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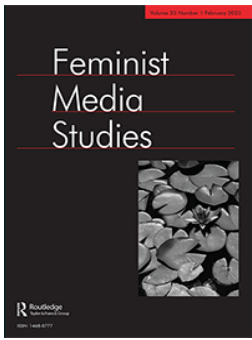
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Unmasking the ideological work of violence in music videos: findings from ethnographic audience research into contemporary sexual politics

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates how scripts of sexual attraction and interaction in contemporary music videos are enduringly formed from heteronormative and essentialist 'natural order' discourses of biological difference that (re)produce and legitimise existing and harmful power relations. Uniquely, this article identifies and interrogates examples of this practice through critical analysis of the use and meaning of male to female and female to male violence in music videos. We know from extant literature that representations inform social interaction and therefore this research has significant implications for real-life sexual interactions and importantly sexual assault and violence against women. By identifying and articulating the ideological work of violence in music videos, this article reveals its significance and meaning in heterosexual sex and relationships. This study is situated within a feminist theoretical framework that prioritises participant voice and calls for social change.

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Introduction

This research takes place in a cultural and political environment increasingly concerned with questions of sex and power and the global effects of gendered sexual inequality (Ros Gill and Shani Orgad 2018; Rosemary Lucy Hill, Daisy Richards and Heather Savigny 2021). Feminist academics have theorised and empirically evidenced social, cultural and structural forces that contribute to and sustain sexual inequalities and their material consequences for women (Melissa Burkett and Karine Hamilton 2012; Ann J. Cahill 2016; Maddy Coy and Maria Garner 2012; Nicola Gavey 2005, 2019; Liz Kelly 1988, 2016; Claire Moran 2017). The unremitting sexual harassment and abuse experienced by women and girls, given voice by academics and movements like #MeToo, suggests the effects of patriarchal heterosexuality are a global phenomenon.

Contributing to this debate, this article presents audience interpretations of representations of sex and relationships in contemporary music videos, identified as potent carriers of sexual stories and meaning with a unique modal value among contemporary media,

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and theorises the ideological work of violence as an essential component of the heterosexual relationship script, an understudied area of enquiry. Centring the act of interpretation, this research presents original empirical evidence to show how meaning is made in that act and demonstrates how this script is enduringly composed of discriminatory heteronormative postfeminist discourses of natural biological difference (Gill 2007) which underpin a damaging contemporary sexual politics. In this way, this article extends our understandings of the nuanced and dynamic way postfeminism rearticulates an unequal sexual politics that privileges men and subordinates women.

Music videos are recognised as potent carriers of cultural meaning particularly among young adults (Jhally 2007) and their representations are important to interrogate because of their potential to be read as a valid and reliable 'truth'. Sexual stories are the currency of music videos and power sits with those who tell the stories (Paul Bowman 2014; Stuart Hall 1998). Recognising one's sexual story or subjectivity represented and legitimated in such a high-status format is an exercise in power (Bowman 2014; Ken Plummer 1995). By operating at this level, music videos are implicated in the shaping of sexual politics by (re)producing and legitimising dominant descriptions of sexual interactions. Further, musicians, a cornerstone of celebrity culture, occupy a privileged space in their ability to 'speak' to and communicate with audiences in a distinctively personal and emotive way, penetrating the audience's consciousness through repetition strengthening associations (James Lull 1987, 14). They epitomise Plummer's (1995) by signifying cultural success through wealth, attractiveness and fashionable sexual stories, embodying contemporary neoliberal aspirational ideals (Heather Mendick, Aisha Ahmad, Kim Allen and Laura Harvey, 2019).

This critical feminist study, part of a larger study into the enduring gendered inequality of hegemonic heterosexuality, draws on feminist theory and sexuality studies to theorise audience interpretations gathered from in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. It demonstrates how the heterosexual relationship script (re)presented in music videos, deeply meaningful and significant carriers of sexual meaning among adolescents and young adults, and central to informing normative understandings of sex and relationships, is heteronormatively gendered, legitimises existing power relations and (re)presents gendered sexual interaction that (re)produces an unequal sexual politics which too often means sexual assault and violence against women (Coy and Garner 2012, 295; Sut Jhally 2007).

By shining a light on the ideological construction of gender relations in postfeminist media culture, this article reveals the complex and nuanced, flexible and dynamic, ways ideological representations facilitate unequal, discriminatory and damaging, sexual politics. Drawn from audience interpretations, which made clear ideological connections between postfeminist media culture and lived experience, these findings show that the ideological work of violence in music videos is intimately woven into a postfeminist ideology that permeates everyday life for these young adults. This is of particular significance in the current moment with intense focus on questions of sex and power and a growing public discourse of male sexual violence against women. This contributes to the wealth of scholarship addressing the normalisation and legitimisation of male violence against women in popular culture and extends our understanding of the scope and significance of a postfeminist sensibility.

Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) was chosen for this research because it takes an audience-centred semiotic approach to reveal audience identified meanings attached to

sexual scripts that characterise notions of (hetero)sexuality orienting gendered sexual politics. This approach, discussed in more depth later on, speaks to methodological limitations in audience and textual analyses which prioritise researcher-identified texts and researcher-analysis, analytically focus on discourse *as* action, lack attention to the modal value of texts and relationships between audience and musician, and analytically focus on text or audience.

It should be noted that in discussing scripts I do not suggest all music videos follow the same pattern, but rather that within the scope of this study which encompassed four dominant music genres (Pop; Hip-Hop/Rap/RnB; Dance/Electronica; Indie/Acoustic), patterns and inconsistencies were identified that represented expected, normal and dominant representations of sex and relationships. The in-depth audience-centred approach used in this study foregrounds participant interpretations as they emerged in complex social interactions and engages with the intimate processes of cultural meaning making in an unprecedented way. All artefacts (music videos, social media content etc.) referred to in this article are participant identified.

Contemporary feminist discussions of sex and relationships often stall in a binary of pro/anti sex/pornography, a hangover from the feminist 'sex wars' of the 1980s (Gill 2012b). This article moves beyond these dualisms, often repeated in contemporary debates on the sexualisation of culture, in a critical and productive way to offer new insights that allow for a revitalisation of work in the field of sexual politics. By adopting Gill's postfeminist sensibility, introduced below, this article problematises the ways sex and relationships are represented in music videos from a politicised critical feminist perspective that is concerned with questions of power and not sexualisation in general, taking a "sex positive but anti-sexism" position (Gill and Orgad 2018, 5).

Postfeminist media culture

Gill (2007, 147–148) argues "arguments about postfeminism are debates about nothing less than the transformations in feminisms and transformations in media culture—and their mutual relationship" and introduces the concept of a postfeminist sensibility, present in media culture, through which we can "examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media." It is this drawing together of mediated representation and a focus on articulations of gender that make Gill's postfeminist sensibility an appropriate theoretical lens for this study. Central themes within Gill's postfeminist sensibility are the sexualisation of culture, the shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification and the reassertion of sexual difference. I use Gill's postfeminist sensibility as a critical term to capture a shift in the representation of women and identify myself as a critical analyst of postfeminist culture, not a postfeminist analyst (Gill 2017).

Postfeminism is fundamentally sexualised, framing the feminine as sexual and linking femininity, sexuality and gender. Research has demonstrated how postfeminism interacts with lived sexual identities and practices and its negative implications. For example, Burkett and Hamilton (2012) and Moran (2017) set out the negative consequences for women and girls of sexual choices being represented as unproblematic and 'freely chosen,' framed in discourses of empowerment and agency by a postfeminist sensibility. Gill (2012a, 2017) details how in a postfeminist sensibility female sexual agency has

become a requirement which simultaneously empowers, depoliticises and isolates women, 'empowering' them to eschew the old codes and adopt an active and visual sexuality, epitomised in the postfeminist sexual subject, but in return, women adopt a burden of personal responsibility that leaves no recourse to social, institutional, political or personal forces.

Postfeminism has been extensively articulated as inherent to and disseminated in popular culture (Gill 2007, 2017; Angela McRobbie 2004) observed in media representations championing (primarily young, white, slim, rich, Anglo-American) women. While appearing to reflect feminist goals, on closer examination these representations reflect a limited and limiting version of womanhood, seeped in white, patriarchal, heteronormative ideals devoid of social and political context, reproducing privileged positions and concerned primarily with the consumption of goods to facilitate gendered subjectivity (Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 2007). Music videos are critical objects of postfeminist media culture, providing a lens to analyse culture and illuminate power and meaning making. They are culturally constructed artefacts significant in the identity formation of adolescents and young adults (Lull 1987) and act as sexual storytellers communicating scripts on gender and sexuality (Jeffrey Jensen Arnett 2002, 257; Jhally 2007).

A final aspect of the postfeminist sensibility I draw attention to is its reassertion of sexual difference. Gill (2007, 159) sets out how a postfeminist sensibility works to "(re-) eroticise power relations between men and women ... [freezing] in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable" by integrating discourses of natural difference. In this way, a postfeminist sensibility identifies sexuality and gender as biologically determined and traditional power structures (e.g., heterosexuality, patriarchy) as 'natural,' thereby prioritising and normalising male sexual desire and subordinating female sexuality. This conceptualisation of gender and sexuality frames contemporary sexual politics, the study of which must develop understandings of power by giving full weight to its politics (Raewyn Connell 1985, 266; Gayle Rubin 1992).

