

Study: Rap Music Linked to Sexism

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Rap music brings out sexism in college students, but it doesn't necessarily cause the students to be sexist.

That's the conclusion of a North Carolina State University study that examined rap music's effects on sexist attitudes among college students. Many critics claim that rap music causes sexist beliefs, but the study's authors suggest the connection they found between rap and sexism is unlikely to be a direct cause-and-effect.

"It's like hearing the word 'chocolate' and suddenly having a craving for a candy bar," says Dr. Michael Cobb, assistant professor of political science, who conducted the study along with Dr. Bill Boettcher, associate professor of political science.

Cobb and Boettcher's findings – titled "Ambivalent Sexism and Misogynistic Rap Music: Does Exposure to Eminem Increase Sexism?" – were recently published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.

The study found that college students who were asked to listen to rap music had significantly higher levels of reported sexism. In the study, males who listened to any rap music were more sexist than those in the control group even though sometimes the rap lyrics did not include sexist language. Females in the study also reported higher levels of sexism when rap music was not sexist in its language, but their endorsement of sexist beliefs was the lowest after listening to rap with overtly sexist language.

"Sexism is imbedded in the culture we live in, and hearing rap music can spontaneously activate pre-existing awareness of sexist beliefs," Cobb says. "We feel it's unlikely that hearing lyrics in a song creates attitudes that did not previously exist. Instead, rap music, fairly or unfairly, has become associated with misogyny, and even minimal exposure to it can automatically activate these mental associations and increase their application, at least temporarily."

To measure the association between rap and sexism, students were recruited to take part in a study and were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. In the control group, students' levels of sexism were measured, but they did not listen to any music. A second condition required students to listen to non-sexist rap music, while a third required them to listen to a rap song with explicitly sexist language. In these two conditions, students' levels of sexism were measured after listening to the music, but they were unaware of the true purpose of the study.

Participants in the group assigned to listen to rap with sexist lyrics heard the song Kill You by Eminem, which describes hostility and violence toward women. The group listening to rap with non-sexist lyrics heard Sabotage by the Beastie Boys, a song that has a similar rhythm to Kill You, but is devoid of overt sexist lyrics.

As expected, males were more sexist across all three conditions. Surprisingly, however, Cobb and Boettcher found that sexist attitudes among respondents also increased after exposure to rap that contained no sexist lyrics.

"Rap music may be associated with sexist attitudes and beliefs, regardless of the actual lyrical content," Cobb says. "So non-sexist rap can now have sexist implications. This gets back to our hypothesis that we don't think rap music causes sexism, because how can rap that

contains non-sexist lyrics cause someone to become sexist?"

According to Cobb, "the key to understanding why women rejected sexism only after listening to Eminem is motivated self-awareness. In the absence of explicitly sexist language, the negative associations with rap music are still being primed. In this case, however, the receiver is unaware that this process is taking place and therefore makes no attempt to inhibit their reactions. When women listened to Eminem, however, the blatant misogyny is startling to them and it triggers a more careful interpretation and rejection of the premises in the song. Males, who were not the targets of Eminem's ire in the song, are not as motivated to recognize the mechanisms at work."

The findings that listeners to both kinds of rap music had higher levels of sexist attitudes than those in the control group, particularly males, is a cause for concern, Cobb says, but it is a concern that also calls for more research into understanding the relationship between the origins of music and the expressed attitudes.

"Priming latent sexism is not the same thing as causing it," Cobb says. "At worst, we could conclude that rap music might exacerbate pre-existing tendencies, but so too can other genres of music and varied forms of entertainment. There is not much evidence in our study to support an argument in favor of censorship."

Source: North Carolina State University

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