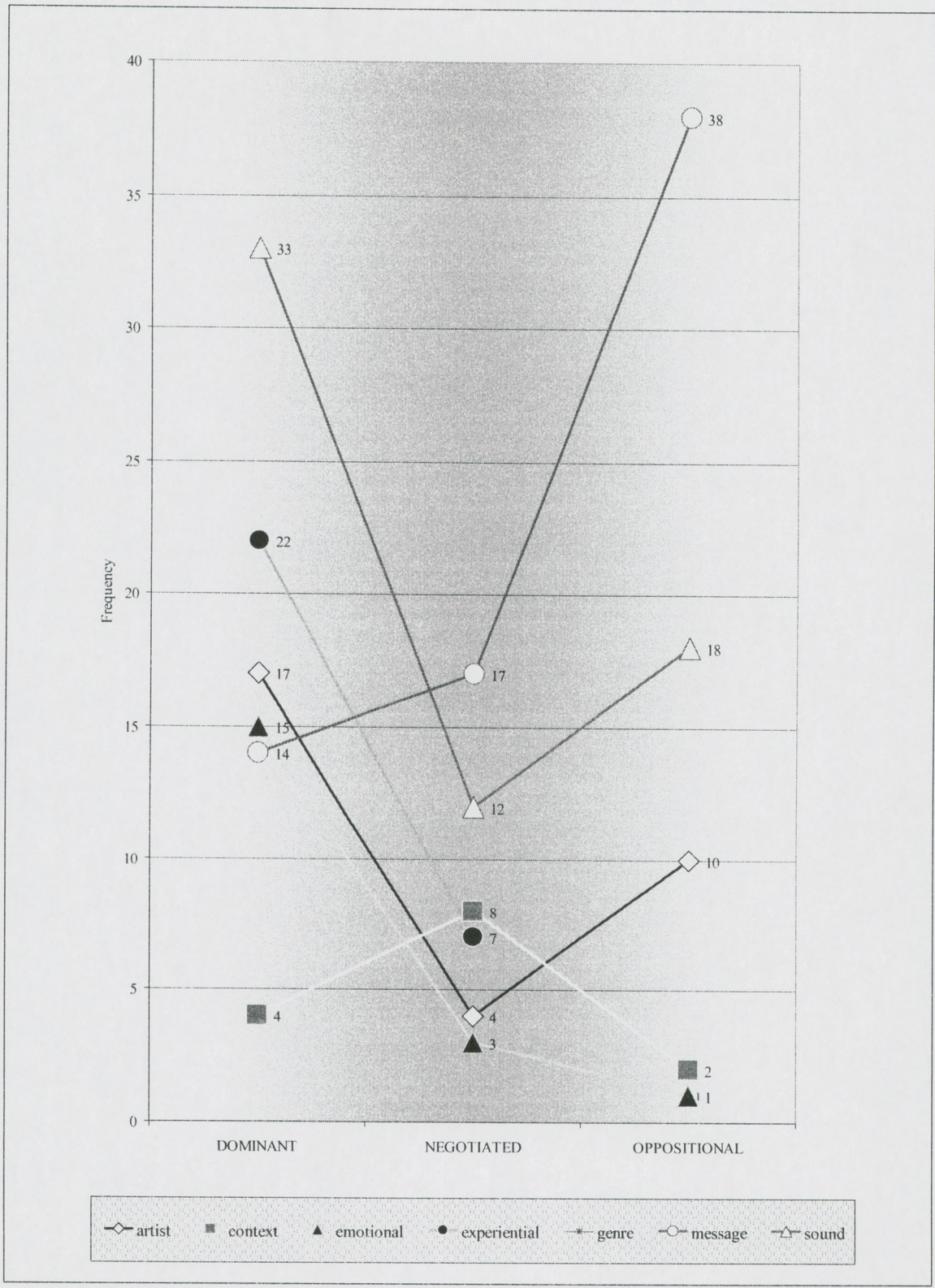


Figure 5.7. Comparative chart of readings and identification themes.

Relationship between Readings and Identification Themes

As we have seen, interesting patterns emerge between readings and identification themes. Figure 5.7 gives us yet another way to conceptualize the data. This chart demonstrates, more clearly, the changes in identification themes between the different readings. These variations will be described below.

Dominant Readings

Sound was predicted to be the most prevalent factor, because people who enjoy music first for its sound (this assumption was supported by focus groups and individual interviews alike). This prediction comes with the assumption that most people do not reflect on what they hear, and many participants did admit to just listening to music for fun (and not interpretation). Whether participants want to elaborate on this or not, they are undoubtedly interpreting/reading the music in some way (even if it is just complacent/dominant).

If we act on this assumption, we would think then, that all dominant readings are detrimental, but we should be very cautious of this assumption. For one, we do not want to judge participants as unreflective because they enjoy a song for its sound. Some music could be “for entertainment only” (can you imagine “Fergalicious” being anything but?). Also, audiences can reflect quite a bit on the songs they read in a dominant manner.

Many sources explained that reading dominant material (such as romance novels) can be a negotiated or even oppositional act. So why can't reading oppositional or negotiated text be a dominant act? For instance, if Avril Lavigne and her fans sing proudly, “He wasn't what I wanted, what I thought no....He isn't really what I'm lookin' for...,” they are opposing the traditional/dependent relationship where a girl sits home alone at night pining (or worse, crying) over an immature guy that dumped her. This dominant reading can still be empowering and telling of a fan's reflexivity.

Negotiated Readings

It was almost impossible to predict which themes would be most prevalent for negotiated readings, because negotiation of the texts can depend on any number of factors. The themes that emerged give us a profound understanding of how audiences are reading. It seems natural that the message, sound, and context components are still prominent. It is interesting, however, that the artist is less essential here. As demonstrated in Table 5.2, it seems we can appreciate, but also poke fun at artists and their eccentricities. With a negotiated reading, we seem to say that it matters less who is singing the song than what is being said.