Kate Millett (1977, 23) defines politics as "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another." Connell (1987) extends this definition by introducing considerations of group interests in the gender order and the effects of this on transformational trajectories. I adopt Connell's reworking of Millett's definition, which articulates the complex gendered inequality of patriarchal social and sexual relations embedded in sexual scripts.

Sexual scripts

The rules of hegemonic heterosexuality, drawn from essentialist sexual ideologies are the framework on which our sexual lives and interactions are judged, and which inform contemporary sexual politics. The materialisation of these interactions in social and sexual life has been conceived of as a set of scripts. Sexual scripting theory challenges biological ways of thinking about sexuality and offers a sociological social constructionist view of sexual behaviour that argues sexuality is contextually and socially constructed (John H. Gagnon and William Simon 1974). It asserts sexual arousal is defined socio-culturally through recognisable attributes (signs) applied to the actor and situation; that is, arousal is signified symbolically, through scripts, and learnt in an interactive process with the social world, i.e., family, peers and media shape our understandings of gendered (hetero)

sexuality. Sexual scripting theory argues sexuality is socially constructed in scripts, which operate externally (organising interpersonal interactions) and internally (shaping intra-personal motivational details) to produce arousal; in other words, interactions are governed by scripts and scripts make interaction possible. Sexual meaning, then, is created within this tiered framework of sexuality and scripts.

Sexual scripting theory has been critiqued for its lack of attention to power relations (sexual politics), however, as Stevi Jackson (1999, 9) argues, there is no way to conceive of questions of power and inequality within this framework without recourse to “meaning and interpersonal conduct”; scripts are based in interaction. It is also important to note that scripts, which are integral to “learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses, and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience” (Gagnon and Simon 1974, 19) are learnt through seeing ourselves and our social lives represented in the media and as such, interrogating audience readings of music videos is an important and valid approach to studying sexual scripts and politics.

Music videos are an important part of sexual storytelling. They have been theorised as contributing to understandings of gender and sexuality through their visual and thematic representations, illuminating the relationship between representation and practice and potential negative outcomes (Jhally 2007). This relationship is not directly causal but contributes to a ‘conductive context’ for a ‘grey area’ of sexual interaction. This theorisation draws on Gavey’s (2005, 2019) conceptualisation of everyday normative functions of heterosexuality (e.g., sexual scripts) as providing a ‘cultural scaffolding’ for rape, sexual coercion and a ‘grey area’ of sexual relations that are not rape or consensual mutually enjoyable sexual encounters, and Coy and Garner’s (2012, 288–289) framing of sexualisation as a ‘conductive context’ (Kelly 2007) providing ‘hegemonic templates’ that enable men to abuse women and girls.

Methodology, epistemology and ontology

The findings discussed in this article are taken from a larger audience study into music video representations of sex and relationships, their intersectional implications and relationship to contemporary sexual politics. Within that study, the common-sense acceptance of violence as part of the heterosexual relationship script and its complex use and meaning in music videos emerged as significant in informing notions of (in) appropriate gendered behaviour in sexual interactions. It is this finding that is discussed in depth in this article.

Positionality

This study takes a critical feminist, social constructionist and symbolic interactionist perspective. My feminist perspective asserts there is a gendered imbalance of power in society that is worthy of critical academic attention and foregrounds audience voice in the feminist epistemological tradition, which informs my methodological, analytical and theoretical approach (Marjorie L. DeVault 1996; Beverley Skeggs 2002). This study engages with the everyday lives, practices and experiences of audiences to unmask processes of interpretation. It does not address questions of production or theoretical analyses of

music, youth, fan or celebrity studies and is exclusively concerned with how the music videos in the sample were interpreted by the participants, not by the researcher or anyone else.

Analytic approach

I conceive of meaning as emanating from a dynamic process of audience interacting with text and created a novel Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) informed ethnographic method to interrogate this. MDA is a relatively new analytical framework that centres social action as the object of analysis (in this case the mediated act of interpretation), offering a nuanced and robust lens because it treats discourse as produced through social interaction, thereby illuminating significant actions and discourses (Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon 2004). MDA argues macro level social issues circulate in micro-level actions allowing the researcher to trace the webs of signification (Scollon and Wong Scollon 2004). MDA locates music videos as mediated means of reproducing social norms and expectations for social identities and social groups (Scollon and Wong Scollon 2004). Using MDA I was able to interrogate significant discourses in the act of interpretation over an extended period of time, accommodating intentional and *unintentional* aspects of communication, revealing the differences between what participants said and did, transcending the limitations of linguistic or textual analysis—a point of particular importance when studying a subject as personal as sex and relationships. In centring the act of interpretation, not the text, I identified significant appropriated discourses and treated discourse as produced through interaction i.e., discourse *in* action, not discourse *as* action.

