

Legal Regulation & Education: Doing the Right Thing?

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Addressing the Harms of Sexism in Music: The Place for Regulation and Education

From degrading stereotypes to domestic violence, sexual violence and rape, the current trends in music videos and online music are highly problematic. Despite this, a regulatory gap remains between the remit of Office of Communications (Ofcom) and the scope of British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). This gap means that online music videos are effectively unregulated, leaving the YouTube community and other online music video providers to regulate themselves.

Analytical Framework

In addressing this problem, this paper adopts a broadly feminist approach while acknowledging the disagreements that exist between feminists. The perspectives and writings of liberal feminists and those of cultural feminists will be used to assess the relative merits of current and proposed regulatory frameworks. Emphasis will be placed on both the (sometimes differing) purposes and results of regulation. Drawing from the literature that emulated from the pornography/censorship debates of the 1980s and 1990s, and the debates on 90s rap music in America, this socio-legal paper will map an old feminist approach onto a new societal problem.

Thesis

Widespread and easily accessible music combined with the freedom and anonymity of the internet pose a new and significant challenge to the regulation of music videos. On the one hand there is a need to combat stereotypes and negative portrayals of gender in the music industry, while on the other maintain artistic freedoms. Robin Thicke, recently 'awarded' Sexist of the Year 2013, provides a prime example of the negative use of gender, specifically women's bodies, for commercial gain and entertainment. As a result of online campaigning, Thicke has become symbolic of a much larger societal problem. Genre-diverse artists such as Eminem, Calvin Harris, Jason Derulo and Kanye West are engaged in a competition for YouTube hits, at the cost of respect for women.

We conceptualise these videos not as individual incidents, but rather a part of a broader picture. So conceptualised, it can be seen that these damage not only those who actively interact with the videos (i.e. those who watch the video), but also have indirect impacts

upon others. Even those who have never watched the video suffer from the attitudes and actions of a society that permits misogynistic music. Put another way, sexism in music is normalised. These images and lyrics are unavoidable; they appear on the TV, radio, in shops, at work, bars and gyms, on the news, and on social media.

The recent proposals by third sector organisations, such as EVAW, OBJECT and Imkaan, which tap into conservative rhetoric on sexualisation, have focused too heavily on age and nudity and have largely ignored context. This focus is 'delinquent'; it underestimates the scale of the problem by only focusing on the effects upon younger audiences, and is over-encompassing in its 'censorship' of nudity.

Through a re-consideration of the harm caused by explicit online music, this paper aims to highlight more accurately the boundaries of the problem. In so doing it will promote more effective solutions. In particular, the potential of gender-aware 'media education', accurate labelling, and online spatial-segregation will be examined. It is concluded that a suite of solutions is necessary and that a feminist analysis can contribute to the choice and formulation of the regulations. In the age of the internet, the use of the Parental Advisory label is out-dated and ineffective; this paper begins the process of searching for its replacement.