

# I Just Want to Look Good for You

## *Stereotypes in Music Videos and How to Overcome the Self-Evident Sexism in Germany*

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For decades, music videos have been a key element of the daily social lives of youth. In a series of studies the gender representations in the top 100 music videos in the USA and Germany were analysed and the use of music videos was surveyed among n=748 representatively selected adolescents in Germany. A qualitative study revealed the extent to which girls and boys recognise the sexualisation in the videos and if this was really needed to fulfil what they are looking for. The results confirm that music videos often show highly sexualised representations of women. 13- to 19-year-olds, of whom 80 per cent watch music videos at least once a week, idealise the artists' representations as self-determined statements, see artists as role models and often misinterpret the sexualisation as a symbol of strength. Here, media literacy is needed and a media pedagogical unit was tested.

*Gonna wear that dress you like, skin-tight  
Do my hair up real, real nice  
And syncopate my skin to your heart beating  
'Cause I just wanna look good for you, good for you,*

Selena Gomez sings “I just wanna look good for you” and portrays herself in the video as a “melancholy victim” (Lemish, 2003) who is suffering horribly because “he” left her even though she had always given him everything. With this, Gomez not only reveals details about her relationship with Justin Bieber to the world in a highly dramatic fashion, she also gives girls and boys orientation for roles and gender relations in a modern relationship. For decades, music videos have been a key element of the daily social lives of youth (Altrogge, 2000). They can influence preconceptions and attitudes, e.g. about sexuality and gender roles (Kistler & Lee, 2009, Aubrey, Hopper & Mbure, 2011).

In the last century the primary medium of distribution for these videos was music channels on TV, then computers, and nowadays it is mobile phones (Trend Tracking,

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2016). Music videos are thus often a part of the youth's daily lives and yet evade public notice and critical viewing beyond the youth culture that uses them. It is therefore even more important to look more closely at stereotypes used in gender representation and their meaning for youth. What are the current, typical ways men and women are portrayed in popular music videos? What quantitative and qualitative tendencies can be shown and what does this mean for the youth? And not least: Is it even possible to teach adolescents more competences in dealing with the gender constructions offered in the videos?

This is where the series of studies by the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) and the MaLisa Foundation pick up and first analyse the top 100 music videos in the US and Germany in 2015. In a quantitative survey at a representative level (n=748), girls and boys aged between 13 and 19 were asked (among other things) about their use and interpretation of music videos and to what extent the artists are meaningful to them. An exploratory qualitative study pursued if adolescents perceive the hypersexualisation and if they would use it themselves planning their own music video. Whether a unit on media literacy can sensitise them was then tested in school classes.

## Step 1: The media analysis

*Yes I do the cooking,*

*Yes I do the cleaning,*

*Plus I keep the na-na real sweet for your eating*

*Yes you be the boss and yes I be respecting,*

*Whatever that you tell me cause it's game you be spitting,*

is what Nicki Minaj sings in her underclothes in *Hey Mama* while wearing a transparent bodysuit. She is in a futuristic desert world with intertextual references to the film *Mad Max*,<sup>1</sup> and there are images of a spectacle with acrobatic dancers and various women wearing very few clothes in provocative poses. It is an eroticised scene that, as science fiction, references the future and thereby calls up an almost slave-like relationship between men and women that she accepts with enthusiasm and fervour. Is this music video, which reached number 36 in the US charts in 2015, a sexist exception, an individual case, or is it indeed a prototype for the market?

Content analytical studies reveal that especially women are hypersexualised and reduced to their outward appearance (summary in Rich, 1998). Music videos represent especially women conforming to the dominant ideal of beauty and highly sexualise their bodies (Arnett, 2002, Jhally, 2007, Aubrey & Frisby, 2012). Women show much more sexuality than men, touch themselves erotically more, dance lasciviously and erotically, and give sultry looks. Their clothing is much less frequently neutral, while this is normal

for men (Wallis, 2010). Female singers stage themselves in two-thirds of the videos in the typical dimensions of self-objectification: “Body exposure, gaze, dance, and dress”, in particular in the pop or hip-hop genres (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012).