Sample and cultural context

There were six adult participants in this study, pseudonyms are used throughout. It is acknowledged this sample has limitations, however, the in-depth engagement allowed for by the method is evidenced in the data. Inclusion criteria were age, location and watching music videos to allow authentic intersectional experiences to direct data collection (Leslie McCall 2005). Participants were selected from the main contemporary musical genres identified through formative research. The sample is detailed in [Table 1](#). Significantly, the diverse range of participant identified musical genres, shown in [Table 1](#), means all videos and artefacts, freely shared by participants based on their (musical) consumption, were relevant, well-informed, authentic and culturally situated (Richard Middleton 1990). This is important for analytic depth, the researcher/researched power imbalance (Jon Prosser and Andrew Loxley 2008) and foregrounds audience voice over researcher focus and assumptions.

This approach provided a rich insight into the semiotic web of signification in interpretation, providing ‘thick description’ in line with the ethnographic praxis advocated by Clifford Geertz (2000) and developed trust-based relationships to overcome barriers to delicate conversations on sex and relationships (Geertz 2000).

Table 1. Participant information

	Sex	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Musical taste	Sexuality	Occupation
Alex	Male	Cis	25	White British	Indy, folk, alternative	Heterosexual	Communications Manager
Carla	Female	Cis	22	White German	European rap and rock	Heterosexual	PG Student
Chris	Male	Cis	19	White British	Guitar based indie-rock and indie-pop	Questioning/heterosexual	Unemployed
Indy	Female	Cis	20	Black British	Hood, rap, 90s/00s RnB, neo soul	Homosexual	Receptionist
John	Male	Cis	24	White British	Electronica	Heterosexual	Music production
Sam	Female	Cis	19	Black British	Rap, alternative	Questioning/heterosexual	Apprentice solicitor

Method

The fieldwork ran from January—October 2018 and ninety 1–3-hour sessions took place. In addition to these sessions, I undertook location-based observations, kept a reflective journal and analysed social media content e.g., YouTube comments and Tweets identified or referred to by participants to observe their social worlds and build a picture of their networks. I used a range of qualitative methods: semi/unstructured observation and interview (structured loosely around themes of interest e.g., representations of gender, sexuality, class), media use, profile reviews and interviews using YouTube comments to elicit reactions (adapted from Q Methodology, see Job Van Exel and Gjalte Graaf, 2005). To support insight and overcome power imbalance, participants chose session locations, which ranged from a carpark to walks around town and social events with friends and, in one case, family. This plurality of methods was developed to engage participants in varied ways, drawing out a range of responses to reveal inconsistencies and contradictions. This approach was informed by MDA, which seeks to explore the semiotic web of signification surrounding the social act, i.e., by observing my participant's interpretation of music videos from a variety of perspectives, multiple types and levels of signification were made visible and available to analysis. The level and scope of insight obtained is demonstrated in the level of intimacy that developed and informed the findings here discussed.

Notes and audio recordings from fieldwork sessions were transcribed in a paraphrased style that maintained the voice of the participant and are included here in this format. All data was uploaded to NVivo qualitative data analysis software and analysed using an abductive coding method within an MDA lens i.e., the significant discourses appropriated in the act of interpretation were the focus of analysis, not the text or the participant. An abductive and iterative analytic process drawing on a range of sociological perspectives brought depth and revealed correlations and contradictions (H Russell Bernard 2011). All data was coded to researcher-identified appropriate MDA codes (e.g., discourse in place, mediational means) and then these codes were re-coded by participant-identified themes that emerged in the data. These themes were then interrogated for significant patterns, intersectional edges, contradictions and correlations.

Findings and discussion

Violence emerged as a central feature of the heterosexual relationship script in music videos across genres. In this section, I outline the heterosexual relationship script as identified by my participants and detail the role and features of violence that emerged as a central feature of it. I then briefly point to three scripts (female sexual availability, sexual interest and sexual initiation) participants identified within the overarching heterosexual relationship script to further illustrate the nuanced and dynamic way postfeminism rearticulates an unequal sexual politics that privileges men and subordinates women in music video representations of sex and relationships.

Heterosexual relationship script

Explicit sexual representations in music videos were limited and sex was typically referenced in subtle, symbolic, and metaphorical ways meaning sexual scripts were embedded in scripts of gendered behaviour indicating an overarching (heterosexual) relationship script. Through its repetition across genres, its intercultural meaning and acceptance indicating hegemony through legitimisation and normalisation, the following was identified as the dominant heterosexual relationship script by participants.

