‘Dear Future Husband’: young people’s critical exploration of gender and sexuality in pop music videos

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed to explore how young people can critically engage with music videos to explore dominant constructions of gender and sexuality. As the primary consumers of popular music and music videos, adolescents are also a group who exist in a unique sociocultural space, where both misogyny and feminism are present in their highly media-driven lives. This study used focus group workshops with young people in high school to generate qualitative data based on the participants’ discussion and interpretations of gender and sexuality in two music videos. Seven groups of young people aged 14 – 16 analysed two popular music videos and reflected particularly upon discourses of expected femininity and female sexuality. Discussion elucidated insightful analysis around gendered subjectivity, and presented three complex and opposing themes, which are explored in detail. A cohesive thread emerged in the data in which young people demonstrated their capacity to identify hegemonic gender constructs, while also relying on these constructs to read and police the women shown in the music videos.

KEYWORDS
Gender, sexuality, popular music, music videos, adolescents

Gender in young people’s current lives

Young people establish their identity and independence through the broader political, cultural and socio-structural contexts in which they operate. High schools exist not only as a physical place in which adolescents spend a significant amount of their time, but also a socio-political sphere where the performance, negotiation and reproduction of gender norms are enacted through overt and covert structures (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben 2013, 365). This study is situated in a unique sociocultural point in the lives of young people in high school, a time wherein both misogyny and threat to women, alongside feminism and resistance, are palpable in young people’s lives. In Australia, on average one woman per week is killed by a current or former partner, and 95% of partner violence is perpetrated by a male (Our Watch 2015). Globally, prevalence figures indicate that approximately one in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO 2013). A symptom of misogyny in contemporary sociocultural context is known as rape culture, defined by feminist activists in the 1970s as the normalisation of aggressive male sexuality, and the woman’s role in deserving or provoking sexual violence (Attenborough 2014). Contemporary popular culture responses to violence and misogyny have seen feminism visibilised to young people in particular, from pop singer Beyoncé’s performance at the MTV Video Music awards in front of an illuminated screen

reading 'FEMINIST' (Bennett 2014), to Taylor Swift's public media relationship with feminism (Keishin Armstrong 2016). Young people's responses in and around schools have been documented in feminist scholarship in recent years, such as setting up high school collectives to challenge rape culture and explore feminist consciousness, and using online digital spaces to promote feminist discourse (Keller, Mendes & Ringrose 2016; Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence 2016, 85).

Schilt and Westbrook (2009) describe how the persistence of gender inequality is underpinned by cultural acceptance of a binary gender system, where only two genders reflect a corresponding biological sex, and attraction to the 'opposite' gender is natural and acceptable. Compulsory heterosexuality is thought to function in social and power structures as heteronormativity – the assumption and maintenance of the heterosexual gender binary throughout cultural, legal and institutional practices. However, sociological research has, since the 1980s, adopted a post-structuralist theory of gender as a social construct, transforming the notion of gender from something we *are* or *have*, to a salient set of categories that we *do* (Gergen 1985). Gender is thus something every person performs and produces, based on dominant social norms (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). West and Zimmerman (1987) first outlined how the construction of a person's gender identity is complex, fluid and influenced actively by external dominant cultural constructs that constitute what is 'appropriate' feminine and masculine behaviour. Theorists have also since argued that the practices and processes of doing gender are inextricably linked to the maintenance of heteronormativity (e.g. Toomey, McGuire & Russell 2012).

The media and young people's attitudes and beliefs

Working from the premise that gender is a social construction compels an understanding of how the narratives delivered through socio-cultural structures shape an individual's developing identity. Popular media is referred to in feminist literature as a structure that reflects, mediates and reinforces normative beliefs about how gender and sexuality should be taken up and performed (e.g. hooks 1992; Brooks & Hébert 2006). Personal devices mean video content cultivates online dialogue and connection among networks of young people, and new media technologies are hosting content that is increasingly integral to young people's social politics, including digital feminisms (Retallack et al. 2016, 88). Papacharissi (2015, 21) describes how digital media cultivates affect, and invites the audience to consume content through creating an affective relationship with the media's subject. Grusin (2010) describes the particular potency of audio and visual content combined in digital medias, in not only cultivating this affective relationship between the audience and subject, but also through its depiction of the affective states of others.