To get an overview of the current status of gender representations in music videos, the 100 most successful songs of the 2015 charts in Germany<sup>2</sup> and the USA<sup>3</sup> were studied, whereby a sample of 168 resulted because of overlaps in the German and US charts (32 songs). They were analysed with a quantitative content analysis (Berger, 2016) with a code book of 63 variables in video and lyrics by five independent, trained coders.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1.** Main results of the media analysis: Women are more strongly sexualised than men, in the US more frequently than in Germany

	Women	Men
There are twice as many men as women (singers).	32%	58%
The songs are more often sung from the men’s than from the women’s perspective.	26%	52%
Women sing more often about love.	57%	39%
Women wear sexualising clothes more frequently than men.	56%	21%
Women move erotically in around every third video, men almost never.	37%	3%
Women touch themselves in an erotic-sexual way; they do this more often than men.	27%	6%
Men show “dominance” and derogatory gestures more frequently.	12%	20%
Women are shown without their head in half of the videos, men clearly less often.	53%	32%
Women’s buttocks are shown in every fourth video.	22%	8%
There is a focus on women’s breast in almost every third video, men’s stomach muscles are shown less often.	29%	16%
	US	Germany
In the US women wear sexualised clothes more often than in Germany.	67%	49%
In the US they sing more often about sex...	28%	19%
... and it is shown in the videos more frequently than in Germany.	48%	31%
Women make more erotic gestures in the US.	52%	51%
Women touch themselves in an erotic-sexual way more frequently in the US.	39%	20%
The US music videos more often have a focus on the female breast.	34%	22%

The analysis reveals clearly: Men dominate the charts. They are the main artists twice as often and half of the music videos are clearly told from the male perspective while only 29 per cent are told from the female perspective. In every other video, the women are extremely thin and wear clothing that sexualises them. With men, this occurs much less frequently. The gender-specific staging is even clearer when it comes to gestures. For example in almost one third of the music videos, women touch themselves in erotically sexual ways while men do this very rarely. The different staging of men and women is

clearest, however, when it comes to the camera perspectives. In half of the videos the women are shown headless for example and in almost every third video, a focus is on the female chest is shown. A corresponding sexualisation or eroticising representation of the male buttocks is relatively rare.

In a comparison of the top 100 music videos in the US and Germany, it can be seen how much this is especially a phenomenon of the US music culture. In the US, the women are represented much more often in clearly sexualised clothes than in Germany, women move erotically and lasciviously in more than half of all videos in the US and in 3 of every 10 videos in the US, a close up of the women's breasts is shown; in Germany this appears in only 2 of every 10 videos.

In the US, the successful music videos are thus once again more sexualised and objectified than in Germany. Sheila Whiteley speaks of a "continuing fixation on the sexualised body" in the music industry that leads to "reflecting and constructing a persuasive pornification of contemporary youth culture" (Whiteley, 2015, 29). Even songs which lyrics are erotic and sexual to only a limited degree are staged very sexually in the music videos.

## Step 2: How youth use and assess music videos

Only a few reception studies have looked at the extent to which this enters into the internal attitudes and images or strengthens certain preconceptions among youth. However, these clearly show: Watching music videos with sexual content can strengthen the attitude in male students (by enhancing or priming) that women are sex objects (Kistler & Lee, 2009), increase the acceptance of rape myths (Aubrey, Hopper & Mbure, 2011, Kistler & Lee, 2009, Oosten et al., 2015), and strengthen preconceptions that women use sex in a targeted way for their own purposes (Aubrey, Hopper & Mbure, 2011).

To get the current overview of the importance of music videos for youth, their assessment of the development process and the gender representation as well as a self-assessment as to whether the stars become role models and ideal images, 748 girls and boys aged between 13 and 19 from a representative sample<sup>6</sup> were interviewed.

The results showed: the majority of the youth in Germany regularly watch (at least once a week) music videos, 13- to 14-year-olds more frequently than the older ones (17- to 19-year-olds). Among them there was a core group of heavy users who used music videos at least once a day continually throughout their adolescence. Especially among 13- to 15-year-olds, many were heavy users.

