

The effects of sex, violence and misogyny in popular music

Though the music industry may want listeners to believe that its lyrics have no effect on social norms, Taylor Swift and a host of experts are singing a different tune.

A media controversy sparked in February in response to Kanye West's sexualized lyrics that took credit for Taylor Swift's fame. West defended his song "Famous" on [Twitter](#), saying, "First thing is I'm an artist and as an artist I will express how I feel with no censorship."

The famous feud and the lyrics, now immortalized on West's new album, "The Life of Pablo," raise questions about misogyny, content and censorship in the music world.

It's a conversation that has been going on for years as the lyrics heard in popular genres of music have become measurably more violent and sexual. But does this increase in explicit lyrics have an effect on its listeners?

Increased instances

Associate professor P. Cougar Hall of Brigham Young University, along with professor Joshua West and student Shane Hill, conducted a [study](#) published in 2012 that analyzed the sexual content of lyrics in Billboard Hot 100 songs.

"In the past, studies had just looked at degrading lyrics, usually lyrics that are degrading to women or hypersexualized. We weren't just looking at songs that talked about sex, but we looked at songs where women were objectified," Hall said in an interview with the Deseret News. "(Sexualization is) when sexuality is forced upon girls in particular, when their value is essentially just the sum of their sexuality."

In the study, Hall and his team coded the top 100 songs from 1959, 1969, 1979, 1989, 1999 and 2009 for general sexual references and specific references to sexualization and then tracked the trends.

They discovered that instances of sexualization dramatically increased in lyrics during the '90s and 2000s. Hall attributes this escalation to two main factors: parental advisory laws passed in 1985 and the rise of rap music.

"Many of the artists ... were concerned about censorship and artistic freedoms, but I think that actually the result was just the opposite," Hall said. "When the government put out that advisory, it allowed people to say, as far as lyrics, anything they wanted. Because of that, we now have songs and lyrics post-'85 that we would not have had. Clearly, the gloves were taken off."

According to Hall, an increase in popular rap music led to more drug, alcohol and sexual references in lyrics. In fact, while studying the sexual references in the songs, Hall and his team noticed so many drug references that they decided to conduct an additional study focusing on substance abuse.

"You had more artists that identified with the hip-hop culture, the street culture, cultures that are indeed more sexualized," he said.

Sexualization

While the lyrics themselves are well-documented, their effects may be harder to pinpoint.

In a study titled [“Exposure to Degrading Versus Nondegrading Music Lyrics and Sexual Behavior Among Youth,”](#) Steven C. Martino and his associates tracked a group of adolescents over three years to assess the correlation between the music they listened to and their sexual behaviors. They found that sexually degrading lyrics correlated with higher rates of sexual activity in adolescents.

“Our research ... does suggest that degrading sexual lyrics do more than ‘go in one ear and out the other,’” Martino’s study said. “It may be that listening to popular music, regardless of its content, results in heightened physiologic arousal that, through a process of excitation transfer, incites sexual behavior among teens.”

Degrading lyrics were defined in the study as those that portrayed women as objects and men as sexually voracious and insatiable, Martino said in an interview. They also included lyrics that portrayed sex as inconsequential.

“I think that these kinds of messages are prevalent in popular music, and they’re not always the kinds of messages that we’re looking for as parents. They can be subtle,” Martino said. “Degrading sexual content doesn’t necessarily mean explicit sexual content.”

Martino and his team found that among kids with the highest levels of exposure to sexually degrading lyrics, 51 percent went on to initiate sexual intercourse between the first and second surveys. For those with the lowest levels, only 29 percent initiated sexual intercourse.

“We’re talking about kids that are 12, 13, 14 years old. They’re very impressionable,” Martino said. “It’s a time when they’re looking to the media, their friends and their parents for guidance. We need to look at the messages they’re getting before it sets a lifelong pattern of behavior.”

Hall, who teaches a class on sexuality education at BYU, fears that adolescents will confuse the lyrics of popular music with social norms.

“If Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez are talking about sexual activity, and I’m 14, that just increases this misperception that I have that all kids are sexually active,” Hall said. “It’s this idea that if you’re listening to music that is saturated with sexual messages, you tend to believe that everyone’s doing it. That in itself becomes a powerful perspective.”

