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SHAKE YA ASS, BUT WATCH YOURSELF: AN INTERSECTIONAL AND DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO EXPLORING THE SEXUALIZATION OF FEMALE RECORDING ARTISTS AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

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Certification: In accordance with the departmental and University policies, the above named candidate has satisfactorily completed a Dissertation as required for attaining the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Community Psychology Doctoral Program (College of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences) at National Louis University.

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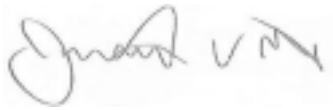

Judah Viola, Ph.D. Dissertation Committee Member

Date May 13th, 2024

Dedication

I want to dedicate this work to my former students who were killed by gun violence during the duration of my time in the program.

I urge us, as a nation, to look deeper into the structural violence, resource scarcity, and systemic racism causing so many early deaths; and I also hope that we recognize the music industry's s role in perpetuating harmful stereotypes through commodifying and glorifying violence in Black communities.

Tyler Williams, (19 years old, January 22nd, 2024)- I remember the first time I met you. I had written all of the students' names on their desks. You were so full of joy and excitement when you walked in and rushed right past me–excited to meet everyone and see the class. It was the first day of a brand new arts integrated charter school. You immediately sat down at the desk that said "Tyler Williams". I said "Good morning, Tyler," reading the name on your desk. You were shocked I knew your name. You asked excitedly, "you already know my name?!" Your smile could light up a room. You brought so much joy and brevity everywhere you went. You loved music, dancing, and making people laugh–you didn't mind laughing at yourself. You hated when people fought and were often in the middle of an argument trying to get everyone to work it out. I got to be your 3rd **and** 4th grade teacher.

I thought skating was like bicycling, they say you never forget how to do it. Although skates and bikes both have wheels, apparently skating is easy to forget. I learned a little too late and in front of a 4th grade class that my rollerblading days had come to a close. Worst field trip ever! We both could not stop falling in the rink! I tried to help you up and we both fell on my wrist, breaking it in two places. Hopefully that will remain the only time I had to leave a field trip to go to the hospital. I always think of you when my wrist hurts. Writing this dissertation, with the incessant typing, my wrist hurt all the time, and therefore you and your energy were in my heart, thoughts, and are throughout these pages.

Rickey Smith, (18 years old, January 18th, 2023)- My favorite memory of you was when you, Ms. Bailey, and I went to Golden Coral together. I was so proud of how far you had come that year so we went to celebrate and you got to pick the place. You originally had chosen Manchu, but changed your mind because you wanted to go somewhere where you could see "white kids." So we drove all the way out to Kenner from Central City in five o'clock traffic to get you to Golden Coral. You stuck a fried chicken leg in the chocolate fountain. You were so funny and full of energy. You had the ability to make the whole room light up. I got to be your 2nd grade teacher.

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Participants- I want to first acknowledge the 99 people who took their time to take the survey. Without them, I would have nothing–no research or insight into empowerment perceptions of the sexualization of female recording artists at all. I appreciate your time, thoughtfulness, and sharing a piece of yourself for the collective understanding. While I was reading the open-ended responses I cried, I laughed, and my heart swelled. I appreciate the authenticity and heart y'all put in your answers and am truly grateful for y'all sharing them with me.

Phil Jamison- I want to acknowledge my former professor from Warren Wilson College, Phil Jamison. My high school and junior high years were spent in relative isolation and seclusion–full of reading books of lyrics collected during the turn of the century, making CDs from Kazaa and Limewire, obsessively researching the music industry in the 1920s, and going to juke joints and blues shows in the deep south. I noticed that the stories surrounding blues and old time did not make factual or critical sense. I saw that common stock songs were sung in both genres and instruments like the banjo originated in Africa. It wasn't until I got to WWC where Professor Phil Jamison was the first person to affirm what I was seeing. He explained that he was finding that the first fiddle players and dance callers in the region were of African descent. Thank you for affirming my discoveries and helping to dismantle a false reconstruction of our culture and history. If it were not for that moment where I finally felt heard, I might not have continued on this journey. So much of this paper was learned from your Appalachian dance and Appalachian music classes. I was listening to one of my favorite podcasts the other day, *Radiolab* from NPR, and you were being interviewed about the false origins surrounding square dancing and the narrative that it is an anglo-saxon art form. It reminded me of our dance field trip to the Carter family home I believe…it was also a great reminder to put you in my acknowledgements.

Ray Legler- I want to acknowledge my Advisor, Ray. Even though he did not think I would finish in time! Thank you for your help, support, sense of humor (when I was in the mood for it), and patience.

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Family- I was raised by a single mom who had her first kid at 18. No matter where she lived or what she was going through, she enrolled in college until she graduated. I have been in higher education since the womb and want to thank her for passing down the ability to balance everything that life throws at you while also not giving up on school.
Thank you to my brother, Josh for continuing to remind me to continue this research and work.
Thank you to my great grandfather, Abner Crow Johnson, for his epic harmonica playing and instilling within me my love of blues, always encouraging me to think critically about the world, take intentional steps towards social justice, being unapologetic about who I am–especially as a woman, and to do the right thing always–particularly when its hard.

Chili- Most of all, thank you to Chili, my rescue border collie mix from New Orleans. Despite dealing with cancer treatment during my dissertation, she was always by my side while I wrote this.

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Abstract

This dissertation, titled *Shake Ya Ass, But Watch Yourself: An Intersectional and Decolonial Approach to Exploring the Sexualization of Female Recording Artists and the Empowerment of Women in the United States*, critically examines the phenomenon of sexualization of women in the music industry and its impact on female empowerment. Through an intersectional and decolonial feminist lens, the study delves into the historical and socio-cultural contexts that shape the portrayal and perception of female recording artists in the United States.

The research traces the roots of feminism and the commodification of racial stereotypes through music, exploring how female empowerment has been influenced by these dynamics. It questions whether the sexualization of female artists serves as a form of empowerment or perpetuates patriarchal oppression. By analyzing contemporary examples, such as the works of Lil' Kim, Cardi B, and Megan Thee Stallion, alongside historical contexts from blues to modern hip hop, the study seeks to uncover the complexities of sexualization as both a potential tool for liberation and a mechanism of subjugation.

Empirical data is drawn from surveys with diverse participants, examining their perceptions of empowerment through sexualization. The study employs frameworks of empowerment theory, intersectional feminism, and decolonial approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis. Ultimately, it aims to understand the real impact of the sexualization of female recording artists on women's perceptions of empowerment and contribute to the discourse on gender, race, and power in the music industry.

Keywords: sexualization, empowerment, intersectionality, decolonial, female recording artists

Shake Ya Ass, but Watch Yourself[1]**:** *An Intersectional and Decolonial approach to exploring the sexualization of female recording artists and the Empowerment of women in the United States*

Designer pussy, my shit come in flavors

High-class taste, [men] got to spend paper

Lick it right the first time or you gotta do it over

Like it's rehearsal for a Tootsie commercial

- Lil' Kim*, How Many Licks Does it Take*

Growing up in the 90's and early 2000's Lil' Kim (2000) exposed so many girls and women to female empowerment through the use of sexualized lyrics, outfits, and dancing. At the time, listening to music targeted to and sung by women, other than hearing a few songs about being independent, making your own money, and kicking Tyrone's friend and the other scrubs to the curb with their box to the left, sexualization has been sold to girls and women as a form of empowerment. The idea of female empowerment through sexualization remains a phenomenon as songs like "WAP" by Cardi B and Megan the Stallion or "Go to Town" by Doja Cat receive millions of views worldwide. This paper aims to critically analyze the sexualization of female recording artists and their music, questioning whether this phenomenon empowers women or is merely a repackaging, commodification, and perpetuation of male desires rooted in patriarchal structures. In our dynamic culture, where the music industry serves as a reflection, transformer, and catalyst of society, the role of female recording artists in shaping and challenging female empowerment is one to be studied. As we engage in the music through experiences, and as these explicit lyrics linger ubiquitously in our minds, phones, and radios, what relationship do they

[1]The phrase "Shake Ya Ass, but Watch Yourself" is borrowed from the 2000 song "Shake Ya Ass" by Mystikal. It was used to show how women often have to balance being attractive and sexy while not trying to be *too* sexy.

have with the real empowerment of women? Is sexualization a practice of freedom or a perpetuation of our own oppression? Furthermore, what music *does* empower women according to women?

First, the historical context of feminism is explored, and the understanding of the need for a Decolonial and Intersectional feminist framework is introduced. This will be done through an overview of feminism in the United States, an introduction to respectability politics, an exploration of the systemic segregation in the music industry through ballad collection, the Bristol Sessions, the Grand Ole Opry and the commodification of racial stereotypes through race records, an understanding of the historical empowerment of women seen in the blues of the 1920s, a look at the Folk and Blues Revival of the 1960s, an overview of sexualization and objectification in the media, a note about a paradox in the empowerment of female recording artists, probing into Hip Hop, Trap Feminism and Bounce as a call to take a Decolonial lens when analyzing female recording artists, and previous research done in modern female recording artists and sexualization.

Next, the theoretical frameworks will be explained: Empowerment theory, and Intersectional, and Decolonial Feminism will be explored as a framework for analysis. Then, research into measuring intersectionality, empowerment, and sexualization will be discussed. Next, the gap in the research will be identified followed by the aims and research questions, research method, sample, measurement instrument, design and procedure, data analysis, results, discussion, key findings, implications for future research, methodological considerations, and finally, the references used in this work.

Setting the Context

History of Feminism in the United States

> What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heel print upon another woman's face
>
> -Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.*

The history of feminism in the United States is a complex composition, where polyrhythms, harmony, timbre, and melody intertwine to create a singular, resonant song. Just as these elements combine in music, our individual stories form our collective history. Understanding this communal composition is critical when analyzing the concept of female empowerment, especially in the context of music and female recording artists, a realm that reflects and shapes our society and culture.

Audre Lorde's quote, "What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heel print upon another woman's face," from *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, personifies this exploration (Lorde, 2018, p. 33). This statement calls out how women can work to perpetuate gendered oppression and the importance of understanding women's diverse experiences and struggles within the feminist movement with a focus on intersectionality. There is no universal woman experience, and women often have to navigate other forms of oppression such as racism, ableism, classism, and so on. Understanding the history of feminism in the United States can help us take a more critical approach to unpacking female recording artists and empowerment. If we do not know our past, we cannot see our present and cannot build towards the future.

The focus on the feminist history of the United States within this study is primarily due to the examination of music and artists emerging from U.S. culture. It is important to clarify that

this approach does not imply a universal female experience that is applicable globally. Instead, the exploration is specifically tailored to the complexities and characteristics of popular music and artists within the United States, acknowledging the unique socio-cultural context in which these artistic expressions have developed.

In Women, Race, and Class by Angela Davis (1983), she explores the history of feminism in the United States through an intersectional lens–delving into how race and class have affected the experience of being a woman in the United States. She explains that the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840) marked an era of transformation of gendered expectations. This was a time when women's traditional roles underwent a significant conversion. Before the Industrial Revolution, women played a vital role in the household economy through tasks like making soap and sewing. However, Davis explains how the advent of mass production made these goods more accessible and affordable, which diminished the value of domestic labor. This transition led many women to seek employment outside the home, and resulted in more leisure time for others, fundamentally changing family dynamics and power distribution within households. Davis notes that often women that stayed within the home had less autonomy and as she describes, these women were often "appendages to their men, servants to their husbands. As mothers, they would be defined as passive vehicles for the replinishment of human life. The situation of the white household was full of contradictions" (p.32, 1983). With the home transforming from a site of production to one of consumption, society increasingly valorized external employment over domestic responsibilities, relegating women to the roles of primary caregivers and domestic workers through social conditioning and fabricated constructs. Furthermore, Davis explains that women's roles, even within the domestic sphere, were racialized–often restricting white women the most within the home.

Consequently, during this time period, a social narrative started developing that cast women as the natural "caregivers." According to Conaboy (2022) in her article, *The Pernicious Myth of Maternal Instinct,* white male scientists, like Charles Darwin, propelled the notion that women were biologically predisposed to caregiving and rearing children–reinforcing stereotypes of female inferiority and their biological destiny within the domestic sphere. Conaboy reveals how Darwin's observations, which focused on a bird's presumed satisfaction with incubating her eggs, were extrapolated to human women, despite many bird species actually sharing the role of incubation between genders and human women not laying eggs. Due to his observations of birds, Darwin labeled women as biologically inclined caregivers, seemingly natural and specialized, in contrast to men's purported predisposition for competition and achievement—a comparison not attributed to avian behaviors. However, Conaboy notes that similar hormones increase in expectant fathers as mothers. Even fathers have changes in their prolactin system–which is associated as a "milk-making" hormone. Despite these similarities, women are seen as the biologically inclined caregivers. Connaboy explains that this delineation of gender roles was further exploited by social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer, who argued that the physical demands of childbearing detrimentally impacted women's emotional and intellectual capacities, thereby justifying male dominance and women's subjegation and relegation to domesticity and motherhood.

This perception reinforced the idea that women's natural desires were homemaking and motherhood, allowing men to pursue ambitions outside the home guilt-free, while the women who could stay home did and, at the same time, vilifying women who had to work. This enabled men to justify disengaging from domestic duties while valorizing motherhood and unpaid labor as the primary measure of women's worth. Women who stayed home were isolated as men were

able to have the autonomy of both a “home life” and “work life”. Women who pursued careers, remained unmarried, or were childless, were stigmatized as abnormal and lacked full legal protections in areas like voting and property ownership. These women were viewed as incapable of keeping a man, possibly mentally unstable, and labeled as “spinsters.” In contrast, men who never married were seen as smart, outwitting the system, and “bachelors.” Therefore, women were conditioned and raised since birth to believe their primary desire should be to stay home with their children, viewing any deviation from this norm with suspicion and skepticism, emphasizing the need for attractiveness to men for economic support as a survival strategy instead of their skills and capabilities–the definition of sexualization. These ideas are deeply embedded in our social structures and disguised as “natural” because this conditioning starts from birth in the home and family and is, therefore, inescapable and becomes as deceptively natural as speaking or walking. To this day, our society continues to repackage and perpetuate these myths born from the Industrial Revolution.

Davis (1983) highlights how the transition from home-based manufacturing to factory work not only intensified the idealization of womanhood as centered on the roles of wives and mothers but also relegated women to subordinate domestic roles, thereby diminishing their economic equality. She notes that this shift particularly impacted upper and middle-class white women. The prevailing social belief in a biological need for women to remain home and care for the family led to the notion of motherhood as embodying virtue and piety. Consequently, the home became viewed as a "place of virtue," managed and passed down by women. Conaboy, (2023) explores how this idealized construct of womanhood and motherhood, with white women at its core—those most likely able to afford not working outside the home—simultaneously elevated their moral standing and limited their social roles. This conditioning led women to

internalize the aspiration to the caregiver role, confining their identities to passive roles focused almost exclusively on human reproduction and isolated in the home.

Furthermore, this forced women to depend on relationships with men despite an increase in women entering the workforce. Chiswick and Robinson (2021) highlight that in 1920, Black women had higher labor force participation rates (43.8%) compared to white women (21.9%). This equates to diverse lived experiences amongst women.

Despite women working, they still were forced to be systematically economically dependent on their male counterparts due to fewer opportunities and lower wages because of the devaluation of "women's work." This, alongside laws preventing women from voting or owning property, led to a competitive dynamic among women who sought men's attention to secure economic stability. Women often felt compelled to be the most attractive or dutiful to succeed in this system where men are seen as the "prize." Survival for women became centered on their appearance, domesticity, and serving men. This is where the throughline begins from the Industrial Revolution to the sexualization of female recording artists. Women have been socialized to center their appearance for survival. Therefore, sexualization almost feels natural and, consequently, insidious and convoluted to deconstruct. This dynamic raises the question: Can this lead to a false sense of empowerment and perpetuation of oppression through sexualization, or conversely, empowerment through controlling the narrative of sexualization?

Furthermore, this sexualization becomes policed, reinforced and perpetuated by women themselves. For examples, when women express sexuality in a society where female sexuality is synonymous with impropriety and their value is diminished compared to men—who are permitted to be openly sexual—they are often automatically sexualized by men who control the narrative and uphold hegemonic norms. Additionally, due to systematic competition among

women, they may perpetuate this ideology by shaming another woman being sexual to be seen as "wifey material" in comparison. In the competition to be perceived as the most pious, since motherhood and being a wife has become synonymous with piety and the weight of a woman's worth, women will "slut shame" other women as a social mechanism of securing the position of wife–perpetuating the oppression themselves.

Davis (1983) notes that the feminist suffrage movement in the United States initially arose from the abolitionist movement, which sought to end chattel slavery. Though rooted in progressive change, the suffrage movement was deeply intertwined with privilege, as for many, political engagement was a luxury. Davis explains that through their involvement in the abolitionist cause, many white women, forced to be subordinate in the home and relegated to domesticity, began recognizing their own oppression and the broader scope of human rights injustices.

Davis (1983) describes how these women, with their new political acumen, campaigned for voting rights, addressed issues like domestic violence, and participated in the temperance movement after the abolishment of chattel slavery. However, Davis identifies that the movement increasingly marginalized Black women, becoming more segregated and excluding them from its narrative. Some white women, who had previously fought against slavery alongside their Black sisters, felt a sense of entitlement and frustration when formerly enslaved Black men gained the right to vote before them. They believed that as educated white women conforming to the prevailing Eurocentric hegemonic values, they were more deserving of this right. Davis explores how this belief revealed an underlying acceptance of white supremacy as a tool for their advancement and the responsibility that white women had in perpetuating this racist ideology under the guise of women's suffrage.

White women realized that aligning with white men's power structures could benefit their cause. The strategic realignment, however, meant turning away from the solidarity they had once shared with their Black sisters. This contributed to the transformation of the suffrage movement, and became a mechanism to uphold white supremacy. Davis (1983) points out that with the acquisition of voting rights, white middle-class and bourgeois women sought to suppress working-class groups, including Black people, immigrants, and uneducated, poor white workers. Segregated suffrage groups formed, further sidelining BIPOC women and concentrating exclusively on the interests of white women. Davis poignantly observes, "It was not women's rights or women's political equality but, rather, the reigning racial superiority of white people which had to be preserved at all costs" (p. 126).

The embodiment of motherhood as a virtue, that upheld white women as the ideal mothers, became a method for passing down and cementing hegemonic norms, including white supremacy (Conaboy, 2023). The Industrial Revolution began forming our current social beliefs about women, and the beginning of the 20th century marked a significant point in solidifying these constructs that tied motherhood to whiteness and white women to purity and positioned white women as conduits for perpetuating these dominant ideologies in the home. By the turn of the century, the solidarity was lost, and many BIPOC women turned away from feminism since it began to center white women, white supremacy, and white privilege.