Trends in young people's digital media use show that while use of devices varies across intersections of gender, race, class, age and psychosocial variables, overall, media exposure is understood to begin very early in a child's life, and emergence of new mediums accompany,

rather than displace, older mediums (Roberts & Foehr 2008). Texts, images and stories are delivered through commodified media such as television, music, film, radio and more, and transmit values and desires that are not only gendered, but also deeply raced and classed. While feminist theory has historically focused on women's shared experience of oppression, more recent discourse has begun to acknowledge the profound differences among women, based on axes of race, class, sexuality, disability and more (e.g. Brooks & Hébert 2006). While this article focuses on young people's negotiations of gender in popular music videos, I acknowledge that this is just one singular component of power relations represented and regulated within this form of media. Critical explorations of power discourses and the intersections of gender and race in popular media can be found in literature such as hooks (1992), Brooks and Hébert (2006), Holtzman and Sharpe (2014) and Dines and Humez (2015).

There is a wealth of literature that aims to inform our current understanding of young people's ideologies and attitudes regarding gender and sexualities. I will first briefly outline several recent quantitative studies to contextualise the nature of young people's supportive attitudes to violence and sexual assault. Such research has named young people a unique group who hold particularly low levels of knowledge about, and higher attitudinal support for violence against women (Flood, Fergus, & Heenan 2009; VicHealth 2010). A national study in Australia (Harris et al. 2015) found that up to a quarter of the young people surveyed were prepared to excuse partner violence depending on the scenario, while one in five believed women share some responsibility for sexual assault. The report stated that *most* young people believe violence is due to men being unable to control their anger, and that two in five young people believe rape results from uncontrollable sexual urges, notions that feminist scholarship align with rape culture (Klein 1997; Rodier & Meagher 2014). Harris et al. (2015) referred to media and schools as the two key factors that influence the knowledge and attitudes of young people regarding gender-based violence.

'Girls can do anything'

Multiple other studies identify young people as the primary group to whom media and popular culture is central in shaping gender and sexual ideologies (Gilchrist & Sullivan 2006; Moloney & Pelehach 2014). Little and Hoskins (2004) highlight the complex and profuse role of the media in shaping the rigid scripts of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality that young people must negotiate. The authors propose that young people's lives are foreshadowed by a saturation of media which particularly highlight narratives of sexism, infantilisation, colonialism and contradiction. The sense of contradiction, they argue, lies in how media and popular culture construct a false sense of freedom for young people, wherein they are given a message that they have limitless choice, that 'gender no longer matters', and in particular, that girls can 'do anything' (Little & Hoskins 2004, 79). What McRobbie (2009) describes as a 'postfeminist' sensibility arises for young women, who through social and institutional structures, are given the message that they are free to pave the course of their own life, due to the successful social,

economic and cultural gains of last century's feminist movements. However, McRobbie (2009) along with other authors such as Gill (2008) and Ringrose (2013) have articulated a phenomenon in which during adolescence and the emergence and creation of self, young people find themselves bound by a new form of self-policing gendered subjectivity. Girls are thus held hostage in their supposed freedom, by media and popular culture driven by a consumerist culture of desire, and the neoliberal pursuit for success (Little & Hoskins 2004). The notion of being held hostage draws on the work of Gergen (2001, 82) who posed that we are all, regardless of identity, held hostage by social conventions. Gill (2008) contends that these social conventions crucially emphasise autonomous choice, requiring girls as neoliberal and postfeminist subjects to self regulate their life story, make the right choices, and pursue self-perfection. The postfeminist landscape means they are provided with little language to understand and locate themselves, in a patriarchy they are told no longer exists (Gill 2008).

Good girls and bad girls

One example of identity delivered to young women through popular culture is the 'good girl'. Hillier, Harrison and Bowditch (1999, 71) described the 'good girl' as a dominant expected performance of femininity, characterised by a sense of naiveté and confining a young woman's experience of her own gender and sexuality to the labels available to her. A woman's sense of sexuality is hence limited to her capacity to be an object of desire, rather than an active pursuer of sex. Froyum (2010) explored the distinct cultural dichotomy of the socially acceptable 'good girl', and sexually assertive alternative, the provocative and immoral 'bad girl', who is thus socially rejected. Froyum crucially notes the racialised and classed components of girls' sexualities, and how media narratives particularly present low-income black girls to embody the 'bad girl' cultural subject.

