Sexualization of Women in the Music Industry
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In 2013, approximately 10.1 million people watched MTV’s Video Music Awards. Almost five million of these viewers were between the ages of 12 and 34, a time when most people are still forming their identity (Deadline, 2013). This particular statistic is disturbing to anyone who recalls the promiscuity of the year’s featured performances. Viewers witnessed the performances of Katy Perry, (whose background dancers wore skimpy red bikinis) Lady Gaga, (who wore a thong and strategically placed seashells), and Miley Cyrus (whose obscene gestures paired with barely-there clothing caused media uproar). These women performed alongside male performers who wore plenty of clothing, while appearing powerful, dominant even. Such displays of sexuality raise the question, “Why must women performers in the music industry appear sexy?” In music videos, on magazine covers, and during live performances it seems that women are expected to achieve success using more than just talent. Women performers in the music industry are incredibly sexualized, which is negatively impacting the physical and mental well being of adolescent girls.

Some people assume that sexualization is simply attributing sexual characteristics to a person, or when someone personally chooses to look sexy. However, the American Psychological Association (APA) has a very clear definition. They state:

Sexualization occurs when:

● a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics, a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy
a person is sexually objectified— that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use,
rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making
and/or

sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. All four conditions need not be present: any one is an indication that sexualization is present (APA, 2007).

It should be acknowledged that there are people who choose to live highly sexual lives on their own terms. However, the APA suggests that media and communication influence the sexual perception of an individual, as well as the way they are perceived by others (APA, 2007). When this research paper analyzes women performers, it must be noted that society has already influenced them to act and to be perceived by people as either sexual objects, or someone who must be sexually appealing in order to remain “relevant”. In other words, they have been and are continuing to be pressured by society to look and to act a certain way so that they can be successful.

One form of media that promotes sexualization of women performers is music videos. According to research, teenagers watch music videos for fifteen to thirty minutes per day on average. Although this statistic may seem miniscule, there are a few things to remember. First, watching music videos is usually a primary activity. This means that the viewer dedicates most, if not all, of their attention to the activity as opposed to multitasking (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2001, p255-6). Secondly, music videos contain highly concentrated amounts of sexual imagery, which is damaging to young women. A prime example of a woman performer who often allows herself to be sexualized in music videos is Britney Spears. When Britney was 17 years old, she recorded the music video for, “Baby One More Time”. The song soared to the top of pop charts, which was, “propelled in part by its music video” (“Britney Jean”, 2014). The video shows Britney
stuck in class dreaming of dancing suggestively throughout a school’s hallways in a uniform that is clearly against the dress code of every decent school district. Most people do not realize that the man in charge of the video, “previously directed humiliating and violent pornography” (Olfman, 2009, p148). This is significant because it proves that fans of Britney and her video were exposed to the work of someone who clearly does not understand or care about exploiting women for a profit. So, when adolescent girls watch this video of Britney, as well as other videos of performers who allow their directors to sexualize them, they are essentially learning to be available sexually, in order to achieve greatness.

It is often argued that men are equally as sexualized in music videos. However, many researchers are able to discredit these claims. For instance, one team of researchers analyzed the characters presented in 1,000 music videos. The data that they collected indicated that, “males are more often depicted as adventurous, aggressive, and dominant; females are more often depicted as affectionate, fearful, and nurturing” (Vorderer & Zillman, 2014, p180). Other researchers found that 57% of music videos included women who were, “portrayed exclusively as a decorative sexual object”. The data derived from a third study showed 37% of women in music videos wore revealing clothing as opposed to 4.2% of men (APA, 2007).

These findings indicate the continuation of gender stereotypes and the approval of objectification. When men in music videos are shown to have more positive and powerful characteristics, it promotes optimistic ideas and expectations of what real men are like. The same principle applies to women. The negative way that they are being represented in music videos extends beyond the fictional characters until it soils the reputation of real women. In fact, psychologists have found that girls and adolescents who access mainstream media content such as
music videos are more likely to promote sexual stereotypes and self-objectification (APA, 2007). Self-objectification can essentially ruin the lives of young women. It has been found to cause, “diminishing sexual health among adolescent girls (measured by decreased condom use and sexual assertiveness)” (APA, 2007). Meaning, that adolescent women could experience STDs and unwanted pregnancies, as well as emotional trauma derived from becoming sexually active before one is truly mature enough to.