Oppositional Readings

Before data analysis was complete, it seemed the most prevalent themes of oppositional readings would be sound (again) and message. It is encouraging that meaning was the most significant theme here, but of course if people don't like the sound of a song, they are probably not going to force themselves to search for a meaning. Often, because we don't like the tune of a song, we refuse to listen, so this would make sense (that most readings are driven by a disdain for the sound).

The third most prevalent theme was the artist. Just as audiences don't reach for meanings with sounds they don't like, they are not likely to continue listening to music by artists they detest. This is unfortunate, especially in the case where an artist and her music are versatile (or sending positive messages), but to each her own!

The Benefits of Reading

Now that we have identified the ways in which participants enact readings, we can explore how different readings might benefit audiences. One might doubt that audiences can be empowered by dominant readings, but it seems possible. For instance, if the text itself is oppositional or negotiated from patriarchal values, singing its tune can be liberating.

Negotiated readings are also useful for audiences, because they show that audiences can appreciate the sound or meaning of a song, but not agree with its every aspect. Whether

participants identify with the artist, emotion, experience, message, sound or context, it is positive that they can negotiate meanings for themselves. This, in itself, is empowering. This is a positive (though not always easy) process, because it puts the power in the audiences hands (or minds, rather).

Oppositional readings are perhaps most empowering, because this is where thoughts turn to action. If audiences have a strong feeling against media, they are more likely to try to make an impact or influence in interpretive communities, and thus media. Those who refuse to consume certain media are making a conscious effort to not reinforce the messages with the texts. By changing the meanings to suit themselves, audience members can influence others in their consumption as well.

Focus Group #4: Complacent, Negotiated, or Oppositional?

One group demonstrated almost perfectly how difficult it can be to separate readings and how challenging it is to interview objectively. Though lively and enjoyable, this group was not exactly supportive of this study's focus. In Focus Group 4, participants seemed irritated by my inclination to suggest that media are powerful purveyors of influence. It seemed they did not want to give pop music any credence or authority over audiences, especially not themselves.

They were critical of the artists and music, but not critical in their reflections. They ranted about Beyoncé's *Irreplaceable* lyrics and what they saw as contradictions in her music (p. 4). They poked fun at Ashlee Simpson's nose (which is just one example of her constantly changing image) and "sophomoric" lyrics (Focus Group 4, p. 7). They admitted disgust with Hinder's adulterous love song – "Lips of an Angel" (p. 3) and pointed the finger mostly at rap artists for their depiction of women (p. 4). They even mocked artists who complain about "how rough their life was" (p. 16). They called some lyrics "stupid" and "pathetic," but they failed to assess them (p. 17).

These are but a few examples of their responses, but they are indicative of the opinions of the group. Though these participants had plenty to say in candid criticism, they scoffed when asked about music's influence:

Table 5.4.

Excerpts from Focus Group #4, Demonstrating Criticism of Study's Focus

Excerpts
1. Uh . . . I dunno' . . . I really . . . I mean, I <i>don't really look too much into it</i> . . . I really <i>just think she's having a good time.</i> (p. 6)
2. And she just grew into herself and . . . I mean, I . . . just don't think that everything has to be <i>so</i> , like, . . . "Ashlee's a woman, so what does she represent with women? <i>What do her lyrics mean? And let's concentrate and focus . . .</i> " (p. 6)
3. Sometimes you just listen to <i>listen . . .</i> (p. 6)
4. I feel like I don't even pay attention to 'em. (p. 9)
5. I just sing them out loud, because that's what they are . . . but . . . (p. 9)

Initially, I was tempted to think that these participants were complacent (at best) or "illiterate" (at worst) when it comes to reading. Perhaps their refusal to think deeply about the lyrics is actually an oppositional (or at least negotiated) reading itself. This could be their way of saying, "I really don't care what the music is saying about women, because I enjoy it, but I refuse to let it get to me."

Still, it was encouraging to see that these women could identify different scripts and images of women. And while they seemed self-righteous when it came to the influence of media, there were signs that they might become more critical of their own consumption. As one participant playfully exclaimed, "I dunno' why I keep listening to it? Now I'm not going to!" This gives us hope that while the media can move in a better direction, so too can the audiences.

Participant J: An Oppositionally Dominant Listener

Throughout the interview, Participant J seemed to be the model oppositional reader. He had a strong disdain for pop music. He was not a fan of its sound, but he also was critical of the messages within this genre. He identified negative images of men and women, stating that the “women can’t make up their mind” and “men are assholes” (p. 3). He saw both sexes as confused, especially in relationships, perhaps because they are mesmerized by the materialism that is all too evident in the media.

In his view, the media have a superficial perspective on relationships, which is polluted with materialism and commercialism. He condemned pop culture’s lack of values, and he was reluctant to admit that such media had any influence on him.

While he tried to prove himself “above the influence,” he admitted that “we are no longer the product of our parents’ upbringing” (p. 6). He said that he, on the other hand, is influenced more by his father and his own experience than he is by the media. He sees lyrics as “nice to listen to or vent through” but offering no models for relationships (p. 12). He argued, however, that “TV, radio, newspapers, video games, [and] movies...all influence people who are easily influenced” (p. 6). He perceived the impact of media as negative, because such influences “come from an anonymous party who you have no interaction with what-so-ever” (p. 6).

The following excerpt sums up his belief that pop music is trivial:

Pop music and all its messages can easily be found somewhere in Orion's belt. But not on the stars that compose it, cause then you'd still take it into consideration as existing. That's how far removed I am from most pop music females and the messages that fill their wallets and bank accounts, whilst they pretend they actually have something to say. (pp. 7-8).

While Participant J displays more oppositional readings than any of his cohorts (4 excerpts), when his excerpts were analyzed in isolation, they revealed almost as many dominant readings (3 excerpts). Participant J related to lyrics by Linkin Park and Eminem. Clearly, these do not fit in the category of female pop artists, but these artists are well represented within pop music.

