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Popular-Music Media Literacy:

Recommendations for the Education Curriculum

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The data presented, the statements made, and the views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors and are based on the report of the Division 46 Task Force on the Sexualization of Popular Music (2018). This report is based on the most recent literature and the recommendations made are specific to education curricula. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Chrysalis L. Wright, Department of Psychology, University of Central Florida, 4000Central Florida Blvd., Orlando, FL 32816 E-mail: Chrysalis.Wright@ucf.edu.

Tweet:
Including popular music media literacy in the curriculum may promote awareness and best consumer practices of music consumption that could combat the potential negative effects of exposure to sexualized music

Bullet points:

- Popular music consumption is the second most widely accessed mass medium (behind television), with children and teens being particularly heavy consumers.
- Recent estimates suggest that 57% of popular music contains some form of sexual reference.
- Increased exposure to sexual content in popular music can impact gender ideals and identity development, self-objectification and female sexualization, permissive sexual attitudes and risky sexual behaviors, as well as acceptance of sexual and gendered violence.
- The primary school curriculum does not adequately provide education regarding media influence.
- Recommendations for inclusion of popular music media literacy in the curriculum, based on the tenets of social learning theory, are provided.

Abstract

Advances in technology have made music more readily accessible and geographic distance irrelevant in dissemination of music. Greater access to popular music has resulted in greater consumption by both children and adolescents. Popular music in the United States may contain the most sexual content, compared to other forms of media. Exposure to such content is associated with the development of gender ideals and identity, objectification and sexualization of women, permissive sexual attitudes and risky sexual behaviors, as well as greater acceptance of sexual and gendered violence. Even so, current education standards do not include media literacy, much less popular music media literacy, and do not prepare children for best practices related to media consumption. Some of the inadequacies in current education standards include introducing education about media influence on personal development at an age far later than children's engagement with contemporary media, avoidance of controversial topics, and not making this education compulsory. Considering the lack of media literacy provided in the curriculum, we outline specific foundational curricular recommendations related to media education and specifically for popular-music media literacy.

Keywords: popular music, sexual content, media literacy, education

The digital revolution increased access to media platforms for television, film, video games and music (among others). This has contributed to more widespread and increased media consumption (Commonsense Media, 2015; Gutnick, Robb, Takeuchi, & Kotler, 2011; Hennessy, 2010; Linn, 2012). Popular music consumption is the second most widely accessed mass medium (behind television), with children and teens being particularly heavy consumers (Commonsense Media, 2015; Kaiser Family Foundation; 2010). Children and young people interact extensively with music, and this interaction gradually increases with age (Gonzalez de Rivas et al., 2009; Kaestle, Halpern, & Brown, 2007). It has been reported that 73% of teens prefer listening to music more than engaging in any other media activity (Common Sense Media, 2015). Furthermore, 57% of 8-12-year olds and 81% of 13-18-year olds listen to music daily (Common Sense Media, 2015). Indeed, children and young people spend over two-and-a-half hours each day listening to music (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Additionally, American adolescents spend about four hours each week viewing music videos (Kaestle et al., 2007).

For consumers of all ages, advances in technology have made music more readily accessible and geographic distance irrelevant in its distribution (Warburton, Roberts & Christenson, 2014). Additionally, media actively construct reality for many consumers, rather than simply transmitting it (Rodesiler, 2010). It is not necessarily the overt meaning of a single image or message that will shape attitudes and identities, but the cumulative effect of the underlying themes or connotations found in media that increases the likelihood that this concept will be adopted or accepted as reality (Dines, 2010; Hall et al., 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a). Given the modern music-media environment and how popular music content can affect socialization, this paper argues for educating young people about its potential negative effects, especially concerning sexuality and gender.

Sexual Content in Popular Music

In the United States, music (compared to other forms of media) contains the most sexual content (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). Additionally, sexual content in music has increased over the past 50 years (Hall, West, & Hill, 2012; Smiler, Shewmaker, & Hearon, 2017). Recent estimates suggest that 57% of popular music contains some form of sexual reference (Terry, Ramage, Gardner, Van Alfen, & Gregson, 2016).