Heterosexual relationship script

Music video relationships in the sample were predominantly heterosexual and revolved around sex and/or discord reflecting recent work by Silvia Escobar-Fuentes and Fco Manuel Montalbán-Peregrín (2021). Their scripts, which were either explicitly represented or offered as justification for plot gaps by participants, are resonant of that outlined by Adrienne Rich over 40 years ago (1980). Men behave badly, most often by being promiscuous (invoking the male sexual drive script), but also by being emotionally and/or physically abusive, neglectful, dishonest or otherwise disrespectful. Women respond by screaming and shouting, crying with and/or being emotionally supported by female friends (as in *Eminem: River* 2018), before eventually taking him back (as in *Ashanti: Foolish* 2002). The post-discord reunion ('happy ending') was frequently cited as evidence of the strength of a couple's bond and explained thus: despite all *his* bad behaviour, *their* love is such they get past it, and was repeatedly supported/evidenced with real-life experiences. This script was in evidence in multiple readings including Indy's reading of *Steve Lacy: Ryd/Dark Red* (2016) where she interpreted the unexplained female to male violence as most likely the result of the male character "cheating on her or something."

Enmeshed in scripts of gendered behaviour, the heterosexual relationship script is founded on the assertion that men will and do behave badly towards women and that women will forgive men. This forgiveness is understood as the 'happy ending,' the post-conflict resolution where women forgive men for physical and/or emotional abuse, the significance of which is addressed in the following sections.

By representing women as accepting of male bad behaviour, music videos locate them in a subordinate role that facilitates male dominance and prioritises male entitlement. This is also observed in the representation of an active and desiring female sexuality, which simultaneously meets male sexual desires, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from Alex regarding the female lead in *Sundara Karma: She Said* (2016):

It's cheeky and playful, she's quite confident [...] it's an "ideal type" (he uses the quotation gesture) to have a confident attractive woman behaving like that, a lot of men would like that, a certain type of man would like that

The woman is sexually desirable because of her 'confidence,' she is an 'ideal type' that carries a high sexual and cultural status for men. It is perhaps also significant that the woman is white, slim and conventionally attractive in her framing as a non-threatening 'ideal type.' Had she, for example, been black her actions may have been interpreted as deviant (Hill-Collins 2004), and had she been less conventionally attractive (e.g., plus-size, disabled), she may have been "vilified" (Gill 2009, 104).

In the following sections, I analyse the frequent use of violence, which has emerged as a dominant theme in the heterosexual relationship script revealing the ideological work it performs in supporting postfeminist notions of biological sexual difference, which inform contemporary sexual politics.

Male violence

Violence was a prevalent and accepted feature of the heterosexual relationship script and there were many examples of female to male and male to female violence. Explicit male physical violence against women included throwing a lamp at a woman (*Ashanti: Foolish*), pushing a woman to the ground (*Eminem: River*) and holding a woman by the wrist to restrain her and stop her from leaving (*Camila Cabello: Havana*). Many demonstrations of male violence were symbolic, including for example, unequal nudity (see for example *Kendrick Lamar: LOVE*), a visual technique recognised as symbolically signifying “unequal power that spells coercion” in visual representations of sex (Gloria Steinem 1980, 37).

An interesting and illuminating interpretation of male violence is Sam’s oppositional reading of *Joji: Will He* (2017). In the video, we see a woman splattered with blood, slumped on a bathroom floor with an arrow through her head. In a blood-tinged bath lays the male lead singing about his relationship with his ex-girlfriend. The dominant reading is that he and the woman were in a relationship, which ended, she began a relationship with another man, and he killed her because of his ‘obsession’ with her. Sam, however, found the video “smart” and, drawing on the unreality of the scene (the fakeness of the blood, the use of a “cupid’s arrow” instead of a knife, the absence of visible violence), suggested violence wasn’t the intended message, but rather, that the man killed her “out of love or out of his own self-development rather than directly against her.” Sam’s assertion the male lead had no intentions of hurt and was ‘artistically’ representing his pain and depth of feelings, his “vulnerability,” is symbolic of a contemporary high-cultural status masculinity and reflects an emotional double standard. When questioned about the normalcy of male violence in music videos, Sam called it “dangerous” saying “it reflects how we know relationships are,” thereby recognising violence as a trope of music videos and reflective of her social reality. By conceptualising violence as simultaneously dangerous and artistic dependent on its semiotic composition, Sam, along with other participants, demonstrated how discourses of ‘art’ have the potential to depoliticise acts of violence. This has significant implications for high-status music videos and musicians.