Perhaps what Participant J appreciates about these artists is that they are going against the grain. In a way these texts are oppositional, so a dominant reading could become an oppositional act (oppositional to the influence of media, if nothing else). Here, we can see how Participant J identifies with one of Eminem's songs:

He preaches about how the media just convolutes things so god damned much, while on the opposite side we all have something to say and shouldn't be kept from saying it . . . which is complimented so fucking well by sampling Dream On, especially when you've heard the whole song . . . and that's something else that be said about Eminem that can not be said about most artists today [that he does things differently]. (p. 9)

While Participant J is pessimistic about the audience's ability to influence media, he agrees that people can read media in a number of ways, "much like horoscopes" (p. 11). When asked directly if we, as an audience, have any power in our interpretations (or readings), he said that "we do, but we mostly choose not to use it – because it breaks the norm . . . and no one wants to be 'that' person" (p. 7).

Audience Perspectives on Reading

During interviews and focus groups, participants were informed of the focus and rationale of the current study. Specifically, participants were told about Hall's theory of reading. In most cases, I was careful to keep this at the end, so as to not sway participants.

I told participants about the different readings: dominant, negotiated, oppositional and then asked participants to rate themselves. I did not decide during the study how to categorize their readings, and this did not influence my categorization, but I hope it was useful for participants to reflect on their consumption and use of pop music. Participants might wonder if their interpretation of their reading was accurate, but since this study is qualitative, there are no "right" or "wrong" answers. It is more important that participants are given a new tool from which to consume and criticize music.

After a brief explanation ("dominant is where you go along with the status quo"; "Negotiated is where you see what the text is saying, but you define it in your own terms"; "Oppositional is where you refuse to use the media as prescribed, you either reject it or replace its

meaning with your own”), most participants were able to label their tendencies for different types of reading.

While some participants labeled their usual type of reading, others said “it depends.” This is perhaps the best explanation and shows, in a way, reflexivity about their readings. Most people are pessimistic about whether readings make a difference, so we are left to wonder how empowering it can truly be if they are not taking advantage of this power.

Summary

Whether all participants recognize their reading as a power, readings are still useful because they show us that we can use media, even while media use us. If we can reclaim images and scripts, we can use them to our own benefit. If nothing else, if we can be critical of the media, we can consume wisely.

This chapter identified the different ways audience members can enact and benefit from dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. While at first dominant readings may seem inhibited, they can be freed by texts which already question the status quo. Negotiated readings are also empowering, because audiences can still enjoy the present media, while deciding for themselves what it is to me. Finally, oppositional readings are most empowering to audiences, because they originate out of a determination to not be bound by texts.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings by Research Question

The premise of this study was to survey lyrics and audience members to see what female pop artists are really saying, and to see how this affects us as an audience. This was done with the understanding, of course, that meaning is not just in the text, or the messenger (or performer, or encoder), but in the audience (or receiver, or decoder) as well. To that end, it was important to examine just how reflexive audience members can be. We also sought to find out how audience members interpret these messages, or in the words of Hall (1980), which readings were most prevalent. Only then could we realize how audience members can enact and benefit from this process. As a result of all of these questions, we intended to assess how pop music and audiences have evolved.

In short, I examined the following research questions:

RQ1: What images of women and relational scripts are most prevalent in music performed by female pop artist today?

RQ2: Are young women and men interacting in a reflective way to images and relational scripts offered through popular music performed by female artists?

RQ3: What type of readings are most prevalent (dominant, negotiated, or oppositional)?

RQ4: How can audiences enact and benefit from oppositional, negotiated, and even dominant readings?

RQ4: Has women's popular music truly evolved? What steps can we take to get us (or keep us) moving in the right direction?

The last two chapters included a great number of responses to these questions. Now, I will attempt to summarize the findings with respect to each of the research questions.

RQ1: Images and Relational Scripts

The first research question evaluated the images of women and relational scripts that audience members illustrated. The results showed that there are both positive and negative

images, and that audience members are generally reflexive of these. On the other hand, most participants were reluctant to admit that they saw any useful relational scripts.

Thankfully, participants identified more positive images than negative images. Negative images included those degrading toward women (i.e., framing them as sex objects, framing beauty and attraction as a priority over other values), unhealthy body images, and sex expressed in vulgar terms. These images were not exclusively mentioned in music by female pop artists, but more so in relation to other genres (i.e., rap) and collaborations.

The positive images were inspiring to say the least. Most reported strength as a strong image in women's pop music, but other qualities like independence, versatility, power, and confidence were also high on the list. Though most of these are related, it is important to extract them to see how each comes into play in different lyrics and with different artists.

Though most participants were hesitant to reveal relational scripts, others were reflexive about common themes. Gender roles were addressed as an area of evolution. Where women in the past were typically confined to nurturing roles and broken hearts, women are becoming more dominant, at least in today's music. Men, on the other hand, are seemingly becoming more sensitive and available to women, especially in relationships.

Relationship status was another theme. Though this topic often leads to confusion, many artists tell the story of content commitment. As relationships change, some artists are settling down, but they are still themselves. Some artists are coming full circle (Christina Aguilera), and some are divorcing (Jessica Simpson), but they are surviving, nonetheless.

Another positive part of pop music is its attention to all kinds of relationships. No longer is romantic love the one and only goal for women. Artists like Ashlee Simpson, Beyonce, and Mariah Carey are seeing about other important relationships, with their friends. Romantic love is still portrayed as sweet and innocent, but also sexual and exciting.

Some audiences seem disappointed with the simplicity of it all. They complain that pop music makes initiating and maintaining relationships seem easy and shallow. Others are

dismayed that there are still songs that pin women against each other (as competition for other men). As participants point out, Ashlee Simpson (with her song "Boyfriend") is one artist who is refusing to play into that drama.

While many songs have been preaching to women to be independent, songs by the same artists (Beyonce and Destiny's Child, for example) are now telling us to cater to men. This is confusing, and irritating, for many audiences, but others see it as a way of enjoying and nurturing a healthy relationship.

