

**Women's Interpretations of Music Videos Featuring Women Artists**

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In recounting her first recognition of sexism in advertising, Kilbourne (2000) says, "I couldn't exactly say what it was, but I knew that (it) was wrong." Hurley (1994) describes growing up as a music video fan disturbed by "an abundance of imagery that has exploited female bodies as objects" (p. 327). "But I had no words to express this," she writes (p. 327). The present study also found college women unhappy with but unable to articulate effective critiques of sexualized representations of women in music videos.

Research on gender and music television tends to be concerned with either content or effects. Less developed is the literature on audience interpretations of music television, especially women's interpretations of women as artists. At the same time, optimism regarding active audiences as resistant readers has been tempered somewhat since the 1980s. Here we share our analysis of the comments of 43 women majoring in mass communications who participated in six focus groups where they viewed and discussed three music videos featuring women artists.

Below, we first describe the literature's apprehension toward music television's gender messages. Second, we describe our focus group process. Third, we demonstrate participants reading the videos critically for gender, although participants' critiques were undeveloped and even contradictory. Then we examine the ways participants deferred to popularized ideas about

feminism to support their critiques. Next, using models that posit constraints on active audience resistance, we attempt to explain participants' responses to the videos. We are women who write as white Anglo heterosexual able-bodied communication feminists.

#### The Literature on Music Television, Gender, and Women

Scholarship on the gendered content of music television and research on the effects that such content has on gendered audiences reveal similar concerns. Both literatures support Jhally's (1990, 1995, 2007) analysis of music television as "dreamworlds" of erotic heterosexual masculine fantasy. But only a few scholars have explored audience interpretations of music television.

Content analyses of music television report rigid gender roles and gender stereotyping, particularly for women, who are underrepresented as artists, as well as the sexual objectification of women (Baxter *et al.*, 1985; Brown & Campbell, 1986; Gow, 1996; Seidman, 1992; Signorielli, McLeod, & Healy, 1994; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 2004; Vincent, Davis, & Boruszkowski, 1987). Researchers also worry about the representation of sexual aggression toward women in music television (Jones, 1997; Kalis & Neuendorf, 1989; Sherman & Dominick, 1986; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 2004; Vincent, Davis, & Boruszkowski, 1987). Meanwhile, feminist and critical approaches to studying music television's content have theorized the possibilities for women's subjectivity, pleasure, and agency as viewers and performers (Bradby, 1992; Lewis, 1990; Kaplan, 1988; Railton & Watson, 2005; Stockbridge, 1990).

Audience effects research mirrors these issues. Christine Hansen's work suggests that sexually violent content enlisting stereotypical gender roles in music videos primes viewers to

adopt more positive attitudes toward such roles and behaviors (Hansen, 1989; Hansen & Hansen, 1988, 1990a, 1990b; Hansen & Krygowski, 1994). Johnson *et al.* (1995) found evidence that African-American teen girls' exposure to rap music may correlate with acceptance of dating violence. Kalof (1999) reports that exposing white college women and men to popular music videos with sexual imagery increased their tolerance of adversarial sexual relationships, with women showing greater acceptance of interpersonal violence.

Moving from effects to meaning, Berry and Shelton's (1999) focus groups interpreted music videos differently across gender and race, although the women rejected "male dominance and authority" (p. 148). Brown and Schulze (1990) found that undergraduate interpretations of two Madonna music videos differed by gender, race, and class; yet, across these categories, students were critical of sexual content, describing it as "pornographic/sexual perversion/women as sexual objects" (p. 98). Brown and Schulze (1990), Berry and Shelton (1999), and Stern (2005) all observe their undergraduate subjects calling women on music television "sluts."

