

Sexism on MTV: The Portrayal Of Women in Rock Videos

Depiction of gender roles is fairly traditional and sexism is high.

► It has become commonplace to analyze various forms of television content to determine how each form uniquely distorts everyday life. Perhaps best known of these studies is the work by Greenberg and associates which examines the presentation of racial minorities, the elderly, sex-roles, social behavior and family role structures and interactions.¹

Generally such research demonstrates that fairly traditional and stereotypical representations of life persist on television. We find such presentations in the characters and social situations of television programming and advertising. Some researchers believe that our perceptions of reality may become warped when such trends persist.²

The purpose of the current analysis is to examine one area of life portrayal — sex roles — as it is found in a new form of television content designed for viewing primarily by adolescents. We will go beyond earlier studies on Music Television by examining the social context in

which sex roles are presented and the function of performer sex in the portrayal of women.

The present analysis centers on the routine presentation of women in music videos. What forms of social action are depicted as routine, normal, or expected of women and which actions are either ignored or negatively portrayed? How is female action contextualized? In this regard we will assess whether women are presented as passive individuals who serve as objects to attract male attention. How is physical contact between men and women portrayed? How are women dressed? How often are women shown as victims of male aggression? Answering these questions will permit us to reach conclusions about gender role communication by music television.

From an industry viewpoint, rock videos have the distinction of being cable's first real contribution to entertainment programming on television.³ Yet critical response has not been overwhelmingly

¹ For examples of recent work see: Bradley S. Greenberg, *Life on Television: Content Analyses of U.S. TV Drama* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1980); Bradley S. Greenberg, "Television and Role Socialization: An Overview," in National Institute of Mental Health, *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), pp. 179-190; Bradley S. Greenberg and Dave D'Alessio, "Quality and Quantity of Sex in the Soaps," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 29:309-321 (Summer 1985); Bradley S. Greenberg, David Graef, Carlos Fernandez-Collado, Felipe Korzeny and Charles K. Atkin, "Sexual Intimacy on Commercial TV During Prime Time," *Journalism Quarterly*, 57:211-215 (Summer 1980).

² This is a central conclusion of cultivation theorists. See: George Gerbner and Larry P. Gross, "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," *Journal of Communication*, (Spring 1976), pp. 173-199.

³ Bernice Kanner, "Can't Stop the Music Channel," *New York*, Oct. 11, 1982, p. 18.

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positive. Corliss quips that these videos are "sights and sounds to blitz your brain."⁴ Gher is concerned that the "same kind of imagery used to sell a man a car is ... employed to sell a teenager a record."⁵ And Kaplan argues that MTV brings "us another few steps towards desensitization in a video culture."⁶

Despite the controversy surrounding the music video, relatively little systematic research has been done. A few studies have centered on viewer motivations and music videos, while others have analyzed rock video content.⁷ The latter have been principally limited to the simple presence of sex or violence. Related to the present analysis we find: Sherman and Dominick measured the degree to which video sex and violence differ in various presentation modes (cable only, cable and broadcast, and videos only broadcast) and on certain socioeconomic attributes. They observed that the male orientation of videos is extremely high but offered no statistical

evidence to support a relationship between performer's sex and female portrayals.⁸ Baxter, *et. al* analyzed levels of sex in music videos and reported a fairly low level, although "sexual feelings or impulses" were coded frequently (56.6%).⁹ Brown and Campbell compared race and gender portrayals on MTV and the Black Entertainment Television cable channel's "Video Soul" program. They found marked differences in how whites and blacks were portrayed in antisocial, prosocial and sexual behavior.¹⁰ And Caplan looked only at violence levels and concluded that males are more violent than females and females are not victims of significantly more violent acts than males.¹¹ Although sexism is sometimes discussed in these studies, none offered a scientific measurement of this dimension.

Method

The study was limited to music videos aired on MTV. A random cluster sample was drawn from MTV weekday programming, drawn from blocks representing daytime and late night hours. These periods were chosen so that we might avoid periods during which video concerts often are scheduled. The late night daypart also was deemed important because the industry considers it its prime time.¹² As it turned out, videos from the late evening and early morning dominated our sample.

