Psychology of Popular Media Culture

Increasingly Sexy? Sexuality and Sexual Objectification in Popular Music Videos, 1995–2016

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We conducted a longitudinal visual content analysis of 462 popular music videos from 1995 to 2016 analyzing the depictions of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression. Our analysis paid attention to the gender and race of the musical artist in each video, as well as the video's music genre. Regression analyses revealed that depicted sexuality and sexual objectification did not change during the period studied. However, ambiguous sexual expression, including sexual gestures, sexual poses, and sexual facial expressions, did increase over time. Furthermore, female music artists were more often portrayed as sexually objectified than male artists. Male artists were more likely shown to objectify other individuals compared with female artists. Moreover, Black and non-White artists were more often shown presenting ambiguous sexual expression than White/Caucasian artists. No significant differences occurred when comparing music videos from the R&B/hip-hop/rap genres with music videos from the pop genre. Our findings are discussed in the light of objectification theory and social–cognitive theory leading to suggestions for future research.

Public Policy Relevance Statement
Our study shows that depictions of sexuality and sexual objectification continue to be a ubiquitous element of mainstream music culture. Moreover, depictions of ambiguous sexual expression increased over time. Overall, our findings suggest that today's music videos might increase self-objectification, stereotypical gender role beliefs, and self-sexualizing behavior among adolescents and young adults.

Keywords: content analysis, music videos, sexuality, sexual objectification

With the advent of music videos on MTV in the early 1980s, scholars from various disciplines have investigated the visual content and the lyrics of music videos. Previous studies have shown that references to sexuality and sexual objectification are prevalent (Andsager & Roe, 2003; Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Baxter, De Riemer, Landini, Leslie, & Singletary, 1985; Brown & Campbell, 1986; Ey & McInnes, 2015; Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; Hall, West, & Hill, 2012; King, Laake, & Bernard, 2006; Sherman & Dominick, 1986; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993; Turner, 2011; Vandenbosch, Vervloessem, & Eggermont, 2013; Wallis, 2011; Ward, Rivadeneyra, Thomas, Day, & Epstein, 2012). Apparently, sexual provocation continues to be a crucial element of today's mainstream music. For instance, Iggy Azalea's music video "Kream" is characterized by a striptease aesthetic. The focal attention is devoted to the Australian rapper who is seen twerking in front of a pile of dollar bills featuring

several close-up shots of her buttocks. With more than 98 million views within the 3 months after its release online in July 2018, the video has already received large attention on YouTube.

Mass media provide an important source of information for learning about sexual norms, values, and behaviors (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005; Ragsdale et al., 2014). Adolescents in particular are considered to be susceptible to the effects of music videos, because their notions of sexuality are still flexible and largely shaped by both the social environment and the media environment (Ragsdale et al., 2014). Exposure to music videos has been associated with increased tolerance of sexual harassment (Bernard, Legrand, & Klein, 2016), greater self-objectification (Karsay, Knoll, & Matthes, 2018), greater objectification of women (Kistler & Lee, 2010), stereotypical gender attitudes (Kistler & Lee, 2010), earlier ages of initial sexual intercourse, and greater numbers of sexual partners (Coyne & Padilla-Walker, 2015). Researchers have often referred to social–cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009; Bussey & Bandura, 1999) and objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) to explain those mass media effects. Social–cognitive theory of gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) postulates that characters appearing in mass media serve as role models to the audience. By observing the presented behavior of media characters, viewers learn what behavior is desirable and normal according to their gender. More precisely, objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) posits that

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women in Western mass media are predominantly valued for their sexual appearance, physical beauty, and sexual appeal to others. Consequently, viewers imitate the behavior shown in mass media to meet the presented normative behavior and appearance.

Despite the common belief that depictions of sexuality and sexual objectification in media have become more numerous over time (Andsager & Roe, 2003; Papadopoulos, 2010; Tolman, & McClelland, 2011), no visual content analysis of music videos has studied the change over time. Previous studies have investigated music videos from a single point of time only, which has failed to clarify how visual depictions of sexuality and sexual objectification have evolved. Preliminary findings from longitudinal content analyses of song lyrics have suggested certain aspects of that evolution. For instance, Hall et al. (2012) identified an increase in the sexualizing lyrics of both male and female artists from 1959 to 2009, whereas Rasmussen and Densley (2017) found an increase in female objectification in country music songs. The American Psychological Association (2007) has called for more longitudinal content analyses of depictions of sexualization in media to identify whether and how visual sexualization has changed across time. This is particularly important for music videos, because they have become increasingly popular (again) in recent years (Edmond, 2014). With progressing digitalization, including online music video distribution and on-demand streaming music video services, music videos have become readily accessible. Our study provided the first visual content analysis of music videos from a longitudinal perspective—namely, from 1995 to 2016. Moreover, we investigated the interactions of year and gender, year and race, and year and genre.

Although a large body of research investigated the effects of sexualizing media and in particular music videos have been a common object of content analysis, the concepts of sexuality and sexual objectification have been inconsistently operationalized or sometimes used interchangeably (Rousseau, Eggermont, Bels, & Van den Bulck, 2018; Ward, 2016). Drawing on the recently established conceptual differentiation of sexual and appearance-related content, sexual objectification, and nonsexual objectification by Rousseau et al. (2018), we introduced for the first time an analytical differentiation between depictions of sexuality and depictions of sexual objectification in music videos. In addition, we included a third category to account for ambiguous sexual expression. This category included depictions, which can be identified as both sexual and sexually objectifying.