Armstrong et al. (2014) also echoed the good girl/bad girl subjectivity when exploring gender and the slut discourse with young American women. Armstrong et al. (2014) refer to the expectation that men desire and pursue sexual activity, while 'good' women are permitted only to consent. Context provides a useful framework for analysing such standards and expectations, in that for young men, (heterosexual) sex is sought after and pursued, regardless of the emotional and relational context, such as relationships, or being in love. Conversely, the literature widely describes how young women are subjected to intense scrutiny of context in regards to (hetero)sexuality – whether they are in a relationship, how long this relationship has lasted, whether they are in love, their clothing, appearance and behaviour around the opposite sex (Armstrong et al. 2014; Froyum 2010; Gilchrist & Sullivan 2006; Hillier et al. 1999). This further reinforces a heteronormative sensibility in young women, that a good girl is always aiming to attract a male partner, she does this for love rather than sexual appetite, and she will be subjected to social policing of 'right' and 'wrong' ways to perform her heterosexual femininity. This social policing works to construct and uphold the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. Where a

young woman violates the code of the 'good girl', she faces public denigration for her failure to perform this identity, policed by the social practice of slut shaming (Armstrong et al. 2014).

Gender, sexualities and the music video

Music videos are a form of popular media that has received particularly widespread criticism in the literature for their exploitation, objectification, and domination of non-male and non-normative bodies and sexualities (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang 2009; Oosten et al. 2015; Peter & Valkenburg 2007). Critiques in quantitative research tend to focus on levels of degrading sexual references and sexualised imagery, such as Primack, Gold, Schwarz and Dalton's (2008) content analysis of pop music for references to sexual activity. Primack et al. (2008) found that over a third of 279 pop songs from 2005 referenced sexual activity in the lyrics, and more than half of these references were considered (by the researchers) sexually degrading towards women. Frisby and Aubrey (2012) looked at race and genre in music videos, and explored how genres of hip hop, pop and country each indicate distinct expectations around women's (hetero)sexuality. Hip hop and rap music has consistently generated criticism from within the research and more broadly for misogynistic and 'antisocial' themes (hooks 1992; Ward, Hansbrough & Walker 2005; Conrad et al. 2009), while country music has been regarded as a more conservative alternative. Frisby and Aubrey (2012) concluded in their content analysis that both black and white female bodies are sexualised and objectified across hip hop and pop genres, and that women's bodies exist in music videos 'for the consumption and pleasure of the viewers' (82). Other findings indicate that sexualised music video content may increase viewers' association with women as sex objects (Kristler & Lee 2009), and that misogynistic music videos increase adolescent viewers' acceptance of 'female token resistance' – the belief that women say 'no' when they really mean 'yes' (to heterosexual sex) (Oosten et al. 2015). The notion of female token resistance undermines women's capacity to give an authentic response of consent, and relies on the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. A 'good girl' would not *receive* the sexual advances of men actively with a 'yes', but rather passively, while bad girls *express* their sexual desires (Brown et al. 2002, 3).

Renold and Ringrose (2011) interrogate the public and private anxieties over the notion of 'over-sexualisation'. Their study emphasises the highly raced and classed discourse in media that both over-simplifies the complex position of girls in sexual cultures, and flattens out social and cultural difference. There is a distinct lack of research that seeks to understand how young people actually negotiate highly sexualised content in popular music. Ward (2003) conducted a substantial review of the media in adolescent sexual socialisation. The results outlined the need for further research in 14 areas, which included exploring young people's critical viewing skills, how viewers actually interpret sexual content, and expanding dimensions other than sexual content and amounts of exposure. Renold and Ringrose (2011) more recently repeated that there remains little investigation into these dimensions. Instead, they argue, a white, middle class

moral panic continues to drive investigation of sexualisation in the media, through a focus on protectionism, victimisation and objectification.

Young people's consumption of music videos is particularly salient when considering the significant and multifaceted relationship that young people have with music (Saarikallio, Gold, & McFerran 2015). Scholarship into the integral value that music holds for young people has documented its role in the constructions, expression and performance of their identity (Carmen 2009; Ruud 1997). Music is engaging and pleasurable for young people, who can spend up to three hours per day watching music videos (Oosten et al. 2015). Research by Harris et al. (2015) into young people's gender attitudes are informed by this understanding, and have recommended that young people be better supported to engage critically with popular media. Multiple studies cited above outline the ways young people engage with media and music videos in particular, and the highly subjective gendered narratives foregrounded in these medias. The research has clearly outlined how gender portrayals may influence young people's attitudes, though there is little investigation into understanding their critical negotiation of music videos.

