Portrayal of Gender Roles in Music Television

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Students (N = 429; women = 273, men = 156) enrolled at a junior college and state university in central California were assigned to 1 of 4 conditions (visual only, audiovisual, audiovisual with discussion, and a no-videos-shown condition) and asked to view three videos commonly seen on Music Television (MTV). At the conclusion of each video, participants filled out a questionnaire designed to elicit their perception(s) of particular gender role behaviors, such as sexism, objectification, etc. Factor analysis revealed the presence of three factors: Male Power, Female Power, and Overt Sexuality. Further analysis showed that factor scores were not significantly different by condition. Although the format of MTV is attuned to society's concerns, it still presents gender role stereotypes that are traditional and subtle.

Researchers have analyzed various forms of television content in an attempt to better understand how each uniquely distorts everyday life (e.g., Craig, 1992). They have also examined the presentation of racial minorities, the elderly, sex roles, social behavior, and family role structures and interactions (Brown, 1976; Craig, 1992; Jeffries, 1986; Kalof, 1993; Lovdal, 1989; Rubey, 1991; R. Sommers-Flanagan, J. Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993; Sun & Lull, 1986). Generally, these researchers have found that traditional and stereotypical representations of life prevail in television programming and advertising (Vincent, Davis, & Boruszowski, 1987). The effect that different types of formats in television programming have on viewers is an ongoing area of research, and an area that we address in this paper.

Over the last few decades, equality issues for women have been in the forefront of the mass media. Equality gains have not fully materialized, however. Women still are overrepresented in statistics related to poverty, earn less than men for comparable jobs, and continue to be demeaned in the mass media, including commercials, music videos, and movies (Dominick, 1979; Franzoi, 1996). For example, women continue to be negatively portrayed in television in subtle forms, although their roles are no longer relegated to those of housekeepers, men’s attendants, or the “weak sex” (Dominick, 1979).

Many positive changes have occurred in television programming over the last two decades, but more quantifiable changes must occur for gender equality to exist. In television today, women are still underrepresented in positions of authority, and they are portrayed more for their sexual appeal than for their intellectual contributions (R. Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993). This subjective portrayal of women in television is not confined to a specific format, but is seen on television’s prime time (Dominick, 1979), commercials (Craig, 1992), and rock music videos (Vincent et al., 1987). Although television programs can reflect actual discrimination of women, these

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programs need not perpetuate such gender inequality. As a socializing agent, television has the potential to set the model for gender equality (Bandura & Walters, 1963).

On the other hand, subtle messages in rock music video programming are difficult to assess, with some studies finding equivocal results. For instance, Rubey (1991) examined the effects of programs typically shown on Music Television (MTV), programming which is characterized by rapid, visual images of glamorous, good-looking people, some nudity, and some violence. Based on the results of a qualitative study of the programs shown on MTV, Rubey concluded that most of the programs shown on MTV were innocuous; for many individuals these programs were “thought provoking.” To Rubey, people who watch MTV are cognizant viewers, able to separate fantasy from reality. In contrast, R. Sommers-Flanagan et al. (1993) examined music videos shown on MTV and concluded they perpetuate gender role stereotypes. Other researchers have found similar negative effects, particularly with regard to rock music videos (Toney & Weaver, 1994; Took & Weiss, 1994; Vincent et al., 1987).

Experimental evidence also shows that viewing rock music videos can exacerbate negative gender stereotypes. Hansen (1989) found that viewers who saw rock music videos that depicted men acting “macho” and women being “sexually submissive” tended to endorse gender stereotypes more often than viewers who saw neutral videos. This experiment suggests a causal link between the portrayal of gender stereotypes in music videos and viewers’ perceptions of social reality. As a result, we have a reliable overview of the consequences of direct (blatant) manifestations of watching these videos. Less is known, however, of what might be the subtle (latent) consequences of watching negative gender stereotypes on MTV music videos.

Some evidence suggests subtle messages are present in music videos. Christenson and Peterson (1988) found that music genres are organized into several meta-genres. In analyzing 26 different music genres (e.g., jazz, classical, soul, rock, etc.), they found that racial origin of music was a powerful “factor” in determining music preference for both men and women. However, other factor structures were different for men and women. For a factor with different forms of rock music, heavy rock had higher factor loadings for men (loadings are mathematical coefficients showing degree of association between variables and factors). For women, these different forms of rock excluded heavy metal. Perhaps this gender difference is a manifestation of the degradation of women shown in heavy rock (Took & Weiss, 1994), as opposed to musical genres that are more subtle and latent in form.