Hurley (1994) and Stern (2005) introduce the problematic of pleasure among women viewers. Hurley's (1994) work with teens describes young women and men expressing enjoyment from participating in and gauging their own gender performances against music video culture. Stern's (2005) focus group with college women who were fans of MTV's non-musical program "Real World" also shows participants taking pleasure in viewing. At the same time, participants criticized women's performances on the program, as well as the program and the music industry, for gender stereotyping and gratuitous sex. Stern's participants even mention Kilbourne's (1979) *Killing Us Softly*.

Generally, then, the literature corroborates Jhally's (1990, 1995, 2007) "dreamworlds" thesis: The content of music television caters to young heterosexual men by portraying a fantasyland in which women are atomized into erotic objects available for men's sexual gratification. He notes that women artists, in order to be marketable, adopt music television's conventions of representation. The literature also supports Jhally's contention that this dreamworld reinforces cultural acceptance of this gender system, including violence against women.

Jhally (1995, 2007) notes that the production conventions of the music video industry were adopted from the advertising industry, while Kilbourne's (1979, 1987, 1995, 1999, 2000) critique of the advertising industry's portrayal of women parallels Jhally's critique of music television. Kilbourne also observes the tendency to dismember women's bodies into objects, and she, too, argues a link to social acceptance of violence against women. Both Jhally (1990, 1995, 2007) and Kilbourne (1979, 1987, 1995, 2000) describe the ways these techniques privilege young thin mostly white unnaturally beautiful women's bodies and offer narratives that pit women against each other in their competition for men. Kilbourne goes further, however, to emphasize the artifice of women's bodies appearing in popular media. Mediated images of women's bodies are manufactured ideals constructed through cosmetics, prosthetics, camerawork, and postproduction manipulation designed to produce "guilt and shame" among real women who inevitably fail in comparison (Kilbourne, 1979, 1987, 2000).

The present study bridges this critical scholarship on the gendered content of music television and empirical research on the ways gendered audiences understand music television.

Our approach assumes the women participating in the study are interpretive agents teasing meaning from cultural texts such as music television.

### The Focus Group Process

The study employed six focus groups, each consisting of six to 12 mass communications students (a total of 43 women and six men) attending a large southeastern university. The students were registered in six visual communication and graphic design courses, and the focus group sessions were conducted during regular class meetings. Students were told the study was about “audience interpretations of music videos.” Course instructors did not offer credit for participation and offered a no-penalty opt-out. No students opted out, and participants signed informed consent. Non-white students represented less than 10% of participants. Due to the minority of men participating, analysis shifted to the women since the women dominated discussion.

The three music videos starring women artists were selected from MTV’s “Total Request Live” top 10 the week of Feb. 25, 2005: Lindsay Lohan’s “Over,” Destiny’s Child’s “Soldier,” and Jennifer Lopez’s “Get Right.”<sup>1</sup> After watching each video, participants were presented with three hypothetical scenarios: two women talking, two men talking, and a woman and a man talking. Participants were asked to write what they thought the characters in each scenario would say if they had just viewed the video in question. After watching and writing about all three videos, participants were invited to share what they had written as well as their personal impressions of the videos. Using the writing prompts as the point of departure, the first author facilitated open-ended discussion for all six groups. The presence of one or two men in some of

the groups did not dampen the women's conversations or their willingness to share their ideas. The men's contributions to discussion were not substantive enough to support analysis, which searched for emergent themes. Below we quote only women.

Reading for Gender: "They Looked like Hookers"

All six groups immediately gravitated to criticizing the artists' appearance as too sexual. Imagined conversations from the writing scenarios generated a pattern. As one participant said, "The girls look at that and they say they wish they had that, and the guys watch that and say 'I wish I *had* that.'" The scenario with two women talking usually produced negative judgments. For example, "Their outfits were too revealing." For the scenario with two men talking, participants always imagined positive evaluations regarding the artists' sexual appeal. "Hot" was a recurrent descriptor. For the scenario with a woman and a man in conversation, participants always assumed a heterosexual relationship and typically imagined a disagreement: "My guy wanted the girl to buy those outfits, walk around the house like that. 'No, I am not a slut.'" Beyond the writing prompts and across the focus groups, this pattern foreshadowed general discussion, which almost exclusively pivoted around the way the artists looked. As one participant said, "I was definitely more interested in what they look like and what they're wearing than the concepts of the video."