In the Throughline episode "The Labor of Love," hosts Abdelfatah and Arablouei and guest export Conaboy (2023), examine the origins of the idea that women's value is tied to "motherhood." The episode highlights the work of twentieth-century psychologist William McDougall, whose assertions in *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908) encapsulated the prevailing ideologies of the time. Conaboy explains that McDougall posited a so-called

"maternal instinct" in women, suggesting that women's primary role and satisfaction derived from protecting and nurturing their offspring, sacrificing their own well-being. Furthermore, McDougall argued that education would diminish this maternal instinct, framing it as a biological destiny rather than a personal choice. Such a stance not only served to further confine and oppress women by discouraging their education but also reinforced the social expectation that men should rightfully make decisions for women, and a woman's worth was intrinsically linked singularly to her capacity for motherhood. Conaboy shows how his views, reflective of the broader eugenicist and racist ideologies of the era, emphasized a prioritization of white motherhood associated with racial purity while devaluing and denying reproductive rights to marginalized groups deemed "unworthy" of reproduction. By positioning white women as the epitome of motherhood, McDougall's theories contributed to a social framework where motherhood was not just central to a woman's identity but was also racialized. The value placed on women, therefore, became synonymous with a white-centric view of motherhood, embedding racial hierarchies within the very concept of femininity.

Conaboy (2023) explains that as the 20th century progressed, the concept of maternal instinct did not go unchallenged. Pioneering psychologist Leta Hollingworth contested McDougall's claims, arguing against the existence of an all-consuming maternal instinct. Hollingworth's critique highlighted the social and legal constraints faced by women, from the dangers of pregnancy to the lack of voting rights and financial independence, framing motherhood not as an instinctive joy but as a form of labor influenced by social pressures and conditioning. Conaboy notes that despite Hollingworth's and others' critical perspective, broader social narratives continued to uphold and romanticize the concept of motherhood as a woman's ultimate purpose, largely ignoring the complexities and constraints highlighted by critics. This

collective embrace of a simplified view of gender roles also reflected an underlying assumption that male authorities—whether in science, politics, or culture—were better positioned to define and speak on behalf of women's experiences and identities. This continues to be reflected through decisions such as the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe V. Wade. This attitude perpetuated the belief in an essentialist view of gender roles, wherein motherhood was not only seen as a natural calling for women but also as a primary measure of their worth and identity and viewed through the lens of racialized and classist hierarchies.

Wealthy white women continued to control the feminist narrative into the 20th century and into the second wave of feminism, which was led predominantly by upper-class white women and continued a trend of exclusivity, often overlooking the diverse experiences of BIPOC and working-class women. This period saw influential works like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which became a cornerstone of feminist literature. Friedan's critique focused primarily on the housewife's perspective, sparking discussions on the limitations and dissatisfaction inherent in traditional domestic roles for women. She coined the term "feminine mystique"—a term she asserts is a social norm that confines women's potential and happiness to their roles as wives and mothers, a stark opposition to McDougall's (1908, as cited by Conaboy, 2023) earlier theories on biological domesticity. Friedan's work played a pivotal role in igniting second-wave feminism, pushing women to find fulfillment beyond the traditional confines of the home. This critique came at a time when, as Mahmassani (2022) describes, post-WWII, women who had previously entered the workforce to help their country in a time of war, were encouraged to leave their jobs as a patriotic duty to support returning soldiers as well as the Cold War effort through returning to "natural" caregiving and domestic roles in embrace of an "American" way of life. However, similar to the first wave of feminism about 100 years before,

as the 1960s dawned, it brought with it a wave of social and political upheaval, with the civil rights movement and anti-war protests challenging the status quo. In this context, many women began to re-evaluate their satisfaction and fulfillment in their socially prescribed roles. Friedan's work became instrumental in sparking the second wave of feminism, advocating for women's liberation beyond the confines of home and family. However, the movement echoed the discontent of middle-class and upper-class white women, not representing the broader spectrum of women's experiences. Friedan's assertion that "American women can break out of the housewife trap and truly find fulfillment as wives and mothers—by fulfilling their own unique possibilities as separate human beings" (Friedan, 2013/1963, p. 406), while groundbreaking, mainly resonated with the single perspective of middle-class white women, thus encapsulating the limitations of the second wave of feminism–it remained upper-class and white-centered.

The feminist gains achieved during this period frequently translated into white women perpetuating the oppression of BIPOC and poor white women by assuming roles traditionally held by men, while the responsibilities of child-rearing and domestic tasks were shifted onto women of color and working-class white women. This dynamic led to a form of double oppression, where working-class women, despite being part of the workforce, were still expected to shoulder the majority of domestic labor and child-rearing responsibilities as the social construct of this being “women’s work” was embedded in family systems.

To illustrate this phenomenon that continues to this day, Mary Romero (2018) provides critical insight through her interviews with domestic workers and their employers. Her research reveals that middle-class women often perpetuated the sexist division of labor by transferring the undervalued aspects of domestic work to BIPOC women, thus maintaining their own social status while reinforcing systems of gender, class, and racial domination. Romero notes, "White

middle-class women escape the stigma of 'women's work' by laying the burden on working-class women of color" (p. 214). This practice highlights the complexity and intersectionality of the feminist movement, where issues of race and class are inextricably linked to gender dynamics and where white women implicitly play a part in perpetuating racist, sexist, and classist oppression.

The third wave of feminism confronted this blindness by being inclusive and embracing concepts like Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). This theory explores the multifaceted layers of interconnected oppression and the relation to power that a person experiences. Crenshaw argued that to represent the needs of diverse perspectives adequately; there must be an analysis of both sexism and patriarchy. Similarly, feminism must include an analysis of race to reflect the aspirations of non-white women in the narrative. She stated that to “include Black women, both movements must distance themselves from earlier approaches in which experiences are relevant only when they are related to certain clearly identifiable causes" (p. 166). Intersectionality highlights the importance of bringing marginalized art into the foreground to acknowledge its value and significance and challenge and expand the existing narratives within cultural discourse. By applying an intersectional lens to the study of art through female recording artists, we can better explore and uplift works overlooked or misunderstood due to systemic biases, ensuring a richer, more diverse exploration of human creativity.

The Beauty Myth by Wolf (2002) is a book and term to describe the use of idealized beauty standards to oppress and control women. She describes how after the time of the Industrial Revolution, when women’s roles transformed, the beauty myth gained traction, influencing the lives of middle-class Western women through ideals and stereotypes shaped by

new technologies capable of reproducing images of ideal female beauty while also being able to manufacture items to help women attain that beauty–which adding to Wolf's findings was often a Eurocentric perspective centered around youth and whiteness, and sidelined BIPOC women from mainstream popular culture, including the music industry, for centuries.

When beauty is commodified, insecurity and normativity requisitely become profitable. Wolf (2002) argues that the commodification of beauty creates a cycle where insecurity becomes lucrative, and social norms demand that women not only fulfill traditional roles such as childbearing and housekeeping but also adhere to these oppressive beauty standards. This expectation places immense pressure on women to not just attract a man to marry but also to maintain their attractiveness to prevent losing their partners to someone younger, highlighting a deeply ingrained social fear, keeping women in a state of competition with each other instead of solidarity, and further entrenching women in a position of dependency without employment opportunities or an independent identity outside of their isolated role in the home.

Female recording artists simultaneously reflect and mold our society and culture, embodying its hidden complexities and driving its evolution. It is important to critically understand how women's roles have evolved, how social constructs were created, how white supremacy played a part in the feminist movement and beauty standards, and how BIPOC women have been marginalized in the industry as well as society and have often been misinterpreted and misunderstood when viewed from a white Eurocentric lens with their voices hushed. In light of this history, this paper adopts an Intersectional and Decolonial feminist framework, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression. It calls into question the patriarchal and colonial filter art has traditionally been analyzed through.

True feminism does not seek equal power but instead the liberation of all individuals from all forms of oppression. Lorde (1983) eloquently states, "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of color remains chained. Nor is anyone of you" (p. 34).

Respectability Politics and Female Recording Artists

Higginbotham's (1994), *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, describes the strategies marginalized groups use to navigate systemic injustices and social prejudice by adhering to hegemonic norms and values. During this time, Black women adopted the idea of respectability to prove that they are worthy of rights. Initially centered on the African American community's efforts to counteract racial stereotypes and discrimination, respectability politics has since been recognized for its broader implications, influencing women across racial divides. This ideology suggests that conforming to established standards of behavior and presentation can serve as a shield against discrimination but while doing so, may also reinforce, perpetuate, and legitamize restrictive social norms.

Adhering to respectabitliy politics can transform perceptions people may have about marginalized people, or people from different cultures, but it can also work to perpetuate hegemonic standards. One aspect of respectability politics is the phenomenon of belief penetration by the oppressed, exemplified by Bill Cosby's comments about Black men needing to "pull their pants up." This functions in two significant ways: firstly, it legitimizes and reinforces the dominant culture's views and behaviors around what is "respectable" as correct. Observers from the hegemonic culture see this reinforcement of their norms and conclude that if the oppressed and marginalized also endorse these norms, then their own views must indeed be valid. Secondly, it perpetuates these norms among marginalized populations who admire and

respect his opinion. This dynamic limits diverse cultural expressions and enforces narrow social conformities. It can even work as insidious cultural genocide and subconciously forced assimilation.

Another manifestation is code-switching, where individuals oscillate between their cultural identity and the dominant hegemonic culture as a survival strategy. This behavior inadvertently maintains restrictive norms through their actions and representations. It reinforces “respectable behavior” in specific places or with specific people. It also creates a hierarchy between those who can code-switch and those who cannot, signaling to the dominant culture which individuals might be more "deserving" of a proverbial seat at the table—favoring those who reflect hegemonic practices over those who embody marginalized ways of knowing and being and creating stratification and distance between those who can or will conform and those and cannot or refuse to. Furthermore, it creates a perception that those less able to code-switch are deficient, lazy, and undeserving, perpetuating victim-blaming of marginalized people and further ingraining these social constructs into our society.

Women in the music industry, regardless of race, face a unique set of respectability politics that are often more stringent than those imposed on their white male counterparts. These standards influence their musical content, public personas, appearances, and behaviors, demanding a delicate balance between perceived purity and an acceptable level of sexiness, while also reinforcing traditional gender roles. The enforcement of these norms not only perpetuates existing social roles but also introduces gendered dimensions that affect women differently due to intersectional factors like race, age, and class. This policing is often perpetuated by society, including other women, through mechanisms such as slut-shaming, body-shaming, or mom-guilt.

In her insightful examination of Aretha Franklin's role in navigating the intersection of race, gender, and artistic expression, Perez (2021) explores how Black female artists confront and often subvert the politics of respectability through their public personas and artistic choices. According to Perez, Franklin's stylistic transformations and lyrical choices not only showcased her unique talent but also functioned as a form of resistance against the restrictive norms imposed by a predominantly white, male-dominated industry. The study highlights Franklin's strategic use of fashion and hair as tools of empowerment, aligning with sociopolitical movements that shaped the experiences of Black women during her era. Perez's analysis extends the discourse on respectability politics by illustrating how Franklin, like many Black female artists, used her platform to challenge and redefine traditional narratives of Black womanhood in the entertainment industry. It also shows how Black women have often repurposed oppressive elements like the focus on appearance—such as makeup and hair—into expressions of empowerment.

The uneven application of respectability politics in the music industry reveals a systemic bias that allows certain individuals greater freedom to explore and innovate artistically without facing significant repercussions. This disparity creates a stifled space for women and BIPOC artists, where deviations from established norms can severely impact their careers, public perception, and personal lives.

Despite these constraints, many female recording artists have resisted and challenged these imposed norms. Artists like Aretha Franklin, Bessie Smith, Beyoncé, and Meg the Stallion have leveraged their platforms to question and redefine the boundaries of what is considered respectable. Their efforts, while sometimes met with criticism, have ignited discussions about gender, sexuality, and race, advocating for a more inclusive and comprehensive representation of

female experiences. Through these dialogues, we see a gradual shift in power structures, enabling an empowering co-construction between artists, fans, the industry, and society at large.

The Systematic Segregation of American Music

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) highlights the importance of not becoming monomaniac by hyperfocusing on one intersectionality. Gender cannot be the singular focus, therefore the effects of racism and segregation in the recording industry must also be unpacked to gain a deeper understanding of how women have been impacted as well as themselves impacted others. Furthermore, as previously explored, gendered oppression tends to be insidious and cloaked as "natural" by social constructs and widely accepted pseudoscience and false narratives. Unpacking other forms of oppression helps to reveal how the music industry plays a part in perpetuating, marketing, and commodifying stereotypes and oppression–racialized and gendered. As the recording industry was the first to be able to package, commodify, and widely disseminate culture, they were one of the first to create and perpetuate segregation and oppression as well.

Echoes of England's Past In the Appalachian Present

Mahmassani (2022) and McCollough (2010) explore how in the early 20th century, British folklorists rediscovered Scottish and English ballads sung in the impoverished Appalachian South. They began to traverse the Appalachian region to "collect" these traditional songs for preservation. These ballads were passed on orally, predominantly by women, and often were sung from a woman's perspective. The stories and lyrics in the ballads were amazingly preserved except for slight changes in details, for example, to match the singer's location. This led to a false understanding that these ancient ballads had no outside influence other than their Anglo-Saxon roots. However, the style in which these songs were sung and the clogging, flatfooting, buck dancing, and even fiddle playing associated with the music were largely

influenced by Indigenous Peoples and African Americans (McCollough, 2010). Despite the English lyrics, the music had become entirely its own with an amalgam of cultural influences.

The rediscovery, collection, and recording of these ballads marked the beginning of a romanticization of a predominantly white, pastoral America. This romanticization celebrated an Anglocentric view of “folk” heritage while simultaneously obscuring the significant contributions of Indigenous peoples and African Americans to the development of a distinctly different singing, rhythmic, and dance style (McCollough, 2010). Mahmassani (2022) explains that this came at a time when, as allies in WWI, the United States' relationship with England became one of nostalgia, romanticism, and longing, unlike the patriotic anti-English days of the American Revolution. Additionally, the influx of Eastern European immigrants spurred a desire to distinguish a distinctly "American" identity, further fueling a narrative that yearned for a simplified, Anglo-specific version of American history and heritage. As these ballads were recorded on "old-time" and "hillbilly" records and gained popularity, they catered to a nostalgia for a simplified, whitewashed, and Anglocentric version of American history, effectively erasing the proverbial rich musical composition created by diverse cultures.

From this backdrop, the Grand Ole Opry emerged in 1925, playing a crucial role in defining and segregating country music's cultural identity. Promoting "old-time" music as an extension of English musical traditions, the Opry championed a narrative that predominantly recognized white, Anglo-Saxon contributions, overshadowing the diverse roots that defined the genre. As Parler (2020) notes, this narrative did not merely forge a distinctively white, Anglo-Saxon “American” identity within the music industry but also systematically overlooked the varied contributions of Black artists in the genre. He shares DeFord Bailey, an African American musician, as an example whose harmonica talent marked a pioneering moment for the

genre. However, his contributions were marginalized and his racial identity was obscured by the Opry's broader industry marketing tactics, which painted country music as predominantly white, thereby masking its rich, multicultural foundations.

Parler (2020) explains that these strategies, which included the use of blackface and "blackface dialect," not only perpetuated racial stereotypes but also worked to sever the genre from its multicultural origins, further alienating Black artists from a genre to which they significantly contributed. This selective memory and marketing approach has had lasting implications for the representation and acknowledgment of Black musicians in country music, especially women, whose contributions have been further obscured by intersecting layers of racial and gendered bias. The Opry's selective commemoration of heritage and its marketing strategies have enduringly impacted how Black musicians are represented and acknowledged in country music, perpetuating a historical narrative that neglects the genre's genuine diversity and richnes, specifically maginalizing Black women artists.

Dowling (2021) details how the Bristol Sessions of 1927, coming just two years after the Grand Ole Opry's establishment, also significantly influenced the trajectory of country music and deepened the racial and cultural segregation within the American music industry. Often celebrated as the "big bang" of country music, these sessions are crucial for understanding the genre's evolution against a backdrop of racial segregation and the emerging consciousness around race in America. Dowling explains that under the direction of Ralph Peer, the sessions aimed to capture and commodify the "authentic" sounds of the Appalachian region, as determined by a Missouri-born talent scout, for commercial success–giving rise to the careers of white artists like the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers–while also enforcing the industry's racialized marketing strategies. Furthermore, white artists like Jimmie Rodgers, who grew up in

Mississippi working on railroads, were significantly influenced by Black musicians. Therefore although Rodgers was a white artist and often called the “father of country music,” the influence of his yodeling, inclusion of blues songs in his repertoire, and recording with African American artists show the diversity of country’s roots, despite its image.

Dowling (2021) dives into how the selective recording practices of the Bristol Sessions illustrate the music industry's concerted efforts to segregate American music along racial lines. Despite the rich presence of African American musicians in Appalachia, the sessions recorded only a couple, Howard "Louie Bluie" Armstrong and El Watson, and notably, no Black women, showcasing a significant gap in the representation of the region's musical diversity. These selective practices and marketing strategies have contributed to country music being predominantly perceived as a white genre, thus marginalizing the extensive contributions of Black musicians. The common assumption that early recordings lack Black artists due to their absence in the genre is misleading; it was, in reality, a result of intentional recording decisions aimed at crafting a predominantly white narrative of the music. This selective representation has enduringly shaped our perception, creating a fabricated historical collective understanding of musical diversity, or a lack thereof. Once the narrative was widely disseminated, it then worked to perpetuate itself through targeted representation, including tokenism.

While country music has always included some Black artists, often having only a small number reinforces the narrative that it is predominantly a white genre. This token representation suggests that the scarcity of Black musicians is due to their limited numbers or lack of talent, which serves to further segregate and exclude. As long as the gatekeepers of country music allow only a few Black artists in, they do not have to address the broader exclusion, perpetuating racial divides and segregation within the genre. Highlighting Black country musicians like DeFord

Bailey and Charley Pride, while proving country has diverse roots, can paradoxically emphasize the rarity of Black country artists, suggesting they are anomalies in a genre where they supposedly “do not belong.” This creates the perception that a Black country musician is a "unicorn," perpetuating the myth that Black country artists are rare exceptions rather than integral contributors. Additionally, the focus on Black male artists highlights the specific exclusion of Black women in country music, further revealing gender and racial biases within the country music industry.

The reinforcement of the narrative that Appalachian music was solely derived from England through early collections by folkorists, and the exclusionary practices of the Grand Ole Opry and the Bristol Sessions, with no acknowledgment of other influences, exemplifies the broader trend of cultural erasure and the selective historical memory within the American music industry. This tendency not only marginalized the contributions of non-white cultures but also diluted the rich and complex composition of American musical heritage. The Grand Ole Opry and Bristol sessions further solidified this narrative, each playing a role in exacerbating the segregation of American music. This selective celebration of heritage distorted the true origins and influences of American music and reinforced systemic inequalities by elevating certain narratives over others. Once this skewed narrative was created, it has been perpetuated ever since.