Music Videos in the Digital Age

With the launch of MTV in 1981, music videos became a key element of popular culture (Gow, 1992). Following the music videos' so-called "golden years"—the late 1980s and early 1990s—the music video industry faced a sharp decline (Keazor & Wübbena, 2010). However, the advance of digitalization has nurtured the development of a new music video culture. The business of online music video distribution, its enterprises (such as VEVO and YouTube), and on-demand streaming music services (e.g., Spotify) have significantly expanded in recent years (Edmond, 2014), signifying a "video turn" in the music industry (Holt, 2011). YouTube became the most important platform, as made clear in summer 2017. Two music videos, one after the other, broke the record for the most viewed video on the site. A few weeks after "See You Again" by Wiz Khalifa featuring Charlie

Puth set a new record of nearly 3 billion views in July, "Despacito" by Luis Fonsi featuring Daddy Yankee passed the 5 billion mark and became the most watched YouTube video of all time (Nevins, 2017). Unsurprisingly, YouTube had been identified as the most popular platform for watching music videos among U.S. teenagers (National Cyber Security Alliance, 2016). Although survey data on time spent watching music videos on YouTube remain largely unavailable, a study has shown that about two thirds (59%) of 12–19-year-olds in Germany watch music videos on YouTube several times a week (Feierabend, Plankenhorn, & Rathgeb, 2017).

Differentiating Sexuality and Sexual Objectification in Music Videos

Sexuality and sexual objectification have been inconsistently operationalized in visual content analyses (Ward, 2016). For example, in their study, Pardun and McKee (1995) defined sexual references rather broadly and, therefore, they included sexual innuendo, sexual suggestiveness, and light physical contact. Morgan et al. (2012) included several aspects of both sexuality (i.e., sexual touch) and sexual objectification (i.e., provocative clothing) to define sexual imagery. Based on the recently established conceptual differentiation provided by Rousseau et al. (2018) as well as on objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), we distinguish between sexuality and sexual objectification. Moreover, we included an additional category: ambiguous sexual expression.

Sexuality

Sexuality encompasses gender identities and roles, sexual attitudes, sexual desire, sexual relationships, and sexual behaviors and is influenced by biological, psychological, social, cultural, and political factors (World Health Organization, 2006). According to the World Health Organization (2006), sexuality requires a positive approach free from discrimination and violence (World Health Organization, 2006). Based on this definition and on our review of previous content analyses of sexuality in mass media (Hall et al., 2012; Kunkel et al., 2007; Rousseau et al., 2018), we define *sexuality* as neutral sexual acts that are nondegrading, are nonobjectifying, and portray mutual consent. We included sexual behavior that depicted kissing, intimate touching, and (implied) sexual intercourse in our content analysis.

Sexual Objectification

Sexual objectification, a specific aspect of sexualization (American Psychological Association, 2007), refers to the cultural practice of regarding individuals exclusively as sexual bodies and thus ignoring their character. Sexual objectification is marked by the perceived lack of agency and personhood of the person being objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Nussbaum, 1995). Unlike sexuality, sexual objectification is void of mutuality and respect (Ward, 2016). A key component of sexual objectification is the objectifying gaze. It is defined as the heterosexual, typically male visual inspection of the body or body parts, which renders the observed individual to a mere object of the spectator's desire (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Rousseau et al., 2018). In visual media, the *objectifying gaze* can be conveyed in several ways

(Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). An individual can be shown to either perpetrate the gaze or be its target. Perpetrating the gaze signifies an active form of sexual objectification, whereas being gazed at (i.e., being the target of the gaze) represents a passive form of objectification. Moreover, the camera angle can imply the gaze by focusing on sexual bodies or body parts.

Researchers have also identified *provocative clothing* that reveals or draws attention to sexual body parts (e.g., cleavage, the stomach, and the pelvis) as an indicator for both decreased agency and appearance-related objectification (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Bernard et al., 2016; Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016; King et al., 2006; Vandenbosch et al., 2013). Empirical findings from experimental studies support this reasoning by showing that increased body display of men and women leads to a decrease of perceived agency (Gray, Knobe, Sheskin, Bloom, & Barrett, 2011). Following previous content analyses (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993), we included the objectifying gaze, objectifying camera shots, and provocative clothing as central characteristics of sexual objectification in music videos.

In the past, sexually objectification of women has been studied more extensively than sexually objectification of men. However, sexualizing media content that objectifies men has become part of mainstream media culture (Gill, 2009; Rohlinger, 2002). For example, Gill (2009) claimed that objectifying representations of the "sexy" male body in advertising aim to equally address gay men, heterosexual women, and heterosexual men. Thus, it is important to include (and compare) depictions of female and male sexual objectification in music videos.

Ambiguous Sexual Expression

Although Rousseau et al. (2018) provided a conceptual differentiation on objectifying and nonobjectifying sexual content, we also recognize that for some sexual acts, situational complexities determine whether they can be defined as neutral sexual depictions or objectifying depictions (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). Feminist scholars have argued that depictions of sexual acts can be interpreted as women's expression of sexual agency as well as a disguised form of sexual objectification (Gill, 2003; Hansen, 2017; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009).

This ambiguity is reflected in previous content analyses on music videos. For instance, Ortiz and Brooks (2014) defined sexual references that do not involve touching, such as winking, blowing a kiss, sexual glances, and dressing or undressing for sexual attention, as sexual mannerisms that denote a type of *sexual expression*. For Speno and Aubrey (2017), however, these behaviors represent staging techniques that women exhibit to appear sexually alluring. Accordingly, Speno and Aubrey (2017) defined sexual expressions (e.g., smoldering look of desire and licking one's lips) and sexual connotation (e.g., touching oneself suggestively and parted legs) as aspects of *sexual objectification*. According to Lerum and Dworkin (2009), such behavior should be studied in the light of institutional and sociocultural contexts, instead of focusing on certain groups of people (e.g., women). Although hardly all contextual aspects can be fully met in a quantitative content analysis, we pursue the clear goal to differentiate between different types of sexual imagery. Therefore, we included *ambiguous sexual expression* as an additional new category, which subsumes behaviors that cannot unequivocally be

categorized as neutral sexual acts or as acts of sexual objectification. We defined sexual movements, sexual gestures and poses, and sexual facial expressions as ambiguous sexual expression.