*"Sex Objects"*

Participants described the videos as "low-brow porn" and imagined the men in their writing prompts to be sexually fantasizing about the women. One participant said, "I think it plays into the male fantasy of how they want women to look." Another asked, "Don't you think it's weird that women singers portray themselves as sex objects?"

The groups also observed an emphasis on women's body parts. But participants were less savvy about identifying techniques that produce such images, such as extreme close-ups cropping women's bodies. Instead, comments tended to catalogue the images: "Body parts, a lot of stomachs." "Asses, they all shook their asses."

*"Artificial Trash"*

All the focus groups discussed the gap between reality and popular culture's idealized representations of women's bodies. One participant summed it up as "artificial trash." Other comments included, "Those aren't real girls," and "That is not reality." However, the "fakeness" that participants attributed to the artists' bodies, as well as celebrity women in general, had little to do with discussion about industry visual modes of representation. Instead, across the groups, feminine perfection was attributed to access to and investment in time and resources. One participant said, "Real-world people, normal people who don't have personal trainers and stuff like that wouldn't look that good." Another said, "If I had someone fixing my nails, and all I had to do is sit there and work out all day, if I had all that money, someone doing my hair and makeup, I would look like that, too."

In focusing on the resources that the artists have access to for enhancing their bodies and beauty, no one critiqued the system that exhorts women to invest their labor and resources to look beautiful or the purpose of such beauty, to be desirable to heterosexual men. Yet participants did recognize and unpack the purpose of sexual objectification. Still, unswerving interest in the perfect but overly "sexy" appearance of the artists demonstrated participants' belief that for women "How you look is the important thing," as one participant said.

*“Jealous”*

While criticizing the video artists’ sexualized appearance, participants also indicated appreciation for the physical perfection the artists achieved on camera and expressed a desire to achieve similar perfection. One participant said: “Stomach, chest, everything, oh, wow, she has a great body. She is looking really good. I want mine to look like that.” Numbers of participants then projected jealousy in their writing prompts. One participant said, “But then again other women might talk about how they were envious of how they looked in the videos and how they wish that they could look like that.” Another said, “Jealous of how their bodies look, you know, how they’re very fit and toned, and they have on all these clothes, and they look good in them.”

*“Sluts”*

Beyond physique and fashion, discussion in all the focus groups charged the artists’ in the music videos, as well as other women artists, with projecting an image of sexual promiscuity, and participants judged the artists harshly for it. The range of terms used repeatedly within and across focus groups included “slut,” “whore,” and “hooker,” among others. Participants used such words to describe the artists’ appearance in performance rather than their off-camera behavior or character. One participant said: “You are supposed to watch it and say, ‘Oh, that was cool,’ versus ‘Oh, my god, that pisses me off. She looks like such a whore.’” Another said, “Like if I saw anyone dressed like that walking down the street, I would be like, ‘Oh, my gosh, she looks like the biggest skank.’”

*“Sex Sells”*

But participants also conceded that “sex sells” and agreed that the artists “know this is what they need to do to sell records,” as one woman said. Only when the facilitator eventually

asked each focus group about industry power did participants acknowledge their belief that men control the industry. However, participants still attributed artistic control, thus accountability for sexual objectification, to the women artists. For example:

Student A: I don't know. I would venture to say that each of those performers probably had a lot to do with the actual implementation of the video. Like, I wouldn't say that it was just a man making the video.

Student B: Well, like, directors and producers, because I know the industry is actually dominated by males being directors and producers. I do agree, though. I think all three of those, all of those artists, had the input of how the video was shot.

