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Investigating the impact of listening to alternative music with misogynistic lyrics on male participants' scores of hostile sexism

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate whether misogynistic lyrics in alternative music evoke negative attitudes towards women. The moderating role of preference for alternative music in generating these effects was also examined. In an online study, participants were randomly assigned to listen to an alternative song with either misogynistic (N = 8) or neutral (N = 7) lyrics. They then completed a questionnaire measuring attitudes towards women and music genre preference. It was hypothesised that participants who were exposed to alternative music with misogynistic lyrics would score higher in hostile sexism than those exposed to neutral lyrics. This hypothesis was not supported since a t-test revealed no significant difference between hostile sexism scores of participants exposed both lyric types. The second hypothesis was that preference for alternative music would moderate the association between the type of lyrics and scores of hostile sexism. This hypothesis was not supported either since analysis revealed that preference for alternative music did not significantly moderate the association between exposure to misogynistic lyrics and hostile sexism. The results are discussed in relation to previous research and some areas for future research are proposed.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the significant presence of different forms of media in our lives, the question of how negative media can affect us has been gaining increasing empirical attention in recent years. In most modern countries, consumption of violent media is high even in children (e.g., Gentile, 2003; Gentile, Saleem & Anderson, 2007; Kirsh, 2006). Numerous studies have established a relationship between violent media and aggressive behaviour. For example, it has been found that exposure to physical violence on television can impact relational and verbal aggression in both children (Linder and Gentile, 2009) and adults (Coyne et al., 2008). Furthermore, evidence suggests that exposure to violent video games may increase aggressive behaviour and decrease empathy and prosocial behaviour (Anderson et al., 2010). The consumption of media violence has been found to have longitudinal effects (e.g., Gentile, Coyne & Walsh, 2011).

Music and aggression. A specific form of media that has received empirical attention in terms of its effects on aggression is music. Due to technological development, music is more accessible, portable, and cheaper than ever. Research has shown that people spend 18.4 hours a week listening to music (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, 2021) and that people of all age groups believe music is important to them (e.g., North, Hargreaves & O'Neill, 2000); Cohen, Bailey & Nilsson, 2002). Considering this, it is evident that researching its impacts is a worthy area of investigation, particularly the impacts of negative messages in music.

In order to investigate how music with violent lyrics can affect our thoughts and feelings, Anderson, Carnagey and Eubanks (2003) conducted a series of studies comparing participants exposed to a rock song with violent lyrics and participants exposed to similar sounding nonviolent song. Their results revealed that those exposed to violent lyrics scored higher on a scale measuring state hostility than those exposed to nonviolent lyrics, suggesting that violent lyrics can increase feelings of hostility without provocation or threat. Furthermore, they found that participants exposed to rock songs with violent lyrics interpreted the meaning of ambiguous words, for example the words 'rock' and 'stick', in a more aggressive way. Research has also demonstrated that violent lyrics can influence behaviour as well as thoughts and feelings. For example, Mast and McAndrew (2011) measured aggressive behaviour by weighing the amount of hot sauce participants added to a glass of water that they were told would be given to the next experimental subject as a taste sample. They found that a group who were exposed to heavy metal rock music with violent lyrics for eight minutes subsequently added significantly more hot sauce to the water than a group who listened to similar sounding nonviolent heavy metal music, suggesting a link between violent lyrics and aggressive behaviour.

Misogyny in music. Misogyny in popular culture and music is an area that has also been investigated over the years. The term 'misogyny' comes from the Greek for 'to hate women' (Fosbraey & Puckey, 2021). Misogyny

has been identified as prevalent in particular genres of music. For example, Adams and Fuller (2006) explored the way in which women are presented in hip hop and rap music, highlighting that the lyrics often contain sexually degrading language about women, depictions of violence towards women, suggestions that women are a burden to men or "users" of men, as well as portrayals of women as objects to be used and discarded. Another genre that has been explored in this way is heavy metal rock music. Research by Arnett (1991) revealed that women who reported liking heavy metal music had lower self-esteem than other women, which they speculate is due to misogynistic themes in the genre.

Considering the presence of negative and violent messages about women in music, questions may be asked about how hearing these ideas can affect attitudes and behaviours towards them. In the same way that violent lyrics in music have been shown to increase feelings of hostility in listeners, can misogynistic lyrics increase hostile attitudes towards women?

