



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jado



Sex, violence, & rock n' roll: Longitudinal effects of music on aggression, sex, and prosocial behavior during adolescence



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 30 March 2015

Keywords:

Music
Media
Adolescence
Aggression
Prosocial behavior
Sex

ABSTRACT

The current study examined longitudinal associations between listening to aggression, sex, and prosocial behavior in music on a number of behavioral outcomes across a one-year period during adolescence. Adolescents ($N = 548$, M age = 15.32, 52% female) completed a number of questionnaires on musical preferences, general media use, aggression, sexual outcomes, and prosocial behavior at two different time points separated by about one year. Using structural equation modeling to analyze the data, results revealed that listening to aggression in music was associated with increased aggression and decreased prosocial behavior over time, even when controlling for initial levels of these behaviors. Listening to sexual content in music was associated with earlier initiation of sexual intercourse and a trend for a higher number of sexual partners (reported at Time 2). Prosocial behavior in music was not associated with any behavioral outcome longitudinally. Collectively, these results suggest that listening to certain types of content in music can have a longitudinal effect on behavior during adolescence.

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I'll get it if you need it, I'll search if you don't see it. You're thirsty, I'll be rain, You get hurt, I'll take your pain. —Gavin DeGraw
— “Soldier”

Would you let me kiss you there you know, down there, where it counts? I'll do it so good, I swear I'll drink every ounce.
—Prince —“If I was your Girlfriend”

Bitch I'm a kill you! Like a murder weapon, I'm a conceal you in a closet with mildew, sheets, pillows and film you. — Eminem
— “Kill you”

As the above quotes represent, music is an exceptional medium to express ideas and feelings. These messages range from uplifting, positive, and encouraging messages to ones that are dark, aggressive, and full of hate. Music has received substantially less attention in the research literature when compared to other media, including television, film, and video games. However, music plays an integral role during the course of adolescence. Adolescents spend over two hours every day listening to music, with time spent listening increasing over the course of adolescence (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Research shows that adolescents use music in a number of ways including for entertainment, mood management, nostalgia, during

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identity development (Batcho, DaRin, Nave, & Yaworsky, 2008; Lonsdale & North, 2011) and as a way for them to express their personality (Arnett, 1995; Arnett, Larson, & Offer, 1995; Delsing, Bogt, Engels, & Meeus, 2008; Gantz, Gartenberg, Pearson, & Schiller, 1978; Larson, 1995; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). Though music contains a host of messages (both positive and negative) little research has examined longer-term effects of listening to specific content in music. Accordingly, the major aim of the current study is to examine how listening to various content in music may influence a number of adolescent outcomes, including aggression, sexual behavior, and prosocial behavior.

Aggression in music

Aggression in music is fairly infrequent, though it depends on genre. For example, Smith and Boyson (2002) examined aggression in music videos and found that only 15% of videos contained aggressive behavior. Notably, rap (29%) and heavy metal (27%) genres contained substantially more aggression than other genres, including adult contemporary, rhythm and blues and rock. Many of the videos contained numerous acts of violence enacted toward the same target. Armstrong (2001) specifically highlighted violence toward women in gangsta rap songs and found that 22% contained violent and misogynistic lyrics. Themes of assault, murder, and rape were all common. He also made the case for examining aggressive content by musical artist (as is done in the current study) because when this approach was taken, certain artists showed much more aggression in their music than others. For example, an analysis of Eminem's bestselling album *Marshall Mathers LP* found that 78% of songs contained violent lyrics. More recently, Hunnicutt and Andrews (2009) found that homicide related aggression in rap music was typically glamorized and is increasing over time, with 42% of popular themes containing this type of aggression by the late 1990s.

A number of cross-sectional (Selah-Shayovits, 2006; Warburton, Gilmour, & Laczowski, 2008) and experimental studies (Anderson, Carnagey, & Eubanks, 2003; Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2006; Mast & McAndrew, 2011; Millet & Dewitte, 2007) have now found that exposure to aggression in music can increase subsequent aggressive thoughts, attitudes, and behavior. Importantly, several studies have found that aggressive lyrics are more important in predicting aggressive behavior than simply an aggressive tone (e.g., Brummert-Lennings & Warburton, 2011; Mast & McAndrew, 2011). A few longitudinal studies of aggressive behavior have also included music. For example, Friedlander, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig (2013) found that media aggression (including music) was associated with increased dating violence over adolescence. However, this study included many types of media (e.g., television movies, magazines, Internet) and the study does not isolate the effects of listening to aggression in music. Two longitudinal studies on Dutch adolescents have focused on certain musical genres as predictors of aggression and find that rock, heavy metal, gothic, punk, rhythm and blues, hip hop, and electronic dance music are all associated with aggression or minor forms of delinquency (Selfhout, Delsing, ter Bogt, & Meeus, 2008; Ter Bogt, Keijsers, & Meeus, 2013). However, these studies are rather broad and it is unknown whether adolescents in these studies actually listened to aggressive lyrics in these genres, or whether simply preferring one genre of music is predictive of a general pattern of externalizing behaviors in adolescence. The authors tend to take the latter view as they explain their results in terms of preference to "loud, nonmainstream music" (p. e387) and do not mention the effect of listening to aggressive lyrics per se. Though these studies indicate there may be a long-term effect to listening to aggressive music, the existing longitudinal studies do not isolate effects for music or do not specifically measure aggression in music. Accordingly, the first aim of the study was to examine both cross-sectional and longitudinal effects of listening to aggression in music across adolescence.

Sex in music

Portrayal of sex is fairly common in mainstream music, with some content analyses showing that between 70 and 90% of songs contain sexual themes (Christenson & Roberts, 1998). Several studies focus on sexual objectification and show that women tend to be more objectified than men, especially in rap, hip-hop and pop as compared to other genres, with African-American women particularly likely to be sexualized in these genres (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Turner, 2011; Ward, Rivadeneyra, Thomas, Day, & Epstein, 2013; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009; Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 2010). A number of studies have found that lyrics are becoming increasingly explicit over time, and even "love songs" are referring more to sex and less to romantic love across time (e.g., Dukes, Biesel, Borega, Lobato, & Owens, 2003).

Sexual messages as portrayed in media can be a powerful socializing influence for adolescents, and may act as a "super peer" as adolescents are less likely to seek out sexual information from parents or teachers (e.g., Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005). Studies show that adolescents who frequently view music videos overestimate the number of adolescents who have actually had sex (Strouse, Goodwin, & Roscoe, 1994; Ward, Gorvine, & Cytron-Walker, 2002), and other research finds that only the youngest adolescents (11 years old) report that they do not feel pressure from the media to have sex (Haag, 1999). A number of cross-sectional and experimental studies find that exposure to sex in music is associated with earlier initiation of sexual intercourse (Primack, Douglas, Fine, & Dalton, 2009), more permissive attitudes toward premarital sex (Kistler & Lee, 2010; Zhang, Miller, & Harrison, 2008) and greater acceptance of rape myths (St. Lawrence, & Joyner, 1991; c.f. Sprankle, End, & Bretz, 2012). Longitudinal studies on sex in music are rare. However, the few that we found showed that listening to certain genres of music in early adolescence, such as rap and hip-hop are associated with an earlier initiation of sex, more risky sex, and greater likelihood to acquire an STI throughout adolescence (Martino et al., 2006; Wingood et al., 2003). However, these tend to be limited in scope, either focusing on certain musical genres (e.g., hip-hop compared to mainstream) or containing a small sample of music. For example, Martino et al. (2006) examined long-term effects of listening to sex in music, but only

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