By exploring music videos in discussion with young people in high school, the current project aimed to emphasise the voices of young people themselves. The purpose of this study was to engage young people in critical discussion to generate rich qualitative data focused on their gendered analysis of music video content. The following research question guided the study:
'How did groups of young people in high school respond to representations of gender and sexuality in two selected popular music videos?'

Method

Setting and Participants

Focus group workshops were conducted across seven diverse school settings around the United Kingdom, and Melbourne, Australia. The schools were recruited through professional and research networks, and these schools ranged from mainstream high schools to specialised facilities for young people at risk. Recruitment aims were focused on capturing enough data and highlighting the voices of young people across a range of diverse demographics, rather than making any attempt for generalisability of results. Participants were students ages 14 – 16.

The schools were all co-educational, and I did not separate students by sex. I established that a gendered analysis of the data was not the focus of this study, and that the practice of segregating young people by sex would risk exclusion or harm to participants who were transgender and/or gender non-conforming. I did not aim to meet quotas in regards to gender and sexual diversity, but there were several participants who openly identified themselves using the words 'queer', 'gay', 'non-binary' and 'trans'. I have chosen not to include quantitative information on numbers of 'girls', 'boys', 'heterosexuals' and 'others', due to the potential for these processes of differentiation and demarcation to 'other' identities that do not fall into the white, heterosexual

gender binary (as outlined in Jensen 2011). The young people were from a variety of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations. The seven groups ranged in size from 5 – 18 participants.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted within one-off focus group workshops. The workshops were similar to focus groups in a methodological sense (Morgan 1997, 31), in that I asked the young people a range of questions to stimulate group discussion. The data for this article is based on what the participants described in discussions about two music videos. The entire discussion was audio recorded for data analysis.

The music videos

Two music videos were selected based on a shortlist I made of Top 40 songs that contained visual and lyrical themes of gender and sexuality that I anticipated young people would be able to identify and discuss, such as gender stereotypical images, references to sex, and representation of sexual and non sexual relationships. The two final music videos selected were 'Dear Future Husband' by Meghan Trainor (Trainor 2015) and 'Literally I Can't' by Play n Skillz and Redfoo (Play n Skillz 2014).

'Dear Future Husband' by Meghan Trainor held a top position in the charts at the time in both the UK and Australia. The song's lyrics are based around the singer's requests to a future 'perfect' partner (male), and the video clip features a 1950's style home with Trainor completing a range of domestic duties while potential male suitors arrive at her house. Because the data specifically reference the lyrical content, I have included the following pre-chorus and chorus lyrics in order to better contextualise the discussion below, which analyses these lyrics in detail.

> *'You gotta know how to treat me like a lady*
> *Even when I'm acting crazy*
> *Tell me everything's alright.*
> *Dear future husband, here's a few things you need to know if*
> *You want to be my one and only all my life.*
> *Dear future husband, if you want to get that special loving,*
> *Tell me I'm beautiful, each and every night'*

'Literally I Can't' was selected as contrasting piece to generate discussion. The video depicts an American frat party scene, where a group of men repeatedly ask a group of women to participate in partying and sexual acts, to which the women repeatedly decline. The lyrical content and visual narrative alludes to sexual assault, *'Girl I know that you can, I don't want to hear no'*, and the objectification and silencing of women,

'I said jump on the pole,
I didn't mean your opinion
Girl I'm sipping on this drink
Trying to see what you've got,
Not trying to hear what you think'

The song engendered widespread media coverage in Australia because the artist, Redfoo, was also a judge on a popular television series, X Factor. Newspaper articles such as The Guardian (Tan 2014) and Herald Sun (Dennehy 2014) reported that Redfoo may be fired from his position on the television series due to the song's offensive content. These articles referred to the song using words such as 'full blown misogyny', 'rape culture', 'sexist' and 'aggressive stereotypes'. Given the critical reception of the music video, and my own interpretation of the video's gendered demarcation of sexual roles and suggested sexual violence, I anticipated 'Literally I Can't' might engender more overt responses to among the participants.

Data Analysis

In order to first approach the complex data that had emerged in these group conversations, I employed a technique derived from Lawrence Ferrara's approach to musical phenomenological analysis (Ferrara 1984). The model is guided by phenomenological principles that emphasise how description is the least distant way of representing a perceived reality. In practice, the model utilises distinct narrative descriptions across multiple levels of listening, to generate multidimensional and comprehensive descriptions that look at the event from a variety of standpoints (McFerran & Wigram 2005).