Girls who are exposed to sexualized media also place appearance as a top priority (APA, 2007). Researchers behind the Dove Evolution campaign conducted one of the most recent studies regarding this issue. In this experiment, three groups of women were asked to watch 5 music videos featuring a, “stereotypically perfect woman” (Doveselfesteem, 2014). Two groups experienced various types of advertisements in between the videos in order to simulate a normal video viewing experience. The remaining group watched ads that were, “designed to address the issue of body confidence” (Doveselfesteem, 2014). The study concluded that viewing music videos, with the more typical advertisements dispersed in between, decreased the women’s body image confidence. Loss of self-esteem as a result of witnessing sexualization is dangerous, because it increases the risk of developing eating disorders, as well as experiencing depression and decreased cognitive functioning (APA, 2007). Sexualization of women performers in the music industry extends beyond music videos. Furthermore, the greater contact adolescent girls have with sexualization, the greater the chance that they will experience the negative externalities associated with it.

Before music videos, Internet, and other media sources became available, news regarding musicians was spread via print sources such as magazines. Despite the growing availability of newer information outlets, magazines are still popular. Therefore, it is imperative that we examine at least
one example of how magazines are portraying women performers in the music industry. One of the first magazines to come to mind is *Rolling Stone*. *Rolling Stone* includes articles regarding many topics, including music, politics, television, and culture. However, the magazine prides itself on its information regarding the music industry, and typically features musicians on their front cover.

Researchers analyzed every *Rolling Stone* cover since its debut in 1967, and assigned points to the covers according to the amount of sexualization present. The results reveal that sexualization has drastically increased, and that a majority of its victims are female. During the 1960’s and 70’s, almost 60% of magazine covers did not sexualize women at all. By the year 2000, 22% of covers featuring women were categorized as sexualized, and 61% of the images were considered to be hyper-sexualized. So, statistically, if you pick up a copy of *Rolling Stone* magazine that features a woman performer that was printed after the year 2000, there is an 83% chance that the cover is sexualized (Hatton & Trautner, 2011). These statistics beg the question, why are so many of these covers sexualized? Often we hear the excuse that “sex sells”. However, if this were true wouldn’t men be equally as sexualized, so that more women would subscribe to the magazine? During the previously described study, the covers featuring male musicians were also analyzed. Shockingly nearly 83% of men were *not* sexualized at all (Hatton & Trautner, 2011). Essentially, society is blatantly objectifying women performers by displaying their half-naked or fully naked bodies on magazine covers so that men will purchase these nearly pornographic images. Yet, the data above proves it is rare that *Rolling Stone* equates sex with a male musician in order to sell their magazine.

Admittedly, most young women do not directly subscribe to *Rolling Stone*. However, the magazine is displayed on shelves and in places where viewing the cover image is inevitable. Young women see it in their school’s library, at the grocery store, or on their parents’ coffee table. It cannot
be ignored that children have access to this platform of sexualized material, and it affects them in
the same ways that other forms of media do. The APA suggests that girls see sexualized images, and
assume that they should be sexy too. However, young girls are not yet provided with accurate
information as to what sex is and whether or not they are mature enough to engage in sexual
activities (2007). For instance, a glimpse of a topless Miley Cyrus suggestively licking herself does
not teach abstinence. Nor do the other, hundreds of topless woman musicians that are found
splashed across the covers of magazines such as *Rolling Stone*. Therefore, young women exposed to
such media are more likely to engage in sexual promiscuity as well as self-objectification (APA,
2007).