Almost 6 out of every 10 girls listed pop as their favourite genre, four out of 10 boys said hip-hop/rap. When asked the question "When you have a choice, do you first listen to a new song without the music video or do you watch the music video right away?" over half of the youth said that they prefer to listen to a new song together with the music video for the first time, among the 13- to 15-year-olds it was six out of every ten.

*YouTube* is by far the source used most frequently to listen to music and watch music videos. For adolescents, and especially for those in the younger group, music videos are a format used extremely often.

In response to the question whether they think men or women sing more frequently in music videos, half of the adolescents assume there is equal participation. One third believe that more women can be seen as singers than men. Most of the adolescents believe the relationship is equal or that women are dominant. Only the minority suspect the actual gender ratio; in fact, media analyses show that only one third of the artists are women. That means that most adolescents clearly have false perceptions when it comes to the number of women and men as stars in music videos.

The majority of the youth agreed with the statement “The singers have a great deal of say in how their music videos are designed”, and they believe: “With music videos, you can really get to know the singers”; the 13- to 14-year-olds agreed with this statement particularly often. The majority of adolescents also assume that music videos are the singers’ self-determined illustration of what they want to say with the song. In actuality, it can be assumed that in particular the female artists who have a spot in the top 100 of the charts are part of a professionally organised staging in which they are “personal brands” and made into “cultural objects” depending on the needs and role (Lieb, 2013) and only have a limited amount of say in how they are presented to the market, especially in music videos. Adolescents appeared to be unaware of this information about the music market and the organised processes of producing a music video.

Based on the high usage and idealisation of the videos as self-determined statements, the artists become role models. Over half of the 748 surveyed want to be like the singers in the videos, 75 per cent of the girls want to look like them, and 74 per cent of the boys want to have a girlfriend who looks like the female artists. These tendencies are strongest in the younger adolescents group/cluster and lower educated youth. For example, 86 per cent of the 13- to 14-year-old girls want to look like the female singers in the videos. Especially here, the female singers are clearly role models for appearance – and as the media analysis has shown, this appearance is almost always hypersexualised.

Based on their media analysis, Cynthia Frisby and Jennifer Aubrey believe that viewers could assume that confident self-staging as a sex object could be a form of self-determination that the artists choose voluntarily, and that self-sexualisation is the path to success (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012). The survey of adolescence in Germany unfortunately confirms this for a large percentage of adolescents. Three-quarters believe it is normal for “singers to present themselves as sexy in music videos”. Boys agreed more frequently than girls with the statement “I think female singers in music videos are strong when they present themselves as very sexy”. With age and education level this assessment decreases, but for the majority it can still be concluded that they confuse the sexualisation of female singers in music videos with strength.

It is interesting here to compare heavy users with those who watch no music videos because the majority of the latter do not find it normal or a sign of strength to “present

yourself as sexy”. This leads to the conjecture that constantly seeing the objectification of singers and their hypersexualisation leads to this being perceived as normal and self-determined. We therefore wanted to know more exactly the extent to which hypersexualisation is explicitly perceived and evaluated and whether it is really needed for what adolescents find important in music videos. In an exploratory study, we looked at these questions using creative qualitative methods.

**Table 2.** Usage of music videos and assessment

Usage of music videos	
The majority of the adolescents in Germany use music videos regularly...	80%
...younger ones (ages 13-14) more often	86%
...than older ones (ages 17-19)	76%
Four out of ten watch music videos at least on a daily basis	24%
Girls prefer the genre Pop...	58%
...and boys very often refer to Hip Hop	4 out of 10
Over half of the adolescents prefer listening to a new song while watching the music video at the same time	55%
Younger ones (ages 13-14) name Youtube as the most used source for music videos	6 out of 10
Assessing music videos	
Adolescents assume a gender balance regarding the singers...	50%
... one third guessed that there are more women than men singing	31%
...the clear majority think that there is a gender balance or even a dominance of women	80%
...only the minority guess the right gender ratio (less women than men)	20%
The majority of the adolescents believe that singers have a lot of self-determination regarding the illustration of their music video	73%
Over half of the adolescents are convinced that one can get to know the singers very well through their music videos...	69%
...particularly the younger ones think so (ages 13-14)	77%
Artists of music videos are idealised...	
...the majority of the girls want to look like the singers	75%
...particularly younger girls (ages 13-14)	86%
...the majority of the boys would like to have a girlfriend that looks like the female artists in the videos	74%
Adolescents think it is normal that singers are portrayed very sexy in music videos	78% boys 72% girls
They think it makes the (women) singers strong, when they present themselves in a sexy way...	67%
...boys do so more often	71%
...than girls	64%