Four distinct layers of narrative description were outlined for the four times I listened to the audio recordings, with the aim of emphasising reflexivity and providing rich context for this data:

1. My personal reactions to what was heard

2. The dynamics of engagement in the room

3. Actual references to gender and sexuality in words

4. Key standout themes in the discussion

After this four-step in-depth narrative analysis was completed for each of the focus groups, I then looked across the data for tentative emerging ideas, in a process comparable to open coding in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998, 101). I grouped quotes under these ideas, which could

then be refined to create an integrated story, connecting categories and their associated context (established through the in-depth narrative analysis). Although this methodology aimed to provide rich context and emphasise the voices of the young people themselves, analysis necessitated a level of critical interpretation from me as the researcher, of which my own subjective lens cannot be separated. As a feminist researcher, I was particularly looking for young people's responses that made reference to gendered imbalances of power and privilege. My interpretations of key standout themes were formed not only by noting attitudes that were raised repeatedly, or with particular agreement/disagreement from other participants, but also those which particularly struck me as a feminist researcher. These will be discussed in more detail below.

Results and Discussion

In the same sense that there is no singular or objective definition of feminism and the meaning it holds to people, there was no single robust or prevailing finding that encapsulated these young people's understanding and negotiation of these music videos. Responses from participants ranged widely, both within each school context and across the focus groups more broadly. Analysing the data was at times confronting, as was conducting the groups themselves, particularly when themes of sexual violence rose among participants. Attitudes around women's behaviour in relation to sex generated particularly heated discussion, and inevitably impacted on me personally as the researcher, both during the discussions and in my analysis. Rather than avoiding this data, I chose to explore this aspect in particular detail. The results have been constructed in relation to the three sets of dichotomies that presented themselves through the data: 'empowerment vs oppression', 'sluts vs prudes', and 'no consent vs asking for it'. These terms were derived from the participants' frequently used words, and terms I had coded as key standout themes in the final stage of the data analysis. In presenting the results in this format, there formed a cohesive thread that characterised the complex and opposing shapes that rose out of the participants' interpretations.

Empowerment vs Oppression in 'Dear Future Husband'

> Researcher: 'How did the clip represent women do you think?'
> - 'Demanding'
> - 'Very demanding'
> - 'Yeah'
> - 'No! She's also saying, 'Don't leave me at home doing all the work!'

The groups were each divided in their interpretation of whether the 'Dear Future Husband' narrative represented empowerment for women, or upheld oppressive, traditional performances of femininity. In two groups this caused heated arguments between participants who felt strongly either way. The participants who interpreted the song as empowering commonly justified this

through a paradox they identified in the 'housewife' visual narrative, juxtaposed by the assertive lyrics that told the future husband what was expected of him:

> 'It's funny cos she goes on about being the perfect wife, and it's an old fashioned sexist kind of look, which makes everyone think it's all this, but the lyrics are completely different! She's like, do this, do that, I'll get you what you need, but I don't know how to cook so don't expect me to cook!'

The participants who were 'for' the song as empowering referenced two of the song's lyrics in particular, in which Trainor sings that she's, 'got that 9-5' (job), and 'never learned to cook'. Their interpretations implied that the message of the song itself was overall empowering, because Trainor made it clear she was not a stereotypical woman who would cook and not work, and they drew the attention of those who disagreed back to these lyrics several times. One possible interpretation of these results is that these young people are, through a postfeminist discourse, certainly aware that stereotypes of women in their domestic roles are sexist, and representative of an outdated gender order. Furthermore, they interpreted the song's explicit subversion of these stereotypes as *negating* sexism in the narrative, potentially because they view the emancipation from these traditional gender roles as the reason for, and purpose of feminism.

The young people who felt the song was an empowering message also justified their discussion through the heterosexual relationship framework, unsurprising given the song is focused around a heteronormative narrative. The participants referenced phrases that appear in the song about being 'treated like a lady' and made comments such as, 'he's gotta be perfect for her to be perfect'. Some of the participants read this as a position of power, or equality at least, whereas others strongly disagreed. Often the groups spent some time in discussion, negotiating the themes of assertiveness presented in the singer's requests for her 'future husband', and deliberating together what these meant for her femininity:

> 'Being assertive is seen as unattractive in a woman. People would see that and think she's being demanding and that's unattractive. I don't think she's trying to do that, she's just saying, 'Well this is what I want'.'
> 'I think it's meant to be empowering to some extent. Like, you're not just going to have me – you need to work for it'.