In what follows, we summarize the current body of literature on depictions of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression in music videos according to our mentioned definitions. In doing so, we specifically address findings on the change of those depictions over time.

Moreover, objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) posits that sexual objectification does not affect all individuals equally, for "particular combinations of class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality, as well as personal histories and physical attributes are likely to produce some heterogeneity of experience both in degree and kind" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 196). Hence, we also included three variables often operationalized in research on the topic: the gender of the artist, the race of the artist, and the genre of the music video (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; King et al., 2006; Morgan et al., 2012; Turner, 2011; Vandenbosch et al., 2013).

Change Over Time

Despite the common belief that instances of sexuality and sexual objectification in media have become more numerous over time (Andsager & Roe, 2003; Tolman, & McClelland, 2011), no visual content analysis of music videos has explicitly addressed the change of depicted sex or sexual objectification from a longitudinal perspective. As explained earlier, comparing existing content analyses studies can be problematic because of different definitions that have been used. Although other measures such as provocative clothing are more standardized, the findings do not indicate a clear pattern of increase or decrease over time (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Baxter et al., 1985; Morgan et al., 2012; Turner, 2011). Evidence from one longitudinal content analysis of song lyrics suggests a general increase of sexualizing content from 1959 to 2009 (Hall et al., 2012). However, it remains impossible to propose informed hypotheses about the evolution of depicted sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression in music videos. Instead, we formulated the following three research questions:

> *Research Question 1:* How has the depiction of *sexuality* in music videos changed over time?
>
> *Research Question 2:* How has the depiction of *sexual objectification* in music videos changed over time?
>
> *Research Question 3:* How has the depiction of *ambiguous sexual expression* in music videos changed over time?

Gender of the Artist

In line with the theoretical grounds of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), the findings on depictions of sexuality in terms of gender in music videos are unmistakable: Women are more often depicted engaging in sexual behavior than men (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Brown & Campbell, 1986; King et al., 2006; Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993; Wallis, 2011; Ward et al., 2012). The same applies for sexual objectification in music videos; women are more likely than men to be portrayed in an objectified way (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang,

2009; King et al., 2006; Sherman & Dominick, 1986; Vandenbosch et al., 2013). From the other direction, men are more likely than women to be portrayed in a dominant role—for instance, by objectifying women by perpetrating the objectifying gaze (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). Findings from content analyses of song lyrics have yielded similar results (Flynn, Craig, Anderson, & Holody, 2016; Hall et al., 2012; Primack, Gold, Schwarz, & Dalton, 2008). Previous studies also hint the idea that ambiguous sexual expression (i.e., sexual suggestive dance and suggestive movements) occurs more often among women than among men (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; King et al., 2006). Hence, we formulated four hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Female artists are more likely shown engaging in *sexuality* than male artists in their music videos.

Hypothesis 2a: Female artists are more likely depicted *being sexually objectified* (i.e., wearing provocative clothing, shown as target of the objectifying gaze, or shown in objectifying camera shots) than male artists in their music videos.

Hypothesis 2b: Male artists are more likely depicted *engaging in sexual objectification* (i.e., being the perpetrator of the objectifying gaze) than female artists in their videos.

Hypothesis 3: Female artists are more likely shown with *ambiguous sexual expression* than male artists in their videos.

Race of the Artist

Few content analyses have investigated sexuality or sexual objectification in terms of race and ethnicity. The study by Turner (2011) indicated that music videos by Black artists contained more sexual content than videos by White artists. Other evidence indicates that music videos on TV channels that target a Black (e.g., African American) audience more often contain sexual depictions than music videos on MTV2 and GAC (King et al., 2006). Regarding sexual objectification, Black music artists have been shown to dress in significantly more provocative clothing in their videos than White artists in theirs (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; Turner, 2011). Similarly, findings from a content analysis of song lyrics showed that lyrics from non-White artists contained almost three times more likely references to sexualization compared with White artists (Hall et al., 2012). We, therefore, hypothesized that Black and non-White artists are more likely associated with sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression than White (e.g., Caucasian) artists.

Hypothesis 4: In music videos, Black and non-White artists are more likely shown engaging in *sexuality* than White artists.

Hypothesis 5: In music videos, Black and non-White artists are more likely shown engaging in *sexual objectification* than White artists.

Hypothesis 6: In music videos, Black and non-White artists are more likely shown engaging in *ambiguous sexual expression* than White artists.

Genre of the Music Videos

Findings from content analyses of music videos and lyrics indicate that R&B, hip-hop, and rap music videos more often include references to sexuality and sexual objectification than videos of other genres. Among such evidence, although Morgan et al. (2012) indicated that 100% of all hip-hop videos and 80% of all country videos in 2008 contained sexual imagery, the sample size ($n = 20$) for each genre was very small. Addressing sexual objectification, Ey and McInnes (2015) showed that music videos from the genre R&B (87%) depicted the highest proportion of sexualized elements, followed by music videos from the genres hip-hop (82%), electronic dance (75%), pop (68%), alternative (45%), electronic music (34%), and rock (32%). Earlier, Aubrey and Frisby (2011) found that R&B and hip-hop artists were more often targets of the objectifying gaze in their music videos than pop music artists were in theirs. Those findings are supported by what content analyses of song lyrics have shown—namely, that R&B, hip-hop, and rap lyrics feature sexually objectifying content, including references to sexual acts that degrade others as well as references to nondegrading sex more often than all other music genres (Flynn et al., 2016; Primack et al., 2008). On the basis of this preliminary findings, we formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 7: Music videos from the genres of R&B, hip-hop, and rap depict more *sexuality* than music videos from other genres.

Hypothesis 8: Music videos from the genres of R&B, hip-hop, and rap depict more *sexual objectification* than music videos from other genres.

Hypothesis 9: Music videos from the genres of R&B, hip-hop, and rap depict more *ambiguous sexual expression* than music videos from other genres.

