

Women in Popular Music Media: Empowered or Exploited?  
A Study and Critique of Popular Music Media's Hypersexualized Representation of Women

A Senior Honors Thesis

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### Abstract

Are women's lives and freedoms advanced by popular media productions of female sexuality, or do these portrayals restrict women's lives and freedoms by offering false pretenses of empowerment? This research examines these questions by investigating the validity of two leading radical feminist theoretical perspectives about the acceptability of popular media's hypersexualized representation of women. Through a combined method of survey response and content analysis, this research aims to bridge the gap between feminist theoretical dialogue and the experiences of women's lives. This thesis, using a feminist theoretical lens, investigates women's attitudes towards and beliefs about the representation of women in popular music media. Research findings indicate varied beliefs among women about the nature of popular music media, though most women indicate beliefs consistent with the radical culturalist perspective stressing the oppressive nature of popular media. Research findings emphasize popular media's role as a catalyst for social construction and social change and also indicate the need for further intersections between feminist theory and women's everyday realities.

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*Music molded the sexual image of women through male oriented music. Now, popular female artists are perhaps doing more damage in regard to sexualizing and objectifying women than male artists ever did. As long as women support misogynist music by buying the records and appearing in the videos, the cycle will continue.- Patrice A. Oppliger (2008)*

*So even in songs seemingly about female victimization and helplessness, the beat and euphoria of the music put the lie to the lyrics by getting the girl out on the dance floor, moving on her own, doing what she liked, displaying herself sexually, and generally getting ready for bigger and better things.- Susan J. Douglas (1994)*

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### Author's Reflections

I am and have always been a total pop-music junkie. For me, it is an energetic English major's dream come true; popular music is poetry I can dance to. This is the understanding that initiated my interest in studying popular music academically. I wanted to know: How does popular-music, understood as a literary experience, affect the way we live in the world? I realized quite quickly that, while this question was fascinating to me, equating music with literature was not always as inviting a thought to others. It was also clear, however, that popular music, seemingly everywhere in our day-to-day lives, did matter to others in an important way. I sought to find out how.

My interest in popular music media as a catalyst for the social construction of gender and sexuality developed during my sophomore year of college, when I was asked to critique Lady GaGa's 2008 hit "Love Game" for a class in literature analysis. In the song, Lady GaGa's references to gender and sexuality are explicit. She sings about a woman who "want[s] to take a ride on your disco stick" and the "story of us," which always begins "with a boy and a girl." Using a feminist theoretical frame, I struggled to determine if Lady GaGa's work endorsed traditional beliefs about human sexuality, or if, perhaps, it challenged them instead. I wondered how popular music in general could be read in this context. Was popular music a means to maintain the status quo, or was it space for political and social activism?

Declaring my minor in Women and Gender Studies in the spring of my sophomore year reaffirmed my interest in this subject and clarified my objective. After studying numerous ways popular media speaks to, shapes, and reflects popular culture in contemporary society, I became convinced popular music media played an important role in people's lives. I still wanted to know

how. With the help of my advisor, Dr. Barbara LeSavoy, I was able to pull out of the popular media discourse the question I really wanted to know: How does popular music media's portrayal of gender and sexuality impact the lives of contemporary women? This question became the foundation for my research, extending over the next two years.

This project has taught me more than I expected. I have learned about feminist theory and about popular media, but I have also learned the value of feminism's quest for understanding and respect for personal experience. My thinking has changed and progressed along with the thesis process. My research does not produce conclusive results, but I believe this finding in itself is significant. To me, the inconclusive results and the questions this research provokes reflect the complex intricacies that make up women's worlds and women's minds. I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to have completed this project. Through it, I have had the chance to discover the unique, invaluable voices of seventy women, and, in many ways, find my own.

### Representations of Women in Popular Music: Empowered or Exploited?

Current trends in popular music media include an increasingly sexualized representation of women, and the consequences of this are unclear. Attempting to address this uncertainty, a number of feminist scholars have written about the new hypersexualized representation of women dominating the airwaves and have begun to theorize about the social and political implications. Particularly, scholars question what this development may mean for women, who, through such media representations, are increasingly encouraged to exploit their bodies as a means of capital exchange (Coy, 2009; Douglas, 2010; Katz, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Oppliger, 2008). Using a feminist theoretical lens, this thesis considers the issue asking: how do women understand popular music media's representation of women, and how do these understandings reflect, refute, or inform two prominent radical feminist theories about popular media's impact on women's overall spaces for action?