### Step 3: Do youth recognise and want hypersexualisation?

*Take me down into your paradise  
Don't be scared 'cause I'm your body type  
Just something that we wanna try  
'Cause you and I,*

is what Demi Lovato sings in her song *Cool for the Summer*, which made it to the top 20 of the year's charts in many countries in 2015. Accompanied by other women, she is portrayed in this music video as extremely “seductive, sassy and smoking hot [...] a new chapter of her career”, as Christina Garibaldi of MTV commented on the video (Garibaldi, 2015). The video therefore marks the next step in the sense of the “life circle model for female popular music stars” from a “good girl” to a “temptress” (Lieb, 2013, 90).

Do adolescents recognise how stereotyped, hierarchical and hypersexualised women are portrayed here? In a qualitative exploratory study, we asked 67 pupils aged between 12 and 17 this question in a school context.<sup>7</sup> They designed a storyboard, including for the text of *Cool for the Summer*, and interpreted screenshots as to their messages. Finally, they once again drew a picture of what a female singer looks like in a music video and stated what they thought was the results of the media analysis of music videos was.

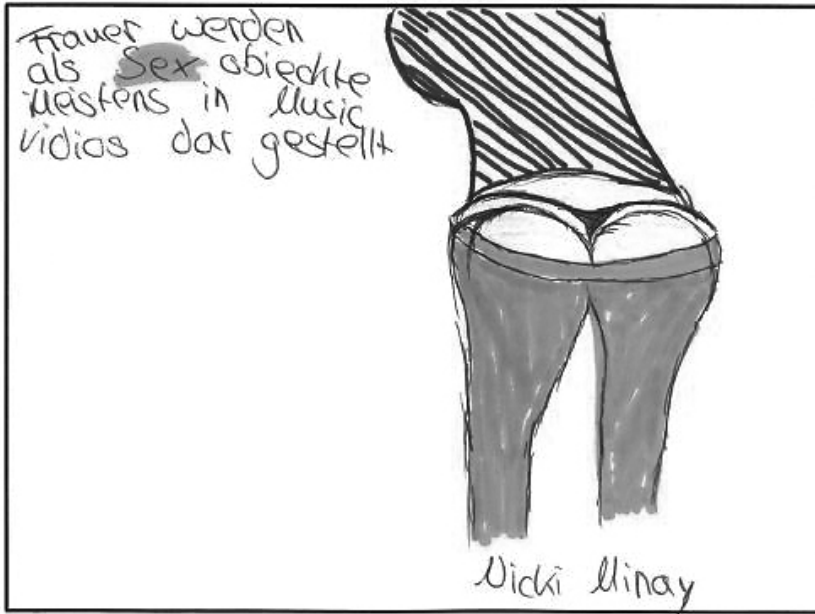
#### *What does a typical female singer in a music video look?*

Whether they recognise the hypersexualisation in the video itself became somewhat clearer in the last part of the study in which the adolescents were asked to draw a typical singer in a music video. In a little more than half of the pictures drawn by adolescents, no sexualisation could be seen. Female singers were portrayed with a microphone in normal clothes. In 47 per cent of all drawings, however, there was a clear sexualisation. Some therefore explicitly drew female singers as sexualised, typically with long hair, high heels and very little clothing. The boy informants drew sexualised women more frequently (59 per cent) than the girls (41 per cent) and mostly had a positive undertone when describing what was typical about a female singer in a music video such as “Tons of make-up, figure-hugging clothes, pretty hair” (boy, 17 years old) or “Not a lot of clothes, good curves, otherwise thin” (boy, 16 years old). In most of the cases of the girls who drew their singer in a more sexualised way, it remains without comments how they feel about it. However, there are also exceptions like one 15-year-old who described what she thinks is typical: “Women are mostly portrayed as sex objects in music videos.” In her picture she drew a woman without a head, that is, the typical carving up of the female body. The woman seems to be bending over and stretching her buttocks out to the viewer, allowing the viewer to see her thong panties. At the edge of the picture there is a reference to the singer Nicki Minaj (see picture 1), who is known for her revealing and sexual performances (as cited above). This is an indication that at least half of the

