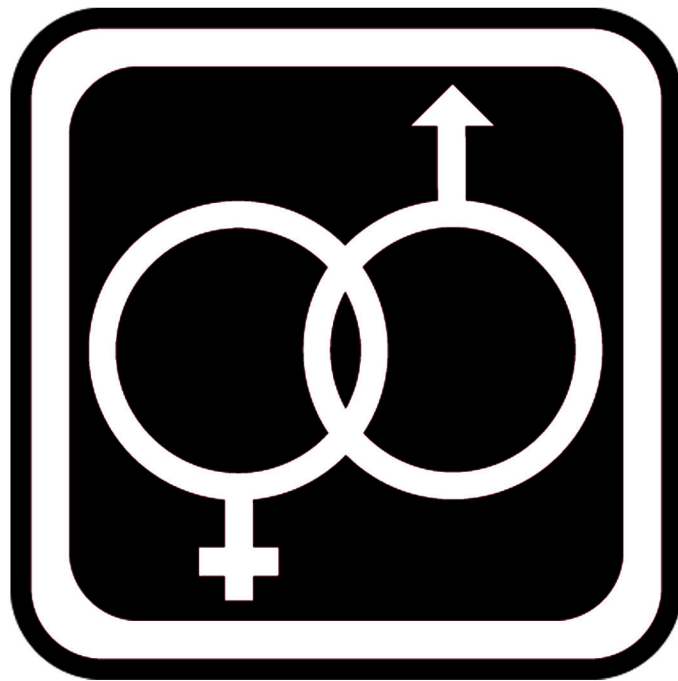


MEDIA LITERACY

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT
SEX IN THE MEDIA

Peyton Paxson



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The objectives of this unit are to help students

- recognize how frequently they are exposed to sexual messages in music lyrics
- understand how music lyrics use linguistic and metaphorical devices to transmit sexual denotations and connotations
- use basic math skills to calculate their degree of exposure to sexually oriented lyrics
- realize how visual images in music videos intensify the impact of sexual themes in music
- appreciate the tension between the music industry's attempts to attract young listeners through sexual themes and parents' efforts to control sexual discourse

MANY PARENTS, educators, and community leaders cite contemporary music as one of the most pernicious sources of inappropriate sexual messages for teenagers. Youth-oriented music is traditionally an expression of rebellion; music that encourages promiscuity and sexual exploitation, while parents and older adults are encouraging precisely the opposite, plays into this tradition. The relatively recent advent of music videos creates another means of presenting these messages, with the addition of graphic images. The prevalence of music in teenagers' lives means that teenagers receive these messages and images repeatedly. This unit strives to help students become critical listeners to popular music's messages about sex and sexuality.

In this Unit. . .

Lyrics has students generate estimates and use simple math equations to determine how many songs with sexual lyrics teenagers listen to daily.

First Person, Second Person, Third Person asks students to explore how songwriters incorporate the use of grammatical person to attract their respective audiences.

Groupies has students examine the phenomenon of fans who engage in brief sexual encounters with musicians. Students also assess different attitudes toward this phenomenon based on gender.

Music Videos asks students to evaluate the impact that sexual images and sexual behavior in music videos has on young viewers.

Love as a Euphemism has students investigate the use of euphemistic phrases and distinguish between literal and euphemistic uses of the word *love* in popular music.

Parental Warnings engages students in analysis of the usefulness of Parental Advisory stickers on CDs. Students are asked to make decisions in the roles of recording company executive, retail merchant, and parent of a teenager. Students also examine the relationship between censorship and self-regulation by the recorded music industry.

POPULAR MUSIC plays an important role in most teenagers' lives. Chances are that at your school, some students identify with, and become friends with, other students based on the types of music they like. The fact that parents and other older adults may not like teenagers' tastes in music often makes that music even more attractive to teenaged listeners. This is because the teen-aged years are when many people begin to identify their interests and tastes as different from those of older adults.

It should not be surprising, then, that while many older adults are telling teenagers not to engage in sex, popular music often encourages sexual activity. As teenagers grow sexually aware, the topic of sex attracts teenagers. Thus, despite the objections of older adults, the discussion of sexual themes in popular music will likely continue in the future.