Feminist scholar Kate McCarthy (2006) draws a link between body theory and women's music and extends the issue of popular music's representation of women into a theoretical realm. Relying on the important work of Judith Butler (1990), discussing the radically socially constructed nature of gender, McCarthy (2006) describes the female body as a "performance site" through which male dominance is "materialized" or "subverted" (p.71). The difference in outcome, McCarthy (2006) claims, is in the matter of ownership. Are women in popular music able to claim their bodies for their own purposes of deconstructing and reconstructing gender identity, or do dominant culture ideologies always co-opt and counter these efforts?

Inextricably linked to inquiries of ownership in popular music media are questions about subjectivity in its productions. Are women represented as the subjects of their own desires, or do



they seem to be performing as the objects of someone else's? Are these interpretations mutually exclusive, or might there be common ground? Answering these questions, central to which are analyses of women's bodies, requires further consideration of women's access to resource and agency, particularly sexual agency, a focus that draws discussion to even more complex theoretical dimensions.

For decades, beliefs about women's sexuality, its construction, enactment, and ownership, have polarized the feminist community. Predominant views on opposing sides of the popular media debate include those held by radical libertarian feminists and by radical culturalist feminists. Radical libertarian feminists adamantly support the continued production of sexualized representations of women on grounds of autonomy and freedom of self-expression. Gayle Rubin (1989), a feminist activist and influential theorist, and Lisa Duggan (2006), a prominent voice for feminist activism, argue this empowerment position. Radical culturalist feminists oppose the radical libertarian view and the continued production of sexualized representations of women on grounds of coercion and co-optation by dominant patriarchal ideology. Catharine MacKinnon (1989), a legal scholar, and Andrea Dworkin (1989), a founding thinker in the radical culturalist camp, assert this oppression position.

Both radical libertarian and radical culturalist theories offer unique perspectives on the controversy surrounding popular media's increasingly hypersexualized representation of women. However, without being made accessible to real women, these theories do little to account for lived experience. In an effort to breach the ever-elusive gap between theory and the realities of men and women's daily lives, this study investigates the validity of leading radical feminist theoretical arguments by giving voice to real women. Through a combined method of survey

response and content analysis, this research investigates female consumer attitudes about popular music's representation of women within a radical feminist frame. This research also helps us to understand popular media as a catalyst for social construction and social change. Representations of women emerging as of particular importance in this study and further considered in this paper include those produced by popular music artists Rihanna and Ke\$ha.

### **Popular Media and the Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality**

Popular culture works to reflect, drive, and constrain the ways society constructs meaning and value (Dines, 2010; Dworkin, 1989; Jhally, 2003; Katz, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Read, 2011; Zeisler, 2008). It influences our perceptions of nearly everything from entertainment values to political issues and all of the important ways these different elements intertwine. Feminist scholar Kylie Murphy (2001) asserts that the extensive pop-culture "literacy" of the modern era plays a particularly complex role in the lives of contemporary women, who have demonstrated both "a critical approach [to] and willingness to work within systems critiqued for being patriarchal" (p. 145). In a word, popular culture affects how people understand and live in the modern world.

In an effort to discover which ideologies are informing our current pop culture dialect, a number of feminist scholars have begun to investigate and critique new changes and trends in popular media. Among recent findings is strong evidence for an increasingly pornographic representation of women in popular music media (Allen, 2001; Dines, 2010; LeVande, 2008; Levy, 2005; Meyers, 2008; Katz 2006). This finding has led several scholars to begin to situate the issue of popular music's hypersexualization of women within the context of the radical feminist popular media debate (Allen, 2001; Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning, 2007; Coy,

2009; Douglas, 2010; LeVande, 2008; Levy, 2005; Meyers, 2008; Katz, 2006; Kilbourne, 2000; Oppliger, 2008).

The radical feminist “sex war” debate consists primarily of two opposing views about the acceptability of sexualized and pornographic representations of women in popular media. On one side of the debate, radical libertarians, who promote androgyny as a liberating platform, support the production of sexualized images on grounds of autonomy, sexual freedom, and self-expression (Tong, 2009). On the other side of the debate, radical culturalists, who promote a women-centered reconstruction of the meaning and definitions of sex and gender, oppose the production of sexualized images of women on grounds of coercion and co-optation by hegemonic systems of gender inequality (Tong, 2009). Summarizing the theoretical frameworks for the radical libertarian and radical culturalist platforms respectively, Rubin (1989) states:

There have been two strains of feminist thought on the subject. One tendency has criticized the restrictions on women’s sexual behavior and denounced the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active. This traditional of feminist sexual thought has called for a sexual liberation that would work for women as well as for men. The second tendency has considered sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This tradition resonates with conservative, anti-sexual discourse. (p. 534)

Central to the division between the theoretical camps is a disagreement among feminists about how sexualized representations are understood to impact women’s “spaces for action” (Coy, 2009; Lundgren, 1998). The next two sections use a critique of a recent pop-music hit to contextualize an analysis of popular music media within these two theoretical frames and to

serve as an entry point into further discussion about popular music media's impact on women's overall spaces for action.