Videos were recorded in the Summer of 1985. Almost 30 hours of programming was recorded. The sample included 300 videos. Videos were eliminated if they were live performance types without a story line, when there were subsequent appearances in the sample, or when they lacked a female character. One hundred ten music videos remained for analysis, a number comparable to the size of many a week's MTV playlist.

Our study began with a scale of sexism first described by Butler-Paisley and Paisley-Butler and refined by Pingree, *et. al.*, originally designed to test for sexism in print advertisements.¹³ Although meant to analyze the "slice of life" vignettes of print advertising, adoption of the scale

Richard Corliss, "The Medium is the Maxim," *Film Comment*, 19:34 (July/August 1983).

Richard Gher, "The MTV Aesthetic," *Film Comment*, 19:35-36 (July/August 1983).

⁴ Peter Kaplan, "MTV: 21st Century Box," *Esquire*, March, 1983, p. 222.

⁵ Se-Wen Sun and James Lull, "The Adolescent Audience for Music Videos and Why They Watch," *Journal of Communication*, Winter 1986, pp. 115-125; Rebecca B. Rubin, Alan M. Rubin, Elizabeth M. Perse, Cameron Armstrong, Michael McHugh and Noreen Faix, "Media Use and Meaning of Music Video," *Journalism Quarterly*, 63:353-359 (Summer 1986); Dolf Zillmann and Norbert Mundorf, "Image Effects in the Appreciation of Video Rock," *Communication Research*, 14:316-334 (1987).

⁶ Barry L. Sherman and Joseph R. Dominick, "Violence and Sex in Music Videos: TV and Rock 'n' Roll," *Journal of Communication*, Winter 1986, pp. 79-93.

⁷ Richard L. Baxter, Cynthia De Riemer, Ann Landini, Larry Leslie and Michael W. Singletary, "A Content Analysis of Music Videos," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 29:333-340 (Summer 1985).

⁸ Jane D. Brown and Kenneth Campbell, "Race and Gender in Music Videos: The Same Beat but a Different Drummer," *Journal of Communication*, Winter 1986, pp. 94-106.

⁹ Richard E. Caplan, "Violent Program Content in Music Video," *Journalism Quarterly*, 62:144-147 (Winter 1985).

¹⁰ Coleman Research, "MTV — Its Impact on Radio Audiences: A National Study of MTV Viewership," Report, Dallas, October 1983.

¹¹ Matilda Butler-Paisley and William J. Paisley-Butler, "Sexism in the Media: Frameworks for Research," A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism, San Diego, Calif., August 1974; Susan Pingree, Robert Parker Hawkins, Matilda Butler and William Paisley, "A Scale for Sexism," *Journal of Communication*, Autumn 1976, pp. 193-200.

rendered a useful measurement for examining the diverse sex role portrayals found in rock videos. Pretests helped us refine the scale. We found it necessary to reduce the scale and modify the Pingree definitions. The result is a four-item ordinal consciousness scale that measures how women are portrayed, limited to specific roles and relationships. Because of the range of story lines found in rock videos, such a scale, by necessity, must address both sexuality and occupational roles.

LEVEL I: "Condescending." The woman is portrayed as being less than a person, a two-dimensional image. Includes the dumb blond, the sex object and the whimpering victim. This level of portrayal can include an aggressive, sexual role. Examples: Here women are used as sexual objects, or are presented in roles where others do her thinking.

LEVEL II: "Keep Her Place." Some strengths, skills and capacities of women are acknowledged, but tradition also dictates "womanly" roles. The tradition also dictates emphasis on subservience in romantic or secondary relations. A high emphasis on sexual attributes still is found here.

LEVEL III: "Contradictory." Emphasizes a dual role where a woman plays a traditional, subservient role while also displaying a certain degree of independence. This character's independence is gained at the expense of her subservience. Anything she does outside of domesticity and nurturance is viewed as "something extra" (woman have secondary interests but the domesticity/nurturance dimension is of foremost importance). Example: A woman with certain skills is placed in a situation where she teaches a man something but then backs off before she embarrasses him.