Within the past twenty years, the rise of the music video has generated another source of

sexual content. Understandably, the videos based on songs with sexual lyrics often contain sexual visual images. However, even songs with few or no references to sexual behavior are frequently promoted on television or enhanced CDs with videos that feature lots of sexual images.

In this unit, you will look at how music presents sex and sexuality. You will examine how teenagers and parents react to those sexual discussions. In addition, you will look at how the media use sex to sell music to the public.

Within the past twenty years, the rise of the music video has generated another source of sexual content.

Lyrics -----

Let's talk about sex baby,
Let's talk about you and me
Let's talk about all the good things
And the bad things that may be
—Salt-N-Pepa, "Let's Talk About Sex"

Answer the following. Use a separate sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. List the titles of 10 songs that you are currently listening to the most. Next to each song's title, place a check mark (✓) in the second column if the song contains lyrics that discuss sex. (We will discuss the third column later in this activity.)

Song Title	Contains lyrics about sex	To or with
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

2. Were you surprised by the number of songs you listed that contain lyrics about sex? Explain why or why not.

(continued)

Lyrics -----

3. For each song that you placed a check mark next to, consider this: Is the song's discussion about sex talking about doing something "to" somebody else, or doing something "with" somebody else? (You might have to think about this question for a while.) Fill in this information in the third column of the chart in question 1.

4. Why do you think that parents are concerned about their children and other young people hearing songs that talk about sex?

5. Can song lyrics avoid the use of swear words but still be too sexually "mature" for young listeners? Explain your answer.

6. Do you believe that some songs that talk about sex can cause some listeners to want to engage in sexual activities? Explain your answer.

U.S. teenagers listen to an estimated 10,500 hours of music between the seventh and twelfth grades, which is almost as much time as they spend in grade school and high school. Teenagers listen to music an average of four to five hours daily.¹ It probably does not surprise you that many teenagers say that listening to music is their favorite activity.

7. Why does the average teenager listen to so much more music than the average older adult?

¹http://www.mediacampaign.org/publications/movies/movie_appa.html

(continued)

Activity 1 (continued)

Lyrics -----

8. Today, a popular song is usually about three to four minutes long. The average teen listens to four to five hours of music daily. How many songs (many repeated) does the average teen hear each day? Do the math below:

Average number of hours listening (4.5 hours 60 minutes per hour = ___ minutes) to music

Average length of popular song _____ ÷ (3.5 minutes)

Number of songs an average teenager hears daily _____

9. Estimate the percentage of songs a teenager hears that contain lyrics about sex. (To help you estimate, decide if your percentage in question 1 is typical, or not, of other teenagers. For example, if 7 of the 10 songs you listed have sexual lyrics, then your average is 70%).

Estimated percentage of songs heard by teenager that talk about sex _____%

Convert this percentage to a decimal . _____ (For example, 25% = .25)

10. Multiply your answer for question 8 by the decimal you got in question 9:

Number of songs that average teenager hears daily _____ (from question 8)

Percentage of songs that contain lyrics about sex . _____ (from question 9)

Number of songs average teenager hears daily that contain lyrics about sex _____ (Don't forget to put the decimal in the correct location.)

11. Were you surprised by your answer to question 10? Explain why or why not.

(continued)

Lyrics -----

12. Do you think most older adults still like to hear songs that talk about sex? Explain why or why not.

13. In addition to sex, what are three other topics that are talked about in songs that teenagers listen to?

-
-
-

14. Are any of these three topics talked about more than sex? Explain your answer.

First Person, Second Person, Third Person-----

YOU MAY ALREADY BE familiar with grammatical person. The words *I, me, we,* and *us* are in the first person. In first person, the speaker or writer is discussing himself or herself. Second person uses the word *you* (which may be singular or plural). Here, the speaker or writer is talking to the listener or the reader. The words *he, she, they,* and *it* are in the third person. This is used when the speaker or writer is discussing someone other than themselves or the listener or reader.

As discussed in Activity 1 in this unit, many popular songs discuss sexual activity. Here we will look at how these discussions differ, based on which grammatical person the singer/rapper is using.

Answer the following. Use a separate sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. Think of songs you like that discuss romantic relationships or sexual relationships. Write a short example of lyrics that use each grammatical person (first, second, and third) to talk about those relationships.

Grammatical person	Song's name	Example of lyric that uses this grammatical person
First person		
Second person		
Third person		

2. Do most of the songs you like use the first person, second person, or third person to describe the person who the singer/rapper is discussing? Explain your answer.