More Segregation: The Commodification of Racial Stereotypes Through Race Records

The record player and radio were invented in the late 1890s and by the 1920’s, they became an integral part of most households. This era began the rise of the music industry and, for the first time, this period saw culture being disseminated on a scale that allowed for unprecedented accessibility, breaking down barriers that previously restricted cultural

experiences to the literate or economically privileged. In its universal appeal and access, music became a powerful tool for social influence, shaping perceptions and interactions in profound and lasting ways. One of the most blatant examples of how the music industry has shaped and systematically segregated our culture is through Race Records. Brauneis (2020) explains that the concept of "Race Records," a term used from the early 1900s to 1949 to categorize music made predominantly by and for African Americans, significantly influenced the shaping of the music industry and wider social perceptions. Initially, record companies targeted a broad, indiscriminate American public. However, by the 1920s, they began segmenting markets along racial lines, creating categories like "race" and "hillbilly/old-time" records, distinct from mainstream "popular" records intended for white audiences. Although divided along racial lines, both genres of music were Southern. "Old-time" records were to evoke a feeling of nostalgia, romance, and pride for early "white-Anglo-Saxon" traditions, while "race records" exoticized and exploited Black music. During this time, carpet baggers from the North exploited Southern musicians, disproportionately affecting Black musicians. Brauneis (2020) describes how this segregation in music marketing reflected and reinforced broader social segregation, with record companies often dictating the genres in which African American artists could record, thus shaping and restricting the representation of Black music. For example, Black women were expected only to sing blues (Wald, 2011; Miller, 2010; Kenney, 1999, as cited in Brauneis, 2020). This categorization not only commercialized racial stereotypes but also played an essential role in how Black music was perceived and consumed, then consequently perpetuated into the future–demonstrating the music industry's significant influence on cultural norms and practices for generations. It segregated the industry and determined who was entitled to play what genre. Our perceptions and the gatekeeping that determined whose music is whose began to

be cemented in the 1920s by the music industry. These perceptions are still ingrained in our culture today as music is seen as owned by and for specific races, regions, genders, and cultures.

A long-standing debate about who can play country music is perpetually revisited and has been reignited as this is being written. Schmall (2024) reports that on February 13th, 2024, Beyoncé requested KYKC, a country music radio station in Ada, Oklahoma, to have her new song, a country song called "Texas Hold 'Em," played on the radio. This was initially refused, sparking an outcry. The refusal— despite her significant contributions to music and her personal connection to the genre through her Houston roots — is a stark reminder of the enduring legacy of these segregational practices and policing of what Black women can perform. The station's initial response to the request, stating that Beyoncé's music would not be played because they are a country music station, triggered widespread criticism and highlighted the exclusionary practices that continue to marginalize Black artists, specifically Black women, within the genre. This harkens back to the idea that anything a Black person performs is othered as a "race record." It is as if because it is a Black woman, it cannot be country; it must be R&B–as if nothing has changed in 100 years.

Schmall (2024) explains that this incident is not isolated. It reflects a broader pattern of exclusion and marginalization of Black artists in country music, a genre that, ironically, has Black music at its roots. The controversy surrounding Beyoncé's country music credentials, including the rejection of her 2016 song "Daddy Lessons" from the Grammy's country category and the reactions to her performance at the Country Music Awards, illustrates how music industry gatekeepers perpetuate segregation and the false narrative that country music is white. The music industry's role in commercializing racial stereotypes through these practices has had lasting effects on how music genres are perceived and who is deemed an "authentic" artist within

those genres. Is art creating culture, is culture creating art, or is the music industry manipulating both for profit?

Brauneis (2020) states that the term “Race Records" was changed to "Rhythm and Blues" by Billboard in 1949; despite the shift in name, the genre remained segregated and continues to influence today's musical landscape. This enduring segregation often leads to the overlooking or misattribution of contributions by Black artists in various genres, rooted in stereotypes dating back to the 1920s. Notably, regardless of the significant contributions of Black artists across various genres, there remains a deep-seated segregation within musical categorizations, largely due to persistent racial stereotypes. For instance, the early black fiddle players and the African origins of the banjo are often overlooked or even forgotten (McCollough, 2010), with these contributions instead being attributed to “white” culture, a misappropriation rooted in romanticism, stereotypes, historical memory reconstruction, and the racist practice of minstrel shows.

Brauneis (2020) articulates that this racial segregation in music is particularly evident in the evolution of rock and roll. The practice of "mirror covers," prevalent in the 1950s and early 1960s, reveals the racial disparities in the music industry. Prominent artists like Elvis Presley, Bill Haley, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, and others like Pat Boone and Georgia Gibbs built their careers by covering R&B recordings performed initially by African American artists. Dot Records, for instance, concentrated on producing white covers of R&B hits (Weinstein, 2015, as cited by Brauneis, 2020). Although not illegal, the system worked to exploit Black musicians. If they were not the song's composers, they received no royalties; if they were, they only got the minimal statutory license rate. Theoretically, the rules were neutral, but in reality, the market for African American covers of white songs was virtually non-existent,

leading to a one-sided effect that benefited white recording artists on the backs of their Black counterparts (Chapple & Garofalo, 1977; Leszczak, 2013, as cited by Brauneis, 2020, p. 19-22).

In Lieb's (2018) *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars*, she explores an infamous example through Elvis Presley's rise to fame with "That's Alright, Mama," a cover of Arthur Crudup's original blues song from 1946, which exemplifies cultural appropriation within the industry. Presley's version, which became a hit in 1954, translated Black R&B music to a white audience, expanding its reach through rock and roll and reshaping the genre as predominantly white. In contrast, Crudup, the original artist, remained unrecognized and under-compensated, highlighting the systemic exploitation of Black musicians in the music industry.

This practice of rebranding music genres based on racial lines echoes the legacy of Race Records: if a Black artist performs, it is categorized as R&B or Blues, but if a white artist does, it becomes Rock and Roll.

Lieb (2018) finds that despite his profound influence on Rock and Roll music, including writing songs later recorded by prominent artists like Creedence Clearwater Revival, Rod Stewart, and Elton John, Crudup's contributions were overshadowed by the racial dynamics of the industry. His story reflects a broader trend of Black artists in the 1950s and 1960s being exploited, often paid in material gifts rather than royalties, leading to financial wealth disparities not just for themselves but their descendants and families as well (Scheurer, 1989, p. 59; Hines, 2005, p. 486, as cited by Lieb, 2018, p. 226).

The situation of Black artists during this era, including Crudup, exposes the racial imbalances and exploitation prevalent in the music industry. Despite their significant contributions, these artists often operated at the margins, facing systemic barriers and limited

recognition. The irony that persists today is the rarity of famous Black musicians in rock and country bands, genres deeply influenced by their musical legacy (Lieb, 2018). This enduring irony highlights the long-term impact of the music industry's act of racial segregation, perpetuating stereotypes and shaping the perception of musical genres and the artists within them, leading to racial segregation in the music industry that continues to the present.

Through understanding the legacy of Race Records, it is clear that the music industry has a profound effect on our society, culture, and perceptions. Through perpetuating gender stereotypes–by disproportionately objectifying women in song lyrics, the music industry has again acted as an architect of society where it has either carved more profound stereotypes or capitalized on them. Griffen et al. (2023), in their study, *There's Some Whores in this House: An Examination of Female Sexuality in R&B/Hip Hop and Pop Music, 1991–2021,* found that female artists, especially in genres like pop, hip-hop, and R&B, are often marketed in ways that center appearance, emphasize their sexuality, and conform to specific gender norms. This marketing strategy is a form of commodification that reduces the complexity of women's experiences and identities to superficial traits deemed marketable and palatable to the masses that have been socialized in patriarchy. Lieb (2018) notes that this practice limits the scope of artistic freedom and reinforces harmful social norms. It also shows the powerful force of the music industry in shaping our society.

The sexualization of female artists in music videos, lyrics, and public personas is a direct reflection of this. The industry often promotes a narrow and objectified image of women, which not only impacts how female artists are viewed but also influences social expectations of women in general. It will continue on a feedback loop, acting to perpetuate stereotypes of women in perpetuity until thoroughly examined and dismantled. However, the cycle of oppression is

complex and interconnected, suggesting that as long as any form of oppression exists, it will exacerbate and perpetuate others. Therefore, to truly dismantle the stereotypes and expectations placed on women, it is imperative to address and dismantle all forms of oppression simultaneously.

For female artists from marginalized populations, the challenge is twofold: They must navigate gendered expectations and racial stereotypes imposed by both society and the music industry from its legacy of Race Records and deeply entrenched gender stereotypes. This layered oppression stresses the need to analyze this phenomenon through an Intersectional lens.

The historical context of Race Records offers crucial insights into the music industry's role in shaping culture and the current dynamics, as well as the layered oppression that BIPOC female recording artists endure. This history highlights the importance of an Intersectional feminist approach to analyzing past and present artists to understand and challenge the ongoing impacts of these practices.

Historical Empowerment in the Blues

In the 1920s, a transformative era characterized by the rise of record players and radio, female blues artists were at the vanguard of the recording industry, significantly outnumbering their male counterparts. As noted in a 1926 study as cited by Lynskey (2021), "upwards of 75% of the songs are written from a woman's point of view. Among the blues singers who have gained more or less national recognition, there is scarcely a man's name to be found." Despite their groundbreaking contributions, these pioneering women and their music were often stigmatized as sinful and immoral due to the social perceptions of that time. Nonetheless, their impact was undeniable. For example, within ten months of signing with Columbia Records, Bessie Smith, a prominent figure in this movement, sold over 2 million records (Thompkins, 2018).

By examining the legacy of these early blues artists, we gain valuable perspectives on the evolution of female representation in music at a time when these social constructs were being crystalized in popular American culture. Often overshadowed by social disapproval, their contributions laid the groundwork for future generations. Analyzing the historical context in which these women operated allows us to appreciate the progress made and the challenges that persist for female recording artists today. They were the first famous female recording artists, and it is upon their shoulders that contemporary artists stand–to continue the journey of empowerment through music.

Davis's (1998) *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* offers profound insights into sexualization's role in empowerment in blues music lyrics, illustrating how expressing diverse sexual partnerships was an act of freedom during the oppressive Jim Crow Era. Davis notes, "For the first time in the history of the African presence in North America, masses of Black women and men were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they entered" (p. 4). This newfound sovereignty in sexual matters marked a significant departure from past constraints. In this context, women embracing their sexuality in their songs represented a practice of freedom. Music and songs became a space for expressing these freedoms. In a society where women are expected to abstain from sexual matters, their image and perception was sexualized. As these recording artists sang sexualized lyrics, they began raising consciousness and shaping the perception and voice of all women while also garnering attention for being immoral and sexualized by white hegemonic society.

Their influence continues to reverberate today. Bessie Smith laid the groundwork to help shape the expressive freedom of female artists in hip-hop. As Mahon (2019) explains, Smith's persona, themes, and vocal prowess resonated through generations, finding a distinct echo in the

works of hip-hop artists like Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa, and TLC in the 1980s and 1990s. Like Smith before them, these artists engaged in an open dialogue about the multifaceted nature of sexual intimacy that centers women's pleasure, much like in songs like "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine" (Smith, 1923, as cited by Mahon, 2019) and, for instance, Smith's "I'm Wild About That Thing" (Smith, 1929, as cited by Mahon, 2019) boldly celebrates female sexual pleasure. This topic was considered taboo during her era:

> What's the matter, papa? Please don't stop,
>
> Don't you know I love it and I want it all?
>
> I'm wild about that thing, just give my bell a ring,
>
> You pressed my button, I'm wild about that thing.
>
> -Bessie Smith, *I'm Wild About That Thing*

Mahon explains that this thematic throughline, from Smith's embrace of sexual freedom, to tracks like "Let's Talk About Sex" by Salt-N-Pepa and "Ain't 2 Proud 2 Beg" by TLC, Shows the legacy of female recording artists expressing empowerment through autonomy and freedom of sexuality. However, when women demonstrate their sexuality, it can also lead to sexualization through commodification, consumer reception, and the greater narratives that dominate society. This interaction and co-construction is key to determining the perception of empowerment versus disempowerment.

Although these women were often cast as immoral due to their inclusion of sexualized lyrics in their repertoire, they also tackled other critical social issues. Davis's (1998) exploration of blues music, mainly focusing on iconic figures like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, reveals a rich tapestry of themes encompassing independence, assertiveness, and defiance against dominant middle-class ideologies. Their songs bravely defied the norms of respectability

politics, a concept articulated by Higginbotham in 1994; by daring to include taboo topics in their songs, these women were able to help reshape and reconstruct respectability by defying it, revealing the complexities and nuances of womanhood. These artists used their platform to address broader social issues such as domestic violence and infidelity, offering a voice and a sense of solidarity to working-class Black women–and by extension, all women. Their music became a conduit for challenging respectability politics and restrictive social ideologies, transforming the personal into the political, fostering a sense of community among women, and creating safe spaces for marginalized people. Their sexualized lyrics became a space of community and exploration.

Davis (1998) speaks to the significant divergence of these blues women from the traditional narratives of their time. The expected roles and realities of middle-class white women were often misapplied as universal, regardless of race or class, creating a disconnect between social expectations and the actual social conditions of Black women. For example, the previously shared Chiswick and Robinson (2021) statistics show that in 1920, Black women had higher labor force participation rates (43.8%) compared to White women (21.9%). The woman experience was not the same and drastically differed across racial and class lines. Davis explains that the blues genre, particularly through the voices of Smith and Rainey, offered a counter-narrative to these imposed ideals, particularly around concepts of marriage and domesticity. This allowed more diverse women to see themselves reflected in these female recording artists. Often giving advice to other women, their songs frequently served as a platform to caution against exploitative relationships and subvert traditional Eurocentric patriarchal narratives. Furthermore, the practice of giving advice in song has its roots in traditional African music. According to Stone (2010), using songs for advice, comfort, inspiration, and education is

rooted in the traditional music of the Akan people of modern-day Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire (Okrah, 2003, p. 69; Nketia, 1963, 1990, as cited by Stone, 2010). This tradition of advice-giving can be seen in "Sam Jones Blues"(Smith, 1923, as cited by Davis, 1998, p. 11-12) by Bessie Smith

Sam said, “I’m your husband, dear”

But she said, “Dear, that’s strange to hear”

You ain't talkin' to Mrs. Jones

You speakin' to Miss Wilson now

I used to be your lawful mate

But the judge done changed my fate

Was a time you could-a' walked right in

And call this place your home sweet home

But now it's all mine, for all time

I'm free and livin' all alone

-Bessie Smith, *Sam Jones Blues*

Which, as Davis (1998) explains that the song describes a husband showing up at his door to find a woman, his former wife, who decided she would rather be alone. Smith’s songs often satirically contrast the idealized view of marriage with the stark realities faced by working-class Black women. They gave advice to women and built community through shared stories. What these women sang about mattered to women and led to real social change. However, white hegemonic culture villainized these expressions as an affront to their Eurocentric values and saw blues and jazz as a space for immorality and sin.

Moreover, Davis (1998) highlights the role of women's blues in creating a public discourse around male violence, a topic that was relevant and critical in that era. This genre did not just acknowledge violence against women as a prevalent issue but defined it as a social problem worthy of discourse and consciousness-raising. This approach in women's blues anticipated the politicization of personal experiences that later became a hallmark of the women's movement in subsequent decades.

The contribution of these blues artists was multifaceted and extended beyond music to become a powerful medium for social commentary and change. By openly discussing taboo or private topics like sex, they provided a voice to the marginalized and laid the groundwork for future movements and discussions around women's rights and empowerment.

Davis (1998) analyzes Billie Holiday's role in challenging sexist and racist portrayals of women in love, further exemplifying how blues artists subverted and transformed conventional narratives. Holiday's performances, filled with sarcasm and criticism, challenged the meanings of songs chosen by predominantly white male producers, emphasizing the complexity of women's experiences and desires. This also shows how women, although seemingly acting on their own accord, are often expected to perform according to white male producers' expectations.

Not only were blues women creating space and voice for women, but the blues and jazz genres also created inclusive spaces for the LGBTQ+ community. Pioneering artists like Ma' Rainey were instrumental in this inclusivity. By openly singing about dating women and wearing men's suits, she defied traditional gender norms (Davis, 1998). Chen (2016) discusses the Harlem Renaissance, emphasizing its significance beyond its famous literary contributions and highlighting the roles lesbian and transgender black women played in forging paths for freedom of expression. This era was pivotal for the development of a Black LGBTQ+ community, with

blues and jazz functioning as a safe queer space. The question arises, does the open expression of sexuality by oppressed groups, i.e., BIPOC women and queer individuals, create safe spaces for everyone due to their understanding of intersecting oppressions?

The enduring influence of female blues artists is pivotal in comprehending the evolution of women's expression of their sexuality in music. Chen (2016) describes how these trailblazers set a foundation for modern artists to persist in challenging and redefining social narratives about women's sexuality and empowerment. Significantly, these artists' spaces, often on the fringes of mainstream visibility, became sanctuaries for a wide array of intersecting identities, especially for LGBTQ+ individuals. These environments, primarily cultivated by Black women-led movements, provided unique opportunities for creative expression and communal solidarity, serving as a safe haven for marginalized voices and identities. In talking about taboo subjects, female blues recording artists were able to make the private political and contribute to consciousness-raising from which we have all benefitted.

This progress was met with significant opposition. Lynskey (2021) points out the many detractors who criticized these groundbreaking women, often labeling their expressions immoral. For instance, “Black Swan, the first black-owned record label, rejected Bessie Smith for being "too vulgar." The Chicago Defender, a prominent black newspaper, decried these artists as 'filth furnishers' and 'purveyors of putrid puns,' condemning them as a “hindrannce to the standards of respectability and success” (as cited by Lynskey, 2021). This backlash underscores a societal tendency to vilify women, particularly Black women, who openly express their sexuality. Furthermore, it shows how when women are sexualized or singing sexual lyrics, this overshadows all else, and they are seen through a single lens despite their multifaceted talent and subject matter. Rooted in a patriarchal and colonial mindset, this criticism reflects the belief that

women should conform primarily to roles of motherhood, exhibiting less interest in sexual matters compared to men. This view of sexuality was an affront to respectability politics. They were the founders in the music industry of transforming respectability politics by denying them.

The legacy of female blues artists is crucial in understanding the evolution of women's expression of their sexuality in music. Their music laid the foundation for future generations to continue challenging and redefining social narratives around women's sexuality and empowerment.

Preservation and Perpetuation: Shaping the Story through Stereotypes

The Great Depression was a transformative period that redefined American music into what we recognize today as a preservation, shaping, and reinterpretation of musical forms. Mahmassani (2022) observed a significant shift during this era, where, amidst economic hardship, Americans turned to the music of the rural working class, or "folk," for comfort. This trend reflects a broader cultural pivot towards an "authentic" American experience.

In the 1920s, the music industry was characterized by racial segregation, epitomized by race records, hillbilly and old-time records, the Bristol Sessions, and the founding of the Grand Ole Opry. The subsequent 1930s continued to perpetuate the myth of Appalachian music's Anglo-Saxon roots, marginalizing Black and African American artists and deepening stereotypes and segregation within the genre. This era also marked a significant phase in the preservation of music through efforts such as those by the Library of Congress, which set the stage for a new wave of musical archiving and (re)construction of the American folk canon.

McDaniel (2012) discusses that in the 1930s and 1940s, there was a shift in masculinity revealing a complex interplay among cultural, economic, and social transformations that redefined traditional gender norms in popular music. This period witnessed a backlash against

earlier conceptions of masculinity, which were characterized by aggression and dominance. Newer, more subtle forms of masculinity emerged, embracing consumerism, fashion, and a more sophisticated demeanor. Importantly, McDaniel also notes that era also marked the racialization of masculinity within music genres, intertwining the identities of performers with racial stereotypes.