That's not to say the pop music dismisses those unhealthy or chaotic relationships. Even strong artists like Kelly Clarkson (specifically, in her "Addicted" song) tell us about relationships which can be horribly addictive and unhealthy. Other songs discuss topics like infidelity and breakups. If there's one positive message we can see in these songs, it is that women are staying strong. In the end, they learn their lesson and live their lives.

RQ2: Reflexivity

The second research question asked whether young men and women were being reflexive in response to these images and scripts. While some refused to believe media have a hold on them, others acknowledged the power of the industry, radio, and other forces which dominate us.

Findings were discussed in relation to the issues of consumption, products, production, and byproducts. As we discussed in this section, we consume more than just media (we consume messages and ideologies). The products of media are not limited to the songs and CDs we purchase and download. They include the artists themselves who often compose themselves as the perfect package. In discussing the production process, we saw some participants who were aware that those who dominate media can also dominate meanings for people.

Finally, the byproducts, or effects of media were discussed. While most did not want to admit that they were influenced by media, they expressed great concern about younger audiences. Though they may not be reflexive of their own experiences, it is encouraging that they are concerned for others.

RQ3 & RQ4: The Prevalence, Enactment, and Benefits of Readings

The third and fourth research questions are interwoven. The third research question asked which readings were most common, and the fourth asked how audiences can come to these readings and benefit from them. In simple terms, these participants most often read texts in a dominant manner. Second to that, they showed oppositional tendencies. Surprisingly, negotiated readings occurred the least.

Looking closer at these readings, we developed a taxonomy of identification themes which seemed to drive different readings. These themes included the artist, context, genre, emotional and experiential elements, the message, and the sound. It was interesting to see how these themes fluctuated between different types of readings. For example, the message seemed to become more important as readings moved away from dominant codings (with the message being most prominent in oppositional readings). Conversely, while sound was most significant in dominant readings, it was less so in negotiated and oppositional readings. A number of patterns unfolded, and this gave us more insight into the process of reading.

This is not to say that readings are one-dimensional. Reading is multidimensional, and thus oftentimes contradictory. Therefore, in any given response, a participant can display readings that are dominant, negotiated, *and* oppositional.

RQ5: The Evolution of Pop Music by Female Artists

The fifth research question is extremely open-ended, but that doesn't mean we should stop here. A culmination of all the other findings gives us the idea that we are making some progress. Though, as with most progress, we sometimes take a few steps back, it seems we are headed in the right direction. In addition to what the texts are telling us, we need to keep audiences' insights central. For it may matter more in the end, not what messages we are given, but what we do with them. The next several sections will highlight how texts are developing but also how audiences are interacting with them.

The State of Pop Music Today

Despite the criticism of pop music today, indeed, we've come a long way. While the second wave of the Women's Movement started in the 1960s (though we know it has been going on forever), music saw some major changes later, with Madonna in the 1980s, the Spice Girls and Destiny's Child in the mid- to late-1990s, and many more artists today. We still see a number of traditional roles being played by women (i.e., being dependent, making themselves beautiful to get a man, etc.), but many more women are breaking the mold, while still fitting nicely into formulas prescribed to them by media.

What's important to realize is that the audience has the same power, to assert themselves while partaking in popular media. We can take the best of messages and leave others alone. We can also, through negotiated and oppositional readings, interpret our favorite tunes on our own terms. We can interpret the messages female pop artists put forth in many ways. Our interpretation depends on our own experiences and viewpoints, but we cannot deny that female pop artists are putting forth some positive and innovative messages.

While Jessica Simpson has sung sweet melodies about love ("With You"), she's begun to branch out with "I Belong to Me." And while Destiny's Child has softened their style from "Say My Name" and "Bug a Boo" to "Cater 2 U," Beyonce is not afraid to tell her man that he is *not* "Irreplaceable" (if you read that message in a dominant manner, you understand that he is *replaceable*). Even Kelly Clarkson, whose most popular songs include "Walk Away" and "Since U Been Gone," admits she's sometimes "Addicted" to a relationship while she serenades us with "You Found Me."

Christina Aguilera was once "Dirrty" and though she sings in her latest album that she is "Still Dirrty" she also tells us how she's finally found "The Right Man" and married him. She contends there "Ain't No Other Man." Has she settled down since her "Fighter" days? Certainly, but she reminds us that she and her image are "Here to Stay," despite what anyone else says.

We can view these contrasting messages as contradictions, but another, more positive explanation is that they are showing their versatility. After all, a woman is entitled to change her mind from time to time. This wide range of music gives young women, and all audiences, a positive perspective on change and the inevitability of life itself.

No doubt, the industry has a tremendous influence on the artists, their music, and thereby our interpretations. But as we've watched some artists grow, we see a multitude of messages also develop. As Jessica Simpson went from a sweet little virgin to America's sexiest housewife, we saw her music express her sexuality. Now that she's a hot divorcee, we see her having more fun and experimenting more with who she is. Likewise, Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears, started as sweet little Mouseketeers, but they claimed their fame by being sexy teenage vixens. And though poor Britney has become a "train wreck" (according to Focus Group 5 participants, among others), Christina seems to be getting better and better everyday.

Hate it or love it (or negotiate it), pop music is not going to go away. While we may not think we have a tremendous impact, this study revealed that we as an audience can impact the industry with our money, but more importantly, we can decide for ourselves what meanings the music will have for us.

Popular Opinion

Perhaps Participant H put it perfectly when she said, "I think the beats are way better than the lyrics" (p. 6). Though she is a fan of pop music, she realizes that it does not always put forth the best message. The fact that she enjoys the music, admires the artists, and still can critique it shows that she is certainly reflexive.