*"Kids are so Impressionable"*

Participants did not link the cultural ubiquity of images of beautiful women and cultural pressure for women to improve their beauty with participants' own interest in focusing on the artists' appearance or with participants' desire to look more like the artists. Instead participants worried about the effects of sexual content on adolescents and children because, as one participant said, "Kids are so impressionable." Participants expressed belief that young viewers of both genders treat the too-sexual content of music television as a reflection of reality. As one participant said, "That is their education, their view of the world." Participants, however, did not express concern that such an education may pressure underage women to subscribe to the beauty imperative.

In sum, although participants were critical of the videos' representation of women, we find some lapses instructive. First, because the treatment videos did not explicitly deal with

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sexual aggression and violence toward women, focus group discussion did not raise the issue either. Second, that mass communications students enrolled in visual courses did not identify production techniques such as camera angle and framing used to objectify women is sobering.

Third, participants had to be probed to consider industry power and gender. Furthermore, after acknowledging that men control the industry, participants still argued that women artists retain creative control. This may indicate participants' naiveté and either hope for their own futures or a sincere desire to hold women artists to a higher standard. Attributing creative control to the artists and then finding their creative work lacking also may signal another dimension of participants' tacit jealousy. Moreover, the tendency for participants to label the artists "sluts" may reflect an analogy of prostituting oneself for fame and fortune. But few labels are more damaging to women than "slut," and participants may have resorted to this kind of ready-made insult to support their negative assessment of the artists and videos. Perhaps, given the limitations of a focus group, participants did not have the time to contextualize their dislike of the images they saw within a wider examination of power relations and political economy. Thus, it may have been a case of inadvertently blaming the messenger. However, holding individual women responsible for socially sanctioned gender constraints and institutionalized sexism is common.

Because a majority of participants were white and four of the five artists starring in the three videos were women of color, we searched for evidence that participants' dislike of the artists' performances were racially or ethnically driven. But transcripts provide no clear instances of any participant judging any of the artists on the basis of race or ethnicity, although there was limited preference for Destiny's Child and Lopez over Lohan on the basis of age. Presumptions

of heterosexuality manifested across all six groups, however, from frequent discussions about boyfriends to bewilderment at the idea of women dancing erotically for an audience of women.

Fourth, we find it noteworthy that the focus groups were not interested in discussing the three videos' narratives, especially as forms of "female address," that is "female-musician videos designed to speak to and resonate with female cultural experiences" (Lewis, 1990, p. 109). The videos did contain female-address "access signs" commandeering the privileges of men's spaces and activities for women's use and female-address "discovery signs" celebrating women's "modes of cultural expression and experience" (p. 109). Nevertheless, six groups of mostly white and apparently heterosexual women holding extended conversations about other women's appearance should not be written off as trivial, as they illustrate a particular kind of women's culture, however problematic.

Indeed, our most significant finding is that the women who participated limited their interest in the videos to what the artists looked like and found the artists' looks too sexual. It was as if participants assumed that women as artists would eschew the kinds of sexual representations of women typically found in videos that men produce for men. A participant describing one of her writing scenarios said: "She would have expected men singers to portray women as sex objects, but it was frightening that women portray themselves that way." Because of what participants viewed as highly sexual performances in the videos, four of the focus groups were confused about whether the three videos targeted women or men and never settled the question. For example, one participant said: "I'm kind of confused because 90% of the guys I know would not watch those videos. But it seems like those videos were made for guys, and it's like I don't

know why.” Confusion about target audience may explain why participants did not read the videos’ female-address narratives.

Overall, across all six groups, transcripts show participants rejecting the sexual objectification of women’s bodies in the service of erotic fantasy for (heterosexual) men; yet participants did not reject women’s cultural beauty imperative or recognize it as a less explicit form of sexual objectification. This led us to question the reasoning participants used to criticize the artists.