According to McDaniel (2012), popular music genres such as crooning, country, and the blues were central to this redefinition, each shaping and reflecting different facets of masculinity. For example, the hypermasculinization of Black blues players contrasted with the more subdued and polished personas of white crooners. This differentiation not only highlighted the diverse portrayals of manhood but also underscored how racial identities influenced these portrayals. Therefore, the music industry not only mirrored the broader social shifts concerning masculinity but also played a crucial role in constructing and perpetuating racialized images of masculinity. These images often reinforced existing stereotypes, attributing raw, unrefined masculinity to Black musicians while aligning white musicians with refined, distinguished, and controlled expressions of gender identity.

Furthermore, through the lens of racialized masculinity, Alan and John Lomax's efforts to record “authentic” American music profoundly shaped the musical landscape. This father and son team’s selective recordings and personal agendas particularly influenced the portrayal of American music, shifting focus from female blues and jazz artists and Appalachian female ballad singers to the rugged male American anti-hero epitomized by figures in prison chain gangs, railroads, and fields. This shift further solidified the constructed narrative of American music and our perception of its folk canon.

In *"Our Singing Country": John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past*, Filene (1991) explores the complex relationship between American music, cultural identity, and the processes of historical memory reconstruction. As the 1930s unfolded, John and Alan Lomax embarked on a journey, to document and record folk music across the United States for the Library of Congress. Filene explains that they intentionally searched for various isolated communities, aiming to capture the essence of American folk music, untainted by the commercial influences that had begun to dominate mainstream culture through records and radio. Their focus on marginalized voices, such as those of prisoners and laborers, reinforced the narrative of the American anti-hero, characterized by resilience, defiance, and a deep connection to the struggles of the common man. The women of the blues were erased as the lonesome bluesman took center stage.

However, Filene (1991) illuminates the Lomaxes' selective approach to preserving American music, highlighting their efforts to construct a specific narrative of American folk music that prioritized certain cultural elements while sidelining others. They made recordings that reinforced their biases and beliefs. The people that the Lomaxes championed and brought to the spotlight were notably rugged men, like Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly. Their work in music preservation also created gendered stereotypes that left women out of the narrative.

Alan Lomax famously encountered Leadbelly, an ex-convict who would later be dubbed the "King of the 12-string Guitar," in a prison. Leadbelly's release was partly facilitated by Lomax and partly by the song he wrote to the Texas governor, “Governor Pat Neff,” requesting his release. His story–along with other legends like Robert Johnson selling his soul, the mysterious death and unmarked grave of Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Sonny Terry who shot a

medicine show producer in the leg–played into the trope of the mysterious loner bluesman, blending tales of hardship and mystery.

Filene (1991) explains that through the Lomax's promotion of Leadbelly as the quintessential embodiment of American folk music, they significantly influenced the perception and canon of this genre. He shows how their depiction of Leadbelly is a prime example of the intricate balance they attempted to maintain in constructing a public persona. While they recognized and celebrated his music as a crucial component of American cultural expression, their portrayal of Leadbelly involved stereotyping and villainizing–casting him within a narrative that emphasized his past as a convict and portrayed him in a violent and simplistic light. The Lomaxes would often share his story of being a murderer or have him record with no shoes wearing overalls. Filene critically observes that they characterized him as an “untamed,” almost “animalistic” figure, driven by primal instincts rather than intellect or artistic intention, as evidenced in their 1936 biography and various press representations. However, he finds that contrary to the image fabricated by the Lomaxes, Leadbelly was often seen in a suit with gloves, and other prominent folk figures like Pete Seeger described Leadbelly as “soft-spoken, meticulously dressed, and wonderful with children” (1991, p. 610). This dual perspective and intentional maligning and character construction reveal the Lomaxes' complex engagement with folk music: on one side, valorizing its authenticity and cultural significance, and on the other, constructing, perpetuating, and deepening the era's prevailing racial prejudices and stereotypes.

Moreover, Filene (1991) explores how the Lomaxes' methodology, relying heavily on recording technology to capture "unadulterated" performances, speaks to their belief in the power of technology to preserve cultural heritage. The Lomaxes' endeavors, as detailed by Filene, were not merely pure acts of cultural preservation but also acts of cultural creation and reconstruction,

actively participating in the process of canon formation. By selecting which voices to amplify and how to present them to the public, the Lomaxes influenced perceptions of American music and identity. Their work highlights the dynamic interaction between cultural preservation, the construction of national identity, and the power dynamics inherent in the act of collective remembering and the privilege of who gets to control the narrative. Through their recordings and the tropes they perpetuated, Filene explains that the Lomaxes contributed to a vision of America that celebrated certain "authentic" folk traditions while exoticizing, marginalizing and creating caricatures of others, thereby shaping the legacy of American music and its heroes in ways that resonate today.

As cited by Mahmassani (2022), Filene (2000) explains that the Lomaxes documented a cultural phenomenon termed "outsider populism," which describes the impact of those outside the mainstream on popular culture, often challenging entrenched norms. This includes various expressions like prison work songs, Woody Guthrie's anti-capitalist ballads, union marches, and Leadbelly's blues, all of which illustrate evolving definitions of authenticity and folk music. However, according to Filene, the Lomaxes' approach was marked by a lack of genuine engagement or self-reflection. They failed to account for how their presence—particularly within the controlled environments of prisons, where guards oversaw interactions—might alter the authenticity of recordings from incarcerated individuals. Moreover, the Lomaxes were known to stage scenes and manipulate sounds in their field recordings, thereby stereotyping, stigmatizing, and commodifying these cultural expressions to align with what they believed would resonate with the broader American public. In their promotional efforts, they depicted Leadbelly and other African American bluesmen in racially charged, fearsome terms that set them up to be both revered and feared. This framing established a complex dynamic that would influence the

representation of African American musicians in the folk movement for decades, casting them as both archetypal ancestors and demons, ultimately marginalizing these artists within the very movement that purported to celebrate them.

Moreover, McDaniel (2012) reveals how the romanticization of the "lonesome bluesman" trope contributed to a monolithic representation of Black masculinity within the genre, overshadowing the diversity of experiences and expressions within the African American community. As Filene (1991) explores, the Lomaxes' recordings, while invaluable for their contribution to preserving American folk music, played a pivotal role in shaping a narrative that associated blues music almost exclusively with Black male musicians. This narrative, reinforced through commercial recordings, media images, and public performances, perpetuated stereotypes of Black men as inherently connected to suffering, criminality, and an "authentic" American experience rooted in racial and economic marginalization.

McDaniel (2012) describes how, in essence, the stereotyping of blues musicians as Black men is a product of both cultural preservation efforts and the commercialization of the blues. These efforts, while aimed at capturing and celebrating America's rich musical heritage, also reflected and reinforced existing racial and gendered biases. The legacy of these efforts is a blues genre that remains deeply associated with narratives of Black masculinity, often at the expense of acknowledging the genre's broader historical and cultural complexities.

To build more context, these recordings took place during the Jim Crow era, where through commodification and strategic public appearance construction, like what was done with Leadbelly by the Lomaxes, the evolution of blues music and its depiction of Black masculinity became a mirror reflecting and shaping the era's social norms. Initially, in the 1920s, blues music was a platform where female artists thrived, using their voices to address social injustices, give

advice, and provide a more holistic picture of womanhood. However, as the rugged American anti-hero became an important figure and masculinity was commercially racialized, the music industry criminalized the public personas of Black male musicians, and white male scouts and producers began looking for a specific trope to sell, the genre began to pivot towards themes that often glorified misogyny, alcohol use, and high-risk lifestyles, thereby sidelining the critical voices of women while also working to criminalize Black men. This shift not only marginalized female artists but also contributed to embedding racial and gendered stereotypes deeper into the fabric of American musical history.

The Reconstruction era (1863-1877) marked notable advancements for the African American community, including passing voting rights legislation, increased literacy and education, and establishing Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). However, the removal of union soldiers mitigated many advancements through a resurgance of racial violence. By the1920s, the nation saw a restructuring of whiteness as Eastern Europeans increasingly moved to the United States, and "white" became legally recognized through Bhagat Singh Thind's 1923 Supreme Court case. The Ku Klux Klan was revitalized. This subsequent Jim Crow period, combined with the Great Depression, wove a complex and increasingly oppressive social structure. The convict leasing system, which allowed the leasing of prisoners for work, rapidly became a vehicle for exploiting Black male labor, imposing conditions arguably harsher than slavery. Selby (2021) delineates how the systematic criminalization of Black men, often for minor infractions, was strategically employed to sustain their exploitation and perpetuate narratives that justified their ongoing subjugation.

The commercially constructed narrative of blues music, entwined with these socio-economic upheavals, began to mirror and shape perceptions of Black masculinity, as in the

case of Leadbelly–frequently depicted within contexts of violence, criminality, and resilience amidst systemic oppression. The increasingly racialized masculinity that framed Black men as violent (McDaniel, 2012) and the commodification of these themes further entrenched the stereotype of the "violent Black male," helping to justify extending the legacy of slavery into the contemporary prison system. Initially, as a platform that amplified female voices on social issues, as blues music was commodified, it gradually transitioned towards narratives that marginalized female contributions and celebrated a masculinized, often misogynistic, perspective. This significant genre evolution has influenced contemporary musical styles like hip-hop and rap, which grapple with similar racialized thematic concerns, social constructs, and gender domination that are commodified and marketed.

Furthermore, the transformation of blues music into a domain dominated by themes of womanizing and risk underscores the lasting impact of racial and gendered oppression in American musical history. In preserving cultural history, the music industry also worked to perpetuate stereotypes and deconstruct the diverse heritage of American music. Importantly, the construction of this musical narrative was not organic but was significantly influenced by figures like Alan Lomax, Francis Child, Ralph Peer, and numerous other white male folklorists, producers, and field recorders. Despite narratives of "authentic" music discovery and preservation, these white men were actively molding, shaping, manipulating, and defining the American musical landscape behind the scenes.

Through the lens of blues and its evolution towards racialized masculinity, we observe how intentional choices made by outside cultures, specifically white men, forever shaped our collective memory of the story of the birth and development of an important musical genre in this country. It also shows the gendered and racialized aspects of how artists are depicted.

The Blues and Folk Revival and the Old White Boy's Club of Greenwich Village

Mahmassani (2022) describes how the folk revival movement that began in the 1940s, centered in New York's Greenwich Village, was spearheaded by figures like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. In Washington Park, an influx of white-middle-class suburbanites gathered, transforming folk music from a symbol of unified struggle and nationalism in the Great Depression Era into a beacon of change and resistance to fascism and war. Guthrie, with "this machine kills fascists" on his guitar, became a key figure, particularly after the 1949 death of Leadbelly, once known as the "King of Folk," which left the movement predominantly led by white males. Guthrie's authenticity was rooted in his experiences as a Dust Bowl refugee and migrant worker, contrasting with Pete Seeger, whose white middle-class background did not diminish his importance in the movement due to his dedication to preserving thousands of songs, artists, and musical styles through recordings and memory.

Mahmassani (2022) notes that the folk music gatherings of the 1940s, especially in New York's Greenwich Village, often reflected the era's social gender biases, typically casting men as musicians and relegating women to the audience. Influential figures such as Alan Lomax played significant roles in the folk music revival, promoting artists like Bob Dylan and shaping the movement's narrative, much as he had done decades earlier through his field recordings and biased construction of America's historical musical canon (Filele, 1990). Mahmassani explores how consequently, this narrative disproportionately celebrated male contributions, further marginalizing the roles and achievements of women in the genre. The movement's male dominance, influenced by social expectations and respectability politics that discouraged women from pursuing careers as musicians, led to a historical oversight in recorded music, predominantly amplifying the recognition of male artists.

Similarly to the Industrial Revolution diminishing the value of domestic tasks, it is possible that recordings diminished the important role women had in the family and community through singing, remembering, and passing down songs. This bias has contributed to the erasure of women, particularly in genres like blues and old time, in our collective memory. Furthermore, representation is a powerful phenomenon. The more society collectively sees a genre or domain as “for men” or “for women,” the more these stereotypes are perpetuated through the social conditioning phenomenon of representation.

Lomax's archival efforts did much to popularize folk music but also perpetuated a male-dominated narrative that often overlooked the contributions of women and stereotyped artists of color. The revival, drawing from rediscovered recordings of the 20s and 30s, maintained an Anglocentric perspective on traditional music, reinforcing racial and gender stereotypes within the music scene as well as solidifying the archetypes of the dangerous Black bluesman and the pure white folk singer, continuing the legacy of divisiveness and segregation that have long influenced American music culture.

In her dissertation, *Folk Feminism: The Women of the American Folk Revival*, Mahmassani (2022) explores the impact of racial and gender stereotypes on the careers of Joan Baez and Odetta within the folk music scene. While Baez, a white woman, enjoyed celebration and commercial success, Odetta, a Black woman, encountered significant challenges that stifled her career progression despite her talent and adherence to respectability politics. The folk scene's biases mirrored broader social stereotypes: white women were often idealized as pure, while Black women were subjected to over-sexualization or seen as aggressive and marginalized. This disparity notably affected Odetta’s recognition in the predominantly white Greenwich Village, a testament to the intersectional barriers that Black women artists faced in the music industry.

The polarization within these stereotypes hindered not only individual artists like Baez and Odetta but also women's collective advancement in challenging a male-dominated industry. Mahmassani (2022) notes that initially, Odetta was a leading figure in the Greenwich Village folk scene; however, with Joan Baez's arrival, she was gradually pushed to the margins. This illustrates how a male-dominated space often fosters competition among women by only allowing a token amount in, preventing solidarity. By reinforcing narrow roles based on race and gender, the industry perpetuates division, privileging one woman while marginalizing another and obstructing collective efforts among women to overcome these barriers. Once a white woman is allowed in the space, she may perpetuate the status quo to hold power instead of making room for Black women, which would be a perceived loss of power. In this way, white women end up perpetuating the very oppression they were working against.

Side note: Although Joan Baez identifies as having a Mexican father, it is important to recognize that this does not necessarily mean she is not white or that she did not benefit from a proximity to whiteness. Mexico, like the United States, was colonized by Spain, a European country that also participated in the slave trade and now has a diverse population. While anti-miscegenation laws in the United States historically prevented marriage and procreation between different ethnic groups, leading to stricter racial segregation than countries like Mexico that often married between ethnicities and races, this does not necessitate that being “Mexican” is automatically considered “non-white.” Mexican and white are not mutually exclusive. Spanish is a European language, and Mexico's colonization by a European country adds to the complexity of racial, ethnic, and national identity. Race as a social construct only makes sense when analyzing power or proximity to power.

It is crucial to understand that "Mexican" refers to a nationality, not a race, and is often inappropriately racialized in discussions about ethnicity and nationality. Additionally, the term “white passing” can be problematic since race is a social construct. It is important to explore how individuals who identify as minorities might experience benefits due to their perceived proximity to whiteness and how this perpetuates racial hierarchies. This nuanced perspective allows for a better understanding of identity and the various factors that influence how individuals are perceived and treated in society. Joan Baez was perceived as white by most consumers and therefore treated as a white woman regardless of her personal identity. Additionally, in a Black and white binary, she would be considered white. This highlights how harmful this binary can be to everyone in between—they are forced to pick a side while simultaneously being erased.

Mahmassani (2022) contextualizes the movement by explaining that during the 1950s and 60s, the American cultural landscape was defined by stringent norms regarding women's sexuality, both in music and society as a whole. The Cold War era's Red Scare and emphasis on upholding "American Values" served as a thinly veiled injunction for women and BIPOC communities to maintain traditional roles under the guise of patriotism. This period, marked by sexual repression, measured women's values by the lengths of their skirts, firmly insisting on modesty and decorum as hallmarks of femininity.

As the folk and blues revival intertwined with the protest movements of the 1960s, they became synonymous with anti-Vietnam War sentiments, the Civil Rights movement, and progressive change. This period also marked a significant shift in social attitudes towards female sexuality. Women began to challenge and reject the strict confines of respectability politics, embracing their sexuality as a form of empowerment and self-expression. However, this embrace of sexuality was often perceived differently across racial lines by hegemonic society.

Concurrently, this awakening to sexual autonomy coincided with a booming capitalism's realization that “sex sells.” The commercialization of women's sexuality introduced a paradox: while women sought to reclaim their sexual agency, the booming post-WWII economy, fueled by technological advancements in mass production, created an environment where the pervasive culture of objectification commodified female bodies. Thus, what began as a movement towards autonomy and liberation was co-opted, with women's sexuality often being framed within the context of male desires and fantasies.

This period of cultural transformation reveals the intricate and interconnected interactions between gender, sexuality, and capitalism. It highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of empowerment—one that differentiates genuine autonomy from the commodification and objectification of women's bodies. In this context, the question arises: Can women truly find empowerment through sexualization? As Conaboy (2022) pointed out, the historical dominance of white men in deciding social roles—believing themselves biologically predestined for knowledge and education while relegating women primarily to maternal duties—extends to their influence in the music industry. They have crafted and commodified social norms through intentional, racialized, and gendered marketing strategies, shaping our society’s cultural consumption and perceptions.

Bringing it Back Home: Forging a New Musical Identity and Perspective

Starting a dissertation on the sexualization of female recording artists with a historical overview from the late 1800s through the 1960s, particularly focusing on the segregation of music during the early 20th century, might initially appear strange. However, this perspective is critical for understanding the inextricably connected layers that have shaped today's musical artists and genres. This era was pivotal, setting the stage for our current ingrained gendered roles,

the construction of the nuclear family, and the solidification of racialized cultural norms that continue to shape who we are. As America transitioned into a capitalist powerhouse, the Industrial Revolution and the advent of manufacturing transformed the economy and allowed for the commodification of culture on an unprecedented scale. During this time, when radios and record players became household staples, music became a central form of entertainment and a powerful medium for constructing and disseminating cultural narratives.

It was against this backdrop that enduring myths surrounding gender roles and racial stereotypes were commercialized and marketed, selling us a version of ourselves we bought, believed, solidified, and passed down. These deeply embedded narratives, built on fallacies about biological gender differences—propagated in and by a predominantly white, male-dominated society—necessitate critical scrutiny. To grasp the present-day sexualization of female recording artists within the broader cultural context, delving into these historical origins is imperative. We need to unpack these constructs to know ourselves through our history more genuinely, get to know each other better, and start the journey of returning to each other. It prompts us to question what we accept as inherently "American," potentially unveiling a reality far removed from the one we acknowledge—a reality where white men have reconstructed, fabricated, orchestrated, and perpetuated our stories under a guise of authenticity, history, culture, and legacy–and we believed them.

Moreover, this exploration exposes a glaring omission from the traditional narrative: the Indigenous peoples of America, whose musical traditions and influences have been largely overlooked in the dominant story of American music. The erasure of the Indigenous narrative raises questions about the racial binary that our music industry has created. The story of Black and white and "race records" and "old-time" only tells two stories–everyone else is erased.