The song lyrics construct the singer's 'special loving' as her main contribution to the relationship, which is to be withheld should the partner not meet her expectations. The participants' analysis saw this as a symbol of empowerment, in that Meghan Trainor's character held power in making the men 'work for it'. In line with the gendered narratives which place men as the natural pursuers and beneficiaries of (heterosexual) sex, and women as passive recipients, none of the groups identified the absence of the character's own sexual desire. Given the well-documented lack of positive feminine sexuality in young people's sexual scripts (Hillier

et al. 1999; Gilchrist & Sullivan 2006), it was unsurprising that the participants did not draw attention to something they have no discourse or language to explore. However, many participants strongly disagreed with the interpretation of the song as 'empowering', for several other reasons. These participants noted how the narrative reinforced a dominant traditional form of femininity wherein women are marriage obsessed, consumerist and image-focussed, and can be best shown respect, love and affection through the purchase of gifts. Their analyses were framed around a resentment of pop culture messages that confine expressions of femininity to superficial and submissive stereotypes, specifically, girls doing anything men want them to do. The female participants tended to speak from a personal perspective and indicated that they viewed these stereotypes as harmful because they reflected badly upon themselves as girls:

> 'I just don't like the message of the song. Like girls are always the ones who receive the gifts, they never give the guys chocolates. They never get him anything, it's just about like, 'Oh treat me like a lady, and I'll do whatever you want!''
> 'It's just about how girls are always doing what men want them to… it basically says girls always want flowers and chocolates, and like, I'll do anything you want me to.'
> 'I just don't like the song cos in some bits she'll say like 'if you want my special loving you have to do this'. And it's like, well, not really. Like if you want me and my body, then you have to do this and that for me.'
> (Boys call out) - 'Slavery!'

This final above quote illustrated the engagement of some of the male participants in the analysis of this video clip, which was at times minimal. Their lack of engagement and, for some, obvious disinterest in discussion about this music video gave an impression that the young men did not feel the discussion was relevant or relatable to them. The above quote, in which the boys called out 'Slavery!', was the only comment the boys offered during this particular discussion. This offer indicated their interpretation of what some of the girls in the group had previously classified as 'empowerment'.

Conversely, there was one group of mixed gender participants who collectively engaged with great enthusiasm in the discussion. These students were passionate advocates for the rights and visibility of queer and gender diverse young people, and several of the students in the class voiced these identities during the course of discussion. Their concluding analysis of 'Dear Future Husband' captured a particularly insightful interpretation of the gendered subjectivity in the song's relationship narrative:

> 'Look… if you take away the gender, then it's like 'If you treat me right, I'll treat you right and we'll have a good relationship'. Then it's cute and sweet and adorable. But if you look at the fact that she's saying it, and it's how he has to take her out and then she'll stay home and cook and clean and buy groceries, and then he'll go and buy her a ring and material possessions. That sort of thing, it's just reinforcing stereotypes.'

Sluts vs Prudes in 'Literally I Can't'

> Researcher: 'So, what's the 'Literally I Can't' video clip all about?'
> - 'It's about sluts.'
> - 'Not really… it's about girls being really boring and conservative and the boys changing them'

The participants' discussion of the female characters in Redfoo's controversial 'Literally I Can't' essentially presented an interpretation of how well, or how poorly, the women traversed a hierarchy of gender boundaries. When analysing the interactions between the men and women in the clip for 'Literally I Can't', the participants most often began by referring to the women's specific physical properties, such as their clothing, jewellery and hairstyles. The participants described the group of women in the clip who continuously declined the men's advances and offerings using words like 'preppy', 'stuck up', 'rude', and 'prudes'.