Music videos frequently sexualize and objectify women (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Flynn, Craig, Anderson, & Holody, 2016; Ross & Coleman, 2011; Turner, 2011; Wallis, 2011). While there was no reported change in the level of depicted sexuality and sexual objectification in popular music videos between 1995 and 2016, ambiguous sexual expressions have increased (i.e., sexual gestures, sexual poses, sexual facial expressions) (Karsay, Matthes, Buchsteiner, & Grosser, 2018). Male artists are more likely to include sexual content in their music and to objectify both males and females compared to female artists (Smiler et al., 2017). Female artists are more likely to be portrayed as sexually objectified compared to male artists (Karsay et al., 2018) and are more likely to objectify themselves (Flynn et al., 2016). Additional sexual references in music include sex as a priority for men, sexual violence, women defined by "having a man," simulated sexual acts, and sexual innuendos (Andsager & Roe, 2003; Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning, 2007). Music genre and racial differences in sexual content are also prevalent. Hip hop, rap, R&B, soul, and pop music contain higher levels of sexual content compared to other music genres (Flynn et al., 2016; Holody, Anderson, Craig, & Flynn, 2016; Smiler et al., 2017; Terry et al., 2016; Turner, 2011; Wright & Qureshi, 2015), and minority music artists are more likely to display sexual content in their music in comparison to White artists (Karsay et al., 2018).

Consequences of Exposure to Sexual Content in Popular Music

Concerns about overt sexual content in music media and the potential impact on youth culture have grown since the rise of commercial music (Street, 2001). Increased exposure to sexual content in popular music can impact gender ideals and identity development (e.g., Ey & Cupit, 2013; Gonzalez de Rivas et al., 2009; Timmerman et al., 2008; ter Bogt, Engles, Bogers, & Kloostermann, 2010), self-objectification and female sexualization (e.g., Bell, Lawton, & Dittmar, 2007; Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Karsay, Matthes, Platzer, & Plinke, 2018; Rousseau, Rodgers, & Eggermont, 2019; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012), permissive sexual attitudes and engaging in risky sexual behaviors (e.g., Carpentier, Knobloch-Westerwick, & Blumhoff, 2007; Coyne & Padilla-Walker, 2015; Johnson-Baker, Markhan, Baumler, Swain, & Emery, 20165; Wright & Centeno, 2018; Wright & Rubin, 2017), as well as acceptance of sexual and gendered violence (e.g., Aubrey, Hopper, & Mbure, 2011; Kistler & Lee, 2009).

Gender Ideals and Identity Development

Exposure to sexual content in music can impact the identity and gender role development of children and young people (Bosacki, Francis-Murray, Pollon, & Elliott, 2006; Gonzalez de Rivas et al., 2009; Timmerman et al., 2008; Wall, 2003), stereotypical gender role attitudes and beliefs (Karsay et al., 2018), sex role stereotypic schemas, and gender ideals (ter Bogt et al., 2010; Ward, Hansbroughn & Walker, 2005). Exposure to sexual content in music likely shapes children's and young people's sexual attitudes and behavior, which may influence gender role expectations and identity development (Andsager & Roe, 2003; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, 2006b; Walter, 2010). Young children may experience premature sexualization as a result of exposure to sexual content in music (Brown et al., 2006; Pardun et al., 2005) and may adopt an

adult persona in an attempt to emulate popular music artists' portrayed image (Ey & Cupit, 2013).

Objectification and Sexualization

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) provides a framework for understanding the impact of sexual content in music on consumers, particularly adolescents. This theory proposes that exposure to a variety of sexually objectifying experiences from media outlets and interpersonal relationships socialize women to adopt an observer's perspective as the primary view of their own bodies. According to objectification theory, increased exposure to sexualization causes women to view their bodies as objects separate from their person. This perspective, known as self-objectification, results from habitually engaging in body surveillance where individuals monitor their own body in comparison to cultural ideals (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Exposure to sexual content in popular music may be related to increased self-objectification and self-sexualizing behaviors among women consumers (Aubrey & Gerding, 2015; Karsay et al., 2018; Karsay & Matthes, 2016; Trekels, Karsay, Eggermont, & Vandenbosch, 2018). In fact, even limited exposure to sexual content has a significant impact on self-objectification (Roberts & Gettman, 2004).

Using objectification theory as a framework, a growing body of research has helped illuminate a myriad of negative consequences of self-objectification stemming from sexual content in music, including an impact on beauty ideals, body surveillance, body esteem, dieting patterns, anxiety levels, and mathematical performance (Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Music video exposure has also been related to greater perceptions of appearance importance and weight concerns in adolescent females (Borzekowski, Robinson, & Killen, 2000), feeling less attractive, having less confidence, experiencing lower levels of body

satisfaction, greater feelings of being overweight (Tiggemann & Slater, 2004), increased body dissatisfaction (Bell et al., 2007), and more negative body image in African American teenage girls (Peterson, Wingood, DiClemente, Harrington, & Davies, 2007).

Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors

Consumption of music television is correlated to the endorsement of sexually permissive attitudes among adolescent girls (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995) and young women (Zhang, Miller, & Harrison, 2008). Similar relationships link acceptance of sex-role stereotypes, especially negative beliefs and attitudes toward women, and consumption of pop music (Strouse, Goodwin, & Roscoe, 1994), hip-hop music (ter Bogt et al., 2010), and music videos (Ward et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2008). Sexually suggestive popular music also influences social judgments regarding potential romantic partners (Carpentier et al., 2007) and dating behaviors (Gueguen, Jacob, & Lamy, 2010). It has been speculated that the association between sexual content in music and sexual attitudes and intentions may be mediated by perceived peer behavior (Frison, Vandenbosch, Trekels, & Eggermont, 2015; Johnson-Baker et al., 2016).

Exposure to sexual content in music is also associated with engaging in risky sexual behaviors (e.g., early age at sexual intercourse, multiple sexual partners, engaging in unprotected sex) (Coyne & Padilla-Walker, 2015; Frison et al., 2015; Johnson-Baker et al., 2016; Peterson et al., 2007; Wingood et al., 2003; Wright & Brandt, 2015; Wright & Centeno, 2018; Wright & Qureshi, 2015; Wright & Rubin, 2017). This association varies based on music genre with rap, hip hop, pop, and R&B having more of an affect compared to other genres (Wright & Qureshi, 2015; Wright & Rubin, 2017). Music artists can influence consumers' sexual behaviors not only through their music lyrics and videos but also via their public image, brand, and social media posts (Wright & Qureshi, 2015; Wright & Rubin, 2017).

Sexual and Gendered Violence

Research has documented the association between exposure to sexual content in music and acceptance of female token resistance (van Oosten, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2015), the active, sexual role of men (Frison et al., 2015), male sexual dominance (Rousseau et al., 2019), and sexually offensive behaviors of men toward women (Hust, Rodgers, & Bayly, 2017; Rodgers & Hust, 2018). All of these behaviors may result in acceptance of and engaging in sexual or gendered violence. Additionally, music that portrays sexual violence may contribute to endorsing sexual violence and sexually aggressive behavior (e.g., Kistler & Lee, 2009). Both long- and short-term exposure to sexually violent lyrics may have a subtle impact on beliefs and attitudes, including reduced respect for women and approval of sexual violence and gendered aggression. (e.g., Aubrey et al., 2011; Kaestle et al., 2007; Kistler & Lee, 2009; Rubin, West, & Mitchell, 2001). Experimentally, these attitudes can lead to actual aggressive behavior (Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2006).

Public Education Standards

Considering the potential negative influences from exposure to sexual content in music media, popular music-media literacy may promote awareness and best consumer practices about music consumption. Media literacy is defined as

> a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. (Center for Media Literacy, nd)

The primary school curriculum in the United States however, does not adequately provide education regarding media influence on personal development (Ey, 2016).

The current education standards in the United States were launched in 2009 with the aim of providing consistency across the country (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). While the federal curriculum standards are not mandatory, numerous states have adopted them in their education system (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). Nevertheless, these federal curriculum standards are limited in preparing children for media consumption and media literacy (Ey, 2016). Some inadequacies include introducing education about media influence on personal development at an age far later than children's engagement with contemporary media, avoidance of controversial topics, and not ensuring this education is compulsory (Ey, 2016).

Popular Music Media Literacy: Recommendations

Despite an increasing need for media literacy, media education programs within the curriculum are sparse and the majority that do exist do not focus on music. Rather, they often focus on newspapers and other print media (Olson & Pollard, 2004), television advertising (Draper et al., 2015), video games (Walther, Hanwinkle, & Morgenstern, 2014), social media (Soetaert, Vlieghe, & Vandermeersche, 2014), and fake news (Horn & Veermans, 2019). This is problematic as adolescents have little-to-no knowledge of the core concepts of critical media literacy when it comes to music (Robillard, 2012). Adolescents need tools that can help them decipher and reject the sexually laden, overtly sexist and misogynistic messages that are often included in music lyrics and videos (Robillard, 2012).

Media literacy can improve young consumers ability to identify the main ideas contained within media (Hobbs & Frost, 2013). A recent meta-analysis examining the effects of media literacy on adolescents found that media literacy interventions had a positive effect on media

literacy skills as well as reducing positive attitudes towards and intentions to engage in health compromising behaviors (e.g., smoking, risky sexual behavior, alcohol consumption) (Vahedi, Sibalis, & Sutherland, 2018). In particular, this research found that media literacy had the largest effect on reducing positive attitudes towards, and intentions for engaging in, risky sexual behaviors (Vahedi et al., 2018). Experts agree that media literacy and education need more attention, especially during the elementary school years (Ey, 2016). Considering the content of popular music, music consumption trends, and the role of media in shaping attitudes and behaviors, this need relates directly to popular music media literacy as well (Ey, 2016; Flynn et al., 2016).