### **Articulating the Irritant: “Purely Sexual Empowerment”**

Participants seemed uncomfortable with the videos’ suggestion that women’s power lies in their sex appeal to heterosexual men. “If there were any kind of female empowerment, it would be purely sexual empowerment,” said the one participant who best expressed the indictment her peers struggled to put into words. Kilbourne (2000) argues that popular culture’s emphasis on women’s physical sexual appeal represents a “trivialization of power” that co-opts women’s movement. Jhally (2007) notes the paradox of music television’s “dreamworld” that positions women as “independent and in control” only when they are “passive and submissive” to the sexual desires of men. Participants echoed these observations. In expressing their discontent with the videos, participants invoked references to feminism and power. Some identified sexual objectification as incongruous with women’s power but seemed unable to explain why. Others reasoned that women’s movement has empowered women with a sexual equality to men that the video artists exploit. Neither argument connected women’s beauty work and (hetero)sex appeal.

Across the groups, some participants indicated that performing suggestively in revealing clothes weakened the artists' power and strength. One participant said:

She's kind of going after this issue of women being objectified a little bit. Then she comes out in these skimpy clothes and stripper thing. You totally negated what you are trying to say by doing that.

In this type of response, participants observed the incongruity between the power of being a subject and loss of power in performing as a sexual object:

Student C: I think it is interesting that the women are trying to portray girl power, kind of like women are powerful, and yet they are flaunting around with no clothes on. Like an oxymoron.

Student D: It's pretty hypocritical if you think about it. Yeah, you want to be a strong woman, and you're dancing around half naked for a guy.

Student D hints that "dancing around half naked for a guy" limits a woman's power to her body's ability to attract the desire of a man; however, no one using this incongruity response ever completed this argument.

A second type of response equated the power women's movement grants to women with (hetero)sexual power:

And by doing that they may think their inner feminist side is coming out. Like girls and guys are equals, and they can get sex the same way. Girls want sex just as much as guys do, but they are taught to not express it. It is pretty much the same thing, but now they just exploit it.

Here the participant suggests that the artists “exploit” a feminist right to equal sex. Another participant said:

Isn't that where we are right now? We can be sexy. We can be strong. We can show that we're sexy and that we are as sexual as the men are, and it's okay because we do have as much. I think it is a good thing. Before it would have been looked at as a bad thing. Now it is just like she said, they are flaunting themselves, and it seems like an oxymoron, but I don't think society looks at it like that anymore.

In the sexual equality argument, women's movement has urged society to accept women's equal right to sex, even if that “seems like an oxymoron.” Here, “sexy” and “strong” are no longer incongruous, thanks to social change for women. Beyond undermining their own objections to the videos and constricting women's power to heteronormative sexual power, participants employing the sexual equality response missed the point that men don't dance half naked in order to demonstrate their strength or exercise their power and right to sex.

Whether it was incongruity or sexual equality, in trying to articulate “totally negated,” “oxymoronic,” and “hypocritical” messages about women, participants consistently invoked references to “girl power,” “feminism,” “women's liberation,” “equality,” and “women's movement.” Participants seemed to call on feminism as the last-word authority on women's “strength” and “power,” even when participants seemed unsure about their understanding of feminism and unable to define power beyond sexual power. For example:

For years, I guess, we have been told about how the women's movement, you know, was totally anti showing your body to get power, or moving or whatever,

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and now it is kind of the opposite. Now it is you can flaunt your body, and it is now not looked at as much. Like they had more power in the video. Before I think it would have been more like they were submissive, and now you can do that, and it doesn't look like you don't have power. I don't know.

As "I don't know" illustrates, we witnessed participants struggling to explain an inconsistency between sexual objectification and women's power, and participants often seemed hesitant or ambivalent about their own explanations. Participants also tended to explain this inconsistency as a result of women's movement, which they framed as progressive, even if they didn't quite convince themselves. In fact, this produced another unfortunate tension that made women's movement responsible for sexualizing women, even while participants rejected sexual objectification and embraced women's movement.