The participants in general referred to the women disdainfully, not only for their appearance, but for refusing to participate in the various elements of the party, and for refusing the gestures of the men. The literature is rich with examples of the double standard that heterosexual young women face, wherein young men's pursuit of sex is celebrated, while young women's desire is denigrated (e.g. Hillier et al. 1999; Jackson & Cram 2003; Gilchrist & Sullivan 2006). Jackson and Cram (2003) explored the polarising experiences of pressure and shame that young women face when negotiating their developing sexuality, allocated into a frigid/slut dichotomy and feel they cannot win. Holland et al. (2010) similarly described the imbalance of standards placed on young women, predicated on rigid gender constructs which police them with disciplinary labels of either 'slag' or 'frigid'. The participants' interpretation of the women in 'Literally I Can't' appeared to be formed in reference to this discourse, frequently using these labels to classify women based on their sexual performances of femininity. Where sluts transgress and exceed what is appropriately sexual, prudes are not sexual enough. These are based on specific physical properties (in this case short skirts, or pearl necklaces), which act as social signifiers of these transgressions when placed in a context of feminine sexuality. Interestingly, at times these labels were contradicting and used simultaneously, the young people asserting that the women filled both opposing roles:

> 'They're dressed preppy but they've still got that sense of skankiness.'
> 'They look slutty, but when it comes to the lyrics… it's trying to demonstrate that they're slutty but they're frigid as well.'

Contrastingly, while the participants spoke about the female characters at times with disciplinary scrutiny, they also demonstrated insight into the misogyny present in the music video. They described the song's representation of women using terms such as 'sexualised', 'objectified' and

'no voice'. One girl's interpretation spoke to the role of women in music videos in general: 'We're not seen as people, we're seen as a label or object'.

One group, when commenting on the ways in which women were objectified and silenced in 'Literally I Can't', made their own use of the slut/prude dichotomy:

> Researcher: 'So what's the woman's role in this clip?'
> - 'Shut up and be sexy'
> - 'You're like a toy'
> - 'Either you're a prude, or you're a slut'

A sense of complexity and contradiction lay in the way the young people at times both rejected, and reinforced the scrutiny of women's gender performances. The participants spoke passionately about how 'men are always above women', and at times explicitly referred to the objectification and oppression of women present in music videos. However, the women in both video clips were simultaneously held to account on the basis of their appearance or behaviour that did not meet expectations of femininity. When arguing whether Meghan Trainor was being demanding in 'Dear Future Husband', one group labelled her as 'bossy', while another came to the conclusion that she was a 'princess', both gendered insults that shame women's expression of power. One group of girls identified themselves using the word 'feminists' and were vocal in identifying and rejecting themes of misogyny in 'Literally I Can't', however went on to describe the women in the video clip as, '…just really stuck up, and rude'.

Renold and Ringrose (2011) developed the concept of 'schizoid subjectivities' in regards to teen girls' sexualities and desire. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guatarri, they describe how teen girls in particular are positioned to respond to contradicting regulations of their bodies, and thus their sexualities coheres in a 'schizoid formation'. This concept may be applied to the participants' inconsistent and contradicting navigation of the women in these music videos, implying their own 'schizoid' tensions of sexual passivity and desire.

No Consent vs Asking For It in 'Literally I Can't'

> Researcher: 'What is this song about?'
> - 'Partying'
> - 'Consent'
> - 'How she won't put out'
> - 'And then the boys just say, well bad luck'
> - 'And then they just orgy'
> - 'Yeah then they just jump on top of them, haha.'

When interpreting 'Literally I Can't', participants in each group were usually quick to pick up on themes of sexual pressure evident in the video's storyline, where the men repeatedly offer

different types of alcohol to the women who refuse to participate. Some participants noted the lack of consent explicitly, and responded to lyrical content such as 'Girl I know you can, I don't want to hear no', with statements like, 'Oh my god! That just sounds so **bad!**'. These participants appeared to be aware of the themes of implied sexual violence and pressure, explicitly referring to the narrative using the word 'consent', and the men's portrayals as violent and 'sex obsessed'. Other participants were more ambiguous with their language, using phrases such as 'to make them do stuff', and 'to take advantage, maybe', to describe the men's goal with the women. One participant's analysis of the song's narrative exemplified this sense of ambiguity, making it difficult to determine if they were using a coded speech to interpret implied sexual acts, or simply relaying the narrative:

> 'And the girls are like 'nah I don't want to party', and then stuff happens… and they start partying.'

At the same time that the young people noted the absence of consent and lack of voice held by the women in 'Literally I Can't', they also held the women partly accountable, through a discourse of rape culture. Rape culture in practice holds survivors of sexual assault responsible for their actions, and victim blaming refers to women's behaviour such as their clothing, sexually permissive demeanour and being in locations that may increase the likelihood of becoming victims of violence (Rodier & Meagher 2014). The participants exhibited this discourse when questioning why the women in 'Literally I Can't' had been at the party, in the context of the implied sexual violence they experienced from the men:

> - 'Well, they went to the party in the first place…'
> - 'Yeah, why would you go if you 'can't'?'
> 'Like everything they're saying is no, but why would you go somewhere if you didn't want it, if you didn't like anything there?'