To further explore how our collective narrative often reduces American culture to a binary of white or Black influences with everyone else being erased, let us embark on an etymological journey to uncover the erasure of the rich and complex history of the American South. The term "lagniappe," commonly used in Louisiana to denote a small extra gift given by a merchant to a customer, serves as a poignant metaphor for the hidden depths of American cultural history. Contrary to popular belief, influenced by the pervasive French culture in Louisiana, this term does not originate from French. Instead, it traces back to the Kichwa language of the Incas of South America, introduced to Louisiana by the Spanish. This linguistic continuity prompts us to consider: If a single word from an ancient language can persist in Louisiana's vernacular, what other profound social and musical influences might we have overlooked or even deliberately erased from our collective memory, like chapters torn from a book? Language not only shapes our thoughts—it is our thoughts. If an ancient Incan word can endure unnoticed in our language into the 21st century, the full story has yet to be told.

A deeper examination of traditional New Orleans cuisine reveals the legacy of Chinese railroad workers. Yakamein, a popular local dish found at cornerstores all over New Orleans with Chinese and Creole roots, showcases a diverse cultural heritage. Additionally, the vibrant Caribbean influence is palpable through carnival traditions along the Gulf Coast, revealing a history much richer and more intricate than is commonly acknowledged. Thus, we see evidence of diversity through celebrations, language, and food—so why not in music? Are we facing intentional erasure or selective recordings?

As highlighted in *Sonic Affinities: Sicilian and African American Musical Encounters in New Orleans* by De Stefano (2019), the narrative of American music has often been simplified to a racialized binary. However, the Southeast's history tells a story of diversity that is seldom

explored. Specifically, in Louisiana, Italians who were lynched and resided in African American neighborhoods were also among some of the early pioneers of blues music.

Moreover, the persistence of these cultural elements prompts a deeper reflection on the constructed nature of social roles and identities. It calls us to question long-held beliefs about gender roles and the impact of segregating music along racial lines. What truths have been obscured by the mass production and commodification of culture? How might our understanding of gender, race, and music shift if we dismantle these constructed and commodified narratives and instead embrace the full spectrum of our collective history?

As we delve into the sexualization of female recording artists and the broader discourse on empowerment and identity, these questions become crucial. They challenge us to re-examine our perceptions and consider how historical oversimplifications have shaped not only the music industry but also our understanding of ourselves and each other. In fully acknowledging the intricacies within the rich musical composition of American cultural history, we open the door to a more comprehensive and truthful narrative, one that honors the complexity of our shared story and fosters a deeper understanding of the invisible forces that shape our lives and identities.

Sexualization and Objectification and the Modern Music Industry

As cited in Ward's (2016) *Media and Sexualization: State of Empirical Research, 1995–2015*, the APA Task Force's (2007) broader conceptualization of sexualization is referenced beyond mere sexual objectification. The APA Task Force defines sexualization as a condition where an individual's worth is predominantly derived from their sexual appeal or behaviors to the detriment of other qualities; where a person is judged by an overly narrow standard of physical attractiveness equated with being sexy; where an individual is objectified, or treated as an object for others' sexual use; or where sexuality is inappropriately ascribed to a

person (as cited in Ward, 2016). This definition situates the sexualization of girls and women as a widespread cultural issue, manifesting across various mediums, including clothing, toys, media content, and interpersonal interactions.

The music industry's sexualization of women can be traced back to social changes regarding women's roles and expectations that originated after the Industrial Revolution—this period marked a critical turning point in the standardization and commercialization of female beauty standards and the devaluing of domestic labor. As women saw their social value diminish and men's increase, they were set to compete for men and their requisite economic stability. Appearance became a way to win this competition. Wolf (2002) explains that the advent of mass manufacturing and widespread communication avenues made these beauty ideals widely accessible. As a result, if not naturally present, beauty was increasingly viewed as a commodity that could be purchased, placing significant importance on women's appearance and creating billions of dollars in profit. This phenomenon, intertwined with the entrenched economic dependency on men and the culturally endorsed belief in women's primary roles as caregivers and homemakers, fostered an environment where sexualization emerged as a socially acceptable norm in the quest for economic security. In a society where women's worth is frequently measured by their physical appearance, women's sexuality becomes a tool commodified to sell confidence to men and, paradoxically, to foster insecurity among women. Systemic gender inequalities and economic dependencies exacerbate this cycle of commodification and insecurity.

The contemporary market is inundated with products overwhelmingly targeting women to improve their appearance. This trend emphasizes women's looks, which often necessitates considerable disposable income. For many women, maintaining their appearance becomes an "investment," encompassing makeup, fashion, jewelry, hair care, and tanning in the economic

survival competition for a man. This phenomenon reveals a deeper issue: Our economy thrives on exploiting women's insecurities and the ingrained expectation to conform to an idealized standard of beauty and objectify oneself for acceptance and centering male desires.

This financial strain is exacerbated for women because, on average, they earn less than men, yet face higher costs related to meeting the social expectations of appearance maintenance, including cosmetics, fashion, and personal care products. Additionally, other gender-specific financial burdens extend to essential feminine hygiene products and the disproportionate costs associated with childbirth and child-rearing. This economic and social landscape highlights the deep-seated inequalities that perpetuate women's financial and emotional exploitation in a society that prioritizes the appearance of women over all else and the social constructs that facilitate the normalization of the objectification and sexualization of women.

It is impossible to look at any issue from a single intersectional perspective. For example, new research shows that the disproportionate rates of fibroids and uterine cancer seen in Black women are linked to the use of hair relaxers (White et al., 2022). These chemicals, which are often used to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards of straight hair, disproportionately affect Black women by exposing them to harmful substances. This highlights the intersection of race and beauty standards, showing how Eurocentric ideals can have severe health implications for women of color, and disproportionately Black women who are often forced to conform to these standards under the racist guise of "professionalism." Moreover, as women age, procedures like Botox, Lasik, and Juvederm become ways to continue competing for a man's attention, revealing the additional pressure of ageism in maintaining appearance. This multi-faceted pressure underscores the complex and pervasive nature of societal beauty standards and thus

sexualization, which exploit women's insecurities across different intersections of race, age, and gender, perpetuating a cycle of physical, financial, and emotional strain.

In understanding the dynamics surrounding female recording artists, the exploration of sexualization and objectification within the music industry is crucial. Paasonen et al. (2021), *What counts as objectification*, explain that sexualization involves portraying individuals, especially women, sexually or attributing sexualized characteristics to them. This practice creates a convoluted relationship between self-empowerment and adherence to patriarchal desires, blurring the line between a woman asserting her sexual agency and contributing to her own oppression. The cultural shifts marked by "pornification" and "sexualization" have set the stage for the objectification of women in popular culture, influencing female recording artists' presentation and public perception.

As explained by Paasonen et al. (2021), objectification, often used synonymously with sexualization, involves treating a human being as a thing, devoid of agency and control over their perception and treatment. This concept comprises appearance, beauty, bodies, sex, and social power. It varies significantly in application, from slavery to advertisement, and each context results in different social effects and power dynamics. Notably, Paasonen et al. noticed that the notion of self-objectification is challenged in cases like Kim Kardashian, who leveraged her own sexualization through a leaked sex tape into a billion-dollar empire, questioning whether one can truly objectify oneself given that subjects, unlike objects, possess agency.

Lieb's work in *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry* (2018) offers an overview of the lifecycle of female pop stars, highlighting a trend where they often experience a shorter span of fame and are compelled to prioritize their physical appearance over their talent. Lieb notes that this focus on sexual appeal and beauty, driven by public scrutiny and

objectification, contrasts starkly with the career trajectories of male artists, who are not primarily judged on their physical appearance. Male recording artists do not have to navigate the complexities of centering their appearance, such as make-up, body type, aging, fashion, and respectability politics that obligate women to toe the line between being sexy enough but not too sexy, and so on.

To deepen the understanding of the effects of sexualization in the media, Ward's (2016) *Media and sexualization: State of empirical research, 1995–2015,* a comprehensive review of empirical studies spanning two decades illuminates the pervasive impact of media sexualization on society. Analyzing over 100 publications, Ward found that exposure to sexualized media content is strongly linked to a host of negative outcomes including increased body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, endorsement of sexist beliefs, and a greater tolerance for sexual violence towards women. Notably, this exposure also leads to diminished perceptions of women's competence, morality, and humanity among both genders.

Ward (2016) takes a moment to emphasize the distinction between sexualization and being sexual, explicating that sexualization should not be conflated with sexual expression or desire. Instead, it is a form of sexism that reduces individuals to mere body parts for others' sexual gratification, disregarding their needs, interests, or desires. However, is it possible for a woman being sexual and exploring her sexuality to be able to exist in our existing social narrative and confines without being sexualized? For example, although blues women like Bessie Smith and Ma’ Rainey were singing empowering lyrics that encouraged sexual agency, they were sexualized by white hegemonic society. Moreover, despite Meg thee Stallion and Cardi B’s intention to co-construct empowerment through normalizing women talking about and being sexual in the song “WAP,” in a sea of songs where men are praised for their sexual lyrics,

they received significant backlash from critics who even suggested something may be medically wrong with the female recording artist (Robart, 2020). More explicitly, is it possible for women to have the freedom of being sexual without inherent sexualization in a patriarchal society? Moreover, how does intersectionality affect one's relationship to the freedom of sexuality? It seems one's proximity to power aligns with their proximity to freedom of sexual expression.

Exploring the impact of female recording artists, studies reveal that sexual objectification is rampant in music videos, where women are significantly more likely than men to be depicted in a sexually provocative manner. A study cited by Ward (2016) from Aubrey & Frisby's (2011) *Sexual objectification in music videos: A content analysis comparing gender and genre* found that a substantial majority of music videos by female artists contain elements of sexual objectification. This visual representation shows how women often work to perpetuate gender stereotypes and even influence our collective cognitive processing. This is because, as Ward finds, research indicates that sexually objectified images of women are processed cognitively more like objects than humans, highlighting the dehumanizing effect of such media portrayals. Therefore, the sexualization and objectification of women in the media, particularly within the music industry, have far-reaching consequences on social perceptions of women, affecting their internalized self-view and contributing to a culture that devalues and dehumanizes them. This may also directly impact actual violence against women.

However, reflecting on how talent scouts and producers have historically shaped, orchestrated, and perpetuated stereotypes in the music industry raises questions about female recording artists' agency in determining their music videos or broader public personas. With predominantly white men still at the helm and exacerbated by the social context, women are

often expected to adhere to prescriptive behaviors and personas in order to be successful and "make it" in the industry.

Further emphasizing the pervasive nature of objectification in the music industry, a comprehensive content analysis spanning various genres — including Rap, Country, Adult Contemporary, Rock, Rhythm and blues (R&B)/Hip-Hop, and Pop — reveals telling trends. According to Flynn et al. (2016), women are consistently the primary targets of objectification in music lyrics. The study also found that male artists are more frequently the source of this objectification, often portraying others, particularly women, as objects. However, it is notable that female artists, despite being underrepresented in the most popular songs, are likelier to engage in self-objectification than their male counterparts. This pattern reflects the complex dynamics of gender roles and expectations within the music industry, where women often navigate a fine line between agency and adherence to social norms that commodify their bodies and sexuality and, more often than not, unknowingly work to perpetuate the hegemonic patriarchal narrative.

Moreover, Visser et al. (2022), who developed the Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale (ESS-R) found that women, unlike their male counterparts, self-objectify at a higher rate and often perceive this self-objectification as empowering. This aligns with Ward's (2016) findings that show women self-objectify in the media at a higher rate and leads to several critical questions: Does the disproportionality in objectification lead women to accept it as normal? Are women socialized to self-objectify based on their social position, conditioned to feel empowered by such actions? Could this be a scenario where a false sense of empowerment is created—where women prefer to self-objectify as a means of control, adopting an "I would rather do it myself than have someone else do it" approach?

Although female recording artists are significantly more sexualized than their male counterparts, women are not objectified or sexualized at the same rate. Griffen et al. (2023) provide a critical analysis of why Black women are disproportionately overly sexualized. This echoes the legacy of “race records” and the racialization of music genres, with pop being represented mostly by white women and R&B/Hip-Hop more widely represented by Black women. Griffen et al. (2023) explain that representations of sexuality in R&B/Hip-Hop are heavily influenced by racial and gender norms. For Black artists in R&B/Hip-Hop, hypersexualization is intertwined with masculine norms of sexual power and dominance, a legacy of the Jezebel stereotype and male-dominated production influences. This contrasts with the less explicit, more metaphorical depictions of sexuality often found in pop music, dominated by white artists. This exploration indicates the need for discussions through an intersectional lens about how historical perspectives on women's roles and sexualization impact contemporary female artists and their interaction with the world and internalization of their ideas of themselves.

To deepen the understanding of why Black women are disproportionately objectified or sexualized, it is critical to explore the origins and enduring impact of the "Jezebel" stereotype. In *Revisiting the Jezebel Stereotype: The Impact of Target Race on Sexual Objectification*, Anderson et al. (2018) elucidate that this stereotype portrays Black women as inherently sexual and promiscuous, casting them as seductive and alluring by nature, thus reducing their identity to mere objects of sexual desire. This stereotype's roots extend back to the era of slavery in the United States, where it served as a mechanism to rationalize the sexual exploitation of enslaved Black women. By framing them as naturally lascivious, their abusers found justification for their actions, simultaneously victimizing and vilifying these women.

This trope not only facilitated the justification of abuse by white men but also kindled resentment among white women, who perceived Black women as inherent seductresses. At this same time, social narratives began to celebrate white women as paragons of motherhood and virtue, and Black women were painted as their antithesis: hypersexual beings available for the sexual gratification of others. This dichotomy not only dehumanizes Black women but also perpetuates racial and sexual hierarchies by contrasting Black femininity against an idealized white purity of motherhood and virtue, thereby polarizing them and preventing unity among women. Understanding the "Jezebel" stereotype's deep-rooted history and ongoing impact is crucial for unpacking the complex dynamics at play in the music industry and beyond, shedding light on the systemic challenges and stereotypes faced by female artists, and the disproportionate sexualization and objectification of Black women.

Misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey in 2008 while writing her dissertation at Emory University, describes the specific anti-Black, racist misogyny that Black women — and people perceived as Black women — experience (Babineau, 2023). Bailey combined "misogyny" with "noir," the French word for black and a reference to the film genre, highlighting how these negative representations frequently appear in media. This concept is essential for understanding how such stereotypes, including the "Jezebel" stereotype, persist and affect the lives of Black women in various domains, including the music industry.

An intersectional example of the racialized sexualization of women can be seen through two famous women who had the unfortunate luck to come into the orbit of Justin Timberlake–Britney Spears and Janet Jackson. Both women experienced public scrutiny because of the male pop star. Britney Spears, a young star framed within a narrative of purity and virginity, faced intense public backlash when Timberlake revealed their sexual relationship and

that she was not a virgin on a radio show. Despite the fact that it takes two, Spears bore the brunt of the criticism, emblematic of social tendencies to police and infantilize white women's sexuality while holding men to a markedly different standard. This same idea of infantilization that surrounds white womanhood ultimately saw Spears placed under a conservatorship under the control of her father–a white man, illustrating how social perceptions of purity and virtue can have profound, real-world consequences on women's autonomy. She was competent enough to make money for her father but not to keep the money for herself and have autonomy–even being prevented from the choice to have another child. Justin continued with his career, carrying no stigma for not waiting until marriage or for revealing intimate information about Spears. He was allowed to shave his curls off without being accused of losing his mental functioning and never had to be placed under the care of another man.

Conversely, just two years after Justin's exposure of Spears on the radio, Janet Jackson's career was markedly impacted by the 2004 Super Bowl incident, in which Justin Timberlake exposed her breast during a live performance. This exemplified the stark contrast in how society responds to the objectification, sexualization, and policing of Black women's bodies compared to their white male counterparts. During a performance, Justin tore her dress as part of the act which accidentally exposed her breast in the process–this was not planned. The fopaux was ubiquitous on the news, in the media, and in conversations nationwide immediately afterward. In the aftermath, Timberlake's career flourished while Jackson faced significant backlash, including demands for a public apology. Justin did the action, whereas Janet was acted on. However, she was expected to apologize and was shamed for the accident. Despite Timberlake's active role in the wardrobe malfunction, Jackson shouldered most of the public and industry scrutiny. The incident demonstrates how Black women are disproportionately blamed and sexualized in

situations where their white male counterparts are readily absolved of responsibility and is a direct reflection of misogynoir and how the “Jezebel” stereotype continues to show up in our society. Just as before, Timberlake's career, unlike Jackson's, suffered minimal fallout, underlining a pervasive double standard that privileges white male actions and narratives over those of women, particularly Black women.

These examples underscore the necessity of an intersectional analysis in understanding the complex layers of racialized sexualization and objectification within the entertainment industry. They reveal a troubling pattern where women, subjected to stringent social scrutiny, face life, and career-altering consequences while men like Timberlake continue to enjoy expansive creative freedom and professional success. It calls into question whether women can be sexual without being sexualized, as the standards placed on women of virtue and piety are seen as antithetical to sexual freedom. This disparity not only showcases the gendered and racial biases entrenched in the music and entertainment industry but also calls for a more holistic feminist critique that addresses the intersectional dimensions of sexualization and objectification.

Paradox in the Empowerment of Women Recording Artists

Before delving into this idea of sexualization as empowerment, it is essential to acknowledge a potential paradox. These artists might facilitate empowerment through their unapologetic embrace of sex and even sexualization, yet simultaneously, this might uphold misogynistic stereotypes and desires. Rappaport (1981) emphasizes the need for a model that embraces this paradox, allowing for divergent reasoning and multiple, contradictory answers rather than seeking a single solution to complex social issues. This dichotomy is crucial in understanding the role of women recording artists and their influence in society – they can be

both agents of empowerment and unwitting perpetrators of entrenched gender norms that subconsciously center men's desires.

Hip Hop: Trap Feminism and "Sissy" Bounce

Hip Hop, like its ancestors, Blues and Jazz, has evolved into a domain of creativity, consciousness-raising, and empowerment despite often being criticized for its male-dominated and misogynistic culture. Women within this space have carved out their own narratives of empowerment, as highlighted in Joan Morgan's *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999) and Sesali Bowen's *Bad Fat Black Girl: Notes from a Trap Feminist* (2021). These works offer a view of hip-hop and trap feminism that addresses themes of empowerment amidst objectification.

Morgan (1999) speaks to the need to address self-esteem and objectification within hip-hop culture, acknowledging its role in both reflecting and shaping gender relations. Morgan and Bowen (2021) celebrate female rappers' transformative role in redefining Black femininity. Bowen speaks particularly to the "Hot Girl Summer" cultural phenomenon led by artists like Megan Thee Stallion and City Girls. This movement symbolizes self-confidence and empowerment, particularly for women, challenging the historical policing of Black girls' and women's identities.

Payne and Halliday's (2023) exploration of Megan Thee Stallion's influence further extends this discussion. They analyze how she balances academic pursuits with sexually explicit content, exemplifying a model of 'ratchet-respectability.' The Daily Campus (2016) reported that Brittany Cooper defines "ratchet respectability" as a concept that encompasses a spectrum of African acts that either champion or combat something, including pushing boundaries to the point of breakdown or "doing the most"—termed 'ratchet'—combined with 'respectability'-

compliance with hegemonic standards of propriety and decorum. By challenging the rigid norms of respectability politics, “ratchet respectability” allows Black women to assert their individuality and autonomy by embracing all facets of their identities.