Male violence was frequently referenced through subtle and symbolic visual cues, for example weaponry, displays of physical bodily strength and dominance, ownership and control of space, shouting and aggressive behaviours, or, as Sam put it “using their masculinity.” Male violence against women was frequently discussed in terms that made it seem mundane, for example, “This image of a woman being pushed to the floor or something is nothing new” (Carla) reflecting Millett’s (1977, 44–45) assertion that violence against women is met with a “curiously ambivalent” emotional response in patriarchy. Claims from female participants that male violence was a fact of life were almost always followed up with a reluctance to blame men and assertions that “not all men are like that,” and/or justified with claims that women were at least as bad as men (at committing violence), if not worse, as articulated by Indy:

Indy expressed a sense of resignation to the reality of violence in relationships saying “arguments sometimes get physical” but seemed reluctant to blame men, following up this statement with “it’s both sides, it’s not just one person beating the other, and more often than not it’s the girl that starts it so... yeah... like in the video she hit him”

It is significant to note that interpretations of male violence intersected with race and class. For example, Carla associated it with “lower class” and “non-white” social groups, and music video representations of male violence were almost exclusively attributed to Rap and Hip-Hop genres, indexing black culture. There was no recognition of the violence towards women expressed in rock, metal, punk, pop and other genres (Julie Andsager and Kimberly Roe 2003; Susan Brownmiller 1975; Hill, Richards and Savigny 2021). *Eminem: Stan* (2000) was singularly cited as an example of male violence in a music video. A highly successful and critically acclaimed rapper, Eminem is also known for his misogynistic lyrics and turbulent relationship with his ex-wife. In conversation about *Eminem: River* (which features explicit male physical violence and emotional abuse towards a woman), Carla characterised him as a multifaceted gentle intellectual, with public (aggressive and angry) and private (smart and “pretty nice guy”) identities. Eminem is white and arguably this gives him the privilege of being able to act violently and aggressively and have it presumed to be an ‘act’ performed to meet the tropes of a genre rather than characteristics attributed to his race (Peggy McIntosh 1998). The distinction between acceptable and non-acceptable male violence connected to notions of art reflects Sam’s comments above and demonstrates a cultural dissonance that neutralises the text and allows the audience to participate in and enjoy it without disrupting their cultural identity e.g., feminist.

Female violence

Female to male violence was widespread and frequent across all genres. When women were violent or physically aggressive it was typically interpreted as an emotional (over) reaction to the man’s actions, an act of exasperation or desperation that was always either futile or playfully flirtatious, conceptualised as a theatrical act (Carla), comical (Sam), pantomime (Alex), not intending, or indeed able, to cause bodily harm, a view seemingly unchanged since 1970 (Millett 1977, 44). Female characters acting aggressively or violently in music videos were criticised and mocked for their irrational outbursts of emotion, and parallels were drawn with real-life examples of this type of behaviour with Sam surmising that these women are known as “psycho” girlfriends. The ineffectiveness of female violence is epitomised in *Sundara Karma: She Said* when a woman headbutts a man causing his nose to bleed and he shows no sign of pain, instead laughs about it, leading Alex to the conclusion that it was the “playful act” of an “ideal type” of woman. For Alex, the woman asserting herself through physical and symbolic violence is not only *not threatening* but also meets a high-status ‘dreamworld’ of male sexual desire that raises questions about the meaning, value and significance of female sexual agency (Gill 2009; Jhally 2007).

Carla interpreted female violence as “violent but more passionate violent than painful aggressive violent,” adding female violence was symbolic of emotion, whereas male violence carries different meaning because of male strength. The interpretation of female

violence as passionate, a flirtatious act or erotic foreplay preceding sex or sexual contact was linked to notions of 'angry sex.' Carla regarded this type of 'angry sex' ("sex after an argument is [...] the best sex ever") as a normal feature of heterosexual relationships demonstrated through its presence in language, movies and stories, if not her personal experience, and violence was understood more generally as reflective of relationships in real-life.

This understanding of female aggression as preceding sex fits the 'token resistance script' which is based on ideas of female sexual modesty and submission and asserts that women do/should offer 'token' resistance to men's sexual advances even when interested in sex. This script supports the idea that when a woman says 'no' to sex she really means 'yes', undermining women's ability to express sexual needs and desires, calling doubt on their refusals of male sexual advances, and supporting social acceptance of male sexual coercion (E Sandra Byers 1996; Katie M. Edwards, Jessica A. Turchik, Christina M. Dardis, Nicole Reynolds and Chritine Gidycz 2011). It further supports the positive outcome rape myth, a popular trope of pornography that says force is acceptable, and often required, in obtaining sex from women who appear not to want sex initially but enjoy it in the end (Neil M. Malamuth and Ed Donnerstein 1982; Diana Scully 1990) by suggesting that women reject men's sexual advances as part of a 'cat and mouse game' but secretly want to be dominated. It has also been linked to Sexual Miscommunication Theory, which argues biological and psychological differences between men and women result in a lack of understanding where "men may misinterpret or over-perceive a woman's willingness to engage in sexual relations" (Burkett and Hamilton 2012, 820).