While recognising that the men were 'taking advantage' or 'making them do stuff', the participants also highlighted the women's appearance and behaviour:

> 'Yeah like they're asking for it but then they're just teasing you.'
> 'The girls are acting and dressing like they can but they're saying I can't. But they can, they're just choosing not to.'

Participants described the women's clothing using words like 'slutty' and 'skanky', discursive markers of feminine sexual activity and excess. These notions intersect with the boundaries of 'good' femininity, implying the women had contravened innocence and ruptured a 'good' girl's morality. In doing so, the participants perhaps felt justified in coding the women's behaviour as 'asking for it'. The participants saw the women as signifying excess through material agents of femininity – a skirt too short, too much make up, a pearl necklace. Thus they had demonstrated

certain messages about their sexual availability, which could be read through the slut/prude discourse, and coded as ‘asking for it’, ‘teasing’, or ‘dressing like they can’. These codes also support the work of Oosten et al. (2015) on the concept of token resistance, in that the young people believed the women said no but meant yes. The discourse of blame placed on the women in the narrative also echoes the latest Australian research that outlines young people as a key group who excuse violence, and believe women share some responsibility in sexual violence (Harris et al. 2015).

Conclusion

While negotiating adolescence as a magnified period of developing sexual beliefs and gender ideologies, young people engage with music across a range of increasingly available mediums and platforms. Where music videos were one day restricted to viewing by young people on a television in the home, the contemporary intersection of new highly mobile viewing and social devices has reshaped the contextual landscape of video viewing entirely. Personal devices host multiple platforms of content that is increasingly available, and increasingly important to young people. Young people exist in a unique space where their negotiation of gender and sexual norms can be cultivated through digital spaces, which also serve to nurture their relationships with music. The participants in this project demonstrated a powerful grasp on aspects of gendered subjectivity, which they could identify through narratives in two music videos. These included hegemonic portrayals of femininity as consumerist, superficial, marriage obsessed, and sexual pressure as a component of sanctioned masculinity. When presented with gender stereotypes around white middle class women and domestic duties, or men as ferociously sexually driven, young people have the capacity to critically analyse discursive gendered scripts, and reject such themes in the moment. Evaluation of sexualisation and objectification was often clear and disapproving among the young people in this study, which is unsurprising given the discourse in the media, research, and beyond, around female sexualisation in particular genres of music.

However, I interpreted the data as incredibly complex, and at times found the participants’ evaluation of the women in the music videos to be contradicting, paradoxical, or to hold ‘schizoid’ tensions (Renold & Ringrose 2011). While the participants were able to outline the hypercritical lens through which women are viewed in media, they applied this same lens to read and police what was an acceptable performance of femininity. Particularly in their interpretations of women in either accepting or refusing the sexual advances of men, the young people used physical signifiers of femininity to apply disciplinary labels of sexual excess or withholding – the slut vs the prude. Women’s sexual identities in music videos continue to operate from these binaries, and young people make use of these to assign women into either category, or at times in this study, both. These signifiers, labels and codes may assist young people in reasoning that such women are responsible, or ‘asking for it’, supported by a broader social discourse of rape culture and victim blaming.

This study explored how young people continually negotiate gender and sexualities in music video content, and indeed have the capacity to demonstrate their own critical viewing skills. Binary constructions of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality are well documented in the literature, and continue to be embedded in young people's interpretations of music video narratives. These revealed themselves in this study through several opposing dichotomies, in which women were either empowered or oppressed, sluts or prudes, gave no consent or were 'asking for it'. As can be heard in the young people's voices, fixtures of feminine sexuality must move beyond these binaries. To stop girls from being held hostage by forces of sexism and contradiction (Little & Hoskins 2004), postfeminism (Gill 2008), or protectionism and victimisation (Ringrose & Renold 2011), we must explore ways of expanding girls' acceptable identities from simply 'good' or 'bad'. Considering young people are the highest consumers of popular music, the primary viewers of music videos, and are already making use of digital and popular media to explore feminist consciousness (Keller et al. 2016), I suggest that popular music offers fertile ground for young people to critically engage with feminist thought, and thus allow for more self-directed evaluation and expansion of acceptable gender and sexual hegemonies.

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