Pop (Music & Culture) as Negative/Unrealistic

As positive as we may want to be, we have TO acknowledge the negative aspects of pop music, if we hope to make things better. It seems today everybody's a critic, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. Participant L, for example, says pop music is "not what it used to be" (p. 2). He pointed out that pop music is "very disrespectful towards women" and "very

commercialized” (p. 2). Fortunately, he does think change is possible, but he says it will take great efforts from those in the music industry. Since we cannot rely on the industry itself to change, we might have to step in from time to time.

Participant B, on the other hand, has given up on pop music. While even he can enjoy Justin Timberlake’s “Sexy Back,” he thinks we have hit “rock bottom” (p. 1). He is discouraged by the nonsense that is constantly “topping the charts,” and he says he doesn’t “find the point in listening to [it]” (p. 1).

They are not the only ones concerned. Participant J told us, “what society needs is honesty,” but “we have media telling us how things should be” (p. 7). Even Participant A, who is an avid fan of pop music, admits “music is *so* important to *me*, but...the way that the music industry is changing is...*I don’t* like where it’s going...” (p. 18). It seems even those who enjoy pop music most still see the need for changes.

Potential for Change?

If we are disappointed, we have to wonder, can it change? Participant M seems to have given up, and she “can’t picture it changing” (p. 2). Participant H just laughed and said, “I would love to be able to change the s ... we call pop music!” (p. 7). Participant F would agree. He thinks “the only way consumers could change it would be by saying ‘we won’t buy this anymore’” and he contends that if we keep buying it, “then it won’t change and will possibly only get [worse]” (p. 6).

Pop (Music & Culture) as Positive/Realistic

While most seem to have given up, there are still a few die-hard fans and supporters of the genre. Participant K called attention to Avril Lavigne, who give us “a good mix of relationship related music and ‘find yourself/ be yourself’ music” (p. 3). Participant K continued by citing some of Avril’s lyrics:

Find yourself/ Cuz I can’t find you/ Be yourself/ Who are you?/...do what you do/ just keep on laughing/...so you go and make it happen. (p. 3)

Participant K continued praising female pop artists, because she said their music is ...specifically good for girls growing up, trying to figure out who they are, learn about relationships, getting through teen troubles...It's a good balance of anger, sadness, confusion, and empowerment. (Participant K, pp. 3-4)

Participant A applauds Mariah Carey, who she says has "never been apologetic ...Like even if she did do something [and] later apologize for it, she always was like 'Well, at that time, that's what I needed to do'" (p. 9).

Power of the People (in Readings)

Regardless of how much music evolves, we as an audience must evolve, if we hope to benefit, rather than deteriorate, from pop music.

Many people have become critical of how pop music lacks substance, but if we want to see changes, we have to make the changes. We have to watch what we buy, or buy into. We need to be careful with our spending and all other ways of consuming the products of the industry (listening to music, buying magazines, spending time skimming newspapers or online stories, tuning into news magazines on TV, and talking about pop culture with friends). We have to use these powers in good, and intelligent, ways.

Surely some music is "for entertainment only" but lest we be duped, we have to be at least a little more conscious of our consumption, the products, production, and byproducts as well as our readings. Hopefully this study has not only encouraged the practice of (negotiated and oppositional) reading, but also made an impact by starting such conversations.

The Future

In the future, there are so many angles from which we can study the same phenomenon, or others. It is important to keep the research questions in focus, but to be open to wherever findings can take us.

Implications for Future Research

This study contributed to the communication studies field by extending research in the area of critical studies. I may be naïve, but it is my hope that someday, somehow research like this can impact us all in a positive way. We can complain about “the noise” or we can try to do something about it. I choose to sing along, but also to be critical of my own interpretations.

The present study also started some great discussions among participants. While the goal of this study was not necessarily to educate students about theory, most participants were open to such a discussion. Even those who were not into the theoretical aspect remarked how much they enjoyed talking about music. It is my hope that they will take something from this study and share with others.

In the future, we would want to continue using triangulated methods. Specifically, a more rigorous content analysis would be necessary to compare the qualities of the text with readings. Further, a content analysis which examines pop music lyrics diachronically could offer valuable insight. I would propose doing such an analysis with software and also manually in order to microanalyze lyrics. I am optimistic that we can return to this, with even more great pieces to analyze in the future.

Extending Research – New Directions

While this study investigated a number of issues, there are still so many different directions in which we could go. A comparative analysis of pop music by males and females, for instance, might be a good place to start. Or, we could ask participants to evaluate other texts, like music videos. Another direction could lead us to comparing the images presented among different genres.

We could also expand on this research by looking for a more diverse audience, or a more unified audience. Interpretive communities were described in the literature review, and certainly we saw a trace of their influence in the focus groups. In the future, it would be interesting to

survey people who already constitute their own self-defined interpretive communities. Many such groups can be found online, in chat rooms and fan clubs.

The Future of Pop Music

While I cannot imagine where pop music will take us in the future (and I cannot imagine it getting any more futuristic), I sense and hope that some changes are on the horizon. The findings in this study show us that audience members can be reflexive of their consumption and interpretations. Some detest pop music, while even fans have a number of criticisms. Change will only occur if we do something. While we assume most changes will result from our spending habits, I argue that even more important changes can result in our interpretations. It would be presumptuous to think that this study can change everything, but perhaps it was impetus for smaller changes for certain individuals. The majority of the participants enjoyed talking about music, and I'm certain the dialogue will not end with this study.

In my opinion, which is shared by many participants here, we are already moving in a good direction, but we need to keep our eyes and ears on course. We need to oppose messages which demean us, even if it is merely in the form of negotiated readings. We can claim power in being reflexive.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A1

E-MAIL SENT TO MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY FACULTY MEMBERS

Dear [Faculty Member],

I am a graduate student in the Communication Studies department here at Montclair, and I would like your help in recruiting participants for my Masters' Thesis.

The title of my project is "Musical Mystique" and I am investigating what themes and relational scripts are present in contemporary popular music by female artists. Additionally, I am conducting focus groups and individual interviews to see how young audiences are reading these messages.

I would greatly appreciate if you could share the details of my study with your students. If any of your students would like to participate, they can e-mail me at younga2@mail.montclair.edu.