Although the manifest content of television programming has changed, practically no studies have investigated subtle messages embedded in it. Content analysis of television programming provides some answers (Dominick, 1979; R. Summers-Flanagan et al., 1993). However, these analyses refer to the content of those programs and less to the perceptions of viewers. Thus, in this study we examined (a) how content analysis of music videos can be organized so that any subtle meaning embedded in music videos can be assessed and (b) what differences exist between viewers and nonviewers of music videos in this latent content. Additionally, we explored (c) reasons that can help explain the origin of these viewer differences and (d) possible gender differences in how men and women are portrayed in music videos. We center our analysis on music videos, particularly of the type seen on MTV. We take this approach because rock music videos contain the strongest gender stereotypes (Franzoi, 1996) and because they are directed at young audiences, some of the most impressionable members of our society (Schuman & Scott, 1989).

Method

Participants

Participants \((n = 429; \text{women} = 273, \text{men} = 156)\) consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in Introductory Psychology, Gender Roles, and Child Psychology courses at a junior college and state university in central California. Participants were between 16 and 58 years of age \((M = 23.47, SD = 7.67)\), with women \((M = 23.86, SD = 7.79)\) tending to be slightly older than men \((M = 22.49, SD = 7.00)\). Participants were recruited from classes, student clubs, and through informal channels (friends of students who decided to participate and who agreed to tell others). All participants were 16 years of age or older, and all signed informed consent forms. They also were assured complete anonymity and were informed of their option to withdraw during all phases of the study.

Materials

The test instrument consisted of a survey containing 15 questions, each scored on the basis of an 8-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“not present”) to 8 (“consistently presented as a major theme”). These questions were adopted from a study conducted by R. Sommers-Flanagan et al. (1993). These researchers developed categories “designed to focus on sex role behaviors frequently identified as stereotypically male or female . . . [and] other sexually oriented behaviors” (p. 746), and focused on seven
categories (Dominance/Subservience, Aggression [Implicit and Explicit], Aggression with sexuality, Objectification, and Sexuality [Implicit and Explicit]). The present study extends these categories by modifying the questions to include a gender-based origin (e.g., “Objectification” was divided into the separate categories of “Male portrayed as object or decoration” and “Female portrayed as object or decoration”). A question asking the participants to rate the presence/absence of “overt sexism” was also added. It should be noted that R. Sommers-Flanagan et al.’s study was qualitative, reporting the frequency of major categories trained judges saw in a large set of videos. Our study sought to replicate, quantify, and extend their results using a questionnaire format.

The procedure for video selection consisted of the following: Eighteen hours of MTV were recorded from March 21–24, 1995, during the time periods of midnight to 6:00 p.m., 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. The tapes were then screened for duplications, and 20 videos were then randomly selected. These videos were shown to 10 individuals (5 men, 5 women), who rated them on themes of aggression, violence, and sexuality. A consensus model was used for the rating system (R. Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993) in which the raters openly discussed their ratings; if differences existed, they watched the videos again until group consensus was achieved. Three videos were selected on the basis of the raters’ agreement that these videos were representative of MTV: (a) “Red Light Special,” by TLC, which rated high on the theme of sexuality and relatively low on aggression and violence; “Hold On,” by Jamie Walter, which rated high on the themes of aggression and violence but relatively low on sexuality; and “Hold My Hand,” by Hootie and the Blowfish, which rated relatively low on all three themes. Additional criteria for selection were that all three videos were of similar musical styles (contemporary), and the combination represented a diversity of ethnicities and genders, an important factor according to Christenson and Peterson (1988).

Procedure

Participants were assigned to one of four viewing conditions: (a) visual only (n = 62)—without the sound component of the video; (b) audio and visual (n = 80), in which participants could see and hear the videos but not discuss the content of what they were watching; (c) audio, visual, and discussion allowed (n = 216), in which participants were told to imagine they were home and to feel free to bring up anything for discussion as they watched the videos; and (d) no videos shown—control group (n = 71). All participants were told this was a study on their attitudes and perceptions with regard to MTV and its presentation of male and female gender roles. They were also told the study was voluntary and anonymous. After this presentation, the participants read and signed the informed consent forms. Participants in the video viewing conditions (a–c) watched all three videos, which were counterbalanced to reduce order effects. After viewing each video, participants filled out the instrument shown in the Appendix. The control group did not watch any videos; rather, they were asked to provide ratings of those videos that came to their mind when they thought of MTV. All participants were debriefed on the hypotheses of the study after concluding their participation.

Results

The ratings of each participant were averaged across the three videos they watched, and data for the three viewing conditions (a–c, n = 354) were combined. This was done to determine if a factor structure existed for the types of videos the participants watched in this study—a structure that should be present regardless of the format on which the participants watched these videos, and hence why we combined data from the viewing conditions. A principal component analysis of the 15 questions was conducted. The Kaiser criterion, which extracts for rotation the number of factors with eigenvalues of one or higher, as well as varimax rotation were used. The solution produced three factors that accounted for 56.5% of the variance in the 15 items: (a) Female Power, (b) Male Power, and (c) Overt Sexuality (see Table 1).