Some research has aimed to investigate the effects of lyrics on attitudes towards women. Research by St Lawrence and Joyner (1991) investigated the effects of sexual violent lyrics on attitudes towards women and acceptance of violence towards women by exposing participants to either sexually violent heavy metal rock music, Christian heavy metal rock music, or classical music. They found that exposure to heavy metal rock music increased male's sex-role stereotyping and negative attitudes towards women, regardless of whether the lyrics were sexually violent or Christian themed. This suggests that it is the aggressive nature of the genre, not the lyrics, that evoke negative attitudes towards women. However, the authors speculate that poor articulation of the lyrics may have meant that participants were unable to understand the meaning of the song and were therefore unaffected by the sexual violent content.

Later research has shown that lyrical content does affect attitudes towards women, not just genre. Barongan and Hall (1995) investigated the effect of listening to misogynistic rap music on men's sexually aggressive behaviour towards women by comparing those exposed to misogynistic rap music and those exposed to neutral rap music. They measured sexually aggressive behaviour by showing participants neutral, sexually violent, and assaultive themed video vignettes and allowing them to choose which one to show a female confederate. They found that 30% of those exposed to misogynistic rap music chose to show the assaultive video, while only 7% of the control group chose to show the sexually violent or assaultive videos. Participants who chose to show the sexual violent or assaultive videos reported that they thought the confederate appeared more uncomfortable and upset while watching the video than those who chose to show the neutral video. This suggests that misogynistic lyrics in music facilitate aggressive behaviour towards women because a higher percentage of those who listened to misogynistic rap music decided against the neutral video and instead chose one of the sexually violent options, which would have upset the confederate. However, Anderson, Carnagey and Eubanks (2003) argue that the behavioural measure used in this study was not clearly aggressive, which may lead to questions about the validity of the study.

A more recent study that has further examined the effects of misogynistic lyrics on thoughts, feelings and behaviour is Fischer and Greitemeyer (2006). They conducted a series of studies in which they tested the effects of misogynistic lyrics in rock, pop and rap songs on attitudes and behaviour towards women. They found that male participants who listened to misogynistic lyrics recalled more negative features of women and reported more feelings of vengeance than those who listened to neutral lyrics. They also discovered that those who listened to misogynistic song lyrics gave more hot chilli sauce to a female confederate than those who listened to neutral song lyrics. These results highlight how misogynistic lyrics can affect thoughts and feelings about women and that this is reflected in how they behave towards them. Large samples were used and results were consistent across all five studies, providing good evidence that misogynistic lyrics can have negative effects.

The Present Study. Based on the previously outlined research, the present study aims to further investigate the idea that misogynistic lyrics can evoke negative attitudes towards women, particularly hostile attitudes. Since most previous research has used rock or rap music, this study aims to expand on previous findings by using alternative music instead. If the results reveal that listening to alternative music with misogynistic lyrics results in higher levels of hostile attitudes towards women, this will support the idea that it is the lyrical content, not the aggressive nature of the rap and rock genres, that results in more hostile attitudes towards women.

Additionally, the present study aims to further expand on previous research in the area by investigating whether genre preference moderates the effects of misogynistic lyrics on attitudes towards women. In other words, does liking the genre of music increase the likelihood that negative messages within the lyrics will affect a person's attitudes?

As a result, there are two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that those who are exposed to alternative music with misogynistic lyrics will score higher on a scale measuring hostile sexism than those who listen to neutral

alternative music. The second hypothesis is that preference for alternative music will moderate the association between listening to the song with misogynistic lyrics and scores of hostile sexism, such that, among individuals who like alternative music the most, the association between exposure to the misogynistic lyrics and hostile attitudes towards women will be stronger.

2. METHOD

Participants. Participants were recruited through advertisement on social media. The questionnaire received 26 responses, 9 of which were incomplete and therefore had to be excluded. The remaining participants were 15 males aged between 18 and 25 (M = 21.75, SD = 2.17). One participant did not report his age, but completed all other questions, so his response was included in the analysis.