A postfeminist sensibility has been highlighted as reframing "coercive sex" as resulting from "a woman's lack of assertiveness," thereby placing responsibility on effective (sexual) communication with women (Burkett and Hamilton 2012, 821). Jhally (2007, no page number) outlines how pornographic tropes are used in music videos as part of "the pornographic imagination" and argues their inclusion in music videos is intentional to sexually excite men, and that this trope reinforces an idea that even when unexpectedly attacked, "women's arousal wins out over fear."

That music videos borrow interdiscursively from and reference pornography is no surprise when we consider the prevalence of directors, actors and distributors from pornography in contemporary music video production (Ariel Levy 2005; Nathan Slavik 2014). Pornographic tropes were recognisable to participants and contributed to complex and critical personal relationships to music video representations of sex and relationships. The 'positive outcome' rape trope was used in representations of heterosexual relationships, which, as stated, rely on suggestion and metaphor to index sex, and feature a 'happy ending' where women forgive male bad behaviour including violence.

A second key consideration in discussions of the dynamics of female violence is that my participants conceived the male characters as allowing it to take place, either as a result of sexual enjoyment (as in *Father John Misty: Nancy from Now On*) or because of the lack of threat (as in *Camila Cabello: Havana*). This is significant for understanding the ideological work of female to male violence in music videos. Notions of masculinity are closely associated with physical strength. By framing female to male violence as erotic or non-threatening, this masculine characteristic is maintained and the implicit underpinning (biological) assumption that the man could take (physical) control of the situation (woman) at any moment is not disrupted. In this semiotic communication, the viewer is

reminded of the weakness and vulnerability of women, their subordinate role in the proceedings, and male dominance. It is male physical power signifying dominance that overshadows the interaction and frames it as erotic or non-threatening underscoring male control, the powerlessness of the female, the futility of resistance. This was supported by participants' reactions when asked how violence would be perceived if the roles were reversed, which elicited concern and disapproval at the very idea and universal agreement that the message would be dramatically changed.

Scripts within the heterosexual relationship script

Embedded within the overarching relationship script were scripts identifying sexual availability, sexual interest and sexual initiation:

Female sexual availability

In a reading of *Camilla Cabello: Havana* (2017) with Carla, it became apparent that female presence signified sexual availability. The presence of women implicitly signified sexual availability and this was understood and expressed in a commonsense way by participants in multiple readings. Women and not men were discussed in this way, locating women as the 'mouse' in the cat and mouse game discussed above.

Sexual interest

Participants identified women as attracting male attention by e.g. dancing, hair flicking, making eye contact, smiling or laughing (irrefutable evidence of sexual interest according to Sam). Men indicated sexual interest through their physicality, perhaps by standing in front of a woman to block her path, touching her face, arm, shoulder or back, or placing a hand on her stomach to stop her walking past, as in *Camilla Cabello: Havana* (2017). Typically, the woman willingly acquiesced but could physically remove herself; remaining was considered implicit consent to further male attention. Rejecting male sexual advances was unusual not only in the videos in the sample but also in my participants' collective consciousness. This is remarkable because of the predominance of sex and relationships as a theme in music videos (see Escobar-Fuentes and Montalbán-Peregrín 2021) and can be understood through an appreciation of the relationship script outlined above.

Sexual initiation

It was in sexual initiation that explicit sexual contact was most frequently observed, incorporating postfeminist female sexuality where sexually assertive and confident women regularly initiated sexual contact (Gill 2003). For example, a woman seductively pins a man against a wall in *Majid Jordan: Small Talk* (2016), another woman takes her top off at the dinner table and walks over to her male partner in *Kendrick Lamar: LOVE* (2017), and another woman walks over to a man euphemistically singing about fellatio and pats his beer bottle causing it to froth over in *Flo Rida: Whistle* (2012). However, in closer analyses participants interpreted these actions as singular acts of 'confidence' that frequently incited a negative judgement on the woman's respectability with criticisms of girls and women (in videos and participants' social lives) who desire male attention as sexual flirts and/or teases. This speaks to the limitations of an active female sexuality to be positively embodied outside mediated representations. While not considered out of the

ordinary to see a woman initiate sexual contact in a music video, it was more 'normal' and 'expected' for the man to and if a woman did initiate sexual contact, if it was reciprocated, she instantly yielded power to the man who then took the lead, reiterating discourses of male physical dominance and a 'natural order' outlined above.

In pointing out these participant identified scripts of gendered sexual interaction, I further evidence how postfeminist discourses of natural order of biological difference and unequal sexual politics, discussed above, frame representations of sex and relationships and offer a new lens through which to understand the hollowness of mediated female sexual agency and heteronormative sexual politics.