I am attaching flyers which I will be posting on campus, so you can see more specifically what I am looking for.

If you have any questions, you can contact me (younga2@mail.montclair.edu) or my thesis advisor, Dr. Christine Lemesianou (lemesianoc@mail.montclair.edu).

Thank you,

Amy Melissa Young
Grad Student
Communication Studies
Younga2@mail.montclair.edu
(856) 297-3834

APPENDIX A2

E-MAIL SENT TO RAMAPO COLLEGE FACULTY MEMBERS

Dear [Faculty Member],

I work here at Ramapo as a Graduate Residence Director in the College Park Apartments area. Additionally, I am a graduate student in the Communication Studies department at Montclair State University, and I would like your help in recruiting participants for my Masters' Thesis.

The title of my project is "Musical Mystique" and I am investigating what themes and relational scripts are present in contemporary popular music by female artists. Additionally, I am conducting focus groups and individual interviews to see how young audiences are reading these messages.

I would greatly appreciate if you could share the details of my study with your students. If any of your students would like to participate, they can e-mail me at ayoung1@ramapo.edu.

I am attaching flyers which I will be posting on campus, so you can see more specifically what I am looking for.

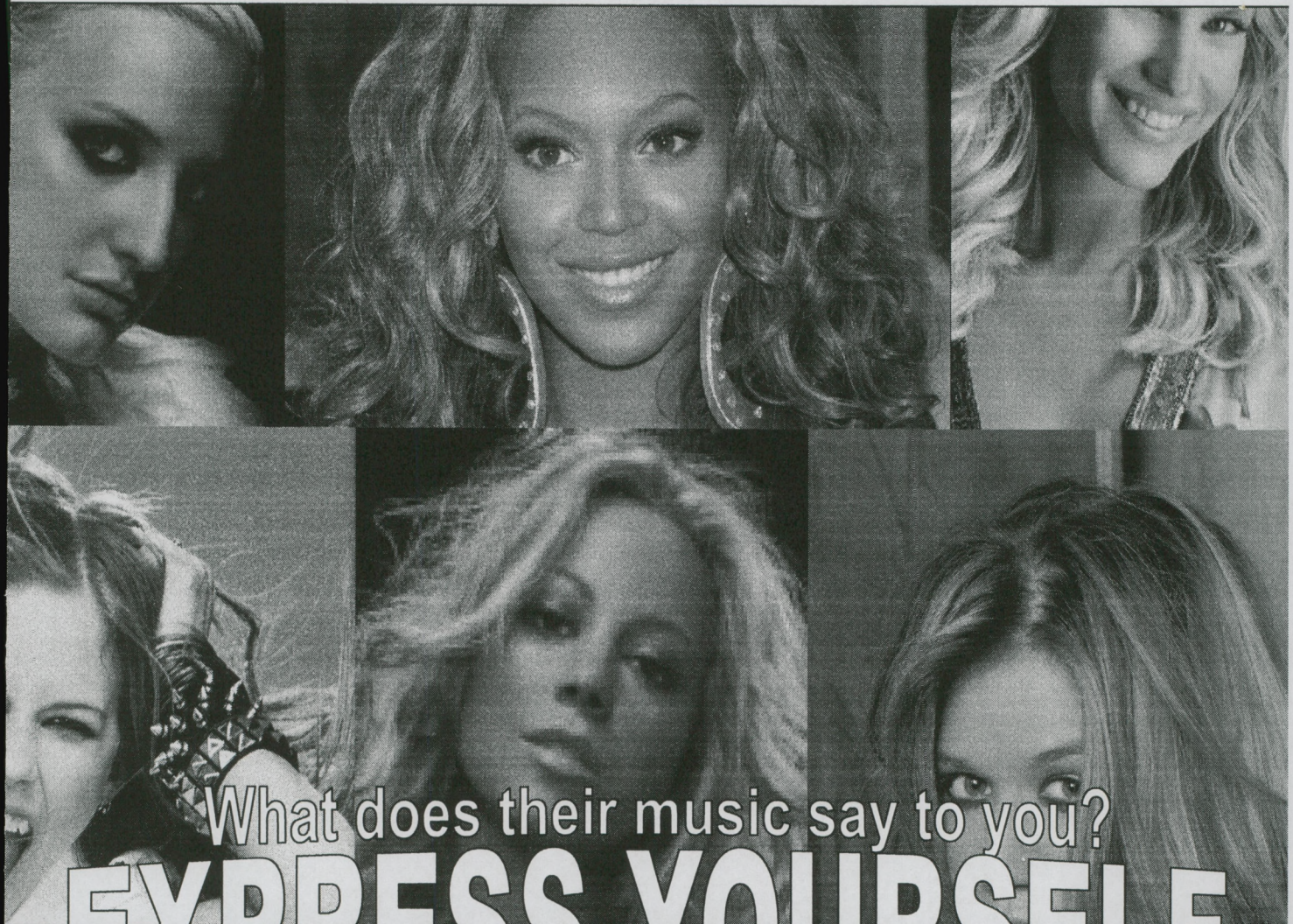
If you have any questions, you can contact me (ayoung1@ramapo.edu) or my thesis advisor, Dr. Christine Lemesianou (lemesianoc@mail.montclair.edu).

Thank you,

Amy Melissa Young
Graduate Residence Director

APPENDIX A3

FLYER DISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT CAMPUSES



What does their music say to you?

EXPRESS YOURSELF

by participating in Communication Research!

In less than an hour, you could help a grad student with her thesis and learn more about the music you love!

Individual interviews will run 20-30 minutes.
Focus groups will run about 45 minutes.

You can do just one or both, and feel free to bring your friends!

E-mail younga2@mail.montclair.edu for more details.

APPENDIX A4

www.facebook.com INVITATION

Hi [NAME],

My name is Amy and I am a grad student at Montclair (in the Communication Studies program). I am writing to you because I see that you like [FAVORITE ARTIST, AS SEEN IN PROFILE].