In addition, to understand whether depictions of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression did change for gender, race, and genre over time, we tested two-way interactions of year and genre, year and gender, and year and race. In what follows, we describe our sampling strategy, the levels of analysis, the coding procedure and the included categories.

Method

Sampling

Following Aubrey and Frisby (2011) and Morgan et al. (2012), songs from the U.S. Billboard song charts were sampled, given our assumption that songs with outstanding popularity have the greatest potential impact on audiences. Although the popularity of a song does not necessarily equate with the popularity of the related music video, we assumed that a significant overlap between a chart position and the popularity of the related music video exists. For example, the song "Despacito" has been the longest running Number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 Charts, and at the same time, it was the most watched YouTube music video ever.

To form a sample of music videos, the U.S. Top 10 Billboard Charts for the first week of every month during the 22-year period of 1995–2016 were accessed. After excluding all duplicates, an initial list of 1,088 songs was retrieved, for an average of 49.5 songs per year ($SD = 5.28$, range: 36–58). For each year, a random sample of 21 songs was drawn. The official music videos were searched on YouTube and coded online. Every song without

a corresponding music video, with an animated video, or with a video that did not depict the artist was excluded from the sample and replaced by a randomly chosen music video from the same year. Our final sample, thus, consisted of 462 music videos.

Levels of Analysis

We included two levels of analysis. The variable genre referred to the music genre. For all other variables, the main artist in each music video served as the unit of analysis. We coded for the presence or absence of a particular characteristic of the artist or behavior presented by the artist in the video. With this coding strategy, we aimed to grasp the general theme of the music videos (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Conrad et al., 2009). Although identifying the main artist in videos by solo artists was straightforward, for music groups, we coded the most prominent member represented in the video (e.g., Adam Levine for Maroon 5). Table 1 displays all categories and variables included in the content analysis. Following previous research (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011), we focused on coding the artists as opposed to coding all individuals shown in the music videos. Adolescents often idolize music artists, and they serve as a role model to them (Ivaldi & O'Neill, 2008; Monnot, 2010). In the case of videos with guest artists, the so-called featured artists (e.g., Mariah Carey feat. Jay-Z), the first artist (e.g., Mariah Carey) was coded as the main artist because he or she was usually the focus of the video.

Coding Procedure

Following extensive literature review of content analyses in the field, we developed an initial codebook to systematically code sexual, sexually objectifying, and ambiguous sexual expression. The principal investigator (i.e., the first author) trained the other two coders, and the second author provided expert information and helped resolving discrepancies throughout the coder training process. Coder training consisted of several training sessions over the course of 3 weeks. Training sessions involved explaining the categories as well as watching and coding music videos from the initial list of 1,088 songs. The coders coded music videos in joint coding sessions as well as independently at home to identify potential misunderstandings of the categories. Discovered discrepancies were resolved by discussing the coding scheme with the principal investigator. During these meetings, the existing literature was consulted and the definitions for the variables were amended, and further examples for the variables were added, if necessary. Although most variables were straightforward, variables on ambiguous sexual expression needed more discussion. At the end of each meeting, the alterations to the codebook were checked for clarity and theoretical consistency. Based on this discussions, a final version of the codebook was established.

At the end of the coder training, we informally assessed reliability in two pilot tests on a subsample of $n = 20$ music videos. On the basis of the results of the pilot tests, we were confident that reliability will be adequate among coders. Subsequently, we performed an intercoder reliability test with all coders by coding a subsample of $n = 20$ (4.3%) randomly chosen music videos. We used Krippendorff's alpha to calculate intercoder reliability, because it has been proposed as the standard reliability measure (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Krippendorff's alpha accounts for the number of coders, levels of measurement, sample size, and the presence or absence of data (Hayes &

Table 1

Categories and Variables Included in the Content Analysis

Category	Variables	
General categories:		
Gender of the artist	Male	
	Female	
Race of the artist	White/Caucasian	
	Black/African American	
	Hispanic/Latino	
	Asian/Pacific Islander	
	Biracial	
	Other	
	Not identified	
Genre of the music video	R&B/hip hop	
	Pop	
	Rock	
	Country	
Content categories:[a]		Composite scores
Depicted sexuality	Kissing	$M = .29$, $SD = .68$, range: 0–3
	Intimate touching	
	Sexual intercourse	
Depicted sexual objectification	Provocative clothing	$M = 1.03$, $SD = .8$, range: 0–4
	Target of gaze	
	Objectifying camera shot	
	Perpetrator of gaze	
Depicted ambiguous sexual expression	Sexual movements	$M = .34$, $SD = .73$, range: 0–3
	Sexual posing	
	Sexual facial expression	

Note. The codebook including all definitions can be obtained from the first author upon request.
[a] For the analysis, we recoded the race of the artist into the broader categories of White/Caucasian and Black/non-White.

Krippendorff, 2007). We retrieved following values for the 13 variables: *genre* (1.00), *gender* (1.00), *race* (1.00), *kissing* (0.86), *intimate touching* (0.86), *sexual intercourse* (1.00), *provocative clothing* (0.74), *target of the gaze* (1.00), *perpetrator of the gaze* (1.00), *objectifying camera shot* (0.83), *sexual movement* (0.75), *sexual posing* (1.00), and *sexual facial expression* (1.00). The test scores indicated acceptable-to-good intercoder reliability.