Looking for sexualization alone would miss the multifaceted approach taken by Megan Thee Stallion; integration is pivotal in understanding her influence– the coexistence of these diverse facets, traditionally seen as mutually exclusive, makes her work empowering (Payne & Halliday, 2023). Just as blues women used their music to express a range of experiences and emotions—often addressing themes of autonomy, desire, and resilience—Megan Thee Stallion continues this tradition through her own multifaceted work; however, like the blues women before her, her work is often reduced to mere sexualization

Morgan (1999) and Bowen (2021) acknowledge the delicate balance between empowerment through sexual autonomy and defying respectability politics, as well as the reinforcement of social structures these genres perpetuate. For example, the commercialized themes of "bad bitches" and “chickenheads,” where the empowerment narrative can intersect with capitalist and patriarchal exploitation. Is it genuinely empowering to use men for what you want? Can a woman find empowerment in self-objectification and sexualization?

An offshoot of hip-hop, Bounce music, began to form in New Orleans in the 1990s and marks a significant cultural development within hip-hop with echoes of its blues and Jazz foremothers. This unique subgenre, often led by queer and trans artists along with women, provides a vibrant example of how music and dance, which may be sexualized from an outsider's perspective, can offer safe spaces for marginalized communities and work toward empowerment. The term "sissy bounce," coined by Fensterstock (2012), aptly describes this wave of openly gay, queer, or trans rappers who utilize their performances as a medium to express and celebrate their

sexual and gender identities. Artists like Sissy Nobby, Katey Red, and Big Freedia have been instrumental in this movement, shifting the visibility and acceptance of queer identities within the hip-hop realm, challenging common stereotypes of misogyny and masculinity within the genre.

With its deep roots in New Orleans culture, Bounce music challenges and redefines traditional gender norms, particularly in dance. Reid-Merritt (2023) explains that dance can often be a communal space for expression and community building in places influenced by West African traditions like New Orleans. Furthermore, Lauron J. Kehrer's research (2023) explores the intricate relationship between Bounce music and its dance, called shaking, and LGBTQ+ identities, highlighting how this genre, especially in the aftermath of events like Hurricane Katrina, has evolved into a form of artistic expression that fosters gender exploration, community resilience, and healing.

Bounce music is inextricably tied to it’s dance, shaking. Shaking is often called “twerking” due to Miley Cyrus’s nationwide popularization of the word. Although twerking falls under the category of shaking, shaking in New Orleans embodies all the myriad ways to shake one’s body, such as legs, shoulders, and bottom. Reid-Merritt's work (2023) sheds light on the significance of dances like shaking and twerking within the Black community, tracing their historical roots and cultural impact to West Africa as manifestations of celebrations and community expression. Reid-Merrit explains how African dance often highlights “leading body parts”--hips/pelvis/(butt), chest/shoulders, legs/feet, arms/hands, and the head/neck through movement in isolation. Some of these dance moves, often controversial and seen as sexualized by mainstream society, are deeply entrenched in African-descendant people’s, especially Black women's expression, and have been a part of the African Diaspora descendant communities for

centuries.

Kehrer (2023) also delves into the challenges Bounce artists face in mainstream media, with particular attention to Big Freedia's journey in navigating gender and sexual identity. The "sissy style" bounce and other Black queer dance forms, such as voguing and J-setting, combine traditional styles with innovative adaptations to express new racialized and gendered meanings. These dance forms enable performers to seamlessly transition between femininity and masculinity, reflecting the diverse spectrum of Black queer gender performances. This also highlights the need not to sexualize movement or dance but instead uplift it as its cultural art.

Analyzing hip-hop, trap, and bounce music through a decolonial intersectional lens that acknowledges historical and cultural contexts is crucial. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how these genres provide safe spaces and empowerment by challenging respectability politics and embracing the multifaceted identities of Black women and LGBTQ+ individuals. It shows that sometimes, we sexualize actions or movements through a lens of hegemony and out of cultural context and that movement and seemingly taboo lyrics can be a practice of freedom. The legacy of blues women, who used music as a platform for sexual liberation and community building, resonates in women's contemporary expressions of hip-hop. These genres, particularly in the face of being sexualized due to their embrace of the African aesthetic, offer a powerful means for marginalized artists to reclaim their narratives and challenge social norms. Can and should art forms be sexualized at all?

Research into Current Female Recording Artists

The history and context of female recording artists in the United States were explored to provide a critical and fuller picture before analyzing research into current female recording artists. This provides a richer lens to explore the context in which current studies are nested.

In the thesis study "Women in Popular Music Media: Empowered or Exploited?" by Jaime Glantz (2011), the focus was on exploring the impact of popular music media's portrayal of gender and sexuality on contemporary women. Specifically, Glantz inquired, "How does popular music media's portrayal of gender and sexuality impact the lives of contemporary women?" (p. 7). The findings revealed that a majority of respondents, primarily female college students from a New York University, leaned towards a radical culturalist viewpoint, perceiving the hypersexualized representation of women in popular music as oppressive.

However, the study's scope raises concerns about the breadth of perspectives captured. The survey, open to students of various ages, demographics, and majors, however, only college students, primarily centered on a question that did not explicitly reference sexualization or hypersexualization: "I believe popular music's representation of women is a) oppressing to women; b) empowering to women; c) Of no consequence to women; d) prefer not to answer." (Glantz, 2011, p. 31). This question, while indicative of general attitudes toward women's representation in popular music, lacks a direct mention of sexualization or hypersexualization. Consequently, the claim that a majority of respondents viewed hypersexualization as oppressive to women might not be fully supported by the data, given that none of the survey questions explicitly named sexualization or hypersexualization. This omission points to a potential gap in the study, suggesting a need for more explicit questioning to gauge women's perceptions of sexualization in popular music accurately with a more diverse population.

Through the use of focus groups, Faluyi (2015) delves into the objectification within female hip-hop culture, highlighting a double standard in the representation of Black women compared to their non-Black counterparts. This study emphasizes the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and the need for a more balanced portrayal of Black womanhood in the media.

Payne and West's (2022) research on the influence of hip-hop culture on Black college women at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) uses HHF (Hip Hop Feminism) as a lens to explore the construction of gendered racial and sexual identities. The study reveals through interviews how participants draw from diverse representations of Black womanhood in hip-hop to construct their multifaceted identities, often contending with hypersexualization and respectability politics. This reflects the complex dynamic where female recording artists' portrayals in Hip Hop both challenge and reinforce certain stereotypes and gender norms and highlights the importance of interpretation and the extent to which one may internalize the message and then act on the world.

In her qualitative study, Garoutte (2022) performs a thematic analysis of the lyrics from Cardi B and Meg Thee Stallion's hit song "WAP," identifying three main themes: intersectional feminism, objectifying men, and forced role reversal in power dynamics. Garoutte argues that "WAP" represents an empowerment narrative, where Cardi B promotes intersectional feminism by advocating for women's right to pleasure and reversing the male gaze to a female one, thereby reframing sexualization as a form of empowerment. This is a significant departure from traditional perspectives, as it portrays women as active participants in their sexual experiences rather than passive objects. This calls into question the need to delineate being sexualized and sexualizing, in particular, for one's own pleasure. As previously discussed, Ward (2016) states that there is a marked difference between being sexual and being sexualized. However, to certain people–especially those who see women's roles as being virtuous mothers who do not find pleasure in sex– it may be indistinguishable.

Garoutte's (2022) study also notes the song's role in objectifying men, a reversal of traditional gender dynamics. This reversal is seen as a potential tool for increasing social

awareness and empathy among men, as it exposes them to feelings of objectification typically experienced by women. She asserts that this role reversal could lead to greater gender equity, particularly in sexual contexts, by challenging social norms and double standards.

Moreover, Garoutte (2022) further suggests that Cardi B's approach in "WAP" challenges the social script that discourages women from openly discussing sexual preferences, thereby empowering women to be gatekeepers of their own bodies and sexual experiences. This also challenges respectability politics, making space for other ways of being outside of the hegemonic view of respectability and female sexuality.

Furthermore, Garoutte (2022) explores the practical implications of this sexual expression–questioning whether it can effectively combat issues such as sexual abuse and promote consent. The song challenges traditional male-dominated rap narratives, allowing women to express sexual autonomy. Garoutte concludes that Cardi B's approach makes her an intersectional feminist, as she empowers women across various intersections of identity.

The idea that women are less interested in sex than men is a cultural construct rather than a scientific fact. This belief is deeply rooted in patriarchal values that traditionally valorize male sexuality while simultaneously policing and shaming female sexual expression. In a society where women's sexual desires are suppressed or stigmatized, the perception often arises that women are inherently non-sexual or primarily sexual in response to male desire. This flawed perspective can lead to dangerous misconceptions about consent, perpetuating the harmful notion that women's sexual reluctance or refusal is expected or normal, thereby trivializing instances of sexual coercion or assault. When racial dynamics intersect with these gendered stereotypes, the consequences can be even more harmful and disproportionate across racial identities. Garoutte (2022) explains that by encouraging and normalizing the expression of female sexuality and

recognizing women as sexual agents, society can begin to dismantle these harmful stereotypes. Acknowledging that women, like men, have a diverse range of sexual desires and the capacity for sexual agency is a vital step towards fostering a culture that respects women's autonomy and consent.

Although this study brings valuable insights into the lyrics, more is needed to help elucidate how women feel about the song. How do women interact with the song, interpret it, and then act on the world? Do women feel empowered, or do they feel sexualized? Can women feel both empowered and sexualized at once? Is there a need to delineate being sexualized and sexualizing, in particular, centering one's own pleasure?

In *Sexual objectification in music videos: A content analysis comparing gender and genre* conducted by Aubrey and Frisby (2011) highlights the differential sexual objectification of men and women in music videos, aligning with objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, as cited by Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). This study highlighted that female artists frequently experience greater sexual objectification than their male counterparts through visual elements such as revealing attire and suggestive gazes, reinforcing social views that prioritize women's bodies and appearance. This phenomenon is further exemplified by music videos featuring male artists, where women are often portrayed in decorative, non-contributory roles, echoing Mulvey's (1975, as cited by Aubrey & Frisby, 2011) concept of the male gaze, which asserts that men possess more power to objectify through visual dominance. The study also noted that male artists seldom display their own sexuality; instead, they externalize sexual allure through female extras in their videos, promoting themselves through the objectification of women's bodies. This trend suggests a broader cultural narrative that equates female worth with physical attractiveness, imposing stricter appearance standards on female artists than their male counterparts. In genre

comparisons, country music videos were found to be less sexually objectifying, possibly reflecting the genre's conservative values regarding gender roles, effectively limiting sexual expression of women in this genre. However, the study found minimal differences in the level of sexual objectification between R&B/hip-hop and pop music. The analysis suggests that while R&B/hip-hop videos do feature sexual objectification, it often involves background dancers or characters rather than the artists themselves, a nuance that raises questions about the critique leveled specifically at this genre. Furthermore, it reveals that pop female recording artists are likelier to engage in self-objectification. Aubrey & Frisby (2011) note that this finding raises questions about gender dynamics within genres, as R&B/hip hop videos often objectify women through background characters, whereas pop music, with a higher proportion of white female artists, features more self-objectification by artists themselves and, therefore work to perpetuate gendered norms.

Looking deeper into the sexualization of women across musical genres, Griffin et al. (2023) conducted a study, *There's Some Whores in this House: An Examination of Female Sexuality in R&B/Hip Hop and Pop Music*, analyzing R&B/hip hop and pop lyrics from female recording artists over 30 years (1991-2021). They note, "This study fills an important gap in the literature by providing a thirty-year examination of sexual messages in R&B/hip hop and pop music" (p. 4). Their research contributes to understanding racial differences in representations of female sexuality and how these messages contribute to the construction of female sexual identity among girls and women.

Griffin et al. (2023) identify themes such as views on promiscuity, female agency around pleasure, metaphorical or future sex, and sexual prowess, highlighting how these themes differ across genres. They emphasize that while such themes are common in both R&B/Hip Hop and

Pop, the content and context of the messages vary significantly, influenced by factors like race, gender norms, and industry dynamics. Their analysis of R&B/Hip-Hop lyrics reveals a trend of unrestricted sexual expression centered around autonomy and pleasure. This genre allows female artists to express their sexuality. Moreover, these lyrics often confront the Jezebel stereotype, the racist trope deeply intertwined with the intersectional identities of race and gender.

In contrast, Griffen et al. (2023) found that pop music, represented by mostly white women, often frames sexuality within Judeo-Christian values, portraying virginity before marriage as ideal and any references to sexuality or sexual behavior as temporary lapses in judgment, i.e., being drunk, overcome with emotion. This approach perpetuates gendered stereotypes that women should be less interested in sex except for marriage, lack agency, and need a man to "lead the household." Furthermore, it reveals the deeply ingrained racial and patriarchal biases that dictate acceptable forms of female sexuality, where white women are often portrayed as innocent and lacking in agency, a stark contrast to the hypersexualization of Black women. This creates a polarized spectrum of sexualization within the music industry, where the portrayal and perception of artists' sexuality and their intentions vary significantly based on their racial and intersectional identities. These findings also align with Aubrey and Frisby (2011) who found that women were more likely to self-objectify in pop music–effectively perpetuating gendered stereotypes and deepening social constructs.

Furthermore, Griffen et al. (2023) discovered that in over thirty years, they observed an increase in sexual messages in Pop music, shifting from metaphorical to more explicit and direct discussions of sex and female sexual pleasure. However, this transition raises concerns about the commercialization of female sexuality, when does it become a marketing tool rather than a form of genuine expression (Quinn, 2010; as cited by Lieb, 2018)?

In their research, Anderson et al. (2018) explored the impact of race on the sexual objectification of women, hypothesizing that Black women would face greater objectification, especially under conditions of sexualization. The study aimed to understand objectification through two lenses: the objectifying gaze and implicit associations with animal, object, or human attributes. White participants were found to objectify Black women more intensely than white women, particularly when the women were sexualized. This effect aligns with the Jezebel stereotype, suggesting that sexualized depictions of Black women in the media contribute significantly to their objectification. The research enriches this understanding by showing that objectification is not merely about visual attention but also involves dehumanizing associations, positioning Black women closer to animals and objects than to being perceived as fully human. This groundbreaking study calls for further exploration into how educational and social norms perpetuate harmful stereotypes and emphasizes the need for critical examination and change in the representation of Black women in media and culture.

Comparing Lil' Kim's "How Many Licks Does It Take" with Britney Spears's "Oops!... I Did It Again," both released in 2000, illustrates this contrast. Lil' Kim's lyrics openly express her sexuality, centered on her pleasure and agency, whereas Britney Spears, despite her suggestive performances, publicly maintained a persona of virginity at the start of her career. Spears's portrayal in the song is characterized by feigned innocence and sexual allure. She sings about accidentally leading a man on and "playing with [their] heart, [and getting] lost in the game" (2000). This showcases the complex dynamics of sexualization in music and how the sexualization of female recording artists is not monolithic. Furthermore, many artists may be sexualized for being sexual. It is important to discern what can empower, what can oppress, and the effect of racialized stereotypes.

Masterson's (2023) study on Janis Joplin's posthumous career further exemplifies how media narratives can reinforce gendered norms, particularly in the portrayal of deceased female celebrities. By depicting Joplin as a troubled and vulnerable figure who was insecure with her appearance, the media narrative effectively diminishes her autonomy, framing her transgressive behavior as a consequence of her vulnerabilities rather than as deliberate choices. This portrayal not only undermines Joplin's talent and pioneering role in rock music but also perpetuates stereotypes that center appearance and infantilize femininity, suggesting that white women specifically lack control over their circumstances. This narrative strategy aligns with Griffen et al.'s (2023) findings on the portrayal of white female recording artists, where sexualized lyrics are often reframed as lapses in judgment, implying a lack of agency.

In the realm of country music, a study, *Girl in a Country Song: Gender Roles and Objectification of Women in Popular Country Music across 1990 to 2014,* by Rasmussen and Densley (2017) analyzed 750 songs from 1990 to 2014 and uncovered a consistent portrayal of women in traditional family roles, alongside their objectification. Notably, the 2010s witnessed a trend toward more frequent objectification and a diminished portrayal of women's empowerment in country music lyrics, predominantly in songs performed by male artists.

This trend aligns with historical research that combines the racialization of "motherhood"—with white women expected to embody virtue and piety—and the shaping of country music as predominantly white. This framing often restricts women's narratives to roles of either being objectified or serving as mothers, leaving significant gaps in the broader story of womanhood.

Schick (2014) explores the troubling dynamics of pop music’s effect on sexual objectification and male dominance, specifically through a middle school drama program's

performance of Britney Spears's "Hit Me Baby One More Time.” The study, utilizing ethnographic and intertextual methods, reveals how such performances, approved and chosen by professional educators, inadvertently contribute to the normalization of sexist behaviors and gender-based violence. The decision by the teacher to theme the production around Las Vegas, and then casting older boys in dominating roles, and girls as objectified sex objects or background showgirls, reflects a broader issue of adult facilitation in socializing gender inequality and sexual objectification. This is shown through the absence of critique or intervention from parents, administrators, and other teachers, who seemed to endorse these problematic representations where all except one underage middle school girl in the production were portrayed as objects of male desire and servitude. Schick's findings add more understanding to how the interaction with a song and its underlying themes can lead to unintentional social co-construction that begins to change society to reflect the media itself. For example, the interactions between, teacher, students, parents and administrators show that interacting within the medium creates the fabric of society itself. Through approval, modeling, and creation, children were being conditioned to normalize the objectification of girls and women. Furthermore, it is an example of how white women may perpetuate gendered stereotypes through sexualization that contribute to the greater society. Finally, it reveals how ingrained this social conditioning is if even adult educators are completely unaware of the stereotypes and problematic behavior they are fostering, facilitating, and perpetuating.

Not only do female pop stars have to contend with an industry that disproportionately objectifies and sexualizes them, but when they attempt to be feminist, it becomes commodified and commercialized. The commodification of feminist ideals, particularly through the concept of “Girl Power,” poses a question: Does turning a movement into a commodity strip it of its power

to empower? The emergence of “Girl Power” in the early 1990s with the Riot Grrrls, a feminist punk rock movement, marked the beginning of this concept as a form of anti-capitalist expression. According to Hains (2013), this movement envisioned empowerment as a do-it-yourself (DIY) project, achievable through creating subcultural texts like zines and music. However, this narrative shifted when the Spice Girls adopted “Girl Power” in the late 1990s, repackaging it into a mainstream commercial phenomenon. This new version of “Girl Power,” while promoting normative femininity and positioning girls as consumers, contrasted sharply with the Riot Grrrls' original vision.

Despite these differences, the Spice Girls' “Girl Power” version significantly impacted the mainstream, influencing other musicians and the media. Hains' (2013) research focuses on whether the chronological encounter with the Spice Girls or Riot Grrrls influenced individuals' perceptions of feminism. She discovered that many girls and women might not have been exposed to any form of feminism; ironically, even the Riot Grrrls' version of “Girl Power” had not been commodified and popularized by the Spice Girls. This mainstreaming, although commodified and problematic due to its focus on girls’ appearance, primed a generation of girls for a feminist perspective they might otherwise have missed.