Design. The experiment used a between-participants design. The independent variable was the type of lyrics in the song participants were asked to listen to at the start of the study, before completing the questionnaire. The lyrics were either misogynistic (N = 8) or neutral (N = 7), meaning there were two conditions. The dependent variable was the participants' score of hostile sexism. Preference for alternative music was measured as a moderating variable.

Procedure. The study was conducted online using Qualtrics. Firstly, participants read an information sheet about the study and completed a consent form to confirm their willingness to take part in the study. The information sheet outlined what the study involved and how participants' data would be used after completion of the survey.

Participants were then randomly assigned to either the misogynistic lyrics condition or the neutral lyrics condition using a randomiser on Qualtrics. The randomiser was set up to give participants an equal chance of seeing the misogynistic song or the neutral song at the start of the study. The songs were presented in the form of embedded YouTube lyric videos.

After listening to the song, participants completed a questionnaire including a scale measuring attitudes towards women and a scale measuring music preference. The questionnaire also included some short questions about participants' familiarity with the song and the artist. If they were familiar with the artist, they were asked if they liked them.

Demographic information was also collected. Participants were asked to report their age and gender. They were also asked to provide a memorable anonymous code, which they could use to withdraw their data at a later date if they chose to.

Lastly, a debriefing sheet, which explained the aims and hypotheses of the study, was presented to participants.

Materials. The stimuli were two alternative songs. The songs were identified as 'alternative' based on the genres listed on the artists' Wikipedia page (Cute Is What We Aim For, 2022; Paramore, 2022).

The song used in the misogynistic lyrics condition was Newport Living by Cute Is What We Aim For. The song describes a girl who acts promiscuously to get what she wants. The lyrics often refer to her worth; for example, they refer to her as being left on the "half price clearance rack" (Cute Is What We Aim For, 2006).

The song used in the neutral lyrics condition was Hard Times by Paramore. The song is about a completely different topic. The singer describes a period of depression in her life, a subject which contrasts with the playful 80s sound of the music (Paramore, 2017).

To ensure that the lyrics of Newport Living would be interpreted as misogynistic and that the lyrics of Hard Times would not be, qualitative lyric analysis was carried out on both songs. It was determined that Newport Living contained eight different misogynistic words and phrases, repeated on several occasions in the chorus. Hard Times was determined to have zero misogynistic words and phrases.

To further ensure that the lyrics of Newport Living were perceived as misogynistic, a test was conducted in which five participants, acquaintances recruited on an opportunity basis, were asked to listen to both songs. They were asked to consider the lyrics and report whether they believed one, both or neither of the songs contained misogynistic messages. All five participants reported that the lyrics of Newport Living contained misogynistic messages.

Measures. In order to measure hostile sexism, Glick and Fiske (1995)'s Ambivalent Sexist Attitudes scale was used. The scale consisted of a series of 22 statements. Participants had to indicate the degree to which they agreed

or disagreed with each statement on a six-point scale ('strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'). The scale measured a range of different attitudes: hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, protective paternalism, gender differentiation and heterosexual intimacy. Of the 22 items, 11 measured hostile sexism. According to Glick and Fiske (1995), to calculate participants' scores of hostile sexism, these 11 items should be averaged to produce a score between 1 and 6. Two of these items needed to be reverse coded before scores were calculated.

Music preferences were measured using the Short Test of Music Preferences (STOMP). The STOMP is a 14-item scale assessing preferences for music genres (Rentfrow, 2003), in which participants are required to rate the extent to which they like each of the genres of music on a seven-point scale ('strongly dislike' to 'strongly like'). Scoring for this scale typically takes place on four music preference dimensions: reflective and complex, intense and rebellious, upbeat and conventional, and energetic and rhythmic. Alternative music is grouped under intense and rebellious, alongside rock and heavy metal. However, for the purposes of this study, only participants' scores of preference for alternative music were used in the analysis, as neither rock nor heavy metal music were relevant.

3. RESULTS

Using all participants' scores of hostile sexism, a mean score of hostile sexism was calculated for each condition. These can be seen on Figure 1 below.