Given the small sample size of our first reliability test, we performed an additional reliability test with an independent coder (i.e., a graduate student), which upholds the notion of reproducibility as the most important indicator of reliability (Krippendorff, 2004). The independent coder was blind to the hypotheses and research questions and received 2 weeks of training, which involved approximately 40 hr of coder training. After coder training, both the independent coder and the first author coded a subsample of 50 (10.8%) randomly chosen music videos. Krippendorff's alpha for the 13 variables was as follows: *genre* (0.83), *gender* (1.00), *race* (0.90), *sexual movement* (0.77), *sexual posing* (0.75), *sexual facial expression* (0.81), *kissing* (1.00), *intimate touching* (0.73), *sexual intercourse* (0.70), *provocative clothing* (0.88), *target of the gaze* (1.00), *perpetrator of the gaze* (1.00), and *objectifying camera shot* (0.75). The test scores from the second reliability test provided further confidence that we had developed a reliable coding scheme. The first, third, and fourth authors coded 16%, 44%, and 40% of the material, respectively. Coding a substantial amount of the material represented a central requirement for the third and fourth authors as part of their master's thesis. However, we acknowledge that the coding material was unevenly distributed between coders and that future research should strive for an equal distribution of the coding material.

General Categories

Gender of the artist. The gender of the artist had to be clearly identifiable in the music video as either woman or man. We acknowledge that the gender of the artist is not a binary category and that many artists do not identify as female or male (e.g., Shea Diamond, Lucas Silveri of The Cliks, and Big Freedia). Owing to the rarity of occurrence and aspects of intercoder reliability, we did not include other gender identities when coding the gender of music artists.

Race of the artist. Relying on previous research (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Frisby & Aubrey, 2012), we differentiated race into seven categories: White, Black, Hispanic or Latino, Asian or Pacific Islander, multiracial, other, or unidentifiable. The artist's race and/or ethnicity was retrieved by researching the artist's biography online.

Genre of the music video. To identify the genre of the music video, we used the categorization used on Apple's iTunes store. As some genres were very rare (e.g., Reggae and Latin), we recoded songs in those categories into one of four genres (i.e., R&B/hip-hop/rap, pop, rock, and country).[1]

Content Categories

Depicted sexuality. Depictions of sexual behavior included three dichotomously coded variables: *passionate kissing*, *intimate touching*, and depicted or strongly implied *sexual intercourse*. All variables had to clearly convey sexual intimacy to be defined as

sexual behavior. Thus, a light kiss (i.e., peck), for instance, was not coded as passionate kissing. The kiss had to be clearly visible in the music video. Intimate touching included self-touch as well as touching another person in a sexual way (e.g., touching genital area or touching breasts). The category was rather narrowly defined as sexual foreplay to be distinguished from sexual movements and sexual posing (see below). Therefore, hugging or holding hands was not coded as intimate touching. Sexual intercourse was typically not explicitly shown but strongly implied through the narrative of the video. For instance, when the first scene shows a wildly kissing couple that throws themselves into bed and the subsequent scene depicts them waking up together implying they are naked and only covered by the bedsheets. We only coded depictions of sexual behavior that involved the artist.

Anecdotally, it is not uncommon to see same-sex sexuality, especially between two women, in music videos (e.g., Madonna's "Justify my love" and Lady Gaga's "Telephone"). Therefore, sexuality variables accounted for heterosexual (i.e., opposite sex) as well as queer sexual behavior in the music video. However, we did not explicitly code for the occurrence of heterosexual or queer sexual behavior. The three variables were summed up to a composite sexuality score ranging from 0 to 3.

Depicted sexual objectification. We coded whether the artist was sexually gazed upon. In addition, we included whether the artists applied the objectifying gaze. Thus, we differentiated between the artist being the *target of the gaze* or the being the *perpetrator of the gaze*. Gazing was defined as "checking out" the body of a person stemming from sexual interest. The objectifying gaze does not convey mutuality or flirting. Thus, simultaneous eye contact between two individuals did not count as objectifying gaze. A typical scene could show a woman passing by in front of a group of men who are gazing, catcalling, or commenting at the women. However, the codebook accounted for sexual gazing independent of the target's and the perpetrator's gender. We also coded whether an *objectifying camera shot* was present or absent. The camera shots had to focus solely on sexual parts of the body (i.e., legs, upper thighs, buttocks, or breasts) without showing the face to be identified. This type of camera shots could also include several body parts, such as a shot from the legs upward to the buttocks of the artist. We also coded either for the presence or absence of *provocative clothing*. Relying on previous content analyses (King et al., 2006; Turner, 2011), the artist's attire was considered to be sexually objectifying when it included specific materials (i.e., made of leather or transparent cloth) or specific colors or prints (i.e., black, red, and animal prints) or was worn in a manner (i.e., unbuttoned) that implied sexual suggestiveness. Provocative clothing also included clothes that clearly accentuated sexual body parts (e.g., short skirts, shirts with deep cut-outs, and lingerie). Together, the four dichotomous variables (target of the gaze, perpetrator of the gaze, objectifying camera shot, and provocative clothing) were summed up to a composite score (0–4) to measure sexual objectification.

Depicted ambiguous sexual expression. We defined *sexual movements*, including dance movements, that draw attention to

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[1] Songs from the genre *alternative* were coded as rock songs. Songs from the genre *Latin* were coded as pop songs. *Reggae*, *electronic*, and *dance* songs were examined individually and either coded as pop, rock, or R&B/hip-hop/rap.

sexuality and that are meant to be suggestive or arousing as ambiguous sexual expression. This variable could include grinding or thrusting hips (e.g., twerking), lap dance, or pole dance. *Sexual posing* included nondance movements, such as standing or laying with spread legs, lolling, and self-touching, all to convey sexual readiness, but no actual foreplay or sexual behavior. *Sexual facial expression* included suggestive facial behavior such as licking or biting one's lips in a sexual way, seductive gazing, and consuming food in a sensual way. Each variable was coded as either present or absent. The three variables were added up to a composite score ranging from 0 to 3.

Results

We ran several negative binomial regressions that included the composite measures (i.e., sexual behavior, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression) as our dependent variables. Following the argument of Darlington and Hayes (2017), our composite measures qualified as count variables, because they included few observations, and most of these observations clus-

tered toward the bottom of the distribution. As ordinary regression analysis can be problematic with count variables, we conducted negative binomial regression analysis instead. In cases where we included a dichotomous variable as the dependent measure (i.e., perpetrator of the gaze), we ran logistic regressions. In all analyses, we entered year (as a continuous variable), gender, race, and genre as independent variables. For our additional analyses, we tested the two-way interactions of year and genre, year and gender, and year and race separately.