Does any discussion on women's empowerment, even if commodified or a manifestation of male desires, contribute to the progression toward genuine empowerment? Are these continual transformations and discussions steps closer to a more profound understanding and realization of what women’s empowerment can truly be? Is it less about the message and commodification and more about the iterative metamorphosis result of how women then act on the world?

These studies demonstrate the necessity for different research methodologies that seek diverse women's voices to share their experiences and perceptions regarding empowerment and

sexualization in music. Incorporating mixed methods through a survey can shed light on the impacts of musical representation on women's lives. This approach is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of female recording artists' influence in shaping social norms and personal empowerment perceptions according to women.

Additionally, these studies highlight the importance of adopting an Intersectional and Decolonial lens in this research. Such a perspective is crucial for delving into the complexities of women's sexualization in the music industry, ensuring that diverse voices and experiences are acknowledged and understood in their full context.

Theoretical Frameworks

Empowerment theory

Understanding if an action empowers an individual, community, or group requires exploring empowerment. According to Rappaport (1981), true empowerment is divergent reasoning that champions diversity, shared resources and power, autonomy, and collaboration. This perspective prompts us to consider whether empowerment emanates from an artist's singular message or the result of the active engagement of diverse communities with the music as they create personal experiences and memories while acting on the world.

Consider the case of TLC's (1999) "No Scrubs." The song's lyrics:

> So no, I don't want your number
>
> No, I don't want to give you mine and
>
> No, I don't want to meet you nowhere
>
> No, I don't want none of your time
>
> - TLC, *No Scrubs*

are a declaration of empowerment through autonomy and choice in dating, encouraging listeners to reject unworthy suitors. While TLC is delivering this message to millions of women

worldwide, the essence of empowerment is arguably realized at the individual level and community levels. Through personal interactions with the song—listening to its message, internalizing its philosophy, and applying it in real life—listeners find empowerment. This individual action and reinterpretation of the song's message in diverse social contexts transform it from a global anthem into a source of personal strength, autonomy, and thus empowerment. On a community level, women may become more collectively supportive of each other instead of dating “scrubs,” leading to community empowerment.

Through a review of theoretical frameworks and measurements of Empowerment, Richardson (2018) created recommendations for measuring empowerment. She advocates for including direct measures of agency—such as the ability to make and act upon one’s own choices—and indirect indicators, like the social and personal impact of these actions. In the context of "No Scrubs," this means looking beyond the song's immediate message of self-respect and autonomy. It involves considering how the song denotes choice and fosters a collective dialogue about gender norms, choice and autonomy in relationships, and personal identity among its listeners.

By examining "No Scrubs" through the lens of Richardson (2018), we see that the song's impact extends beyond a simple message of independence. It involves a complex interaction between the artist’s intentions, the audience's interpretations, and the social context. The song, therefore, becomes a catalyst for a broader discourse on women's rights and agency, reflecting Rappaport’s (1981) view of empowerment as a collective process. This collective process is not only about individual agency but also about the shared experience of challenging and reshaping social norms.

When women, who have historically been blamed for much of their own oppression and trauma surrounding sex, can sing about and dance in a sexually suggestive manner, it provides a space for them to take control of their narratives in a way that shifts away from blame for mistreatment to autonomy, choice, and empowerment. This act of self-expression can be seen as a form of empowerment, where, as Rappaport (1981) suggests, the goal is "to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives" (p. 18). In this context, empowerment through music and dance becomes a tool for women to assert their agency and redefine their experiences on their own terms. As women listen to sexually explicit lyrics and sexualized dancing and act on the world through dialogue and actions, women can control the narrative and feel empowered.

Intersectional Feminism

This research adopts an Intersectional feminist lens, essential for a comprehensive analysis of the empowerment or disempowerment inherent in the sexualization of women and female recording artists. Intersectionality, as DeBlaere et al. (2018) articulate in *Intersectionality applied: Intersectionality is as intersectionality does*, is the critical insight that various social categories like race, class, gender, and sexuality are interlinked, forming an intricate tapestry of social inequities. This theoretical approach ensures a thorough understanding of social and cultural interpretations and how these interpretations can vary based on proximity to social power centers.

The Eurocentric and white supremacist perspectives that have long dominated academia often perpetuate narratives of inferiority, especially towards cultures and research outside this narrow view. Research must aim to amplify women's voices and opinions from diverse intersections, measuring empowerment through a multifaceted lens.

Kimberle Crenshaw's seminal work (1989) on intersectionality, *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics*, highlights the inadequacies of traditional feminist and antiracist approaches in fully capturing the experiences of Black women. Crenshaw argues that the intersection of race and gender leads to a form of oppression greater than the sum of its parts, necessitating reevaluating and restructuring existing analytical frameworks to include these intersecting identities.

In *Feminist theory: From margin to center,* bell hooks (1984) further critiques the idea of a universal female experience, emphasizing the varied and complex realities of women. She asserts that understanding and confronting all forms of social oppression is essential, as they are interconnected and supported by similar institutional structures. hooks also points out the flaws in defining feminism as seeking social equality with ruling-class white men, arguing instead for feminism aimed at ending sexist oppression and reorganizing society to prioritize human development over material and imperialistic desires.

Audre Lorde (2018) adds to this discourse in *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*, by emphasizing the power and redemption of women nurturing each other, challenging the patriarchal fear of genuine connections among women. She advocates for empowerment through unity and self-definition, moving away from patriarchal structures as the sole source of support. Although women as a whole are disproportionately sexualized, as Griffen et al. (2023) showed, women are not all sexualized at equal rates, and the narrative of sexualization is often racialized, which is polarizing to women and prevents unity. This social structure is in place because as long as women are polarized, they are unable to come together to dismantle patriarchy. It will take all of us to reconstruct our current social confines.

Intersectionality allows us a way to acknowledge each other and come together to end all forms of oppression.

Decolonial Perspective

In *What is Decolonial Critique?*, Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2020) describes decolonial critique as a methodology that aims to dismantle the colonial foundations of Western modernity and its hegemony of knowledge, culture, and social norms. He critiques the prevailing Eurocentrism in philosophy and critical theory, pointing out the often defensiveness within academia that either dismisses non-European perspectives as peripheral or superficially includes them without challenging Eurocentric frameworks. He advocates for a decolonial shift, where critique transcends mere addition to the canon and instead becomes a transformative process that values and uplifts non-European knowledge and critiques as essential for understanding and combating coloniality. This shift requires reevaluating the critique's role, emphasizing its connection to decolonial struggles and the necessity of deconstructing the coloniality of knowledge and power.

The contrast between the portrayal of Black and white female recording artists highlights the need for an intersectional and decolnial approach. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of understanding how different cultural contexts shape perceptions of sexuality and empowerment. Reflecting on personal experiences in New Orleans, where dance and bodily movements rooted in West African ancestry are not inherently sexualized, questions arise about the definitions of objectification and sexualization. Maldanado-Torres (2007) emphasizes the need to consider how education, academic scholarship, national culture, and media – domains where modern/colonial attitudes are perpetuated – influence our understanding of these concepts. Therefore, when writing about national culture and the media in the academic sphere, a

decolonial approach is needed to stymie misappropriated stereotypes and Eurocentricly skewed standards.

One aspect of the sexualization of female recording artists is their dance and choreography. When taking a decolonial perspective, one appreciates the importance of dance in the African community. Dance is an integral part of the culture in all Sub-Saharan African countries. As Reid-Merritt (2023) explains, dance in Afro-descendant communities is rooted in traditional African societies and is present in every celebratory occasion, from birth to death. This form of dance, often participatory, invites community members to join in and share spirited energy through movement. The importance of dance in all celebrations shows the multifaceted representations that body movement can have. As the primary instrument in dance, the physical body becomes a unique form of expression. African dance emphasizes total body articulation. Using a decolonial framework that honors African traditions and aesthetics is essential when exploring Afro-descendant cultures to uphold research integrity, understanding, and knowledge.

Reid-Merritt (2023) further elaborates that movement, which might be sexualized within a Eurocentric framework, like shaking the bottom, is a part of the African dance aesthetic. The execution of different body parts, categorized as "leading body parts," becomes the focus of popular dance in the Black community. These movements, integral to African and African American dance, continue to play a significant role in the cultural expression of Afro-descendant communities. However, in the United States, the expression is often sexualized through mainstream culture. This necessitates that art, especially art that is sexualized like dance, is analyzed through a Decolonial feminist lens.

Measuring Intersectionality

Taking an intersectional feminist approach, the study incorporates scaled questions inspired by Scheim and Bauer's (2019) Intersectional Discrimination Index (InDI) to address the challenge of capturing the multifaceted nature of intersectionality without necessitating participants to specify the causes of their experienced marginalization (questions 19 and 20). This innovative approach allows for exploring participants' perceived intersectional oppressions, offering insights into the complex dynamics of proximity to power and perceptions of empowerment.

The final question provided participants with the *Intersectionality: Wheel of Privilege (as observed in the USA)* created by Tessa Watkins and adapted from Sylvia Duckworth and Olena Hankivsky, PhD. Participants could identify themselves as "in the power center," "erased," or "marginalized" depending on how they identified. The questions ranged from homeownership and citizenship to religion. This question was designed to obtain a more holistic picture of how specific intersectionalities might affect one's perception of empowerment.

Measuring Empowerment

Incorporating the concept of measuring empowerment, as discussed by Richardson (2017), into the survey's design is critical for authentically capturing women's perceptions of empowerment in the context of sexualization in the music industry. Richardson's critique of current practices in measuring women's empowerment emphasizes the complexity of empowerment as a construct, arguing for a multifaceted approach that considers agency, choice, and achieving outcomes as dimensions of empowerment while also taking an approach that is culturally and contextually responsive and understanding that empowerment can manifest in various forms. This perspective is particularly relevant to the study, as it seeks to understand how

women perceive and experience empowerment through the lens of female recording artists and their music.

To apply Richardson's (2017) insights, the survey incorporated open-ended questions that allow participants to discuss which music, genres, songs, and artists they find empowering and their views on the sexualization of female recording artists. This method aimed to capture the wide range of ways empowerment can be perceived and experienced. It offers participants an unrestricted platform to express their viewpoints, recognizing that empowerment can take various forms, influenced by personal experiences, social norms, and cultural contexts. This approach ensures that the qualitative data enriches the quantitative findings, offering a deeper understanding of women's perceptions of empowerment and sexualization within the music industry.

Furthermore, Richardson's (2017) recommendations for researchers to adopt a critical lens that accounts for the relationship between individual actions and structural conditions are reflected in the survey's items. By including demographic items that explore the relationship between intersectionality and experiences of empowerment, the survey seeks to explore how different aspects of identity (e.g., race, gender identity, cultural background) relate to how empowerment is experienced and perceived in the context of music and its sexualization. This approach aligns with Richardson’s emphasis on recognizing women's cultural and situational contexts and decision-making environments for a more comprehensive exploration of how empowerment is both individually felt and structurally influenced.

Measuring Sexualization

Incorporating the insights from the Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale (ESS-R) developed by Visser et al. (2022), it is recognized that women may self-objectify at a higher rate and

perceive this self-objectification as an empowering act, a phenomenon not mirrored in male experiences. Given the specific focus of this study on the sexualization and empowerment of female recording artists from the perspective of a diverse group of women, the ESS-R's comprehensive approach to measuring the enjoyment of sexualization offers valuable conceptual understandings. However, access to the individual items on the ESS-R proved to be a challenge, and due to the scale's length and the complexity of using its items in isolation without compromising their integrity and the survey's focus, it was deemed inappropriate to incorporate questions directly from the ESS-R into this survey. However, a few questions on the survey (questions 9-11) were influenced by this work.

Gap in the Research

Most of the research into this topic has been in analyzing trends and lyrics, interviews, focus groups, and limited survey(s). This reveals a gap in hearing from a larger, diverse population of women about what they truly find empowering and what they think about the sexualization of female recording artists and music. I have not found any research that shows what a diverse population of women think about what is being sold to them. What songs do they find empowering? Do they feel empowered when women flip the script and objectify men? Furthermore, much of the research frames the issue within a simplistic Black and white binary, neglecting the rich spectrum of identities that could provide deeper insights. There is a clear need for more inclusive research that explores a wider array of identities to enrich our understanding of these dynamics in the music industry.

Aims and Research Questions

This research explores what women think about the sexualization of female recording artists and their music and what music genres, songs, and artists make them feel empowered.

How do women perceive the sexualization of female recording artists? How does this perception relate to their sense of empowerment? How do different intersectionalities relate to women's perceptions of the sexualization and empowerment narratives presented by female recording artists?

Research Method

A mixed methods approach was utilized to gather the voices of a diverse population of participants–with a focus on women's perspectives. This approach integrated both quantitative (close-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, offering a comprehensive understanding of research problems by combining statistical trends with personal accounts to explore their unique experiences more accurately (Creswell, 2015). This methodology is particularly effective in exploring women's perspectives, providing depth to quantitative data, and enhancing the exploration of observed phenomena. When exploring women's empowerment, Richardson (2017) recommends using qualitative data to explore unique experiences in greater depth–revealing a more nuanced understanding.

Sample

The survey targeted female participants, with the anticipated age range being 18+ years. The study includes a diverse group of women, with a varied distribution of racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, education levels, and so on that reflects the broader population and multiple regions in and outside the United States with 99 total respondents.

The study surveyed 99 participants, encompassing a diverse demographic profile regarding age, educational background, gender identity, and geographical location, see Table 1.1. The education levels among participants ranged from 11 to 28 years of formal education. The distribution was as follows: 11 years (n=1), 12 years (High School degree n=6), 13 years (n=2),

14 years (n=4), 15 years (n=6), 16 years (Bachelor's degree, n=35), 17 years (n=5), 18 years (n=18), 19 years (n=5), 20 years (n=8), 21 years (n=3), 22 years (n=3), 24 years (n=2), and 28 years (n=1).

Table 1.1 Education of Participants

Education (years)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
11	1	1.0
12 (High School degree)	6	6.1
13	2	2.0
14	4	4
15	6	6.1
16 (Bachelor's degree)	35	35.4
17	5	5.1
18	18	18.2
19	5	5.1
20	8	8.1
21	3	3
22	3	3
24	2	2.0
28	1	1.0
total	99	100

Table 1.2 shows the age range of participants was from 19 to 64 years, with specific counts per age group as follows: 19 years (n=2), 20-24 years (n=26), 25-29 years (n=12), 30-34 years (n=16), 35-39 years (n=19), 40-44 years (n=11), 45-49 years (n=7), 50-54 years (n=3), 55-59 years (n=2), and 60-64 years (n=1).

Table 1.2 Age of Participants

Age (years)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
19	2	2.0
20-24	26	26.2
25-29	12	12.1
30-34	16	16.2
35-39	19	19.2
40-44	11	11.1
45-49	7	7.1
50-54	3	3.0
55-59	2	2.0
60-64	1	1.0
total	99	100

Table 1.3 displays the majority identified with she/her pronouns (n=79, 80.8%), followed by he/him (10, 10.1%), they/them (n=7, 7.1%), she/they (n=1, 1%), and he/they (n=1, 1%).

Table 1.3: Participant Pronouns

Gender Identity Pronouns	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
She/Her	80	80.8
He/Him	10	10.1
They/Them	7	7.1
She/They	1	1.0
He/They	1	1.0
total	99	100

When asked where they see themselves as being from despite where they live, according to table 1.4, participants reported they see themselves as being from the West (n=38, 38.8%), Outside the

United States (n=22, 22.2%), Southeast (n=18, 18.2%), Northeast (n=15, 15.2%), and Midwest (n=6, 6.1%).

Table 1.4 Region of the United States

Geographical Origin	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
West	38	38.4
Outside the United States	22	22.2
Southeast	18	18.2
Northeast	15	15.2
Midwest	6	6.1
total	99	100

The participants' racial and ethnic identities encompassed a diverse range of backgrounds. A total of 46 participants identified as non-white or non-European, while 53 identified as white, European, or both European and white. Please refer to Table 1.5 for a more comprehensive breakdown of each participant's unique identity. Each identity was not mutually exclusive, therefore, participants could “check all that apply.” This created 27 unique identities.

Table 1.5: Race and ethnicity: Check all that apply

Race/Ethnicity Combination	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
African	1	1%
Asian	9	9.1%
Black/African-American	8	8.1%
Black/African-American, Hispanic/LatinX	1	1%
Black/African-American, More than two races, European	1	1%
Caribbean	1	1%
Caribbean, Black/African-American	2	2%
Caribbean, Hispanic/LatinX	1	1%

Caribbean, Hispanic/LatinX, Indigenous	1	1%
Central Asian	1	1%
East Asian	2	2%
European	5	5%
European, White	7	7.1%
Hispanic/LatinX	3	3%
Hispanic/LatinX, European, White	1	1%
Hispanic/LatinX, Indigenous, White	1	1%
Hispanic/LatinX, Native American, White	1	1%
Hispanic/LatinX, White	1	1%
Indian (Asian Continent)	1	1%
More than one race	2	2%
More than two races	1	1%
More than one race, Asian, White	2	2%
More than one race Hispanic/Latinx, White	2	2%
Native American, White	1	1%
Sub-Saharan African, North African, More than one race, More than two races	1	1%
White	41	41.4%
Asian, East Asian, Central Asian	1	1%
Total	99	100%
White or European or White, European	53	53.5%
BIPOC or White and another race/ethnicity	46	46.5%
Total	99	100%

Not mutually exclusive

Design

This mixed-methods study employs a convenience sample survey design, made accessible online through Google Forms. The survey was promoted through the researcher's social networks and directly to dance studios to engage a demographic deeply involved with music and movement. The survey was inclusive, inviting responses from all gender identities. It begins with a section defining key concepts of empowerment, sexualization, and intersectionality to ensure consistent understanding across participants. Quantitative questions (2-11) utilize Likert scales to explore themes of empowerment and sexualization, while qualitative questions (12-16) offer space for detailed personal insights. Demographic and intersectionality questions (17-25) are positioned at the end to prevent influencing earlier responses and to deepen the exploration of the relationship between intersectionality and empowerment perceptions.

The survey's design incorporates critical insights from Scheim and Bauer's (2019) Intersectional Discrimination Index (InDI), Visser et al.'s (2022) ESS-R research, and Richardson's (2017) empowerment research, tailored to focus on female recording artists, sexualization, and female empowerment. Participants were encouraged to self-assess their intersectional identities across various dimensions (e.g., ability, gender expression, race), aiming for a comprehensive understanding of intersectionality's relationship with their perceptions, particularly in the sexualization of female recording artists and empowerment.

Procedure

The survey was distributed online through Google Forms and shared via the researcher's social networks and directly to dance studios. All gender identities were invited to participate. The survey sections included an introduction that defined key concepts of empowerment, sexualization, and intersectionality, followed by quantitative questions using Likert scales to

measure perceptions of empowerment and sexualization. Open-ended qualitative questions allowed for detailed personal insights. Demographic and intersectionality questions were placed at the end to minimize bias and deepen the understanding of intersectionality's relationship with empowerment perceptions. Responses were collected and stored through Google Forms.