The good news is that in all the focus groups, participants aligned sexual objectification with reducing women's power, and they aligned women's movement with increasing women's power. The bad news is that numbers of participants then realigned power through women's movement back to women's bodies in a quasi-liberal feminist "girl power" that restricted women's equality to men in the bedroom. Participants accepted dominant-hegemonic ideas that suture women's worth to the beauty of their bodies, and participants lacked familiarity with effective feminist thought.

#### Negotiated Decoding, Ideological Seams, and Resistant Reading

Hurley's (1994) "I had no words" (p. 327) response to the sexualization of women in music videos is emblematic of the focus groups. Participants early and consistently were drawn to issues relevant to the literature on gender and music television, but participants were not adept

at articulating the ideological irritant or their resistance. Participants accepted the importance of a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness. But, in criticizing the artists for sexualizing themselves, participants seemed to reject an extension of that logic: A woman's physical appearance is important in order to attract the desire of a man, and, thus, a woman's power depends on the visible sex appeal of her material body to men. Sex, not beauty, was the tipping point for unease among participants. The artists' beauty was a source of jealousy in participants' writing prompts. But performances of sexuality evoked pejorative labels of sex workers and sexual promiscuity. If participants detoured around the connection between the purpose of women's beauty work and sex appeal, one might guess participants' opposition to women objectifying themselves would come down to feminine modesty and patriarchal sexual propriety. Instead, all six focus groups deferred to undeveloped notions of feminism.

Hall's (2006) model of active audiences decoding media texts posits a middle negotiated reading/viewing position occurring between accepting the dominant-hegemonic code at face value and generating a resistant oppositional interpretive code. Negotiated decoding grants the dominant-hegemonic worldview credence while taking liberty with its application in specific instances. "This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions" (p. 172).

Radway (1986), however, notes that a dominant ideology itself is likely to be contradictory, particularly as it recuperates or rejects competing ideologies—such as patriarchy navigating women's movement. She argues that ideology secures itself through material practices, but when practices cannot fulfill the promised ideal's "constructed desires," the result

is an “ideological seam.” At such a seam, we may find people’s “buried discontent” (p. 110) and subtle resistance.

Whereas Radway focuses on resistant media consumption, Condit (1989) elaborates a series of constraints to decoding popular media resistively. First there is the obvious disadvantage of decoding as a member of a subordinate group whose perspectives are not represented in mainstream discourses. This leads to questions about the existence of a cultural “repertoire” of oppositional discourses to draw on for constructing resistant interpretations. Even so, one must have access to such a repertoire, and the quality of the repertoire is not guaranteed, either. Moreover, entrée to oppositional discourses does not assure facility at deploying them. Beyond competence, Condit demonstrates a “work/pleasure ratio”: The greater degree of labor required to produce a resistant or oppositional interpretation may reduce the appeal and pleasure of doing so. Additionally, Condit distinguishes between a dominant system, which may trigger voluble opposition without serious penalty, and a hegemonic system, which, by definition, has enlisted the consent of subordinate groups. All this may have a “silencing effect” (p. 109).

In the present study, then, we may account for focus group discussions that cluster around the “fatal contradiction” of an ideological seam (Radway, 1986, p. 113), deploy a “mismatched” negotiated code (Hall, 2006, p. 172), and so generate “incomplete and problematic” interpretations (Condit, 1989, p. 108). Women participating in the six focus groups were drawn to the intersection between women’s to-be-looked-at-ness and its ultimate purpose in attracting the heterosexual male gaze that renders women objects of desire (Berger, 1972; Doane, 1982; Mulvey 1975). Although participants rejected what they interpreted as the videos’ sexual objectification of women, participants demonstrated uncritical acceptance that how women look

is important while they detoured around the ideological seam obscuring *why* women's looks are important—to be desirable to men. Nevertheless, we might guess that students would be unlikely to employ the equivalent of a critical scholar's or academic feminist's more fully developed oppositional code, particularly given the dominant-hegemonic code's tendency to suppress and co-opt feminism. Furthermore, although the kinds of criticisms participants offered were remarkably similar across focus groups, we might have anticipated that these women's objections to the sexualization of women would fail to critique the system that endorses such representations precisely because it is a hegemonic system. Instead, participants criticized the individual women exploiting "sex sells" in the videos, even as participants relied on vague notions of feminism to authorize their critiques.