### **Theoretical Framework: Radical Libertarians and Empowerment**

Pro-sex or radical libertarian feminists support current media images and representations of female sexuality. The radical libertarian position holds that, no matter how sexually explicit or controversial, popular media representations of sexuality must be tolerated on grounds of protecting women's rights to sexual freedom, autonomy, and choice (Duggan, 2006; McElroy, 1997; Rubin, 1989). Radical libertarian feminists insist that women's sexualities and experiences are not universal and that popular media representations provide a creative venue for conversation and exploration, as well as identity formation and confirmation. Radical libertarians support popular media representations of women's sexuality as a means to expand their spaces for action (Duggan, 2006; Feminists Against Censorship Taskforce [FACT], 1991; Rubin, 1989).

Radical libertarians support open communication as best policy. They do not, however, claim everyone must accept media productions at face value. In support of this position, FACT (1991) maintains that feminists have "a responsibility to be critical of those images we find sexist, racist, or exploitative" (p. 14). This standard reinforces the position that popular media provides a useful venue to discuss social policy and advocate for social change. Although radical libertarians are open to criticisms and critiques of popular media representations of sexuality, they firmly oppose censoring these images from public view (Duggan, 2006). Radical libertarians support the right for every sexual image to exist regardless of personal values, preferences, and biases (Duggan, 2006; McElroy, 1997; Rubin, 1989). Radical libertarians believe that popular media images, through the multitude of critiques and criticisms they

provoke, promote further constructive feminist dialogue and may well be the key to developing a more “informed, tolerant, and responsible social attitude about the expression of sexuality” (FACT, 1991, p. 14-15).

Positioning the body as a site of power, Rubin (1989) attests that current popular media productions, rooted in sex-negativist ideology, are insufficient and inadequate in their representation of human sexuality. Commenting on the moral limitations imposed by current representations of sexuality, Rubin (1989) states:

This culture always treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges almost any sexual practice in its worst possible expression. Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent.

Virtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction, and love...

But the exercise of erotic capacity, intelligence, curiosity, or creativity all require pretexts that are unnecessary for other pleasures... (p. 529).

What Rubin (1989) describes here is the reproduction of a kind of “sexual morality” (p. 532), which justifies sexual expressions consistent with dominant culture values and problematizes sexual expressions deviating from these values. This, according to the radical libertarian perspective, infringes upon individuals’ rights to experience and to enjoy a multitude of sexual interests and behaviors. According to Rubin (1989), the best way to challenge the stifling and repressive sex-negativist worldview is to advocate for sexual pluralism and an “anthropological understanding of different sexual cultures” (p. 533). This position succinctly identifies the libertarian goal of using popular media as a means to disrupt the limiting “good/bad” sexual

binary that currently informs our understanding of sexuality (Allen, 2001; Cixous, 1975; Duggan, 2006; Millet, 1969; Tong, 2009).

Applying a libertarian critique to Hot 100 hit “S&M” (Rihanna, 2010) opens up the song for recognition of its celebration of a “Mistress” woman’s sexuality. This moves a traditionally marginalized group from the shadows to the limelight and adds to a more tolerant, relevant, and culturally rich understanding of female sexuality. According to Lorde (1984) and Duggan (2006), this broadened understanding and representation of female sexuality benefits men and women alike by legitimizing the entire spectrum of their diverse individual wants, needs, and experiences. Thus, a libertarian critique would show support for Rihanna and her music, making the argument that each woman’s desires are her own and that every woman has the right to perform her gender and sexuality any way she chooses. Libertarians propose that to fail to recognize or to dismiss the idea that a woman may feel empowered by a sexual act, including performing as the object of another’s desire, undermines women’s rights to autonomy, freedom of expression, and sexual agency. Duggan (2006) affirms this view, stating that to equate a performance of sexual objectivity to an internalized experience of degradation is problematic because it assumes that women are victims rather than agents.

