

## Age restrictions on music videos – sexism solved?



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On Monday the [Rewind & Reframe campaign](#) to denounce sexism and racism in music videos was launched by [EVAW](#), [Imkaan](#) and [Object](#) in London. The [debate](#) in Westminster that signaled the start of their campaign is part of a growing online and traditional media interest in the portrayal of women in the music industry [1]. [Rewind & Reframe](#) call for age restrictions to be placed on music videos, in the same way that films or DVDs have age ratings. A discussion on racism and sexism in music is crucial, welcome, and long overdue; yet its focus on age renders the debate obsolete given the broader effects on society.

Women were asked on social media channels to provide examples of those songs which most offended, upset and disturbed them. The song [Blurred Lines](#) was a prominent choice, having already been banned in 20 Universities for its glamorisation of rape and sexist lyrics [2]. Other artists such as Michael Jackson and N-Dubz were singled out as examples, alongside the artist Nelly's contribution [Tip Drill](#) [3]. These examples form only a small part of a larger narrative in pop music that uses sexist lyrics and images.

A feminist response to the sexism contained within Thicke's song has been ongoing [4]. However, for the most part, critiques of this sort of music in the mainstream media have focused on the effects in relation to children rather than the ways in which songs objectify women and have broader societal impacts. The BBC

recently reported that [parents fear music videos have become too sexualised and violent](#), and previously [Annie Lennox has called for age ratings as a response](#) to what she considered to be the sexualisation of children. The current [petition](#) for age restrictions and discussions surrounding the watershed [5] align with this focus on children and young adults. Yet it was women (and men) of all ages that provided examples of videos that made them feel uncomfortable or threatened.

This approach arises from a fixation on the potential damage of sexualisation to children and young adults in music videos and certain popular culture(s). Branding music's misogyny problem as one of sexualisation, taps into long running and vocal campaigns on behalf of children and young adults who are said to be affected by popular music (see, for example, [mumsnet.com](#) and [LIFEcharity](#)) [6]. Yet, the sexualisation approach fails to adequately identify and deal with misogyny in music. A more ambitious, more accurate, method is necessary if we are to change how society sees popular music, its problems, and the solutions.

Using the language of cultural harm rather than sexualisation moves the debate forward. Whereas sexualisation claims are focused on traditionalist arguments concerned with the loss of childhood innocence, cultural harm perspectives look more holistically at the range of effects upon society that flow from the preservation of misogynistic popular culture. The nature of the problem is different according to cultural harm theories, insofar as it is not just about children 'growing up too quickly', but about children growing up in a climate of misogyny. What is more, the problem is greater than the sexualisation framework acknowledges, as music affects not only children but everyone within society, across different ages, races, and genders.

There are, therefore, two problems with the sexualisation approach to regulating music. The first is that it is under inclusive – it leaves lyrics and images that demean women, freely viewable by

children and adults alike. Ironically, the second problem with this approach is that it is over inclusive in other ways – sexualisation approaches are reticent to make the detailed assessment needed about the appropriateness, context, or extent to which nudity is damaging. A moralistic approach focused on protecting the presumed innocence of children avoids the very real issues of violent undertones, possessiveness, and misogyny and instead produces an over-focus on the appearance of women in videos. Nudity in these types of videos is only a symptom of deeper problems of power imbalances and messages that devalue women.

By broadening the scope of the problem, the cultural harm perspective allows for a deeper assessment of the problem of sexism/misogyny within popular culture. In particular it is the objectification of women and the ubiquity of this view of women in popular culture that signals cultural harm and necessitates action [7]. Music is a powerful cultural tool, as it is important to ‘identity development and the formation of relationships...’ [8]. The consumption of sexist/misogynistic messages by all in this development process is harmful, but the harm is exacerbated by the broad acceptance of such messages in society. It is this acceptance that needs to be challenged; age ratings are a false hope because they do not target the underlying causes of misogyny in music.

The debate surrounding age restrictions suggests that they, and consumer choice for individuals, can mitigate against the harmful effects of these videos. However, the sheer ubiquity of this music in public spaces means that age restrictions for children are inadequate and adults’ ability to opt out is no more than a myth. In any case, even if this music was avoidable, its broadcasting in everyday places means its messages also become ‘everyday’; this is known as the normalisation effect [9]. Such normalisation creates a culture that tolerates misogyny – a culture that people cannot, practically speaking, be asked to avoid.

Cultural harm can help to make a stronger argument for collective action to take on misogyny in popular culture. While sexualisation is policed by highly subjective individual assessments, a cultural harm approach allows us to more rigorously define and incorporate normative standards on what exactly constitutes harm, and who exactly is affected. Such an approach would encourage debate and more radical solutions instead of the application of conversation-stopping labels such as ‘explicit’, ‘parental guidance’, and ‘nudity’.

The contrast between the sexualisation and cultural harm approaches can be seen through the example of Flo Rida’s music video [Turn Around \(5,4,3,2,1\)](#). The original video includes close-ups of a large number of dancers’ shaking bottoms interspersed with images of women twerking against a wall and Flo Rida miming spanking the women; the video was later modified. It would seem that it was not the demeaning of women that resulted in the video’s modification, but rather it was the frequent appearance of women’s bottoms. The new [radio-edit version](#) crudely cropped the women’s bodies while their overall objectification remained untouched and unchallenged.

Attaching a ‘sexist’ label to a video, as opposed to an ‘explicit’ label, only modestly advances the debate, but what it does at least, is highlight the broader implications of this music culture to society as a whole. An ‘18’ rating does not promote a discussion on the reasoning behind the label, it does not highlight the sexist content of the material, and it fails to reach those members of society that surpass the age restriction. Cultural harm theories that acknowledge the harm to a broader audience, provide a justification for a stronger regulation of music. It is not enough to stick an age label on a video and hope that sexism will go away.

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[1] See for example [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#). Feminists, and (feminist) female artists, have already been having a debate about the depiction of women in the media, see some recent comments by for example; Ikamara Larasi, Annie Lennox, Charlotte Church. See also, [Miley Cyrus: does the music business exploit women?](#) and [Addicted to misogyny? Music videos still don't get what women really want.](#)



[2] Including: Anglia Ruskin University, Derby, Leeds, West Scotland, Kingston, Nottingham and Birmingham, The University College London Union (UCLU) and the University of London Union (ULU), see [here](#).

[3] Particularly pertinent to Nelly's work is the intersectionality discourse in relation to sexism and racism in music. Specifically, black feminists call for autonomy and fight against the use of their bodies as decoration. For a fuller exploration of these issues, see [here](#).

[4] 'Defined Lines' Is The Robin Thicke 'Blurred Lines' Parody That Trumps All Others, see [here](#).

[5] The point in time from which programming with adult content may be broadcast in the UK.

[6] We use misogyny to denote a general disrespect or disregard for women.

[7] See [Clare McGlynn and Erika Rackley's](#) work on cultural harm and extreme pornographic material.

[8] Brook Bretthauer, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, James H. Banning, 'A Feminist Analysis of Popular Music: Power Over, Objectification of, and Violence Against Women' (2006) 18(4) *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 29, 307 Diana E. H. Russell with Laura Lederer, *Questions We Get Asked Most Often*, in Laura Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women on pornography* (1980) 29

[9] See, Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Harvard University Press 1993) 31.

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