LEVEL IV: "Fully Equal." Treated as a person (possibly a professional) with no mention of her private life. Does not remind us that domesticity and nurturance are non-negotiable the woman's work as well. Women are viewed nonstereotypically.

When multiple levels are detected (more than one level of sexism encountered) all were recorded. Besides the measurement of sexism, additional scales were

employed to evaluate the degree of male-female physical contact (casual hugging, kissing, dancing, petting, love making), the type of seductive clothing — if any (bathing suit, undergarments, seductive attire, suggested nudity), the occurrence of violence, the type of narrative situation shown (romance, recreational, domestic, educational, social institutional, political, occupational), and the sex of the musicians.¹⁴

Four coders — two female, two male — were used, although not all viewed each video. More than 75% of the videos were examined by either two or three of the coders. Inter-coder reliability, computed as simple agreement, was found to be 95.8%.¹⁵

Findings

The data shows that of those videos with women, 56.9% of the observations were rated Level I: "Put Her Down" on the sexism scale. The next highest level found was Level II: "Keep Her in Place" (17.1%), followed by Level IV: "Fully Equal" (13.8%), and Level III: "Traditional Role or Two Places" (12.2%). Less than 14% had more than one level of sexism represented. Typically these supplemented a Level I rating with 4.2% Level II, 4.2% Level III, and 2.5% Level IV. Most (76.4%) used male performers exclusively while 23.6% were all female or mixed. When examining how sexism relates to the sex of the musician we find that there is no significant difference ($X^2 = 6.64$, 3 d.f., $p = .084$). Although the overall chi-square is nonsignificant, this seems to be due largely to the homogeneous nature of our data. Analysis of the separate distributions into the four levels of sexism revealed that the all-male videos differ significantly from chance (X^2

¹⁴ There was reason to believe that male exclusivity might be one variable which would produce significant differences in this study. Therefore we coded videos according to the performing musicians' sex (exclusively male vs. some or all female). It was assumed that male musicians working along with women would be more conscientious of the role of women in society.

¹⁵ O. R. Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), p. 141.

TABLE 1

Frequencies of Video Sexism by Sex of Performers

Level of Sexism	Sex of Performer(s)		Total
	All Male	All Female and Mixed	
Level I: Condescending	52	8	60
Level II: Keep Her Place	14	5	19
Level III: Contradictory	11	3	14
Level IV: Fully Equal	10	7	17
Total	87	23	110

$X^2 = 6.64$, d.f. = 3, $p = .084$

X^2 all male = 49.43, d.f. = 3, $p < .001$

X^2 female and mixed = 6.91, d.f. = 3, $p = .08$

49.43, 3 d.f., $p < .001$) while those with female performers does not ($X^2 = 6.91$, 3 d.f., $p = .08$). Thus far as can be seen, the overwhelming proportion of videos involved all-male performers and portrayed females condescendingly.

The most predominant form of male-female contact was simple touching found in 53.8% of the videos. 26.9% showed kissing, 18.5% displayed contact while dancing, 25.2% depicting hugging, 4.2% presented heavy petting, and 1.7% had implied love-making. As for dress, 9.2% of the videos suggested nudity, 38.7% used highly seductive clothing, and 10.1% used women in undergarments. The 12 of the 46 videos coded as having seductive clothing presented some or all of their women in bathing suits. For illustrative purposes, intimate contact and alluring attire as they compare with levels of sexism are presented in Table 2. When some form of alluring attire was present there were significant differences when compared with level of sexism ($X^2 = 19.06$, 3 d.f., $p < .001$). Seductive clothing was highest in terms of dress/undress, but undergarments, bathing suits and even suggested nudity occurred frequently. Nonsignificant results between alluring attire and sex of musician ($X^2 = .37$, 1 d.f., $p = .545$) suggests that such dress is often used when female performers are present as well as when they are not.

As for male-female contact, casual touching, kissing, hugging and dancing

were found most often. When comparing all videos which had at least one occurrence of kissing, hugging, petting or implied love-making, the new variable, "intimate touch," produces nonsignificant differences between sexism ($X^2 = 5.78$, 3 d.f., $p = .123$) and sex of musician ($X^2 = .03$, 1 d.f., $p = .859$).