I am working on my thesis, and looking to interview people who listen to Mariah and other female popular artists (like Ashlee Simpson, Avril Lavigne, Beyonce, Jessica Simpson, and Mariah Carey).

Below is my invitation, which was approved by Montclair's Institutional Review Board. If you are interested, join my "Help me with My Masters Thesis" group (see my profile), and I'll keep you posted on my upcoming research...

Thanks!

Amy

Express Yourself!

What does today's pop music say to you?

In less than an hour,
you could help a grad student with her thesis
and learn more about the music you love!

Individual interviews will run 20-30 minutes.

Focus groups will run about 45 minutes.

You can do just one or both,
and feel free to bring your friends!

E-mail younga2@mail.montclair.edu
for more details.

APPENDIX A5

www.facebook.com GROUP INFORMATION

Help Me with My Master's Thesis :)**Montclair****Recent News**[edit](#)

I'm just starting this group to see if I can gather some participants for my thesis research . . . Join this group if you are interested, and I'll keep you posted on information about interviews and focus groups . . . Thanks for visiting :)

Photos

Displaying 4 of 7 photos.

[Add Photos](#) | [See All](#)

**Discussion Board**

Displaying 1 discussion topic.

[Start New Topic](#) | [See All](#)

focus group on Thursday at 5:30....who's in?

1 post by 1 person. Updated on Oct 9, 2006 at 3:06 PM.

Information[edit](#)**Group Info**

Name: Help Me with My Master's Thesis :)

Type: [Music - General](#)

Express Yourself!

What does today's pop music say to you?

In less than an hour,
you could help a grad student with her thesis
and learn more about the music you love!

Description: Individual interviews will run 20-30 minutes.
Focus groups will run about 45 minutes.
You can do just one or both,
and feel free to bring your friends!

E-mail younga2@mail.montclair.edu
for more details.



APPENDIX B1

CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Project Title:

Musical Mystique

Why is this study being done?

This study will assess how young people think about pop music performed by female artists.

What will happen while you are in the study?

You will talk with other college students about the meaning of music. You will also be asked questions about your experience with music. You can talk as much, or as little, as you like. This session will be recorded and later transcribed for further analysis.

Time:

This activity will take about 40 minutes. If you would like to also schedule an individual interview, this will take about 20-30 minutes. You are welcome to complete both processes, but you do not have to.

Risks:

You may recall unpleasant experiences or feel minor discomfort if you choose to discuss sensitive topics. These risks are no greater than those encountered in everyday life.

Benefits:

You may enjoy talking with others, and learn something new. This study will encourage you to think more about media. After this study, you might have a better sense of yourself and your relationships. Others may benefit from this study because it contributes to several disciplines (communication, media, and feminist studies). This report will be published as a Master's thesis.

Who will know that you are in this study?

Anonymity cannot be guaranteed in a group setting, and what you say may be published in the results. But, you will be given a pseudonym.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you if you choose to exit the group.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you if you choose to stop the interview.

Do you have any questions about this study?

Contact me at (younga2@mail.montclair.edu OR ayoung1@ramapo.edu).

Do you have any questions about your rights?

Phone or e-mail the IRB chair, Debra Zellner (zellnerd@mail.montclair.edu, 973-655-4327) or the IRB Administrator, Fitzgerald Edwards (edwardsf@mail.montclair.edu, 973-655-7781).

Please initial below to consent to the following:

It is okay to audiotape me while I am in this study:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

It is okay to videotape me while I am in this study:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

I would like to get a summary of this study:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

The copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

If you choose to be in this study, please fill in your lines below.

Print your name here

Sign your name here

Date

Amy Melissa Young

Name of Principal Investigator

Signature

Date

Christine A. Lemesianou, Ph.D.

Name of Faculty Sponsor

Signature

Date

The copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

A summary of study results will be available upon request.

APPENDIX B2

CONSENT FORM FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you fill in this form.

Study's Title:

Musical Mystique

Why is this study being done?

This study will assess how young people think about pop music performed by female artists.

What will happen while you are in the study?

You will be asked questions about your experience with music. You can talk as much, or as little, as you like. This session will be recorded and later transcribed for further analysis.

Time:

This interview will take about 20-30 minutes. If you would like to also participate in a focus group, this will take about 40 minutes. You are welcome to complete both processes, but you do not have to.

Risks:

You may recall unpleasant experiences or feel minor discomfort if you choose to discuss sensitive topics. These risks are no greater than those encountered in everyday life.

Benefits:

This interview will encourage you to think more about media. After this study, you might have a better sense of yourself and your relationships. Others may benefit from this study because it contributes to several disciplines (communication, media, and feminist studies). In addition, this report will be published as a Master's thesis.

Who will know that you are in this study?

What you say may be published in the results, but your name will not be connected. You will be given a pseudonym.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you if you choose to stop the interview.

Do you have any questions about this study?

Contact me at (younga2@mail.montclair OR ayoung1@ramapo.edu).

Do you have any questions about your rights?

Phone or e-mail the IRB chair, Debra Zellner (zellnerd@mail.montclair.edu, 973-655-4327) or the IRB Administrator, Fitzgerald Edwards (edwardsf@mail.montclair.edu, 973-655-7781).

Please initial below to consent to the following:

It is okay to audiotape me while I am in this study:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

It is okay to videotape me while I am in this study:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

I would like to get a summary of this study:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

The copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

If you choose to be in this study, please fill in your lines below.