Descriptive Results

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics and results of χ^2 analyses by the gender of the artist and all applied variables. The sample contained more male artists ($n = 280$, 61.6%) than female artists ($n = 182$, 39.4%). By race, 63.0% ($n = 214$) of the artists were White, 42.0% ($n = 194$) were Black, 3.5% ($n = 16$) were Hispanic or Latino, 7.1% ($n = 32$) were multiracial, and 1.1% ($n = 5$) were Asian or Pacific Islander. For further analysis, we recoded the race of the artist into the broader categories of White

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics by Gender of the Artist of All Categories and Variables Applied

Category	Male artist n (%)	Female artist n (%)	Total n (%)	χ^2
Genre				50.31, $p < .001$
Pop	81 (34.6)	122 (70.1)	203 (49.8)	
R&B/hip hop	153 (65.4)	52 (29.9)	205 (50.2)	
Race				12.75, $p < .001$
White/Caucasian	111 (39.6)	103 (56.6)	214 (46.3)	
Black/non-White	169 (60.4)	79 (43.4)	248 (53.7)	
Sexuality				
Kissing				1.60, $p = .205$
Present	37 (13.2)	17 (9.3)	54 (11.7)	
Absent	243 (86.8)	165 (90.7)	408 (88.3)	
Intimate touching				.58, $p = .448$
Present	22 (7.9)	18 (9.9)	40 (8.7)	
Absent	258 (90.1)	164 (90.1)	422 (91.3)	
Sexual intercourse				.47, $p = .495$
Present	25 (8.9)	13 (7.1)	38 (8.2)	
Absent	255 (91.1)	169 (92.9)	424 (91.8)	
Sexual objectification				
Provocative clothing				134.56, $p < .001$
Present	101 (36.1)	165 (90.7)	266 (57.6)	
Absent	179 (63.9)	17 (9.3)	196 (42.4)	
Target of gaze				11.99, $p < .001$
Present	15 (5.4)	27 (14.8)	42 (9.1)	
Absent	265 (94.6)	155 (85.2)	420 (90.9)	
Objectifying camera shot				87.37, $p < .001$
Present	17 (6.1)	76 (41.8)	93 (20.1)	
Absent	263 (93.9)	106 (68.2)	369 (79.9)	
Perpetrator of gaze				14.47, $p < .001$
Present	42 (15.0)	7 (3.8)	49 (10.6)	
Absent	238 (85.0)	175 (96.2)	413 (89.4)	
Ambiguous sexual expression				
Sexual movements				7.33, $p < .01$
Present	22 (7.9)	29 (15.9)	51 (11.0)	
Absent	258 (92.1)	153 (84.1)	411 (89.0)	
Sexual posing				90.76, $p < .001$
Present	2 (.7)	56 (30.8)	58 (12.6)	
Absent	278 (99.3)	126 (69.2)	404 (87.4)	
Sexual facial expression				43.32, $p < .001$
Present	8 (2.9)	40 (22.0)	48 (10.4)	
Absent	272 (97.1)	142 (78.0)	414 (89.6)	

($n = 214$, 46.3%) and Black or non-White ($n = 248$, 53.7%). Almost half of the songs belonged to the R&B, hip-hop, or rap genre ($n = 205$, 44.4%) or the pop ($n = 203$, 43.9%), rock ($n = 45$, 9.7%), and country ($n = 9$, 1.9%) genres. Owing to small sample sizes, we dropped music videos from the rock and country genre from our final analysis. Thus, we compared only two genre categories with each other: R&B/hip-hop/rap and pop.

Across all years, 18% ($n = 84$) of the music videos depicted at least one aspect of sexuality. Depictions of passive or active sexual objectification were present in about two thirds of the music videos (64.7%, $n = 299$). Depictions of ambiguous sexual behavior occurred in 21.6% ($n = 100$) of the music videos.

Change Over Time

Research Question 1, Research Question 2, and Research Question 3 asked how depictions of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression changed over time. Our data indicate no significant increase or decrease of depicted sexuality ($b = -0.00$, $SE = 0.02$, Wald $\chi^2 = 0.16$, ns) or depicted sexual objectification ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, Wald $\chi^2 = 2.04$, ns) over time. Depictions of ambiguous sexual expression in music videos did slightly increase over time ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.01$, Wald $\chi^2 = 25.25$, $p < .001$). Figure 1 presents these findings. For the sake of visualization, we segmented our data in four periods (1995–2000, 2001–2006, 2007–2012, and 2013–2016). However, all reported results refer to year as a continuous variable.

Gender of the Artist

In Hypothesis 1 we predicted that female artists are more likely shown engaging in sexuality than male artists. As shown in Table
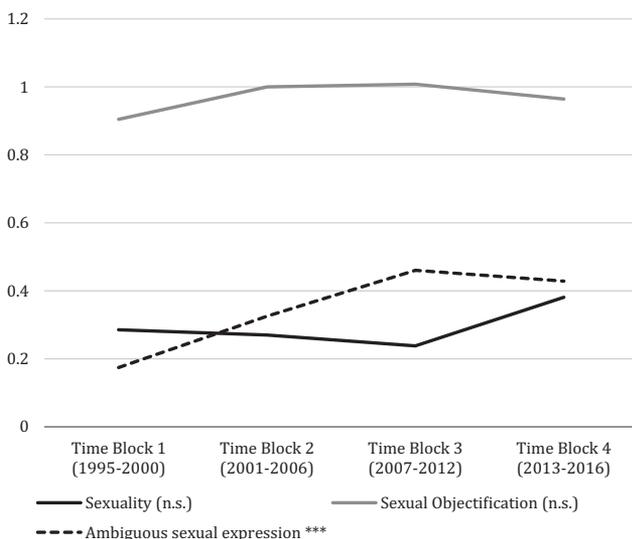

Figure 1. Average depicted sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression over time broken down by time segments. The composite scores for sexuality and ambiguous sexual expression range from 0 to 3 (y axis); the composite score for sexual objectification ranges from 0 to 4 (y axis). *** $p < .001$.