Ultimately, radical libertarians believe that women find a world of different sexual interests, desires, and behaviors empowering and that there is no “right” or “moral” path. They believe that women are in control of their own sexuality and have the right to choose how they express it. The radical libertarian position holds that maintaining access to a wide variety of representations of sexual imagery is important because embracing this diversity poses a challenge to the stifling, repressive, sex-negative dominant culture while reconstructing sexuality

to reflect a new, enlightened, and sex-positive worldview. Radical libertarians understand women as autonomous beings and believe that supporting women's access to all representations of sexuality, no matter how explicit, expands their "spaces of action" by advancing feminist dialogue and by allowing women to explore, perform, and choose as the subjects and agents of their own lives.

### **Theoretical Framework: Radical Culturalists and Exploitation**

Radical culturalists oppose libertarian support for popular media's sexualized representation of women arguing that these images legitimize men's domination and control of women through a rhetoric of power over, objectification of, and violence against women (Bretthauer, Zimmerman, & Banning, 2007). Radical culturalist feminists theorize that popular media's representation of sexuality narrows women's overall "spaces for action" by constructing and reinforcing a system of gender inequality in which men occupy positions of power and women serve in roles of subordination.

Feminist activist Jackson Katz (2006) identifies two significant ways the "pop culture storyline" contributes to this end. The first way, Katz (2006) states, is by conveying contradictory messages to women about their sexuality, first teaching them that social validation comes from sexuality and then holding them in contempt for behaving sexually. Scholars Amy Allen (2001) and Jessica Valenti (2009) refer to these controversial messages as damaging "Good Girl Myths" that link women's worth to their sexuality rather than other important attributes. Allen (2001) provides the following detailed description of the "Good Girl Myths" "good girls do not like sex, are not sexually aggressive; that all girls who do like sex or are sexually aggressive are bad, are sluts; and that all girls are either good or bad, virgins or sluts, or,

paradoxically, both at once” (p. 519). The “pop culture storyline” also works to reinforce systems of gender inequality by promoting an association between masculinity and dominance and power and control through the universal assumption of a male viewer (Katz, 2006).

MacKinnon (1989), laying the foundation for a legal platform in support of culturalist thinking, argues that the universal assumption of the ‘male gaze’ counters and co-opts any women’s claims of ‘ownership’ over their sexuality. Radical culturalists attest to the belief that women are harmed by sexualized representations. Their view holds that these images inevitably cast women into the role of ‘other’ and thereby work to sexualize a patriarchal system of gender hegemony and violence (Douglas, 2010; Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2006; Katz, 2006; Jenson, 2008; MacKinnon, 1989; Meyers, 2008).

Using a radical culturalist framework, a critique of Rihanna’s recent hit, S&M (2010) would assume a very different outlook than when critiqued through a radical libertarian lens. Contextualized within a radical culturalist frame, Rihanna’s work is opened up to a critique that scrutinizes her song for the way it endorses a patriarchal system of gender inequality and eroticizes an incidence of sexual violence. According to this perspective, rather than push the feminist movement forward, the song runs the risk of setting feminist efforts back. Radical culturalists would insist that, although Rihanna (2010) may appear to be enjoying her “sexual freedom” in the form of bondage, she has no sexual freedom to enjoy. This radical culturalists would attribute to Rihanna’s conformity to expressions of sexuality as constructed within and by a patriarchy. A radical culturalist critique of this song would note that Rihanna (2010) fails to construct a new, feminine-based sexuality of her own. It would indicate instead that Rihanna, in assuming that an inherently oppressive construction of sexuality satisfies her own desires,



endorses and perpetuates the limitations of patriarchy: “Now the pain” Rihanna (2010) claims “is my pleasure.”

This demonstrates what radical culturalists believe to be one of most significant problem with hypersexualized representation of women in the media. Feminist writers Angela McRobbie (2009) and Susan Douglas (2010) describe these images of perceived empowerment through sexual exploitation as “tropes of freedom” and “pretenses of progress,” which narrow women’s spaces for action while conversely appearing to expand them (Coy, 2009; Douglas, 2010; McRobbie, 2009). Scholar Robert Jensen (1998) offering a description of the discrepancy between the apparent and actual impact of hypersexualized and pornographic representations of women states, “Dominion and subordination are made sexual, sometimes in explicit representations of rape and violence against women, but always in the objectification and commodification of women and their sexuality” (p. 2). Here, Jensen (1998) affirms that sexualized representations of women are inseparable from their oppressive legacies. Scholars Andrea Dworkin (1989) and Ariel Levy (2005) link this view to current popular culture, arguing that these images reproduce their oppressive legacies by shaping and limiting women’s identities: telling them who they are, which behaviors society expects of them, and how they should value their own worth.

