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Popular Music: Sexually Saturated? A Content Analysis of Sexual References in Popular Music

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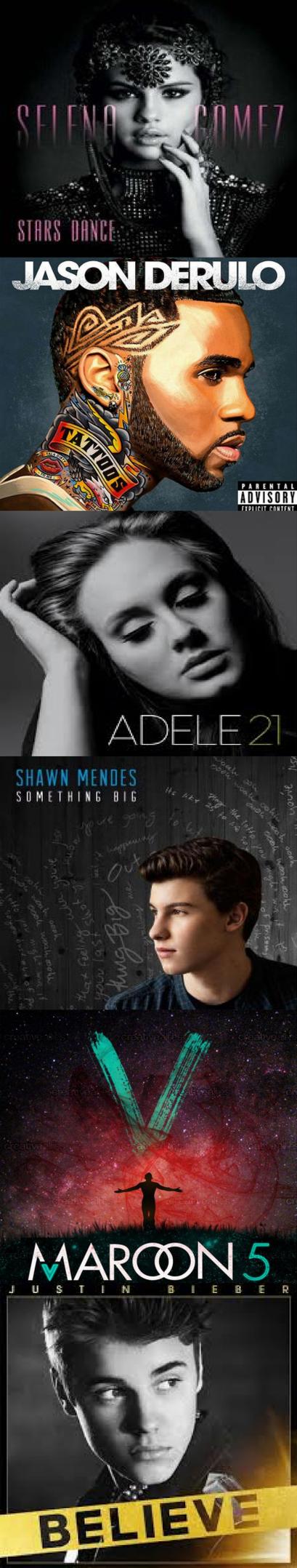
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Popular Music: sexually saturated?

2.93 sexual references per minute of music

A Content Analysis of Sexual References in Popular Music



Introduction

“Music is more important than any other media type in managing mood and expressing identity” (Lonsdale & North, 2011). Because of this, musical artists have a great power to influence the listeners on an individual and group basis and share messages about life, society, and even sexuality (Selfhout et al., 2009). The average college student listens to 2-3 hr/day (Stratton & Zalanowski, 2003).**

- We want to know what messages are being transmitted to us and to the world about sex and sexual relationships. Through studying the 200 most popular songs on iTunes, we observed how often songs contained sexual references and whether those references were portrayed in a positive or negative light.

Research Question

Do some categories of song characteristics (e.g. genre, gender) have a relation to an increased number of sexual references?

- Hypothesis: Both genre and gender are significantly related to presence of sexual references. Are sexual references in music primarily negative or positive about sex?
- Hypothesis: Songs that do contain sexual reference(s) will convey negative attitudes toward sex.

Methods

Variable Definitions:

- **Sexual reference:** any phrase in the lyrics that says or implies a sexual act, including invitations for sex, masturbation, and sexual objectification, but not including making out or kissing.
- **Genre of Song:** The genre assigned by iTunes
- **Gender of Singer:**
 - Male
 - Female
 - Both: if there are multiple people (like a duet/band) with at least one of each gender
- **Attitude:** The attitude is the way the singer portrays sex. Either positive: sex as a way of showing love or negative: sex for lust/personal gratification/gain.
- **Sample:** The top 200 songs from February 2016 as found on iTunes.

Results

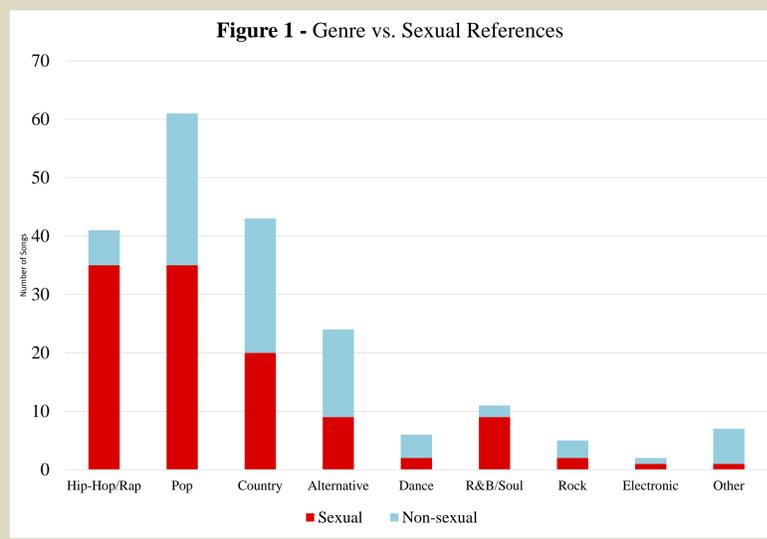
- 57% of songs had at least one sexual reference. 85% of hip-hop/rap songs, 82% of R&B/soul songs, and 57% of pop songs had sexual references. A two-way chi square analysis revealed that there were more hip-hop/rap, pop, and R&B/soul songs with sexual references than expected, and less country, alternative, dance, rock, electronic, and other songs with sexual references than expected, $\chi^2(8) = 29.09, p < .001$ * See Figure 1 for the frequency of sexual references for each genre.
- 75% of the songs that had a sexual reference had a negative attitude about it. 97% of hip-hop songs, 100% of dance songs, and 78% of R&B/soul songs with sexual references had a negative attitude about sex. A two-way chi square analysis revealed that there were more negative references in hip-hop/rap, dance, and R&B/soul songs than expected, and less negative references in pop, country, alternative, rock, electronic, and other songs than expected, $\chi^2(8) = 22.56, p < .005$ * See Figure 2 for the frequencies of negative attitudes for each genre.

Implications

Over half of the popular music today is filled with sexual content and the majority of that sexual content is negative. If music does in fact have a great power to influence its listeners, then this could have an impact on how sex is perceived by the world. When sex is portrayed so casually and negatively, it sends the message that lust is an appropriate drive for sexual behavior. This could potentially lead to more casual sexual relationships. Those who support abstinence before marriage, or at least view sex as something that should come with love and not lust, should consider what type of music they allow in their home and listen to in their leisure time. Finding music that doesn't include sexual references and particularly negative sexual references can help encourage those values.

Limitations and Future Studies

- One limitation is that we could not run an analysis between sexual reference and attitude because attitude was only coded when a sexual reference was found in the song.
- Due to the limited background of each of the coders, there could be small variance in the results. Future research could be conducted to decipher the implicit versus explicit content in the song lyrics.
- Further research is needed in the area of sexual references in today's popular music in order to conclude causation of society's negative views on sex.



57% of songs had at least one sexual reference
Of those:
 48% had 1-10 references
 21% had 11-20 references
 18% had 21-30 references
 7% had 31-40 references
 6% had 41+ references
75% of songs that had a sexual reference had a negative attitude about it