### **Conclusion**

Women majoring in mass communications were critical of the representation of women in the three music videos featuring women artists. Participants identified a preponderance of women's body parts represented for heterosexual masculine erotic fantasy. However, participants did not identify production techniques used to produce such images, and discussion generated some ironies: Participants granted that music television generally is produced by men for men, but participants held the women in the videos responsible for objectifying themselves. Participants agreed that music videos idealize unrealistic standards of women's beauty, but participants said women with the luxury of time and money could attain the ideal. Participants also worried about underage audiences treating music television's sexual images of women as role models, even as participants wished they looked more like the women in the videos.

Overall, participants did not recognize their own exclusive interest in focusing on the artists' appearance, and participants were unforgiving in their evaluations that the artists' appearance was too sexual. Participants uncritically subscribed to the cultural beauty imperative that encourages women to make their appearance a priority. In rejecting the video artists' overt sex appeal, however, participants did not recognize women's beauty imperative and women's sexual objectification as both related to attracting the desire of heterosexual men. Instead, to make sense of their discomfort with the videos, participants relied on popularized notions of feminism. Thus, participants employed oppositional discourses from women's movement to reject sexual objectification without recognizing dominant-hegemonic discourses that naturalize women's beauty imperative. This resulted in unproductive critiques.

Participating in a focus group certainly produced a more critical reading than ordinary viewing. The gendered nature of the writing prompts also inevitably invited discussion of gender. Yet we were taken aback at the continuity of criticism that the focus groups directed toward the videos and the artists. Some participants described real conversations with friends, including "boyfriends," matching focus group discussions, which suggests natural viewing may be critical to some degree. At the same time, the transcripts prove a prevailing heterosexism. Furthermore, although we found no evidence that criticism of individual artists was racially or ethnically motivated, transcripts do reveal instances of students' race, age, class, and gender myopias.

We now realize that using videos featuring women as artists made a complex decoding task more so, as evidenced by participants' confusion about target audiences. If reading resistively for women's representations in music television produced by heterosexual men for

heterosexual men is hard work, then layering that same gendered heteronormative framework onto women surely increases the interpretive workload. Women watching women performing as objects of the heterosexual male gaze for an imagined audience of women is dizzying—*before* contemplating the thorny womanly gaze, whether heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. We liken it to the extra interpretive work required for making sense of double negatives. At the same time, if the symbolic order goads a woman to split her sense of self into both being surveyed and surveying herself as she is surveyed (Berger, 1972), then we shouldn't be surprised to find 20-something women at the pinnacle of their youthful beauty surveying the appearance of women. We also argue that the gendered heteronormative system that provokes women to be critical of women functions to deflect criticism of the system.

Feminist oppositional codes, when they do manage to break through into public discourse and popular culture are systematically maligned or colonized. So it is encouraging that smart young women, who nevertheless have grown up in a culture that admonishes them to make beauty a priority but obfuscates the reason why, would lock onto gender issues and rely on feminism to sanction their critiques. Unfortunately, the watered-down feminist logics readily available in popular media and public discourses tend to reinforce rather than rip out the ideological seam that stitches women's power to the desirability of their bodies. It is impossible to unravel sexual objectification without unraveling women's beauty work and the ideological seam binding "appropriate" and "inappropriate" gender performances to a heteronormativity that makes men's symbolic and material disdain for and control of women's bodies "sexy."

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<sup>1</sup>"Total Request Live" ended Nov. 16, 2008, after 10 years on MTV.