Specific recommendations related to media education in general would base lessons on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), with the aim to skill children and young people in protective measures so that young consumers might avoid the potentially harmful effects of media content. Essential competencies in media literacy programs (Hobbs, 2010) should include skills and constructs such as access, analysis and utilization, creation, reflection, and action. Previous research has highlighted that media education should discuss easy access to media (Olson & Pollard, 2004), balance "empowerment" and "protectionist" orientations (Sekariashih et al., 2016), provide usage skills and content creation skills (Sekariashih, McDermott, O'Malley, Olsen, & Scharrer, 2016), not discourage healthy media use or exposure (Sekariashih et al., 2016), and provide the tools needed to compare and contrast media from different cultures and countries (Hobbs, 2010). Media education should likewise provide an avenue for consumers to question the intentions and contents of media that they consume (Ey, 2014; Rodesiler, 2010), and aim to ensure that consumers do not perceive media as reflecting the real world (Robillard, 2012).

Based on the research reviewed in this paper, we make the following recommendations regarding media education:

(1) Media literacy, including music media, should be included in all curriculum, introduced at a young age and included at every grade level, and should cover controversial topics related to media content in an age-appropriate manner.

(2) Media literacy should overlap with health and sex education in addressing issues in personal development, gender identity, behavioral scripts, and stereotyping and sexual self-presentation portrayed in music media, reinforcing self-esteem based on character and behavior, alongside a healthy and balanced 'media diet' (Warburton, 2012) similar to the healthy food diet that is already taught in schools.

Our recommendations specific to popular music media literacy include:

(1) Popular music media literacy should be embedded in all media education curricula and should include understanding, analysis, and reflection on media content related to unhealthy ideals associated with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality as well as social context, control, resistance, and pleasure as it relates to media use (Ey, 2014; Tobias, 2014) based on a consumer's stage in development (Wright et al., 2016).

(2) Information for parents, caregivers, and educators should be included and should include steps that they can take to facilitate media literacy among children and youth (Ey, 2014).

(3) Education regarding the music industry must be included and should explain that music content comes from the music artist and businesspeople at the record labels (Tobias, 2014) with the aim to market and sell products (Ey & McInnes, 2015). Discussion about consumerism and media should also be incorporated in popular music media literacy (Ey, 2014).

(4) Popular music media literacy aimed at young children should include topics such as the difference between fantasy and reality and celebrity stage persona versus real-life persona (Ey, 2016; Wright et al., 2016).

(5) Multimedia resources should be implemented to provide educational materials and resources that represent ethnic and cultural diversity.

(6) Hands-on activities should be implemented to demonstrate autotune, photo-shop, and music creation with instruments and accompanying tools.

(7) Popular music media literacy designed for adolescents should provide the means for creating their own music to aid their understanding of the portrayal of gender roles in music (Chung, 2007). Adolescents should also examine the social functions of music (Hobbs, 2009) and understand the history behind music genres and the contexts that contribute to them (Tobias, 2014).

Conclusion

This report details the existing research exploring the influence of sexual content in music on young consumers, including its impact on gender and identity development, objectification and sexualization, sexual attitudes and behaviors, and sexual and gendered violence. As a whole, the research reviews the potential negative impact of exposure to sexual content in music on a variety of social judgments, sex-related beliefs, and behaviors. However, research in this area is not without limitations.

Research examining the impact of sexual content in music on consumers thus far has focused on sexualized music that is overwhelmingly heteronormative. Most research in this area has been conducted in the United States and most of the research focuses on the sexualization of women in music media and the impact relative to women, with few investigations examining the

impact of sexual depictions of men in music. Much research in this area is also based on correlational research designs, with few studies examining the impact of sexual content in music content using longitudinal or experimental research designs. Additional research is needed, internationally, across genres, across methods of interaction (videos/watching, CD/Radio/listening), across cultures and ethnicities, and across age groups to broaden our understanding in this field.

This report provides recommendations for popular music media literacy in the education curriculum. To be clear, these recommendations are not just a call to parents, educators, or policymakers. The health and well-being of young people should be a collective concern for all, including those who make a livelihood in the music industry. Working together to ensure optimal outcomes for the next generation is a shared and worthy task.

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