Radical culturalists believe hypersexualized images of women are oppressive and dangerous. They oppose these productions on the grounds that these images normalize a universal acceptance of hegemonic relations and promote the “seductive but false message” that women have, at last, achieved liberation (Douglas, 2010). Ultimately, radical culturalists believe

that these representations narrow women's "space for action" by coercing women to accept the identity of 'other' as 'self,' thereby silencing women's demands for better lives.

### **Critiques & Significance**

Radical libertarian and radical culturalist feminists provide unique, opposing arguments about the acceptability of popular media's sexualized representation of women and, in many ways, serve as each other's own best critic. On one hand, radical libertarians, who support the continued production of sexualized images, reject the culturalist view, asserting that its assumptions about women's sexual objectivity and victimization undermine women's empowerment by denying them access to sexual agency, freedom, and autonomy (Duggan, 2006). On the other hand, however, radical culturalists, who oppose the continued production of sexualized images, reject the libertarian view noting that its assumptions about liberation and empowerment are flawed and that, "under the guise of escapism and pleasure," libertarian efforts set the feminist movement back by reaffirming and eroticizing hegemonic power relations (Douglas, 2010).

The conversation about the representation of women in popular media, traditionally contained within an "ideological tug of war between patriarchal and feminist understandings of what it means within contemporary society to be a woman" (Meyers, 2008, p. 18), has previously overlooked what is perhaps the singular most important question of all: How, in the midst of these conflicting claims, are representations of women in popular media experienced? This research seeks to address this gap in previous literature by investigating women's interpretations of, experiences with, and feelings about popular music media's representation of women. The present research seeks to explore women's understandings of popular music

media's representation of women and to examine how these understandings may validate, refute, or inform the theoretical frames of radical libertarian and radical culturalist views.

### **Research Site and Methodology**

In this study, seventy female students at The College at Brockport, State University of New York were surveyed about personal observations and beliefs regarding the representation of women in popular music media (see Appendix). Female participants of all ages, demographics, and majors were invited to participate in the study. Beyond gender, no other exclusion criteria applied. Surveys were distributed at various locations throughout campus. Surveys were completed anonymously and without incentive. Results of the survey were analyzed by the primary researcher for emerging themes and patterns.

This qualitative study was designed to investigate women's perceptions of and attitudes about the representation of women in popular music media. I draw primarily upon students' survey responses to the open-ended question: "How do you think women are portrayed in popular music?" and the multiple choice question: "I believe popular music's representation of women is: a) Oppressing to women; b) Empowering to women; c) Of no consequence to women; d) Prefer not to answer;" which I use to discuss the emergent themes in and predominant views about popular music's representation of women. Here, three descriptive themes emerged from the survey responses: "Objectification of Women," "Women in Roles of Submission," and "Women's Empowerment Through Androgynous Behavior." I discuss each theme using lyrical examples, which I contextualize within the theoretical framework of the radical feminist "sex war" debate.

### **Results/Discussion**

This section addresses the research questions: How do women understand popular music media's representation of women, and how do these understandings validate, refute, or inform two prominent radical feminist theories about the impact of popular media's representation of women on women's overall spaces for action. For purposes of addressing both components of the research question, I have first categorized survey results according to respondents' indicated beliefs about popular music media's representation of women. These categories include: "I Believe Popular Music Media's Representation of Women is Oppressing to Women" and "I Believe Popular Music Media's Representation of Women is Empowering to Women."

I have then broken down each category into significant themes emerging from the study to provide further description. The category, "I Believe Popular Music Media's Representation of Women is Oppressing to Women," discusses the emergent themes, "Objectification of Women" and "Women in Roles of Submission." The category, "I Believe Popular Music Media's Representation of Women is Empowering to Women," discusses the emergent theme of "Women's Empowerment through Androgynous Behavior." In a thematic context, survey respondents identified popular music artists Rihanna (2011) and Ke\$ha (2010) as artists most representative of popular music media in general. Using lyrical examples from these artists, I consider each theme discovered in this study within the radical libertarian and radical culturalist frameworks.

#### **“I Believe Popular Music’s Representation of Women is Oppressing to Women”**

The vast majority of participants in this study identified a belief about popular music media's hypersexualized representation of women consistent with the radical culturalist view.