3, the gender of the artist did not relate to sexual behavior (Hypothesis 1; $b = -0.42$, $SE = 0.27$, Wald $\chi^2 = 2.42$, ns). Thus, we had to reject Hypothesis 1. Gender did positively relate to sexual objectification ($b = 0.89$, $SE = 0.11$, Wald $\chi^2 = 65.91$, $p < .001$), which suggests that female artists were more often depicted in sexually objectifying situations than male artists. As expected in Hypothesis 2a, female artists were more likely to be passively objectified in music videos than male artists ($b = 1.14$, $SE = 0.12$, Wald = 89.13, $p < .001$), and as predicted in Hypothesis 2b, male artists engaged more often in active sexual objectification ($b = 1.46$, $SE = 0.47$, Wald $\chi^2 = 9.59$, $Exp(b) = 0.23$, $p < .01$) than female artists. Supporting Hypothesis 3, female artists were more likely depicted with ambiguous sexual expressions ($b = 1.90$, $SE = 0.22$, Wald $\chi^2 = 73.44$, $p < .001$) than male artists.

Race of the Artist

The race of the artist did not predict depictions of sexuality ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.33$, Wald $\chi^2 = 0.19$, ns) or depictions of sexual objectification ($b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.12$, Wald $\chi^2 = 1.80$, ns). Thus, Hypothesis 4 and Hypothesis 5 had to be rejected. Black and non-White artists were more often seen in ambiguous sexual expression ($b = 0.74$, $SE = 0.19$, Wald $\chi^2 = 15.84$, $p < .001$), conforming Hypothesis 6.

Genre

In Hypothesis 7−Hypothesis 9, we predicted that music videos from the R&B/hip-hop/rap genre would contain more depictions of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression than music videos from other genres. Results showed that the genre was not a significant predictor of depicted sexuality ($b = -0.60$, $SE = 0.3$, Wald $\chi^2 = 3.25$, ns), sexual objectification ($b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.13$, Wald $\chi^2 = 0.81$, ns), or ambiguous sexual expression ($b = -0.17$, $SE = 0.22$, Wald $\chi^2 = 0.64$, ns). Thus, our hypotheses had to be rejected.

Additional Analysis

We also tested for possible interaction effects of year and gender, year and race, and year and genre. We found no such interaction effects for depictions of sexuality or sexual objectification (Table 3). We found a significant interaction of year and gender on depictions of ambiguous sexual expression ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, Wald $\chi^2 = 10.45$, $p < .01$), which indicates that over time women in music videos were shown more often engaging in ambiguous sexual expression than men. The two other tested interactions—year and race ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.03$, Wald $\chi^2 = 0.29$, ns) and year and genre ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.03$, Wald $\chi^2 = 0.73$, ns)—were not significant. No other interaction was significant (Table 3).

Discussion

Building upon and extending a long tradition of content analyses of music videos, our study contributes a longitudinal perspective to the topic by focusing on the change of visual depictions of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression in music videos from 1995 to 2016. Drawing on objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Nussbaum, 1995) and the

Table 3

Regressions Explaining Sexuality, Sexual Objectification, and Ambiguous Sexual Expression, N = 462

Regression analyses	Sexuality		Sexual objectification		Ambiguous sexual expression	
	B (SE)	Wald χ^2	B (SE)	Wald χ^2	B (SE)	Wald χ^2
Constant	**−.82 (.26)**[***]	**10.14**	**−.55 (.12)**[***]	**30.85**	**−2.66 (.26)**[***]	**105.81**
Year	−.00 (.02)	.16	.01 (.01)	2.04	**.08 (.01)**[***]	**25.25**
Gender (female)	−.42 (.27)	2.42	**.89 (.11)**[***]	**65.91**	**1.90 (.22)**[***]	**73.44**
Race (Black/non-White)	.14 (.33)	.19	.16 (.12)	1.80	**.74 (.19)**[***]	**15.84**
Genre (R&B/hip hop)	−.60 (.33)	3.25	.37 (.13)	.81	−.17 (.22)	.64
Year × Gender	.04 (.04)	.89	.00 (.02)	.01	**.09 (.03)**[**]	**7.90**
Year × Race	−.06 (.04)	1.78	.00 (.02)	.02	.02 (.03)	.29
Year × Genre	.00 (.04)	.00	.01 (.02)	.58	.03 (.03)	.73

Note. Sexuality (three variables): kissing, intimate touching, and sexual intercourse; passive sexual objectification (four variables): provocative clothing, target of the gaze, perpetrator of the gaze, and objectifying camera shot; active sexual objectification (one variable): perpetrator of gaze; ambiguous sexual expression (three variables): sexual movements, sexual posing, and sexual expression. Boldface indicates significant results.

[**] $p < .01$. [***] $p < .001$.

recently introduced conceptual framework by Rousseau et al. (2018), we provided a clear-cut delineation of sexuality and sexual objectification. We also included a third dimension, ambiguous sexual expression, to account for three variables that depict behavior that can be equally interpreted as sexual or sexually objectifying. By including female and male music artists, we could compare gendered presentations of sexuality and sexual objectification. Furthermore, we examined sexuality and sexual objectification in terms of the artist's race and the video's music genre.