Of the videos analyzed, 33.6% used violence. Most acts of violence were of "men to men" (20.2%), "men to object" were next most often (10.9%), and this was followed by "men to women" (8.4%). Those showing "woman to man" violence totaled 6.7%. Women were almost never portrayed as being violent toward objects (1.7%). Most violence was found in videos coded for Level I sexism (17.6%). The next highest were Level II videos with 8.4% being violent. Violence to women, performed by either a male or female aggressor was significant by musician's sex ($X^2 = 6.89$, 1 d.f., $p < .01$), but violence to men by either sex was not ($X^2 = .13$, 1 d.f., $p = .725$).

Finally the videos were evaluated for the presence of various narrative situations 33.6% were found to depict romance, 66.4% dealt with recreational topics, 11.8% involved domestic situations, 2.5% were on education, 33.6% showed social institutions (often depicting anti-establishment themes), 8.4% handled political topics, and 18.5% displayed occupational settings. These were grouped into two categories which were intended

TABLE 2

Alluring Dress and Intimate Touch, by Level of Sexism

Level of Sexism	Alluring Attire		Intimate Touch	
	Present	Absent	Present	Absent
Level I: Condescending	37	23	24	36
Level II: Keep Her Place	12	7	9	10
Level III: Contradictory	3	11	5	9
Level IV: Fully Equal	2	15	2	15
sum:	54 (49%)	65 (51%)	40 (36%)	70 (64%)

$X^2 = 19.06$, 3 d.f., $p < .001$

$X^2 = 5.78$, 3 d.f., $p = .123$

to reflect traditional media sex role presentations—domestic, romance and recreational became the new variable: "traditional female narrative;" education, social institution and political situation were recoded: "traditional male narrative." Only 12.3% of the video presentations had neither narrative present, while 10.1% had only the traditional male narrative, 60.9% had only the traditional female narrative, and 21.8% used both. The overall chi-square was significant (X^2

18.98, 3 d.f., $p < .001$). In addition, "traditional female narrative" displayed significant differences for sexism (X^2

8.23, 3 d.f., $p < .05$) but not performer's sex ($X^2 = .41$, 1 d.f., $p = .524$). "Traditional male narrative" was found to have significant differences for both sexism (X^2

10.36, 3 d.f., $p < .01$) and performer ($X^2 = 4.15$, 1 d.f., $p < .05$).

Discussion

Our results support the notion that sexism is fairly high in music videos. With 57% of the videos rated Level I, and all but 26% judged to portray women in one of the top two sexist categories, the pattern seems quite clear. The presence of differences between sexism and both traditional male and traditional female narratives also support the notion that earlier media stereotypes still are very much at work today in this recent form of video programming, with traditional female narrative found most often. When either narrative is present the level of

sexism increases. Although there were no significant differences in sexism portrayals in videos by male musicians and those by female or mixed male-female musicians, we did determine that the distribution of male-only videos was not occurring by chance and overwhelmingly portrayed women condescendingly. An absence of significant differences between sexism and performer overall appears to be due to homogeneity in the data. Consequently we can conclude that there is no marked difference in the way males and females present sex-role stereotypes of women in rock videos.

In the videos examined it was very common for women to be used exclusively as decorative objects. In these productions women are often portrayed as background decoration, clad in bathing suits, underclothing or highly seductive clothing. They are shown in sexually alluring dance. In one video the male performer is shown slipping money in a bar maid's cleavage while she responds with a seductive look of gratitude; in the same video another woman is shown disrobing as she plays a game of strip poker (Lover Boy, "Lovin' Every Minute of It"). Even when the portrayal is less sexually inveigling, there is a tendency for women to fall into simple ornamental roles. This disparity is important for it suggests that sexist videos need not be sexy.