Print your name here

Sign your name here

Date

Amy Melissa Young
Name of Principal Investigator

Signature

Date

Christine A. Lemesianou, Ph.D.
Name of Faculty Sponsor

Signature

Date

**The copy of this consent form is for you to keep.
A summary of study results will be available upon request.**

APPENDIX C

MUSIC CONSUMPTION SURVEY

Media Consumption Survey*Listening Behavior*

1. On average, how many days a week do you listen to music?

2. On average, how many hours a day do you listen to music?

3. How much money do you spend a year on music?

4. Where do you purchase music?
 - Store: _____
 - Online: _____
 - Other: _____

5. How many hours, each weekday, do you spend listening to music in the following environments?

Home _____ School _____ Work _____

6. What other actions do you perform while listening to music? (Check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> Getting ready for work/school	<input type="checkbox"/> Studying
<input type="checkbox"/> Driving	<input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping
<input type="checkbox"/> Eating	<input type="checkbox"/> Exercising
	<input type="checkbox"/> Other:

7. Which mode do you use most to listen to music? (please rank in order)

_____ Radio	_____ CD player
_____ Online	_____ Other:
_____ iPod/MP3 player	

8. Do you most often ...?
 - Listen selectively to music
 - Listen to music in the background

9. Do you most often...?
- Listen to music alone
 - Listen to music with friends or peers
10. Do you most often...?
- Think about and reflect on what songs are saying
 - Just enjoy the music
11. If a song that you do not like is playing, what do you do?
- Select another song
 - Turn the music off
 - Keep listening
 - Other: _____
12. What do you do if you like a song, but don't like what it is saying?

Musical Preferences

13. Rank, in order, your favorite types of music (do not number the ones you do not enjoy)

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| _____ Top 10 | _____ Country |
| _____ Pop | _____ Dance/Electronic |
| _____ Hip-Hop | _____ Indie/Folk |
| _____ R&B | _____ Jazz/Blues |
| _____ Rap | _____ Christian |
| _____ Alternative | _____ Oldies |
| _____ Rock | _____ Classical |
| _____ Classic Rock | _____ Soundtracks |
| _____ Heavy Metal | _____ Show Tunes |

14. What is currently your favorite song? (please list title and artist)
15. _____ Others: Write the lyrics of a song that you best relate to (please also write the song and artist)

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

“Welcome and thank you for coming. The reason I have asked you here today is because I have my own theories about today’s popular music, and I’d like to see what others think...I have chosen to talk about this particular artist, because I am familiar with her lyrics. What I don’t know, and what I’m curious to find out, is how other people interpret those lyrics...So I invite you today, to share as much or as little as you like about your own experiences with this music...”

“Before we begin, I will need your informed consent, so please take a moment to read through this form and sign if you agree to participate. Understand, too, that you can leave at any time if you no longer wish to participate.”

“I also am interested in consumption patterns. Once you have filled out your consent form, please fill out this quick survey. Your responses on this survey will not be connected to your responses in this interview, but used as aggregate data for this study. Once everyone is done with this survey, we will start our focus group.”

Research Questions: *Are audiences interacting in a reflective way to relational scripts offered through music? What specific relational scripts occur in popular music today?*

1. How are women represented in music?
2. What messages are most prevalent in popular music today? What messages are most prevalent in this artist’s music?
3. What songs most exemplify this message?
4. What artists are giving audiences similar messages?

Research Questions: *How are audiences reading the messages (dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional)? How do audiences internalize and/or reject these scripts? Does internalization/rejection correlate with the amount of exposure to certain lyrics? Does internalization correlate with the type of evaluation (positive/negative) of lyrics?*

5. How often would you say you are exposed to this artist’s music?
 - a. Do you listen to this music more because of its messages?
 - b. OR do you think of these messages more because of the music you listen to?
6. Which of this artist’s songs do you enjoy most?
7. Which of this artist’s songs do you agree with (internalize – read in a dominant-hegemonic manner)? Why?
8. What messages can you apply to your life? To your relationships?

Research Questions: *How can audiences enact and benefit from oppositional and negotiated readings? Do audiences see a need for change? If so, what are they doing about it?*

9. Which of this artist's songs do you disagree with (reject – read in a negotiated or oppositional manner)? Why?
10. Do you still enjoy these songs (this might imply negotiated readings)? Why?
11. If you don't like what an artist is saying, what can you do? What do you do?(stop listening? change how you feel about the message? Change how you feel about the artist?)
12. What types of lyrics leave you disappointed (for their representation of women or models of relationships)? If so, what changes would you like to see? How can these changes occur?

“Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. I appreciate your time and your individual responses. If you have any questions regarding this study, or if you would like a copy of the results, please contact me. If this discussion brought up any issues for you, I also have information on counseling services available.”

APPENDIX E

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

"Welcome and thank you for coming. The reason I have asked you here today is because I have my own theories about today's popular music, and I'd like to see what others think...I have chosen to talk about this particular artist, because I am familiar with her lyrics. What I don't know, and what I'm curious to find out, is how other people interpret those lyrics...So I invite you today, to share as much or as little as you like about your own experiences with this music..."

"Before we begin, I will need your informed consent, so please take a moment to read through this form and sign if you agree to participate. Understand, too, that you can leave at any time if you no longer wish to participate."

"I also am interested in consumption patterns. Once you have filled out your consent form, please fill out this quick survey. Your responses on this survey will not be connected to your responses in this interview, but used as aggregate data for this study. Please let me know when you are finished with this survey and ready to begin."

1. Aside from entertainment, what other purposes does music serve for you?
2. Who is your favorite artist? Music genre?
3. Why is this your favorite artist? Music genre?
4. What do you think this artist's music says about women? About relationships?
5. Do you think this is consistent with most popular music today?
6. In what ways are these messages realistic? In what ways are these messages unrealistic?
7. In what ways are these messages positive? In what ways are these messages negative?
8. How do you personally identify with messages in the music?
9. What relational scripts are present in your favorite music?
10. What relational scripts are present in most music by female artists today?
11. Do messages in songs provide you with useful models for your own relationships?
12. How have these songs influenced your relationships?
13. How have your relationships influenced your listening behavior?
14. What events in your life have influenced your musical preferences?

"Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. I appreciate your time and your responses. If you have any questions regarding this study, or if you would like a copy of the results, please contact me. If this discussion brought up any issues for you, I also have information on counseling services available."