Our results suggest that, although depicted sexuality and sexual objectification in music videos did not change between 1995 and 2016, depictions of sexuality and sexual objectification have been and continue to be pervasive in mainstream music culture. A central finding of our study is that depictions of ambiguous sexual expression, including sexually suggestive movements, sexual posing, and facial expressions, increased over time. Perhaps more importantly, this finding was moderated by gender, suggesting that female artists were increasingly more often portrayed with ambiguous sexual expression. With the findings of our study at hand, expressed concerns that children, adolescents, and young adults face an increasing risk of encountering sexual and sexually objectifying portrayals of people in music videos are partly justified. Despite the potential negative effects of sexually objectifying and ambiguous sexual portrayals, which we will discuss in the following text, sexual content by itself is not necessarily problematic (Rousseau et al., 2018). Mass media are an important social agent in shaping adolescent's sexual socialization (Brown et al., 2005; Fortenberry, 2013; Ragsdale et al., 2014). Thus, music videos that show intimate sexual acts, which are based on mutual consent, might provide valuable reference points for adolescents when developing their own sexuality.

Overall, our findings strengthen central tenets of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), stating that Western media sexually objectify women by focusing on women's sexual appeal and sexual attractiveness. On the one hand, female artists were more often presented in a sexually objectified way. They were more likely shown as being the target of the objectifying gaze, being the focus of objectifying camera shots, and wearing provocative clothing compared with male artists. On the other hand, male artists objectified other individuals more often than did female artists. Together, our findings largely correspond to results from

previous content analyses that indicate that women are more likely to be sexually objectified than men in music videos (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Vandenbosch et al., 2013). Drawing on objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and social–cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), girls and young women might learn from accumulated exposure to popular music videos that acting sexy, receiving sexually focused attention, and being sexually attractive are pivotal for women. Boys and young men might learn that women represent objects of desire and that it is generally acceptable for men, if not expected of them, to objectify women. Thus, as evidenced by previous experimental and correlational studies (Bernard et al., 2016; Karsay et al., 2018; Kistler & Lee, 2010; Trekels, Karsay, Eggermont, & Vandenbosch, 2018), exposure to mainstream music videos might increase self-objectifying thoughts and behavior, self-sexualizing behavior, as well as stereotypical and sexist beliefs among adolescents and young adults. However, feminist scholars have argued that sexual provocation can be seen as a tool of empowerment for female music artists. For example, McNicholas Smith (2017) suggested that Miley Cyrus' controversial and exaggerated performances deliberately challenge existing conventions of femininity. Nevertheless, in many instances, the boundaries of female empowerment and sexual objectification are blurred, leading to ambiguous presentations, including both *feminist* and *sexist* (i.e., postfeminist) elements (Hansen, 2017; McNicholas Smith, 2017). Future research is needed, to disentangle the effects of sexually ambiguous depictions.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that music videos are likely to perpetuate stereotypes in regard to ethnicity, because Black/non-White artists were more likely shown expressing ambiguous sexual behavior than White/Caucasian artists. However, research on the effects of sexual and sexually objectifying media content on ethnic minorities is scarce (Ward, 2016). There is first evidence that watching music videos was associated with more traditional gender roles among African American college students (Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). More (experimental) research is needed to identify whether and how music videos create stereotypes among a White and a non-White audience.

Concerning music genres, seeing depictions of sexuality or some kind of sexual objectification is likely when watching music videos from *any* genre that we investigated. Our findings suggest that music videos in both categories of genre (i.e., R&B/hip-hop/

rap vs. pop) contain depictions of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression equally as often. For instance, artists in R&B, hip-hop, and rap music videos showed an equal amount of depicted sexuality like artists in pop music videos. Unlike findings from previous studies (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Conrad et al., 2009), our results do not suggest that depictions of sexuality are more common in R&B, hip-hop, and rap music videos than in pop music videos.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of the study warrant mention. First, we focused on the visual presentation of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression in music videos, as has been partly done in previous studies. Although we managed to establish intercoder reliability, coding visual content in general, and ambiguous sexual expression in particular, remains a challenge owing to the nuances and layers of interpretation that are inherent to this type of media content. Drawing on Rousseau et al.'s (2018) conceptual differentiation, we provided an additional category of ambiguous sexual expression as an attempt to advance the existing literature on sexualizing media. We encourage researchers to build upon our study to provide even more nuanced visual content analyses in the field. Second, in the future, researchers should consider combining the analysis of visual content and lyrics. Third, relying on previous content analyses of music videos (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Conrad et al., 2009), we coded for the occurrence of particular behaviors shown by the artist in the music video, because we aimed to obtain information on the scope of sexual, sexually objectifying, and sexually ambiguous depictions in a longitudinal sample. In future content analytical studies, researchers should code at the scene level or code the duration of each behavior to receive further information about the intensity of depicted sexual references. Furthermore, we focused solely on the main artist in each video; however, in several cases, women played entirely decorative roles as extras or dancers orbiting around the main male artist in the videos and, in those roles, were often sexualized and dressed in provocative clothing. In that sense, we are aware that we did not analyze all kinds of depictions of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression in the music videos. In response, additional categories for all categories other than that of the main artist should be accounted for in future analyses. We also recommend to code for more than two gender identities, to include the sexual orientation of the artist, and to differentiate between heterosexual and nonheterosexual sexual and sexually objectifying depictions.

Moreover, because we aimed to analyze music videos of the most popular songs, we based our sample on the U.S. Billboard song charts. For a detailed analysis of genre-related differences, future research should include a stratified sampling method for music videos from different genres. Finally, future researchers should code songs from the year-end charts instead of sampling songs from weekly charts, which would present a more accurate list of the most popular songs of a given year.

Conclusion

In sum, our study showed that representations of sexuality and sexual objectification in music videos during 1995–2016 did not change over time. However, ambiguous sexual expression did increase in this period. Our content analysis demonstrates that depictions of sexuality, sexual objectification, and ambiguous sexual expression in music videos represent a crucial element of mainstream culture. This result should serve as a starting point for future research. From the perspective of media effects, we deem it important to further investigate how such depictions affect adolescents and young adults in their daily lives.

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