These respondents indicated that they believed popular music media's representation of women is harmful to women. Two themes in particular appear to have contributed to this belief. These themes include: "Objectification of Women" and "Women in Roles of Submission."

### **Objectification of Women**

Argued by radical culturalists to be a morally problematic phenomenon, objectification is defined as a situation in which a person is viewed as an object intended for the use and pleasure of another (Moradi, Dirks, & Matteson, 2005). According to prominent scholar and theorist Martha Nussbaum (1995), seven key features are involved in the act of objectification; these include: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. Of particular relevance to the sexual objectification phenomenon, and thus of this study, scholar Rea Langton (2009) adds three more features to Nussbaum's list: reduction to body, reduction to appearance, and silencing. According to survey responses, demonstrations of these ten elements of objectification are common in popular music media's depiction of women, with some of the most common forms including: women as sex objects, women as commodities, and women as property. Participants indicated sexual objectification to be the most common form of objectification of women in popular music media.

Lyrics from recent musical hit "Roc Me Out" (Rihanna, 2011) provide an excellent example of this sexual objectification phenomenon as we see Rihanna take on the role of "daddy's" sexual plaything:

*I've been a bad girl, daddy/Won't you come get me?/So give it to me like I want it/This is for your eyes only/Roc me out, back and forth/Roc me out, on the floor/Give it to me like I need it /You know how to make me feel it/ Roc me out, more and more/Roc me out, on the*

*floor/Keep it up for me, you can do it/ Put your hands on me, watch me lose it... (Rihanna, 2011)*

Here, we can see the damaging interplay between the “Good Girl Myths” (Allen, 2001) and popular media’s sexual objectification discourse. All about "daddy," this scenario elevates Rihanna's partner's position of power by putting him in the active role; “daddy” is coming to get her and “daddy” is doing the giving, while Rihanna “the bad girl” is literally “on the floor” waiting. She also, however, triumphantly conveys that she is getting the sex she “needs.” Within this scenario, we see, according to the radical culturalist position, Rihanna reduced to an instrument of “daddy’s” pleasure, oppressed through the denial of her subjectivity and the restrictions placed upon her movement and agency. According to this position, we also see the glamorization of her powerless, sexually objectified state.

### **Women in Roles of Submission**

Radical culturalists also assert that sexualizing representations of gender inequality produce and condone oppressive legacies similar to those of sexual objectification (Tong, 2009). Participants in this study noted that popular music media reflects a patriarchal hierarchy in which men occupy positions of power and authority and women assume roles of submission. Survey responses indicate that this power dynamic is reproduced in popular music primarily by two manifestations of sexist ideology: Traditional-ambivalent sexism and enlightened sexism. Traditional-ambivalent sexism refers to restrictions placed upon women’s spaces for action as a consequence of either hostile or chivalrous attitudes (Glick & Fiske, 1996), whereas enlightened sexism refers to the same restrictions but as a consequence of endorsing a false pretense of women’s liberation (Douglas, 2010). According to survey responses, two of the most common

ways these sexist ideologies, which force women into roles of submission, inform popular media's representations include: images in which women are portrayed as needing men (Traditional-Ambivalent) and images in which women are portrayed as enjoying partner abuse (Enlightened).

Lyrics from "Your Love is My Drug" (Ke\$ha, 2010) illustrate the theme of "women in roles of submission" as we see the ideologies of traditional-ambivalent sexism working in a "woman needing man" female dependency context:

*Maybe I need some rehab/Or maybe just need some sleep/I got a sick obsession/I'm seeing it in my dreams/I'm lookin down every alley/I'm making those desperate calls/I'm staying up all night hoping hitting my head against the wall/What you got boy, is hard to find/I think about it all the time/I'm all strung out my heart is fried/I just cant get you off my mind!/Because your love your love your love is my drug/Your love your love your love/(I said) Your love your love your love is my drug...*

Consistent with traditional sexist ideology, this songs presents the image of woman incapable of providing for herself due to her "dependent" (addictive) nature. She has no control over her emotions or her body, depriving herself of sleep, "staying up all night hoping" and inflicting physical injury upon herself, "hitting my head against the wall." In this example, we see Ke\$ha essentially victimized by the single life and violently reduced to 'other' (de Beauvoir, 1952). Without a man to whom she can be defined in relation to, Ke\$ha is perceived as incomplete. In this image, Ke\$ha, considered from a radical culturalist position, is forced into a role of submission through the violence of 'othering' and is oppressed by her lack of identity, subjectivity, agency, and resources in a male-centered world.

