

The Music Industry and the Portrayal of Gender Roles

As social media continues to grow, issues of its consequences regarding negative self-image by teens is a common topic of conversation. The media has always been criticized for its ability to influence people's thoughts and actions. Women, in particular, are scrutinized consistently based on appearance, independence, and actions that don't coincide with society's expectations of them. With music being a well-used media outlet, it may also have the potential to cause similar repercussions from mainstream media. The goal of this paper is to look at how women are stereotyped in the United States and to examine how these gender roles are encouraged, reflected and reinforced through mainstream music and throughout the music industry as a whole during the 2000's.

In order to understand how stereotypes of women are portrayed in music, we have to look at and understand how gender roles have been ingrained into American society for thousands of years. The perceived and realized distinction between men and women has stemmed from the idea that a woman's main purpose is to reproduce and become a mother. Men learned to control women by suppressing their initial sexual freedom in order to understand exactly whose children they were having, giving men that power over women (Crane and Crane Seeber 2003, 276). Fast-forward to today, after this feminine and masculine divide was created, the idea of gendered sexuality became evident. This idea "include(s) a lifetime of expectations for how people are supposed behave, think, and feel based on their sex assignment as a male or female" (Crane, Towne, and Crane-Seeber 2014). This overarching idea can still be seen in our everyday lives. Knowing and understanding that stereotypical feminine characteristics can be described as "soft"

or “calm” versus masculinity being characterized through the idea of strength or leadership, reinforces these basic assumptions that are founded on gender roles.

Because these gender roles are normalized in American society, they can be reflected not only through general socializations, but also through larger institutions. Media, for example, continues to reinforce common stereotypes of women. While this paper will explore the idea of how music within the media industry encourages gender roles, it is already clear how women are portrayed in the media who are in politics. Overall, “In the political realm, the role of gender stereotypes is often singled out as an important influence on both perceptions of women’s political leadership and actual voting behavior” (Bligh, Schlehofer, Casad, and Gaffney 2012, 561). The media has this capability, because of its immense power, to influence how the public views various concepts, including the stereotypical idea women don’t belong in politics. It’s seen that “the press tends to reinforce female stereotypes in covering women in politics” (Bligh, Schlehofer, Casad, and Gaffney 2012, 567). While this is only one example of the media’s power, this idea can be seen with various other stereotypes. With the press not only reflecting stereotypes that are deeply rooted within our society, but also continuing to encourage them, it can be inferred that other forms of media have the potential to do the same. This paper will focus on how these stereotypes of women are encouraged throughout the music industry, particularly mainstream songs, and what the effects are of this potential reflection.

Before looking into the question of whether or not music has the capability to reinforce stereotypes of women within society, it’s important to initially discuss how these stereotypes are presented by the music industry and through popular songs. Breaking down the lyrical and storytelling elements of typical mainstream music, these songs often present “a conventional conversational language for use in dating and courtship” (Horton 1957, 569). As many popular

songs in the 2000's includes topics of love and relationship, these ideas can be taken in a negative light by representing women as "sexual objects meant for men's pleasure" (Rasmussen and Densley 2016). This idea of women's value coming from their bodies' stems from thousands of years ago with their given purpose of being birth givers.

Continuing today, is the idea of holding a woman's value by her body, or appearance. This is represented in music as "songs from 2010 to 2014 were also more likely to refer to a woman's appearance, to women in tight or revealing clothing, to women as objects, and to women via slang than songs in one or both prior decades" (Rasmussen and Densley 2016). This is seen most often within popular music genres. For example, country music is "the most listened-to music format for those ages 18–49 years-old" (Rasmussen and Densley 2016) and it often reflects common stereotypes of women, with its use of objectifying themes, more often compared to other musical styles. Artists of specific genres are more prone to sexualizing women, in a similar way, within their music.

Rap is another prevalent genre that often endorses female stereotypes. For example, "Eminem says that "all bitches is hoes, even my stinkin' ass mom" (Under the Influence)" which is "not unique in this music genre" (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009). With this idea however, the way women are represented can be reliant on the musician themselves. It has become more popular to empower women through music, but female artists are more likely to be the ones to incorporate these ideals into their own music (Rasmussen and Densley 2016), rather than this change being universal among all artists.