We labeled and interpreted the three factors as follows: The Female Power factor included perceptions of women as aggressive and/or violent towards men, powerful, or as the initiators of sexual advances (α = .81; accounted for 36% of the variance). The Male Power factor included perceptions of violence, aggression, and/or domination by men over women, as well as perception of women being seen as vulnerable or weak (α = .84; accounted for 11% of the variance). Finally, the Overt Sexuality factor included perceptions of sexuality, but also included objectification of women and perceptions of men as being the initiators of sexual advances (α = .85; accounted for 9% of the variance). It should be noted the names we chose to label our factors were somewhat arbitrary; however, based on our reading of the literature, they seem to make sense, as will become evident given our subsequent discussion.

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1We also conducted principal component analysis for ratings of each video by itself. However, analyzing the videos separately did not produce an interpretable factor structure.
Factor scores for each of the three factors were computed as the average of the variables within each factor, adjusting for missing data. That is, if six variables loaded on the factor, the six ratings were added and were divided by 6 to arrive at the factor score. If among the six variables one had missing data, the sum of the variables was divided by 5, and so on, if more than one variable had missing data.

Table 2 presents the results of three one-way analyses of variance (each factor score compared across conditions). Most apparent in Table 2 is the control group; these participants consistently overestimated the subtle content of music videos for each factor compared to the other groups. That is, the group that did not see any videos (control group), but who were asked to think about videos they had seen in the past, consistently overestimated the amount of Female Power ($M = 3.75$), Male Power ($M = 5.20$), and presence of Overt Sexuality ($M = 5.98$).

Only in the factor of Overt Sexuality were there any significant differences found among the experimental groups (between the audio/visual and audio/visual/discussion groups). It should be noted that giving people the chance to talk about these videos may have polarized their opinion, which might have reduced the variance for this group ($SD = 0.86$). It is also possible that because this was the weakest factor (accounting for 9% of the variance), any differences might be due to instability of the factor.

Finally, a $t$ test was conducted to test gender differences in terms of the validity of the Male Power and Female Power factors—one would expect higher ratings for the former than the latter given gender inequality in real life. In fact, this was the case, with Male Power having a mean rating of 3.86 ($SD = 1.17$) and Female Power having a mean rating of 3.10 ($SD = 0.85$), with the difference between these two mean ratings significant, $t(390) = 13.67, p < .01$.

Also, a manipulation check was conducted to make sure the participants’ ratings were their responses to themes in the videos, and not the popu-
larity of the videos they were watching (not to be confused with singer popularity, which we did not measure). Whereas the three videos were rated significantly different from each other on popularity, $F(2,1017) = 74.80; p < .001$, differences across these three groups on theme ratings (factor scores) were not significantly different from each other (i.e., no significant differences were found across the four different viewing conditions; see Table 1), other than on the Overt Sexuality factor, which was explained above. The result of this manipulation check suggests that, although participants could recognize the popularity of the videos, this recognition did not significantly bias their perception of the thematic contents of the factors.

### Discussion

The first hypothesis tested for the presence of subtle meanings embedded in music videos. We found that 15 different gender stereotypes could be succinctly captured in three factors: Female Power, Male Power, and Overt Sexuality. Underneath the surface of the blatant messages one sees in music videos, over 50% can be explained in terms of power and the sexual roles expected of men and women in television programs and society (i.e., the three factors we found). Our analysis thus complements and quantifies the work other researchers have done on content analysis and major themes in music videos (R. Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993).

The second hypothesis tested for differences between viewers and nonviewers of music videos in this latent content; we found some surprising results. Specifically, we found that people who are asked to recall themes from music videos they have seen tended to overestimate the presence of stereotypes present in those videos. This finding is a cause for concern because perceptions guide social reality (Asch, 1956), encouraging people to conform to the status quo (in this case accepting gender stereotypes). One potential weakness is that we do not know what the control group recalled when asked to think about MTV music videos and the prevalence of the 15 themes we presented to them. It is possible we might have gotten what Rosenthal and Rosnow (1991) refer to as the “good subject” effect; where participants may have correctly anticipated the bases of the study. We are unable to completely rule out this explanation. However, the fact the control group consistently overperceived the prevalence of these subtle themes, gives us some bases for confidence in these results (see Table 2).