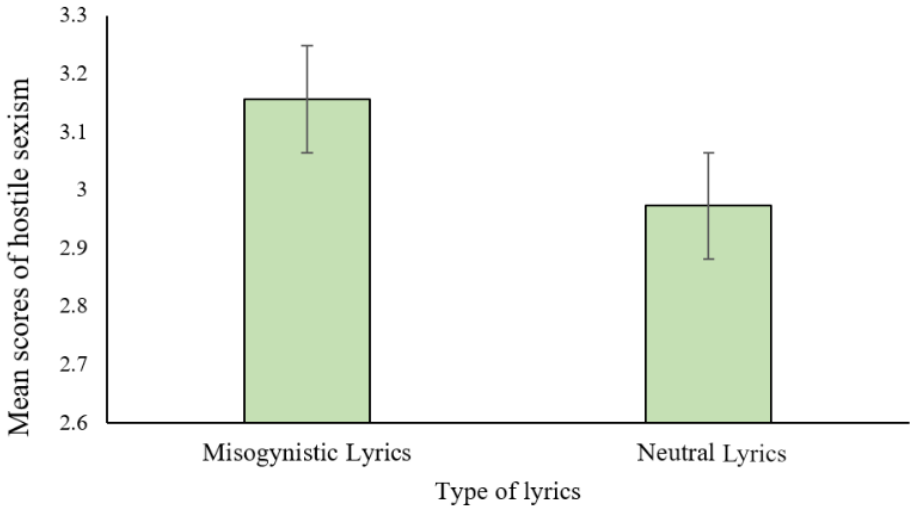

Figure 1. Mean scores of Hostile Sexism in the Misogynistic and Neutral Lyrics Conditions

The first hypothesis was that those exposed to music with misogynistic lyrics would score higher on a scale measuring hostile sexism than those exposed to neutral lyrics.

A Shapiro-Wilk's test was used to test for normality of the data. It was not significant for both the misogynistic lyrics condition, $W(15) = .93$, $p = .515$, and the neutral lyrics condition, $W(15) = .95$, $p = .702$, so normality was assumed. Levene's test of equality of variance was also not significant, $F(1) = .002$, $p = .967$, so equality of variance was assumed.

As a result, to test the first hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted on JASP to compare the mean score of hostile sexism of each condition. The t-test revealed that there was no significant difference between scores of hostile sexism in the misogynistic lyrics condition ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.9$) and the neutral lyrics condition ($M = 2.97$, $SD = .75$), $t(13) = 0.43$, $p = .674$, $d = .22$. This suggests that the first hypothesis is not supported by the data.

The second hypothesis was that preference for alternative music would moderate the association between misogynistic lyrics and scores of hostile sexism. To test this hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis was carried out on JASP.

Participants' hostile sexism was regressed on their lyric condition (misogynistic/neutral), the extent to which they reported liking alternative music, and the interaction between lyric condition and preference for alternative music.

The moderator variable, preference for alternative music, was centred by subtracting the mean from all scores. Condition was coded using 0.5 for misogynistic lyrics and -0.5 for neutral lyrics.

The main effect of exposure to misogynistic lyrics (compared to neutral lyrics) on hostile sexism was positive but not significant, $b = .32$, $\beta = .21$, $t(11) = .68$, $p = .509$. The main effect of preference for alternative music on hostile sexism was negative but not significant, $b = -.14$, $\beta = -.29$, $t(11) = -.95$, $p = .361$. This means that those who scored higher in preference for alternative music scored lower on the hostile sexism scale, but not significantly so.

Preference for alternative music did not significantly moderate the association between exposure to misogynistic lyrics and hostile sexism, $b = .13$, $\beta = .13$, $t(11) = .44$, $p = .668$. As a result, the second hypothesis was not supported.

4. DISCUSSION

Previous evidence has shown that listening to rap or rock music with misogynistic lyrics can increase negative attitudes towards women. The present study aimed to investigate whether a similar effect would occur when participants were exposed to alternative music with misogynistic lyrics rather than rap or rock music. It was therefore hypothesised that participants exposed to alternative music with misogynistic lyrics would score higher on a scale measuring hostile sexism, demonstrating an increase in hostility and negative attitudes towards women. This hypothesis was not supported since there was no significant difference between the scores of hostile sexism of those who listened to alternative music with misogynistic lyrics and those who listened to music with neutral lyrics. The study therefore fails to demonstrate that the findings of previous studies, which suggest that listening to rap and rock music with misogynistic lyrics results in more negative attitudes towards women (e.g., Fischer and Greitemeyer, 2006), extend to alternative music with misogynistic lyrics.