Aggression and misogyny

In a 2006 study conducted by Peter Fischer and Tobias Greitemeyer, [“Music and Aggression: The Impact of Sexual-Aggressive Song Lyrics on Aggression-Related Thoughts, Emotions, and Behavior Toward the Same and the Opposite Sex,”](#) subjects were told they were participating in two studies: one on music and one on spicy foods. After listening to the assigned music, subjects gave a woman a portion of spicy chili sauce for testing.

The woman, as part of the study, made it clear that she did not like spicy food; all participants were told that the woman would need to eat the entire amount of chili sauce that they gave her.

The hot chili sauce was then measured as an indicator of aggression. The study found that male subjects that had listened to songs with misogynistic lyrics administered more hot chili sauce to the woman than other control groups.

“Boys start to listen to this music and feel a sense of entitlement from it, that it’s their right to have many sexual relationships with women without thinking about their feelings or values,” Martino said. “That can also affect their behavior.”

In a follow-up study, when both men and women listened to misogynistic or “men-hating” music, respectively, each cohort assigned the opposite sex to longer durations of “ice water treatment” than the control groups.

“Male participants in our studies only listened to two different songs with misogynous lyrics and showed a considerable increase in aggression toward women,” the study said. “What can be said about this effect in real life, where men probably listen to hundreds of misogynous songs during their life span?”

Jack R. Christianson, author of [“Making the Music Decision”](#) and [“Music: Apples or Onions,”](#) was inspired to research the effects of music when he noticed its pervasion in a high school setting.

“I’m not going to say that if you listen to ‘bad’ lyrics you’re going to go out and do what the lyrics suggest,” Christianson said. “But the dominating thoughts that you have in your mind are what drive your behaviors. The music allows you to remember the lyric.”

He noted that this process is not always deliberate but rather can be the subconscious act of a brain that releases hormones and stimulates pleasure centers in response to certain chords, rhythms and patterns in the music.

Self-esteem

Another issue that can be exacerbated by degrading lyrics is that of low self-esteem, which can lead to anxiety, depression and eating disorders.

A 2007 [press release](#) from the American Psychological Association warned that media influences, including music lyrics, can interfere with cognitive functioning, physical health, mental health and sexual development.

Martino’s study found that the lyrics affected males and females equally.

“Girls adopt these portrayals of sexuality just as readily as boys do,” he said. “So if the message that girls are getting from these lyrics is that girls are primarily valued for their sexuality and their sex appeal, that can be damaging to girls’ self-esteem. They feel like they need to measure up to the images that come from these sorts of songs, and that can be a hard thing for girls to have to deal with.”

What parents can do

How can parents and the concerned public more effectively expose the gap between perceived and actual social norms? According to Hall, teenagers have to learn that they are targets constantly being manipulated by the music industry.

Even if parents discourage the music at home, it's omnipresent. School dances, radio, sporting events, personal music devices and television give kids ample access to degrading lyrics.

"I personally am not one to call for censorship," Hall said. "I think some risqué songs are a blessing in disguise for me as a parent of a 17-, a 15-, and an 11-year-old to have a discussion. We don't engage our young people in these discussions enough. As long as this is in the media, why don't we use this as a cue to action? And why don't we really talk about, not just 'Why is this a dirty song?' but 'What really makes this song inappropriate?' and 'What are the values and principles that are inconsistent with what we believe in?'"

According to Martino, setting limits is appropriate for younger children but may not work once they reach the teenage stage.

"Given the kind of access kids have to media, it's going to be a losing battle to tailor their lives so that they're never exposed to these things," Martino said. "It's better that they have lessons from parents, that they have their parents' views on sexuality so that they think about it a little more critically."

The danger lies in this perception of "normal," according to Hall, who says youths can be fooled by the drug addicts and risky sexual behaviors that are often featured in popular music.

"That's not the way most of us live," Hall said. "We need to do a better job and increase our efforts to help young people understand that."

Christianson takes a similar approach to the problem and teaches his students and readers to choose for themselves.

"Music will do exactly what it is written to do. How you put lyrics to music and what music you choose to listen to affects just about every part of your life," he said. "The thing I want to do is teach my students how to make their own decisions based on how things make you feel and act. Do they go along with your moral compass? There's a ton of good in almost all genres, but there are some that are a subculture. They intend to be bad, and they want to drag people to a dark place. It can take you to the highest peaks and lowest valleys."