The third hypothesis tested the origin of differences between viewers and nonviewers in latent content. Several plausible explanations emerged. First, it is possible that people who watch music videos justify the portrayal of gender inequality they see by using cognitive dissonance (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). This theory posits that if we experience an aversive state (and watching women being degraded could induce such a state), we will attempt to eliminate that negative state by changing our behaviors or attitudes. Because people enjoy watching videos, they are more likely to change their attitudes about them than to stop watching them. We can expect this effect to be true in popular music videos, where viewers would be more likely to downplay any negative portrayal of gender stereotypes.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>Female Power</th>
<th>Male Power</th>
<th>Overt Sexuality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$M^*$</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>$M^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Only</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3.10a</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>3.84a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio/Visual</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>2.99a</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>3.57a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/V &amp; Discuss</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>2.92a</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>3.53a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>3.75b</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>5.20b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^*$Same letters indicate that means are not significantly different from each other—using the Tukey procedure ($p < .05$).
being tampered with, they will do the opposite—
either overestimate or underestimate the presence
of negative gender stereotypes. Because the partici-
pants were behavioral sciences students, this expla-
nation makes intuitive sense. However, it is unlikely
that all participants across the video viewing condi-
tions felt the same way, as the mean rating differences
across these groups were not significant. In this sense,
psychological reactance is not a viable explanation
for the video viewing conditions.

Third, it is possible the mass media is presenting
fewer gender stereotypical representations than in the
past. On the surface, this is not true, as many studies
using content analyses suggest blatant forms of gen-
der stereotyping still are prevalent in television today
(Rubey, 1991; R. Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993). At
a subtle level, we also found that gender stereotypes
are having an effect on viewers’ perceptions of gen-
der roles, as the results showed that viewers see a sig-
nificant power differential between men and women.
Our analysis showed the Female Power factor ac-
counted for the most variance (i.e., 36%), suggest-
ing it was salient in our participants’ minds. Yet,
women still are not portrayed on equal terms with
men in MTV music videos, and it is only when they
act in traditionally masculine ways (e.g., aggressive,
dominant, etc.) that they are perceived to have some
power.

Illusory correlations are one final possible factor
that can explain the subtle meaning of gender stereo-
types; that is, the belief that two variables are related
when no actual association exists (Chapman & Chap-
man, 1969). Specifically, negative characteristics
such as gender stereotypes may be overestimated be-
cause they are distinctive in occurrence. Because our
control group did not view any videos, it is possible
they were only able to recall distinctive negative gen-
der stereotypes from memory. Unfortunately, our data
do not permit us to answer this question, but future
studies may want to take this into consideration.

Several weaknesses about our study should be
noted. First, although the variables of race, gender,
and music popularity affect a person’s interpretation
of music and music videos, we are not able to make
any claims on these variables as none were systemati-
cally manipulated. Second, it is possible the self-
selection of the participants might have introduced
a bias in our results: all our participants were college
student volunteers. However, the fact that we still
found evidence of gender stereotypes in these par-
ticipants suggests our results hold true, because col-
lege students and volunteers tend to be more liberal
in their attitudes (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). Finally,
we were not able to determine why our control group
had inflated perceptions of gender roles in MTV’s
music videos. We could have asked our control par-
ticipants how much time they spent watching MTV,
if at all. This approach would have allowed us to com-
pare participants across conditions for exposure to
MTV. We did not do that, but it is an important
factor that needs to be included in future studies.

To the extent that negative gender stereotypes
in music videos influence our perceptions, it is pos-
sible to carry out strategies to reduce their negative
effects. A critical review of the literature on violence
in the mass media by Linz, Wilson, and Donnerstein
(1992) showed that educational interventions were
the most effective means to mitigate the effects of
violence; legal solutions and warnings were not as
effective. We also now know that making messages
persuasive, one sided, and relevant to the target au-
dience can render educational interventions success-
ful (Franzoi, 1996). Consequently, future research in
this area could benefit from looking at how educa-
tional interventions could be used to reduce not only
the blatant forms of gender stereotypes, but also more
subtle forms (e.g., Female/Male Power and Overt
Sexuality).

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in the mass media: Legal solutions, warnings, and mitigation

**APPENDIX**

**Test Instrument**

Age: ____ Ethnic Group: ____ African American ____ Hispanic ____ Asian ____ Caucasian ____ Native American ____ Other (Specify)

Gender (M or F): ____

Conditions 1–3: Please rate each of the videos based on the scale below:

Condition 4: Please rate each of the following themes based on your perception of its prevalence on MTV:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Present</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consistently Presented as a Major Theme</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Female portrayed as “object” or “decoration” 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
2. Male portrayed as “object” or “decoration” 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
3. Violence directed toward female by male 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
4. Violence directed toward male by female 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
5. Male dominates over female 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
6. Female dominates over male 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
7. Aggression directed toward female by male 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
8. Aggression directed toward male by female 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
9. Overt sexism presented (traditional gender roles) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
10. Female is recipient of male sexual advances 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
11. Male is recipient of female sexual advances 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
12. Theme of presentation is clearly sexual in nature 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
13. Sexual overture present, but not clearly stated 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
14. Female seen as powerful or in control 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
15. Female seen as vulnerable or weak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

How would you rate the overall popularity of this video? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not Popular Very Popular