This finding can be interpreted in multiple ways. Firstly, it may be that the genre and sound of the music has more of an impact on hostility than lyrical content. Since the alternative songs used as stimuli are not as aggressive sounding as rap and rock music, it may be that the misogynistic messages did not have the same effect for this reason. This would provide some support for the findings of St Lawrence and Joyner (1991), which suggest that heavy metal music itself produces negative attitudes towards women, regardless of lyrical content. Secondly, most previous research on this topic took place over ten years ago and this study used a young sample with participants aged between 18 and 25. Therefore, it may be speculated that the results of this study reflect an improvement in attitudes towards women in society and that people in the modern day are less influenced by misogynistic messages they hear in music, perhaps due to increased awareness of the problematic nature of misogynistic content.

The study also aimed to test whether preference for alternative music moderated the association between lyric type and scores of hostile sexism. It was hypothesised that preference for alternative music would moderate this association, such that, among individuals who like alternative music the most, the association between listening to the alternative song with misogynistic lyrics and hostile attitudes towards women would be stronger. This hypothesis was not supported since analysis revealed that preference for alternative music did not significantly moderate the association between exposure to misogynistic lyrics and scores of hostile sexism. This may suggest that people can enjoy a genre of music without noticing or agreeing with the lyrics and being influenced by any negative messages within them.

Strengths, limitations and future directions. This study has many strengths. The scale measuring hostile sexism was found to be highly reliable since the calculation of a Cronbach's Alpha revealed that it was above .7. In addition, the stimuli used for the misogynistic and neutral lyrics conditions were tested before the study to ensure that the lyrical content of both songs was interpreted as intended, confirming that the misogynistic song was indeed interpreted as misogynistic. Furthermore, the study added to previous research by using alternative music rather than rap or rock, as well as by testing the moderating role of music genre preference.

However, the sample size was very small. With only 15 usable responses, there were only 8 participants in the misogynistic lyrics condition and 7 in the neutral lyrics condition. The study could therefore be conducted on a larger scale with a larger range of people, which may reveal different results.

Furthermore, the study only measured attitudes, not behaviour. It may be that the misogynistic lyrics did not influence explicit hostile attitudes towards women, but they may have impacted implicit hostility towards women. Previous studies have included a measure of aggressive behaviour (e.g., Barongan and Hall, 1995; Fischer and Greitemeyer, 2006), which may be a good measure of implicit attitudes towards women. As a result, future

research could be carried out in person and include a measure of aggressive behaviour towards women, for example allowing participants to add hot sauce to a taste sample for a female confederate, as Fischer and Greitemeyer (2006) did.

In addition, the survey included a question about how familiar participants were with the song they listened to. A lot of participants in the misogynistic condition reported not recognising the song, which may have influenced how the lyrics impacted their attitudes. If participants were hearing the song for the first time, it may simply be that hearing an alternative song with misogynistic lyrics once does not affect attitudes towards women. It may be useful to carry out a study in which participants are exposed to the song across multiple sessions to find out whether repeated exposure has different effects.

Lastly, referring back to the idea that the alternative songs used in this study may not be as aggressive sounding as rap and rock music, which may have meant that the misogynistic messages did not have the same effect, it may be interesting to conduct a study in the future which directly compares the impact of different genres of music with misogynistic lyrics on scores of hostile sexism. It may also be interesting to control for musical features, such as melody and rhythm, when investigating genre differences in the effects of misogynistic lyrics.

Conclusions and implications. To conclude, my results failed to support the findings of previous research which suggest that misogynistic lyrics in music result in more negative and hostile attitudes towards women. Instead, there was no significant difference in hostile attitudes towards women in male participants who were exposed to either misogynistic lyrics or neutral lyrics. This may indicate that misogynistic alternative music does not produce the same increase in hostile attitudes towards women as misogynistic rap or rock music, or that the results of previous studies are simply not replicated in the modern day, perhaps due to increased understanding of the problematic nature of misogyny in music. Future research could further investigate this topic using a larger sample size and could examine the impacts of misogynistic alternative music on aggressive behaviour towards women. Research on this topic is valuable as its results can be used to educate popular musicians on the effects their lyrics can have on listeners.

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