adolescents see, consciously or unconsciously the sexualisation, e.g. with clothes and camera perspectives, as typical.

**Illustration 1.** “Women are portrayed in music videos as sex objects” (girl, 15 years old)

12. Wie sieht eine Sängerin in einem Musikvideo aus? Bitte male eine Sängerin.



### *How would adolescents design their own music video?*

We looked exploratively at whether this is something that adolescents think is key to the ideal music video by giving the youth a creative task. They were to design and draw a storyboard for the lyrics to one of two songs. The lyrics were picked so that there was a highly sexualised video (Demi Lovato – *Cool for the Summer*), and in the other song about love and relationship, in which sexuality was not the focus (James Bay – *Hold Back the River*). Our research question: Do the storyboards to the lyrics show tendencies toward sexualisation?

Some of the adolescents came up with very creative ideas in which love and relationships often were the focus. In the interpretation of *Cool for the Summer*, often pictures of couples and sequences from a relationship were shown. There was flirting and the initiation of a relationship; one 16-years-old girl, for example, came up with a story in which two people have a romantic (heterosexual) date, with “physical contact” involved before they drive to their “summer paradise” together.



A 14-year-old boy wants to tell a story of how people are partying at a bar. One of the girls starts to walk away, bored and a little sad. A boy speaks to her cheerfully and buys her a drink. In the final scene, the boy and girl are lying on a hammock between two palm trees: “He shows her his paradise.” In this case it is a male-dominated fantasy in which erotic moments probably play a role. But the woman is not given the tempting, encouraging role or that of the initiator as in the video. Instead, the man is successful at “attracting” her and can then also get her to smile again. No sexualisation of the women can be seen. In the stories for *Hold Back the River* there was also no sex or physical contact shown but dramatic stories of break-ups, lost love, etc. And again, no sexualisation of the women is drawn. These are indications that the adolescents are primarily focused on the content of the lyrics and the relationship that builds up hopefully or takes tragic turns. The results can be interpreted to mean that the pervasive hypersexualisation of women in professional music videos is not strongly necessary for what adolescence are actually looking for in the videos.

The question from a pedagogic perspective is now: How can awareness be raised so that the adolescents who internalise the stereotypes offered in music videos at least recognise the gender hierarchy and self-sexualisation of women when they see it?

#### 4th Step: a lesson unit on media

*And then she'd say, "It's okay  
I got lost on the way  
But I'm a supergirl  
And supergirls don't cry"*

(Anna Naklab feat. Alle Farben & YOUNOTUS: Supergirl)

In the course of the study it became clear: It is our responsibility not to view adolescents only as people who can inform us but to also give them a chance to see through the existing stereotype. After the qualitative interviews we therefore carried out lessons on media literacy that we optimised after each round.

One of the goals was to not talk about stereotypes, hypersexualisation or gender relations directly. The didactic path we chose attempts to make pupils aware of the symbolic nature of non-verbal communication and its implicit meaning. After a brief introduction into semiology, pupils are made aware of the different genders' typical (self-) representation in a humorous way. We started by analysing their own physical experiences with non-verbal communication while sitting, standing and with facial expressions. How does it feel to have feet planted firmly on the ground, sitting with legs open vs. twisted, lascivious posture, with legs crossed at the knees? What are we used to call masculine and feminine when it comes to different gestures and facial expressions? An informational sheet with corresponding pictures illustrates this and reinforces the