A similar sexist discourse can be seen in lyrics from Eminem and Rihanna's recent hit "Love the Way You Lie" (2010). This song provides a descriptive example of "women in roles of submission" as a consequence of endorsing enlightened sexist ideology in the form of "erotized partner abuse":

*(Rihanna) just gonna stand there and watch me burn/that's alright because I like the way it hurts/just gonna stand there and hear me cry/that's alright because I love the way you lie/I love the way you lie... (Eminem) baby please come back/ it wasn't you/baby it was me/maybe our relationship isn't as crazy as it seems/maybe that's what happens when a tornado meets a volcano/all I know is I love you too much to walk away though/come inside, pick up the bags off the sidewalk/don't you hear sincerity in my voice when I talk/told you this is my fault, look me in the eyeball/next time I'm pissed ill aim my fist at the drywall/next time there won't be no next time/I apologize even though I know its lies/I'm tired of the games/I just want her back/I know I'm a liar if she ever tries to fuckin' leave again/I'ma tie her to the bed and set this house on fire.*

Here we see Rihanna submit to her partner's physical and mental abuse under the misguided notion that the abuse is sensual and her consent is voluntary. Consistent with the discourse on enlightened sexism, this description blurs the lines between victimization and empowerment. It presents Rihanna as a battered woman unable to leave her home due to threats against her life but also as woman consciously aware of her condition, who enjoys, even "loves," her abuse.

Eminem, the male partner, clearly occupies the position of power. This undermines the assumption that Rihanna is in a position to autonomously choose the direction of her life.

Through her claims to "love" Eminem's "lies", however, the song sends the "seductive but false



message” (Douglas, 2010) that Rihanna is empowered and has the right and the ability to choose to enjoy her abuse.

These lyrical examples are emblems of the deeply rooted nature of patriarchal discourse in popular culture. They distort images of women’s sexuality to reflect an endorsement of hegemonic power dynamics. These images justify the radical libertarian position that popular media’s hypersexualized representation of women harms women by encouraging both men and women to internalize values conducive to patriarchal system of gender inequality and gender violence.

### **“I Believe Popular Music’s Representation of Women is Empowering to Women”**

In the study, a number of participants rejected the radical culturalist objectification and subordination sentiment, supporting instead a radical libertarian view. These participants expressed a belief about the representation of women in popular music media which holds that sexualized media images are beneficial to women. In particular, the theme of “Women’s Empowerment through Androgynous Behavior” appears to best capture and motivate this belief among participants.

#### **Women’s Empowerment through Androgynous Behavior**

Argued by radical libertarians to provide the key to women’s liberation, androgyny promotes the acceptance and embodiment of any combination of feminine and masculine characteristics in one person (Freeman, 1968; Tong, 2009). It essentially disrupts traditional sex and gender binaries, putting forth the idea that people can become more “full human beings” (Tong, 2009, p. 50) by embracing the entire spectrum of human traits and characteristics and choosing for themselves their own gender roles and identities, “mixing and matching at will”

(Tong, 2009, p. 50). According to survey responses, popular music media representations often portray women who employ androgynous behavior and language as occupying positions of power. Participants note this theme most often in the context of women occupying positions of power in sexual relationships.

Embracing stereotypically masculine language and traits, Ke\$ha in her 2010 hit “Blah Blah Blah” exemplifies this finding, offering the image of an empowered woman taking on an aggressive role in a casual “no strings” sexual encounter:

*Coming out your mouth with your blah blah blah/Zip your lips like a padlock/And meet me at the back with the jack and the jukebox/I don't really care where you live at/Just turn around boy and let me hit that/Don't be a little bitch with your chit chat/Just show me where your dick's at*

Here, Ke\$ha expands the boundaries of her gender and sexuality by taking on a traditionally masculine role. She chooses to engage in the sexual behaviors she prefers regardless of the extent to which they deviate from or conform to traditional gender stereotypes. In this song, Ke\$ha takes the initiative, explicitly laying out the framework for the encounter, “zip your lips,” “meet me at the back,” and “show me where your dick’s at.” She uses aggressive language, “don’t be a little bitch with your chit-chat,” and inverts stereotypical gender roles by casting her partner into the role of sex object and expecting him to perform sexually but not speak.