(continued)

First Person, Second Person, Third Person -----

3. When Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears sing about their relationships, which grammatical person do they usually use to describe the person they are involved with? Explain your answer. (If you are not sure, look over some of their songs at a lyrics web site, such as Lyrics on Demand (www.lyricsondemand.com) or A-Z Lyrics (www.azlyrics.com)).

4. Why do you think that the songs they sing consistently use this grammatical person? Explain your answer.

5. Shania Twain is a popular singer who many male listeners find very attractive. When Twain sings about her lover, she usually uses the second person. How does this grammatical usage help Twain's popularity with male listeners? Explain your answer.

6. When male rappers discuss their relationships with females in their songs, which linguistic person do they usually use when discussing those females? Explain your answer.

(continued)

First Person, Second Person, Third Person -----

7. Who is the primary audience for most male rappers—male listeners or female listeners? Explain your answer.

8. Look at your answers to question 6 and question 7. Then describe the relationship between male rappers' audience and male rappers' choice of grammatical person when discussing relationships with females.

9. Do you know of any rappers who sing what could be described as a "love song"? Explain your answer.

10. Now look at your answers to question 5 and questions 8 and 9. The people who write rap lyrics know what types of lyrics appeal to their audience. Shania Twain also knows what types of lyrics appeal to her audience. Explain how this focus on audience response influences the use of grammatical person in describing relationships.

Groupies -----

MANY OF US find musicians interesting. It is common to want to know about the lives of people we enjoy listening to or watching. However, some people suffer from what psychologists (experts who study the human mind) call celebrity worship syndrome.² This syndrome is an illness that causes some people to develop unhealthy obsessions with celebrities, which can lead to depression and anxiety.

Answer the following questions. Use a separate sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. In your own words, where would you draw the line between simply being interested in the life of a famous musician and suffering from celebrity worship syndrome?

Groupies are people, usually female, who hang around places where they can meet musicians. Many, although certainly not all, musicians welcome groupies for casual sexual encounters ("one-night stands"). Other entertainers, such as baseball players, attract similar people, referred to as "baseball Annie's." Even the "fake" sport of professional wrestling has "ring rats."

Gene Simmons of the band Kiss claims to have had sex with over 4,600 women, most of them groupies.³ Female musicians are also sought after by groupies. Just as some male musicians do, some female musicians discuss having had sex with many groupies.

Having sex with a famous person usually does not result in a groupie becoming famous. If, in fact, some musicians have had sex with thousands of groupies, it is fairly certain that most of those groupies have never been famous.

2. Why do you think that a groupie would want to have sex with a famous musician? Explain your answer.

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3147343.stm>; <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/10/20/1066502114462.html>

³ <http://www.genesimmons.com/pages/rockstar-observer.html>

(continued)

Groupies -----

3. In your opinion, is a one-night stand between a musician and a groupie a “win/win” situation for each, a “lose/lose” situation for each, or a “win/lose, lose/win” situation? Explain your answer.

4. Do you think that most teenaged males admire *male* musicians who have had sex with lots of groupies? Explain why or why not.

5. Do you think that most teenaged males admire *female* musicians who have had sex with lots of groupies? Explain why or why not.

6. Do you think that most teenaged females admire *male* musicians who have had sex with lots of groupies? Explain why or why not.

7. Do you think that most teenaged females admire *female* musicians who have had sex with lots of groupies? Explain why or why not.

(continued)

Groupies -----

Imagine that you like the music of a particular male musician. You find out that he has had sex with many groupies.

8. Would this make you like his music less, like his music more, or would this have no effect? Explain your answer.

Imagine that you like the music of a particular female musician. You find out that she has had sex with many groupies.

9. Would this make you like her music less, like her music more, or would this have no effect? Explain your answer.

Music Videos

THE MEDIA GIANT VIACOM owns many of the television channels that show music videos. These Viacom-owned channels include MTV, MTV2, VH1, CMT, and BET. MTV was heavily criticized for its production of the halftime show at Super Bowl XXXVIII on February 1, 2004. This halftime show involved Janet Jackson's breast-baring "wardrobe malfunction," discussed in Unit 5 of this book. After the show, MTV apologized for the incident and said it was unaware that the Jackson incident was going to occur.