knowledge and opens the link to the music industry. With a partner, the pupils then interpret some still pictures from music videos as to their symbolic meaning and then get into groups to become researchers. Using a respective analytical questionnaire, they analysed music videos as to how the men and women are portrayed, who shows dominant or vulnerable gestures, whose buttocks, stomach or chest are all we see, etc. As expected, the pupils' findings were very similar to our media analysis of the most successful video clips from 2015. With their own independent research, they discovered the gendered tendencies, and some pupils were able to at least begin to articulate this in the closing class room discussion. After the media literacy unit, at least some of the adolescents could interpret the still pictures from the music videos much more precisely in regard to their symbolic meaning, and around one-third was able to recognise the gender hierarchy in the song *Cheerleader*, for example. It is at least a first step to foster media literacy in the field of gender representation.

### Summary of the key findings

Music videos often portray women as highly sexualised and subordinate to men and make them de-individualised, sexualised objects, especially with the clothes they wear and the camera perspectives in which the female body is shown only in parts. Men and heterosexual love from a male angle are dominant. Behind this there is a clear hierarchy and clichés of gender relations that run absolutely counter to equality or equal rights of men and women. Unfortunately, this also confirms a tendency in 2015 toward the objectification and devaluation of women's bodies that is otherwise no longer tolerated to this extent in other media. In this area, there is an urgent need for action in training those who create media and a starting point for a broader public discussion and political action.

Some adolescents perceive the sexualised portrayal of women's bodies, and some boys even connoted this positively while some girls view it extremely critically. When explicitly asked, adolescents, especially those who are younger or visit a lower-level school, even believe it is "normal" for women to sexualise themselves in music videos. They confuse sexualisation with strength and power and interpret it as such. Thereby they follow the patterns of interpretation set up in the music videos – without having the chance of questioning this in relation to the reality of gender equality and the variety of doing gender. They have an idealised picture of music videos as an artist's self-determined expression that the adolescents can then take as a role model for their ideal self and how women should look. This self-sexualisation and the idea of seducing a man as a woman's power (and more or less the only power she has) is not only a step back in equality, it limits the development of the adolescents' identities in diverse ways and in some cases might lead to boys' misguided assumptions as well as to girls' self-sexualisation. Especially the majority of 13- to 15-year-olds are not only regular users of music videos, they use the gendered

staging to re-form their ideals and could therefore be identified as a particularly at-risk group for being influenced by the hypersexualisation in music videos.

Here there is an urgent need for media literacy. One possible starting point would be sensitisation in the area of symbolic interpretation of pictures and non-verbal language, whereby pupils as active researchers can understand how women and men are portrayed. This could at least provide the basis for recognising the extreme stereotypes that are shown by the music industry in music videos and thus make them aware of this. Of course, that can only be a first step that can be complemented by lessons e.g. on the topic of the music industry and on heterosexual and homosexual attractiveness and searching for a partner. That could be an important step toward encouraging adolescents to go “beyond stereotypes” but would certainly have to be supported by an enlightened, gender-sensitised media industry.

## Notes

1. Original from 1979, current: 2015 *Mad Max – Fury Roads*
2. determined by media control (<http://www.charts.de/musik-charts/jahres>)
3. determined by the Billboard Charts music charts, set by Nielsen Music (<http://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/2015/hot-100-songs>)
4. Intercooder reliability, measured according to Holsti's coefficient using more than 10% of the sample, 79%.
5. If the lyrics are about sexuality, then in half of the songs (47%) the word love (or similar words) are not mentioned. If sexuality is the focus of the video, love is often not mentioned (63%).
6. Carried out by Iconkids & Youth in September 2016. Quotas were used for the sample according to age, gender and migrant background of the youth interviewed, what school they had attended or completed, distribution across federal state and size of their cities (150 BIK sample points) as well as their mother's marital status. The representativeness of the youth interviewed corresponds to a probability sample of the same size, the confidence interval at a 90% significance level for an unfavorable case was  $n = 748 \pm 4.24\%$ .
7.  $N=37$  12- to 14-year-olds and  $n=30$  15- to 17-year-olds took part, 43% were girls and 57% were boys. The lessons took place in art or German classes and were carried out at various schools in Bavaria in July 2016.

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