This lyrical example represents a woman empowered by her right to autonomy, an emblem of the libertarian ideal. Ke\$ha, in this context, is the subject of her own desire and able to enjoy her sexuality in the way she chooses. Her spaces for action have been expanded by her ability to engage in a broadened spectrum of human traits and behaviors. The lyrics demonstrate

the theme of “Women Empowered through Androgynous Behavior” and provide justification for the libertarian position, indicating that a broadened understanding of sexuality and access to a wider range of representations enhances women’s opportunities to seek out for themselves and to enjoy what they find empowering.

Interestingly, study findings reveal two unanticipated trends in survey responses. First, a significant number of participants indicated that their beliefs about the representation of women in popular media varied according to musical genre. Specifically, several participants noted that they believed country music was empowering to women but found rock, rap, and hip-hop to be oppressing to women. Second, several participants responded to the multiple-choice question, “I believe popular music media’s representation of women” by selecting both a) “Oppressing to women,” and b) “Empowering to women.” Options c) “Of no consequence to women,” and d) “Prefer not to answer,” were infrequent selections. I consider the significance of these findings in the concluding general discussion section.

### **General Discussion**

This study’s findings reveal that both the radical libertarian and radical culturalist perspectives are extremely relevant in the lives of contemporary women. The challenge in making any conclusive claims about whether women’s spaces for action are advanced or set back by popular media’s representation of women is evidenced in both women’s wide-ranging and blurred beliefs about these representations. The complexities of the study findings stand as a testimony to popular media’s function as an important “ideological battleground” over which meanings, values, and identities are driven, constrained, and contested (Meyers, 2008).

Overall, the majority of responders expressed a belief consistent with the radical

culturalist position, indicating that they believed popular music's hypersexualized representation of women to be oppressive to women. This position arose primarily from beliefs about the inherently patriarchal and hegemonic legacies reproduced by popular media representations. These findings indicate the need for further consideration of popular media as a platform for perpetuating dominant cultural ideology; particularly as such ideologies pertain to issues of gender inequality and gender violence.

A number of responders expressed a contrary belief, however, consistent with the radical libertarian position, indicating that they believed popular music's representation of women to be empowering to women. This position arose primarily from beliefs about women's increased opportunities in response to a broader representation of sexual diversity and sexual agency. These findings indicate the need for further consideration of popular media as a platform for challenging and subverting dominant cultural ideology; particularly as such ideologies pertain to issues of gender construction and gender roles.

Among other noteworthy findings was responders' frequent indication that their beliefs varied according to musical genre. Specifically, responders tended to associate country music with feelings of empowerment and rap/hip-hop with feelings of oppression. In this study, I used the category of "popular music," inclusive of all musical genres, to determine how female consumers experience popular music in general. However, these findings indicate that further research into one or more specific genres may provide alternative or more detailed results.

Also among noteworthy findings was responders' frequent indication that they found popular music to be both oppressing and empowering to women. This response was particularly striking because, due to an unforeseen limitation in the study requesting that respondents choose

“one” of the following answers, respondents had to deviate from the instructions of the study to indicate this belief of a double-effect. These findings suggest not only that women’s feelings about and attitudes towards popular music’s representation of women are complex, but also, that it is important to them to preserve the complexity of their beliefs.

The findings of this study challenge the idea that women’s understanding of and experiences with popular music’s representation of women are universal. The findings also challenge the idea that one radical feminist perspective can be validated to the point of excluding another. The complexities of the study’s findings reinforce the need for authentic intersections between feminist theory and the realities of women’s lives. These findings suggest that there may be several additional areas of concern, as well as compromise, that go unrecognized when issues regarding women’s well being are contained within a strictly theoretical dialogue.

Ultimately, the results of this study indicate that women feel there is a problem in the way they are hypersexualized by popular music media, indicating that they believe the impact of popular music’s representation of women on their spaces for action to be more limiting than liberatory. The results of this study also indicate, however, that many women believe that popular music’s representation of women may also provide a platform from which to expand their spaces of action. This outcome, however, would require that popular media productions promote representations of female sexuality consistent with what real women believe to be beneficial, constructive, and empowering to their own lives.

How do women want to be represented in popular media? In what ways and to what extent do women want their sexuality to be included as part of those representations? What images and representations do women believe would meet their own best interests? These

inquires are readily debated in theoretical realms but are less often posed to women in a meaningful and material way. In light of the results of this study, I believe this is precisely our next step in moving towards the reality of a more accurate, relevant, and culturally rich understanding of women's sexuality as a lived experience and a social construct produced within popular media.



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