If the idea of a young woman gaining access to a magazine such as *Rolling Stone* still seems
far-fetched, think about the magazines that are intended for their age group. One study found that
girls between the ages of ten and fourteen read one or more fashion magazines a week, in order to
obtain beauty and fitness information (Cole & Daniel, 2005, p42). As someone who subscribed to
five different fashion magazines simultaneously during my teenage years, I can assure you that the
images throughout the gloriously glossy pages are indeed sexualized. They are not nearly as profane
as the photographs on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. However, there are subtle inklings of
sexualization such as sexy facial expressions, perfect (airbrushed) bodies, and revealing clothing.
Imagine a girl who sees her favorite female musicians in these magazines and feels the pressure to
look like them because, obviously, the key to success must be defined by one’s sex appeal, right?
This young girl would be falling for the same trap that most young girls do. The “trap” is the natural
tendency for humans to, “engage in in social comparison with media images and psychologically
internalizing the societal thin beauty ideal” (Cole & Daniel, 2005, p44.) Basically, viewing images of
thin women increases one’s chances of also wanting to be thin. Beyond that, viewing sexualized images will then cause girls to compare themselves to the musicians in magazines and wish to look and to feel sexy. As stated earlier, this comparison gives girls a false perception of sexuality, and does not provide them with the information necessary to make smart decisions regarding sex. So, viewing magazine images of their favorite, sexualized, performers may lead to unhealthy sexual habits, or even the acquisition of physical and mental disorders (APA, 2007).

Some of society’s most popular woman performers Katy Perry, Miley Cyrus, and Lady Gaga are often seen in public wearing scandalous costumes, and dancing provocatively, yet, they are idolized by millions of young women. One argument in defense of women performers is the idea that they are attempting to use sexiness in order to appear powerful and more competent. Unfortunately, studies have shown that this logic is flawed, because men and women perceive sexy performances very differently. One researcher found that, “For women, a sexy woman is equated with power; for men, a sexy woman is merely a tease” (Vorderer & Zillman, 2014, p181). Basically, women may feel empowered by performances of their sexualized idols, but men are only seeing them as sexual beings. Women may feel as though these performers are working to achieve equality, while the only thing men see is a woman using her body to achieve success. Therefore, young girls are learning that sexiness equals power, even though that is not the case.

Beyonce Knowles is often guilty of equating sexiness with power. Girls idolize her for her beauty, her fierceness, her fame and her vocals. Judging by her impressive fan-base and resume, it is logical to say that Ms. Knowles is one of the most influential and powerful women performers in the music industry. However, one must question whether or not her influence is a positive one. In her documentary, she acknowledges the fact that society is influenced by images. She states that it,
“shouldn’t influence the way you listen to the voice and the art, but it does” (Life is but a Dream, 2013). Clearly, she understands the impact that her appearance has on how people perceive her overall performance. Even so, she chooses to appear sexy during a majority of her performances. For instance: in her documentary, she wears provocative clothing throughout most of her performances, while background dancers prance around the stage sexily. Beyonce’s voice is fantastic, yet one cannot help but be distracted by her borderline explicit movements. Why does she need to act this way, when her voice is so powerful? Young girls see a woman, perhaps their idol, and admire her voice. Then they learn from her performance that having a great voice is not enough: that they may need sex appeal in order to be successful. It is never explained to them that acting in such a manner promotes objectification, and negative gender expectations (APA, 2007). They are never warned that sexiness and body image does not define who they are as a woman, and that they should not aspire to be somebody else’s unrealistic portrayal of what is normal. Still, they see performances by sexualized women and wish to feel as powerful as they look. As a result, girls become at risk of developing low self-esteem, as well as other psychological issues (APA, 2007).

Most people have a mother, a sister, a daughter, an aunt, or someone in his or her family who is female. Would any decent human being willingly sexualize any one of their beloveds? Would they want these women to have struggled with low self-esteem, depression, an eating disorder, low cognitive functioning, or bad sexual habits resulting from exposure to sexualized content during their youth? The American Psychological Association has several suggestions as to how society can slowly work towards achieving a less sexualized society. They suggest that schools can develop programs that teach students how to analyze media, and decipher the difference between media and reality. For instance, they could view music videos of several sexualized women performers, and
discuss how unrealistic and harmful the videos are. Parents and guardians are encouraged to learn about sexualization, and to place emphasis on teaching children the qualities and human characteristics that society should be encouraging. Also, they should instill confidence in young women based off of goals and achievements rather than appearance (APA, 2007). Finally, women performers must band together and say no to sexualization. They need to prove to themselves and to adolescent women of the world that success can be achieved through talent and hard work. Perhaps if women performers and society work together, the world will learn that sexiness and objectification do not define what women can achieve.
Works Cited