Sexism is perpetuated quite effectively through the way the women of rock videos are dressed. There were significant

TABLE 3

Traditional Male and Female Narratives, by Level of Sexism

Level of Sexism	Female Narrative		Male Narrative	
	Present	Absent	Present	Absent
Level I: Condescending	53	7	14	46
Level II: Keep Her Place	16	3	10	9
Level III: Contradictory	12	2	5	9
Level IV: Fully Equal	14	7	10	7
sum:	91 (83%)	19 (17%)	39 (35%)	71 (65%)

 $\chi^2 = 8.23$, 3 d.f., $p < .05$ $\chi^2 = 10.36$, 3 d.f., $p < .01$

differences between alluring dress and sexism. There was no significant difference between such dress and performer's sex, however. Why? Well, video dress is not so different from that found in magazine advertisements. Videos essentially are selling records and life styles, so video characters don fashionable contemporary clothing. This clothing often just so happens to be fairly seductive too.

Turning to the data on violence we find that while there is a fairly high level (34%) of violence, it is not very blatant. Outright meanness and holocaustic death and destruction just does not occur in most videos. Only 10% of our videos portrayed any violence directed toward women, yet this was enough to demonstrate the trends in higher levels of sexism when present.

To underline the nature of sexism in music videos it may be helpful to examine one case where the video was rated Level III: "Contradictory." AC/DC's "Sink the Pink" shows a woman who is extremely talented at the game of pool. She enters a pool hall and dazzles the all-male crowd as she proceeds to totally dominate in a game with one of the men. Before she wins, however, the woman suddenly backs off and begins to come on sexually to her opponent. The message appears to be that this is a woman with confidence and a commanding presence, but she still is sexual. It is permissible for her to use her talents as long as she does not outperform the man.

The high level of sexism is emphasized by the few videos we studied where men and women were treated equally. These often use "verite" footage depicting people in natural environments (John Cougar Mellencamp's "Lonely 'Ol Night," and Jeff Beck and Rod Stewart's "People Get Ready"). Each draws a strong line between real life and what we see in the video. People are overweight. They wear thrift shop clothing. In the Beck/Stewart video the duo is dancing with rural women of Latin decent. The women are not cosmopolitan. They wear peasant dresses. This approach is a major exception for the video portrayal of women.

Perhaps the most staggering implication of our study is found in the way rock videos glorify luxury and material wealth. Life is painted as jovial, containing few responsibilities. There are few occupational references in videos yet no one ever addresses the problem of how one gets the money necessary for the luxurious life being portrayed. This is an area where videos differ markedly from lifestyle portrayals in other media. Videos show life as fun, exciting and free from domestic situations. They often are shot in exotic locations. The Las Vegas images of Starship's "We Built this City" are good examples. Yet all of these luxuries cost money for which most people must work. Relationships with women also usually do not come without commitments. In rock

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858. STEIN, M.L. *Who was first?* E&P pp12-13 June 27—The Los Angeles *Times* labeled Janet Chusimir, recently appointed executive editor of the Miami *Herald*, as the first woman

to "be in charge of the newsroom of a major metropolitan newspaper," ignoring Mary Anne Dolan, rival Los Angeles *Herald Examiner* editor from 1981 to 1985.

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

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videos, however, such unrealistic portrayals are common.

Conclusions

One of the most commonly portrayed rites of passage in music videos involves development of a heterosexual relationship. Central to the understanding of such relationships is gender role performance. The depiction of these gender roles in rock videos appears to be fairly traditional. Females are portrayed as submissive, passive, yet sensual and physically attractive. Sexism is high when we break down videos into traditional male and traditional female narratives. When musicians are all male they also are more likely to use narrative roles commonly assigned to men in media portrayals. While the clothing worn in videos is frequently quite innovative, it nevertheless

tends to reinforce traditional gender roles. Relationships are almost always shown as developing in recreational settings — at concerts, carnivals, or dances. Relationships typically are shown developing between couples with little interference or involvement with friends or family. And, when relationships are presented, males are portrayed as more aggressive and more in control of the relationship.

It is revealing to find that rock videos perpetuate social norms so effectively. Although perhaps not that surprising, it is worth noting that such characterizations are products of an industry which sometimes prides itself on its progressive attitudes. Apparently rock video portrayals are not very different than other media presentations of heterosexual relationships.

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