While there has been a change in lyrics where uplifting women has become more prevalent with the encouragement of "a whole new breed of women-bold, tough, and materialistic" (Davis 1985, 168), there is still an inadequate representation of women within the

music industry itself. Men in this industry tend to gain more media attention compared to women and when women “receive recognition, their physical appearance and their family lives often garner as much or more attention than their music” (Schmutz 2009). This presents a deeper issue than just misrepresentation within songs. Industries have the ability to uphold gender roles. Typically with the motivation to “maximize sales,” they “encourage provocative, edgy lyrics” (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009).

Because the music industry has such an immense influence, especially as it one of the most used and well-known media businesses today (Common Sense Media 2015), the lyrics presenting stereotypes of women may have a significant impact on how people continue to view women within our society. The individual songs themselves may not appear to have a significant impact on how people view women in general, but songs “are more than mere mirrors of society; they are a potent force in the shaping of it” (Davis 1985, 168). Even with that idea, however, there is an abundance of factors contributing to how people form their own opinions, especially with the continually growing media outlet. So, claiming that one song or one musician can have an impact on gender roles, would be difficult to prove. The impact of music, rather, is largely a result from motives of the music industry as a whole. It is especially effective due to “its promotion of certain acceptable female roles” and the “propagation of negative stereotypes and the inundation of sexist material” (Becker 1990). Once an artist has gained popularity, their ability “to have an incalculable influence on our culture” (Becker 1990) is immense. While this influence can be, and is often used to endorse positive ideals, it still has the ability to leave a negative impression on society.

Influential artists and music businesses have the potential to enforce gender roles on commonly held societal beliefs. Growing up and listening to music that puts down women can

have a lasting impact on young girls on their mental health and self-esteem. Having stereotypes hammered into your everyday life can have damaging effects. With that, “scholars argue that sexual objectification of women by the media teaches women and girls to view themselves as objects to be evaluated by others, which can lead to self-objectification” (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997) (Rasmussen and Densley 2016). With music being used and listened to more frequently, this source of media is found in our everyday lives, almost constantly. As female adolescents grow up, the continuous exposure of listening to music that devalues them or over-sexualizes them, could have an impact on how these teens view themselves. Whether one has cognitive awareness of how this type of music impacts them, these stereotypes being normalized can unknowingly alter how you view yourself and others.

Although it is difficult to completely prove that mainstream music can specifically reinforce stereotypes of women, it can be seen that the influential nature of the music industry does have that impact. The goal of the rest of this research should be to talk to others and understand how they personally believe they have been influenced by music, in regards to the enforcement of gender roles. It will be beneficial to hear directly from others to try to gain a better understanding at a more intimate level and evaluate the impact music has on the individual.

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The Individual Impact of Gender Roles in Music

Music—it's the soundtrack of every generation, but how does it impact one's values, beliefs and essentially the stereotypes that one forms from this form of entertainment? By analyzing information from online sources as well as from interviews, this paper will convey that young adults in the U.S. believe that popular music between 2010 and 2020 has the potential and ability to shape people's views on stereotypes of women, but are less apt to claim a direct impact on themselves as an individual.

With music being a well-used media outlet, it has been shown to have the potential to have a similar power or impact as of mainstream media. Within mainstream music, women, in particular, are scrutinized consistently based on appearance, independence, and actions that don't coincide with society's expectations of them. Continuing today, is the idea of holding a woman's value by her body, or appearance. This is represented in music as “songs from 2010 to 2014 were also more likely to refer to a woman's appearance, to women in tight or revealing clothing, to women as objects, and to women via slang than songs in one or both prior decades,” (Rasmussen and Densley 2016). This is seen most often within popular music genres. A consensus among interviewees is the belief that rap music, more so than other genres of music, misrepresents women through oversexualization.

To conduct this research, this paper explores this topic further using scholarly sources by looking into how gender roles and stereotypes are presented in mainstream music. The main source of information for the ethnographic fieldwork portion of this research was from interviewing three young adults who are avid music listeners with different backgrounds with the

purpose to gain a wider perspective on the potential effect of music. This research process was informative and insightful, as one can never predict how one will respond to the topic at hand.