For several weeks after the Super Bowl, MTV moved videos with sexy images to late night hours, when fewer children are watching. These included videos for Britney Spears' "Toxic" and Blink 182's "I Miss You." However, MTV soon returned these videos to daytime viewing hours. An MTV spokesperson explained: "We decided to take a temperature check, we listened to the audience, we wanted to make sure we still felt good about the images on MTV."⁴

For more than eight years, MTV has been the top-rated 24-hour cable network among viewers between the ages of 12 and 24.⁵ Thus, while many frequent viewers of MTV are adults, many viewers are not. One study by communications scholars found that 75% of the concept videos on MTV involved sexual images.⁶ (A concept video tells a story, while a performance video simply shows the musical act performing the song.) This means that MTV and other television outlets that show music videos are displaying many sexual images each day. MTV shows fewer music videos today than it did in the past. However, much of the other programming shown on MTV also contains sexual imagery.

Answer the following questions. Use a separate sheet of paper, if necessary.

Imagine that you are an executive at MTV. Your boss has asked you to develop a company policy about whether to broadcast music videos with sexual images.

1. Would you continue to broadcast music videos with lots of sexual images? Explain why or why not.

⁴<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A11741-2004Feb27>

⁵<http://www.viacom.com/pdf/05letter.pdf>

⁶Sherman, B.L. and Dominick, J.R., "Violence and Sex in Music Videos: TV and Rock-n-Roll." *Journal of Communication* (1986) vol. 36, 79-93.

(continued)

Music Videos -----

Some parents' groups are upset with the amount of sexual imagery that appears on MTV. However, MTV is not directing its programming toward the parents of teens. MTV is directing its programming to teens.

2. Imagine you are the leader of a parents' group that wants MTV to stop featuring sexual imagery. What do you think would be the best way to put pressure on MTV to stop, or at least decrease, its display of sexual images and sexual conduct? Explain your answer. (This question does not ask if you agree or disagree with the parents' group. This question asks you to decide on the best way for the parents' group to accomplish its goal.)

One way to think about music videos is as commercials. Music videos are usually provided to television companies free of charge. A music company distributes a free music video hoping that people who see the video will purchase the CD that the video is promoting. In addition, there may be other things seen in the video that are for sale, such as the clothes that the musicians in the video are wearing.

Some songs contain lyrics that are clearly sexual. It is not surprising, then, that videos made to promote those songs contain sexual images. However, some songs do not seem to be obviously sexual, but the videos that support those songs often contain many sexual images.

Imagine that you are a director of music videos.

3. Would you create videos that contain sexual images? Explain why or why not.

Many people say MTV and other television companies that show music videos should not be censored. Many of these people say that it is parents' responsibility to supervise what their children watch on television.

4. Do you agree? Explain your answer.

(continued)

Music Videos -----

5. At what age should a child be allowed to watch MTV or some other television channel that shows music videos? Explain your answer.

6. Imagine that you have a younger sister. Would you be upset if she told you that she wanted to dress and behave the way that many of the females behave in music videos? Explain why or why not.

Many celebrities, including the musicians who appear in music videos, are paid money to wear certain brands of clothes, jewelry, and shoes. This is because many fans of those musicians will buy the brands they see the musicians wearing. For example, you may have students at your school wearing Sean John, Shady Ltd., G-Unit, or some other clothing brand associated with a musician.

Some people say that if fans will wear the clothes they see in videos, some fans will also adopt the attitudes and behaviors they see in videos. Thus, if fans see a video in which musicians engage in, or encourage sexual behavior, some fans will be more likely to engage in that type of behavior.

7. Do you agree? Explain why or why not.

Some musicians who are gay appear in concept videos that show them in heterosexual (or "straight") relationships.

8. Why do you think gay musicians often appear "straight" in their videos? Explain your answer.

(continued)

Music Videos -----

9. Imagine that you are the manager of a gay musician. He or she is getting ready to film a new video that will contain sexual imagery. The musician asks you if he or she should appear to be "straight" in the video. What would you tell him or her? Explain your answer.

Some musicians try to be ambiguous, or unclear, about their sexual preferences. This ambiguity often appears in these musicians' videos.

10. List one musician who tries to create an ambiguous image about his or her sexual preferences.

11. Why do you think this musician does this? Explain your answer.