Implications

Located at the intersection of popular culture, sexuality, gender and power, this study reveals the embodied sexual politics of my participants, extending knowledge of how young adults make sexual meaning. Erving Goffman (1977) argues representations of gendered interaction do not express natural differences so much as produce them. Their continued (re)presentation in popular culture serves as justification and legitimisation of the existing order of social arrangements (Connell 1985; Goffman 1977; Hall 1998; Jackson 2006). Applied to representations of violence, these representations serve to underscore the power of male to female violence, reminding women of their place in the sexual hierarchy and social order through referencing the natural order of biological determination; we do not need to see male physical power to understand its effect (Millett 1977, 43).

These findings enhance our understanding of contemporary gender relations and sexual politics by demonstrating how through apparent ideological shifts in representations of gendered sexual interaction, postfeminist mediated representations, which appear to be discursively different from previous ideological constructions work to underscore asymmetrical gender relations in ever more nuanced ways. For example, the hollowness of female sexual subjectivity revealed in the nuanced articulation of the sexual initiation script, which gives women superficial power in the sexual exchange; the underscoring male power that defines expressions of female to male violence as ineffective and the framing of those women as 'ideal types' revealing an implicit male gaze in the sexualisation of culture; and the emotional double standard that celebrates male expressions of vulnerability while identifying women as irrational all build our understanding of contemporary nuanced expressions of sexual difference. In this theorisation, we see how ideology is a flexible and dynamic thing that resignifies and incorporates dissent, e.g., feminism, and develop Gill's (2007) postfeminist sensibility as a theoretical framework for analysis, building increasingly nuanced understandings of its functions.

Another important consideration is the importance of studying music videos as a high-truth value mode of popular culture. Representations of sex, relationships and violence were consistently thought authentic and 'real' regardless of genre. An artistically inauthentic representation, for example the blood and weaponry in *JoJi: Will He*, signified low reality but retained high cultural status because of the value of the artist. Commercially driven music videos had low cultural status but the potential to be interpreted as believable and authentic when their representations intersected with corresponding internalised discourses of class, race and sexuality as low brow, for example in representations of an overt and crass sexuality in poor and/or black women. It is

important to recognise that it is the thematic representation and not the specific representation that was thought reflective of reality. These postfeminist representations were often discussed as an intensified but authentic version of reality, evidenced through parallels with participants' own life stories.

This mirroring of representations with participants' own lives was perhaps a device that facilitated meaningful interpretation but was also echoed in what I observed as I learned about their personal relationship management. For example, Alex's desire to be regarded as masculine in his interactions with women, Sam's softening to the idea of a heterosexual relationship and Indy's rejection of heterosexuality and emerging lesbian relationship.

Sexual stories are essential to contemporary social-biographical identities (Plummer 1995). The semiotic referencing and representation of these stories in music videos, which have a unique ability to communicate with the audience, is important for considerations of their potential to communicate a valid and reliable 'truth'. Music videos blur the line between fantasy and reality conferring a high truth-value, which means they may be read as authentic, achievable, or desirable (Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen 1996) and their scripts of gender and sexuality may become internalised by the audience as common-sense (Hall 1998; Van Leeuwen 2005). This is of particular importance in light of the findings discussed in this paper and their implications for lived sexual interactions.

Conclusion

This article extends understandings of the nuanced and dynamic way postfeminism rearticulates an unequal sexual politics that privileges men and subordinates women and is based on an implicit assumption that representations matter. Sexual stories are told through representation as sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1974; Plummer 1995) and if those stories function to oppress and subordinate social groups, the literature tells us this is a problem. This article presents a significant and exciting opportunity to develop and strengthen theoretical contributions in cultural and feminist media studies by evidencing contemporary nuanced variations in representations of gendered sexual politics in a postfeminist sensibility and extends Gill's (2007) postfeminist sensibility as a framework for analysis.

I do not claim music videos make sexual violence happen, but suggest they contribute to a 'conducive context' for a sexual politics that facilitates a 'grey area' of sexual practice. I argue this happens through the prioritisation of male (sexual) dominance and enduring linking of female submission with notions of an appropriate femininity and female sexuality. Further, that this dominant description negates the potential for a female sexuality that is emancipated from the male sexual dreamworld of a postfeminist sensibility. Locating this study in the context of public discourses of sexual harassment, for example, the Everyday Sexism Project and #MeToo Movement, highlights the power popular culture has to neutralise resistance by appropriating and re-signifying representations to maintain hegemonic definitions.

This article offers a theoretical contribution in its theorisation of the ideological work of violence in music videos as integral to postfeminist sexual politics, communicated through a postfeminist sensibility, and a methodological contribution in its use of MDA as a tool for audience research. However, it recognises there are limitations to any claims that can be made from it and encourages further research foregrounding audience

interpretations of music video representations of sex and relationships to develop its arguments and highlight potential inconsistencies by location, age or other intersectional dimensions.

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