What I wanted to gain from ethnographic research on the topic of misrepresentation was how or if young adults personally believe music has the potential to directly affect one's views and if it has impacted their own. Young adults, being part of a generation that has lived through periods of drastic change have an interesting perspective on the media's impact. They have seen firsthand what affects the media can have.

The interview subjects included young adults and students who are passionate about music. They included Andres Rivera, a Freshman at Indiana University who is currently studying Finance and Entrepreneurship, Jeremy Lavine, a Freshman at Indiana University who is a Finance major, and Kate Karaskiewicz who is a Dance and Sports Management major at Western Michigan University. I chose to interview these individuals because of their background and knowledge of music. Rivera and Lavine both have experience in playing music and Karaskiewicz is a dancer, making music a foundational part of her life.

In order to understand and look at whether or not individuals believe that popular music today influences their own opinions on stereotypes, one must learn about music's impact on one's own life in a more general sense. Music "can directly affect your mood," Karaskiewicz said. She believes that the emotions, which are presented within music, can actually change how you are feeling. For Rivera and Lavine, both turn to music for motivation. This means listening to music while at the gym or doing homework. It can even be said that music is used as an outlet. "Music for pretty much my whole life has been something I can resort to" and even help to "cope with stress and things going on in my life," (Rivera, 2020). For young adults, music is something that they rely on for a sense of comfort and regularity. This can be through the idea that many

people have a difficult time “talking about feelings” or “experiences they've had in their lives and when it's done through song, I think people will listen more,” (Karaskiewicz, 2020). Overall, they seem to have strong opinions about their dependence on music and its prominent place in their lives.

Why one is attracted to the music that they listen to can't be explained with one clear answer, which can be said for these interviewees as well. Authenticity appeared to be a significant factor, however. “I'm most drawn to music that holistically is good,” said Karaskiewicz. “I think music that I respect, I enjoy.” Knowing that the music was produced with honest intentions is important to Rivera when considering his choices in music. Lyrics are also a vital component, as they have the ability to express stories, as well as the overall objective of the song.

Looking at the ethnographic fieldwork, young adults tend to think that popular music between 2010 and 2020 clearly presents stereotypes of women while having the ability to shape people's views on those ideas. With that being said, however, they are less likely to believe that their own opinions, in any way, have been affected by mainstream music. A common view is of “rap culture disrespecting women,” (Lavine, 2020). Within rap music, “women are horribly misrepresented and they're pretty much treated as objects and always sexualized.” Because of that idea, “there's a lot of men out there that kind of see them as objects,” which is “why misogyny is becoming more popular,” (Rivera, 2020). With “popular music genres such as country and rap,” (Matthias, MacCallum, Levy, Leroi, 2015) “rap music is very male centered and feeds sexual oppression,” (Monk-Turner and Sylvertooth, 2008). Even though there continues to be artists perpetuating negative gender roles, “there are a lot of great artists, in particular women, who are doing their best to go against the grain.” It can even be said that “it's

getting better, but it's not necessarily where it needs to be,” (Karaskiewicz, 2020). Considering both sides of this question, based on the opinions of young adults and on research, the idea of women being misrepresented, more so often in rap music, appears to be a commonly accepted idea. Knowing that however, follows with the question of if these stereotypes within music have the potential to shape other’s opinions.

When considering music’s impact on the views of others, “to some extent it does impact people,” but doesn’t necessarily mean “you believe everything that they say,” (Lavine, 2020). Some believe this same idea, but to an even higher degree by saying “music controls the world in some cases,” especially “if you just look at the younger generation and our generation included” (Rivera, 2020). If one were to take what an artist says to heart, it could include their negative views because “when you see someone else make an example, you're more apt to follow,” (Karaskiewicz, 2020). By looking at what these interviewees believe, young adults believe that stereotypes of women in music, in some sense, impacts what others believe. While this conclusion was clear throughout all of the interviews, the young adults didn’t think that their own mindset has been affected. Lavine describes this by stating, “considering a lot of music I listen to is about dealing drugs, killing people, disrespecting women... it's not like I take that to heart and I would never pursue that, but I do know people that do.” He also said, “I'm sure to some extent, music has affected my views, but not in the grand scheme of things,” (Lavine, 2020).

In a similar sense, Rivera believes that “the worst thing about rappers... that's heavily influencing the younger generation, is drugs.” Taking this into consideration, Rivera has seen firsthand someone’s life being affected by music. He believes the influence was not “all music. There's definitely an influence of his upbringing” and “the people he was around, but definitely

the lyrics and the songs that they always listened to didn't help," (Rivera, 2020). Karaskiewicz considers music as "a mode for people" where "people will listen." However, she also holds that "the reason why men are horrible to women or women aren't empowered" is not "just purely music." She says that there it "definitely has an influence, but isn't the end all be all of why," (Karaskiewicz, 2020).

Considering the ideas presented by these young adults, music that contains and encourages negative views of women has potential to impact the views of others. It may not be the only factor, but it has the power and ability to do so. When looking at written sources, these individual experiences and opinions can be backed up with research. Looking at the music industry as a whole, women continue to be at an unfair disadvantage as "many female composers disguise or hide their gender in order to access equal opportunities for career advancement," (Dawn, Hennekam, Macarthur, Hope, and Goh, 2018).

While there has been a change in lyrics where uplifting women has become more prevalent with the encouragement of, "a whole new breed of women-bold, tough, and materialistic," (Davis 1985, 168), there is still an inadequate representation of women within the music industry itself. The individual songs themselves may not appear to have a significant impact on how people view women in general, but songs "are more than mere mirrors of society; they are a potent force in the shaping of it," (Davis 1985, 168). Looking further into that idea, "scholars argue that sexual objectification of women by the media teaches women and girls to view themselves as objects to be evaluated by others, which can lead to self-objectification," (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997) (Rasmussen and Densley 2016). The impact of music itself, however, "comes down to the effect on individuals" but, "we can't really understand the impact of something unless we're able to correlate it with something that's felt, that an individual

experiences,” (Camlin, 2020). The ability to shape other’s views through music can’t be proven, as it all depends on one’s own personal experiences along with a variety of other environmental or personal factors.

The music addressed in this research is mainstream music, which refers to popular music or music of the most listened to genres like rap or pop, from 2010 to 2020. This paper focuses on this type of music because it is more likely to be well known by young adults today as well as having a greater ability to reach a wider audience. This study looks at whether mainstream music has the ability to alter young adult’s opinions. In a more specific way, if stereotypes of women that are portrayed in music can impact one’s views on women. The interviewees believed that music presenting negative ideas can and has influenced others views. However, this can be viewed in a positive light as well. Within music, “empowered women empower other women,” (Karaskiewicz, 2020), representing an artist’s ability to uplift and encourage listeners.

Looking at the overall attempt at ethnography, this research was relatively successful. The goal was to gain a better understanding of young adults’ thought process and individual viewpoints on how music has affected them or others in their lives. With that, the research goals were met. This paper had real conversations with people while encouraging them to speak about their opinions openly. Overall, this paper constructs a project with a viable thesis and research methods. One aspect that didn’t work as well was the idea that many young adults don’t actively think about what they listen to. Many had a difficult time analyzing and understanding why they listen to music with negative connotations. In order to understand why young adults perceive music that way, would take additional research from a completely different perspective. In the future, more people could have been interviewed with more dedicated time. The three students who were interviewed were sufficient, but it always helps to get more viewpoints on the

research. In general, from this process, this researcher learned how to hold a natural flowing conversation while gaining information for research at the same time as well as the knowledge to not have any preconceived expectations for how the interviewee will respond.

In summary, young adults in the U.S. believe that mainstream music between 2010 and 2020 has the potential and ability to shape people's views on stereotypes of women. However, they are also less likely to believe this music has had a direct impact on themselves as an individual. Based on online sources and ethnographic fieldwork, popular music presents stereotypes of women and has the power to influence people's thoughts. Young adults understand the influence of the music industry and personally feel as it has an effect on the world around them by shaping many perspectives.

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