Measurement Instrument

The survey instrument included a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions designed to capture both numerical data and personal insights. Quantitative questions (2-11) used Likert scales to measure perceptions of empowerment and sexualization. These questions were crafted to provide a range of responses, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, allowing for nuanced data analysis. Qualitative questions (12-16) were open-ended, providing participants with the opportunity to express their views in their own words, which helped to gain deeper insights into personal experiences and perceptions. Demographic and intersectionality questions (17-25) gathered information on various identity dimensions, such as ability, gender expression, and race. These questions were positioned at the end of the survey to avoid influencing earlier responses and to allow for a comprehensive exploration of how intersectionality relates to perceptions of empowerment and sexualization.

The survey's structure began with definitions of key concepts like empowerment, sexualization, and intersectionality to ensure that all participants had a consistent understanding of these terms. This was followed by a series of Likert scale questions exploring empowerment and sexualization. Next, open-ended questions allowed participants to provide detailed and personal responses. The survey concluded with demographic and intersectionality-related questions, which were crucial for understanding the broader context of the participants' responses.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from this study were analyzed using descriptive statistics applied to each Likert scale question, with a focus on frequencies and mean values. A composite scale derived from 9 Likert scale questions was evaluated for reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of .835. This result indicates a high level of internal consistency within the scale. The scale was then utilized in a correlational analysis to examine relationships with variables such as age, comfort at work, and comfort without makeup. Additionally, a T-test was conducted to assess differences in the Empowerment through Sexualization (ES) scale across various race/ethnicity groups, and descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the ES scale within different regions.

For the qualitative data, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and patterns in participants' responses. This process was both inductively—originating directly from the data—and deductively—based on the research questions and theoretical frameworks. The analysis began with a comprehensive reading of all responses, followed by the creation of codes based on repeated themes. Data coding was then used to categorize and organize the text, enabling a detailed and comprehensive analysis. This method facilitated a deeper understanding of the qualitative responses, significantly enriching the study's findings by providing insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions of empowerment and sexualization of female recording artists.

Results

The results are presented in the order of the survey questions. Note that the final question, which asked participants to identify their proximity to power across different intersectionalities, was excluded from this section. The rationale for this exclusion is discussed in the discussion section.

As shown in Table 2.1 for the first question, the survey assessed which female recording artists the 99 participants found empowering. The question allowed participants to check all that apply and therefore was not mutually exclusive. Beyoncé was the most frequently selected, deemed empowering by 67 respondents (67.7%). Lady Gaga followed with selections from 59 participants (59.6%), and Adele and Pink were chosen by 57 respondents (57.6%). Rihanna was identified by 52 participants (52.5%) as empowering. Dolly Parton, Missy Elliott, and Aretha Franklin each garnered support from 48 respondents (48.5%). Taylor Swift was selected by 45 participants (45.5%), Alicia Keys by 43 (44.4%), and Lizzo by 43 (43.4%). Queen Latifah rounded out the top ten with selections from 41 respondents (41.4%).

Conversely, several artists were notably less selected. Shenseea and Nailah Blackman were the least frequently chosen, each by only 2 participants (2.0%). Patrice Roberts and Nadia Batson were selected by 3 respondents each (3%). Karol G was chosen by 5 participants (5.1%), and both Spice and Koffee were selected by 7 respondents (7.1%). Bessie Smith, Big Freedia, and Ma' Rainey were each chosen by 8 participants (8.1%). Alison Krauss was selected by 10 respondents (10.1%), and Olivia Newton-John was chosen by 12 (12.1%). Britney Spears selected by 15 (15.3%), Lil' Kim and Jewel at 17 (17.3%), and finally, Ariana Grande, Christina Aguilera with 18 (18.4%). This distribution of responses illustrates varied levels of perceived empowerment attributed to these artists by the survey's participants.

Table 2.1 Most and Least Selected Female Recording Artists

Rank	Most Selected Artists	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Least Selected Artists	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Beyonce	67	67.7%	Shenseea	2	2.0%
				Nailah Blackman	2	2.0%
2	Lady Gaga	59	59.6%	Patrice Roberts	3	3%

				Nadia Batson	3	3%
3	Adele	57	57.6%	Karol G	5	5.1%
3	Pink	57	57.6%			
4	Rihanna	52	52.5%	Spice	7	7.1%
				Koffee	7	7.1%
5	Dolly Parton	49	49.5%	Bessie Smith	8	8.1%
5	Missy Elliott	49	49.5%	Big Freedia	8	8.1%
				Ma’ Rainey	8	8.1%
6	Aretha Franklin	48	48.5%	Alison Krauss	10	10.1%
7	Taylor Swift	45	45.5%	Olivia Newton John	12	12.1%
8	Alicia Keys	44	44.4%	Britney Spears	15	15.3%
9	Lizzo	43	43.4%	Lil’ Kim	17	
10	Queen Latifah	41	41.4%	Arianna Grande	18	18.1%
				Cristina Aguilera	18	18.1%
				Jewel	18	18.1%

Not mutually exclusive

Table 2.1 shows the results from the first question with Beyoncé in the lead as well as the results for the top ten and bottom ten artists that participants identified as empowering. Participants frequently cited Beyoncé's talent, multifaceted persona, and genre-bending capabilities–which is particularly resonant given the stricter constraints female artists face compared to their male counterparts. Beyoncé's ability to break stereotypes while balancing roles as a mother and wife may significantly contribute to her perception as an empowering figure. An interesting observation was the disparity between qualitative and quantitative responses for other artists. For instance, while Lady Gaga came in second place after Beyoncé when given the option

to “check all that apply”, she was seldom mentioned in the open-ended responses, with only three participants naming her as empowering. Conversely, Beyoncé consistently ranked highly in both types of responses.

The artists ranking lowest are predominantly Caribbean, likely due to lesser exposure rather than a true reflection of their empowering impact. Shenseea and Nailah Blackman were chosen by only 2 participants (2.0% each), Patrice Roberts and Nadia Batson by 3 participants each (3.1%), Karol G by 5 (5.1%), and both Spice and Koffee by 7 (7.1%). This trend of lower selection could also apply to historically significant or non-mainstream artists like Bessie Smith, Big Freedia, and Ma' Rainey, each chosen by 8 participants (8.1%). The lower frequency of selection does not necessarily imply a lack of empowerment but rather a potential lack of exposure or familiarity. Thus, the analysis will focus primarily on those artists most frequently selected as they are more likely to reflect the participants' perceptions of empowerment.

In analyzing the top-selected female recording artists, seven were Black women (Beyoncé, Rihanna, Missy Elliott, Aretha Franklin, Alicia Keys, Lizzo, and Queen Latifah) and five were white (Lady Gaga, Adele, Pink, Dolly Parton, Taylor Swift). However, only 13.1% of the participants selected that they identified as Black. This shows that people are empowered by women who do not necessarily represent their same identity. Each of these artists are celebrated not only for their talent but for their contributions to redefining womanhood through their music and public personas. Despite Taylor Swift's dominance in the media, she was considered empowering by fewer than half of the respondents, which might finally settle the Beyoncé vs. Taylor Swift debate in favor of Beyoncé according to this sample.

Empowerment in Objectifying Men

As shown in table 2.2 participants responded to how empowering they find lyrics that objectify men in songs by female artists. The results were that the most commonly selected answer was (3) a neutral stance (n=33, 33.3%). Next, (n=28, 28.3%) selected (1), which was not at all empowering, and (n=22, 22.2%) chose (2), which was not empowering. Only (16=n, 16.2%) found objectifying men in lyrics empowering at all, with (n=12, 12.1%) selecting empowering and (n=4, 4%) selecting (5) absolutely empowering.

Table 2.2 Empowerment in Objectifying Men

Response Level	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Not at all Empowering	28	28.3
2	Not empowering	22	22.2
3	Neutral	33	33.3
4	Empowering	12	12.1
5	Absolutely Empowering	4	4.0
Total		99	100.0

As indicated in Table 2.2, for the question "How empowering do you find lyrics that objectify men in songs by female artists?" only 16 participants considered such lyrics empowering. Surprisingly, the majority, 50.5%, did not find objectifying men in lyrics empowering at all. This finding challenges the assumption that role-reversal in objectification empowers women, suggesting instead that most women understand that true feminism seeks to end all forms of oppression rather than merely inverting them. This may reflect a broader understanding among women that objectification, regardless of the target, is not empowering, particularly given their own experiences of being objectified.

Sexualization of Female Recording Artists in the United States

When asked about the general level of sexualization of female recording artists in the United States, combining both visuals and lyrics, Table 2.3 shows a significant majority of participants, 90 (90.9%), rated this as sexualized or highly sexualized (4 or 5), with 60 (60.6%) giving the highest rating (5).

Table 2.3 Sexualization of Female Recording Artists in the United States

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
5	Highly Sexualized	60	60.6
4	Sexualized	30	30.3
1-3	Neutral to Not at all Sexualized	9	9.1
total		99	100

Regarding the sexualization of female recording artists, a significant majority, 90.9%, of participants believed that these artists are at least somewhat sexualized. This consensus speaks to the widespread understanding of the disproportionate sexualization of female recording artists.

Empowerment Through Dance Movements

The empowerment derived from dance movements often viewed as sexualized, such as twerking, collected mixed responses, see Table 2.4 Fifteen participants (15.2%) found these movements not at all empowering (1), 17 (17.2%) not empowering (2), 34 (34.3%) neutral (3), 22 (22.2%) empowering (4), and 11 (11.1%) absolutely empowering(5).

Table 2.4 Empowerment Through Dance Movements

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Not at all Empowering	15	15.2
2	Not Empowering	17	17.2
3	Neutral	34	34.3
4	Empowering	22	22.2

5	Absolutely Empowering	11	11.1
total		99	100

Table 2.4 further reveals that 66% of participants did not find dance movements typically viewed as sexualized to be empowering. This perception could stem from racialized stigmas and cultural policing around who is deemed appropriate to perform these movements. It may also speak to the oversaturation of sexualization that may lead some women to not find empowerment through sexualized movements.

Sexualized Lyrics by Female Recording Artists

Table 2.5 shows how participants rated the empowerment they felt from sexualized lyrics sung by female recording artists. Thirteen (13.1%) indicated not at all empowering (1), 23 (23.2%) not empowering (2), 29 (29.3%) neutral (3), 26 (26.3%) empowering (4), and 8 (8.1%) absolutely empowering (5).

Table 2.5 Sexualized Lyrics by Female Recording Artists

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Not at all empowering	13	13.1
2	Not empowering	23	23.2
3	Neutral	29	29.3
4	Empowering	26	26.3
5	Absolutely empowering	8	8.1
total		99	100

Similarly, as shown in Table 2.5, only 34% of participants found sexualized lyrics by female recording artists empowering. This could be attributed to social conditioning that pressures women to conform to ideals of purity, as well as the widespread oversexualization of women in media, which may lead to negative associations with sexualization.

Is Shaking Your Bottom Always Sexual?

Table 2.6 shows how participants believe that when women shake their bottom, it is always sexual. The responses varied, with 5 (5.1%) agreeing always (1), 8 (8.1%) mostly (2), 22 (22.2%) neutral (3), 35 (35.4%) maybe (4), and 29 (29.3%) suggesting such movements could mean anything (5).

Table 2.6 Is Shaking Your Bottom Always Sexual?

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Always sexual	5	5.1
2	Mostly sexual	8	8.1
3	Neutral	22	22.2
4	Maybe sexual	35	35.4
5	Could mean anything	29	29.3
total		99	100

According to Table 2.6, a significant shift in perceptions emerges when participants are asked if shaking your bottom is always sexual. A majority, 57.6% (N=57), believe that it isn't necessarily always sexual, and when including those who selected from neutral to "it could mean anything," the figure rises to 80% (N=79). This indicates that most women, who constituted the majority of the survey respondents, do not automatically associate booty shaking with sexual behavior. It is speculated that if more men were surveyed, their responses might show a different trend.

Empowerment Through Sexualization

When asked about personal empowerment derived from being sexualized, such as wearing lingerie or performing a sexy dance, Table 2.7 reveals responses indicated an almost balanced view with 15 (15.2%) feeling not at all empowered (1), 19 (19.2%) not empowered (2),

32 (32.3%) neutral stance (3), 18 (18.2%) empowered (4), and 15 (15.2%) absolutely empowered (5).

Table 2.7 Empowerment Through Sexualization

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Not at all empowered	15	15.2
2	Not Empowered	19	19.2
3	Neutral	32	32.3
4	Empowered	18	18.2
5	Absolutely empowered	15	15.2
total		99	100

Regarding the question of whether sexualization can be empowering, responses were divided. A near-even split exists between those who do not find it empowering—with 15 participants viewing it as not at all empowering and 19 as not empowering—and those who believe it can be empowering, with 18 finding it somewhat empowering and 15 viewing it as absolutely empowering. This division may relate to the social conditioning that discourages women from openly enjoying sex, or it could stem from the frequent target of sexualization towards women and the associated negative impacts. Conversely, some women might find empowerment in sexualization either because they have reclaimed their agency within sexual contexts or because they have adapted to social expectations of their sexual roles. The varied responses suggest that perceptions of sexualization's empowering potential are highly context-dependent, influenced by a combination of social norms, cultural contexts, and personal experiences.

Sexualized Content

As indicated in Table 2.8, the use of sexualized content was perceived as not at all empowering by 19 participants (19.2%), not empowering by 26 (26.3%), neutral by 39 (39.4%), empowering by 10 (10.1%), and absolutely empowering by 5 (5.1%).

Table 2.8 Sexualized Content

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Not at all Empowering	19	19.2
2	Not empowering	26	26.3
3	Neutral	39	39.4
4	Empowering	10	10.1
5	Absolutely Empowering	5	5.1
total		99	100

Despite an even split in the perception of empowerment through sexualization, the majority of respondents did not view sexualized content as empowering. Forty-five participants (n=45, 45.5%) considered sexualized content as not at all empowering or not empowering, while only 15 participants n=15,15.2%) found it empowering at all. This may reflect the disproportionate representation of women being sexualized, leading to a lack of perceived empowerment.

Empowerment through Sexual Autonomy and Pleasure

According to table 2.9, participants' agreement with the statement that songs by female recording artists that center on their own sexual pleasure provide a form of empowerment was high, with 5 (5.1%) strongly disagreeing (1), 5 (5.1%) disagreeing (2), 18 (18.2%) neutral (3), 40 (40.4%) agreeing (4), and 31 (31.3%) strongly agreeing (5). This means a majority (71, 71.7%) agreed (choosing 4 or 5) that these songs offer a form of empowerment distinct from those appealing primarily to male desires.

Table 2.9 Empowerment through Sexual Autonomy and Pleasure

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly disagree	5	5.1
2	Disagree	5	5.1
3	Neutral	18	18.2
4	Agree	40	40.4
5	Strongly agree	31	31.3
total		99	100

However, a significant majority (N=71, 71.7%) agreed (choosing 4 or 5) that songs by female artists that center on female sexual pleasure offer a form of empowerment distinct from songs that primarily appeal to male desires. This suggests that providing more context around sexualization could alter empowerment perceptions, depending on whose pleasure is being centered.

Empowerment through sexual expression

Table 3.1 shows that the statement about the empowerment of expressing oneself sexually without judgment received strong agreement, with 56 (56.6%) choosing 5 and 27 (27.3%) choosing 4, indicating a broad consensus on the empowering nature of sexual expression free from judgment. Only 3 (3%) strongly disagreeing (1), 2 (2.0%) disagreeing (2), 11 (11.1%) neutral (3).

Table 3.1 Empowerment through sexual expression

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly disagree	3	3
2	Disagree	2	2
3	Neutral	11	11.1
4	Agree	27	27.3

5	Strongly agree	56	56.6
total		99	100

The vast majority, n=83 (84%) of respondents believed that there is empowerment in expressing oneself sexually without judgment. This demonstrates that on some level, a majority of respondents associate freedom of sexual expression with empowerment.

Positive Effects of Sexualization

As displayed in Table 3.2, participants considered whether sexualization can have positive effects such as increased confidence or feeling desirable. A majority saw potential positive effects, with 58 (58.6%) choosing 4 or 5, suggesting an acknowledgment of the complex dynamics surrounding the sexualization of female artists. with 5 (5.1%) strongly disagreeing (1), 10 (10.1%) disagreeing (2), 26 (26.3%) neutral (3), 35 (35.4%) agreeing (4), and 23 (23.2%) strongly agreeing (5).

Table 3.2 Positive Effects of Sexualization

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Strongly disagree	5	5.1
2	Disagree	10	10.1
3	Neutral	26	26.3
4	Agree	35	35.4
5	Strongly agree	23	23.2
total		99	100

These results show that many people believe that there can be positive effects of sexualization.

Qualitative Questions

Many of the participants' responses were coded as containing more than one theme. They are not mutually exclusive, and instead overlap and interconnect to form a more colored and descriptive picture.

From your experience, which female recording artist do you most relate to or feel represented by, and why?

Table 3.3 shows that being your authentic self was the most commonly expressed theme amongst participants (n=37). This is followed by being relatable or representing one's cultural or intersectional identities (n=27), named the artist only (n=21), then talent, artistic style, and musicality (n=17), next the artist being multifaceted (n=15), also mentioned was the idea of "doing it for the girls" or being nonsexual (n=14), then the idea of strength or independence (n=6), and women who help or advocate for others (n=6).

Table 3.3 Why participants relate to their chosen female recording artists

Theme	Frequency
Being yourself: vulnerability, unapologetic, against the grain, body positivity, authenticity, self-acceptance, confidence (@)	37
Like me/relatable/cultural representation ($)	27
Named Artist Only (N)	21
Talent/Artistic style/Musicality (%)	17
Multifaceted (+)	15
Non-sexual/for the girls (^)	14
Strong/Independent	6
Helps others/advocate	6

Furthermore, the question asked women to identify who they found empowering and why. The above identified common themes regarding why the respondents found female

recording artists empowering. As seen in Table 3.4, the following female recording artists were the most commonly mentioned as women that the participants related to or felt represented by. Beyonce had the most answers (n=12). This was followed by a tie between Lizzo, Pink, and Taylor Swift at (n=7) answers. The next tie was between Billie Eilish and Miley Cyrus n=4), then Adele, Dolly Parton, and Alicia Keys (n=3), and finally Ariana Grande, Olivia Rodrigo, Meghan thee Stallion, Lady Gaga, and Erykah Badu (n=2). Please refer to Table 3.4 for all artists named.

Table 3.4 Most Named Artist: Relate to or Represented by

Artist	**n**
Beyonce	12
Lizzo, Pink, Taylor Swift	7
Billie Eilish, Miley Cyrus	4
Adele, Dolly Parton, Alicia Keys, Erykah Badu	3
Ariana Grande, Olivia Rodrigo, Meghan thee Stallion, Lady Gaga, Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill	2
Joan Baez, Marina Diamandis, Natalia Lafourcade, AURORA, Sigrid, Selena and Celion, Kacey Musgraves, Adrienne Lenker, SZA, Sabrina Carpenter, Janelle Monae, Beautiful Chorus, Queen Latifah, Jennifer Lopez, Cam, Cardi B, Becky G, Shakira, Patti LaBelle, Dhd, Renee Rap, Lauren Daigle, Nikki Minaj, Celine Dione, Cleo Sol, Mothica, Laufey, Paris Paloma, Florence Welch, Emily King, Cat Power, Lauryn Hill, Shin Yuna, Mariah the Scientist, SZA, Summer Walker, Joni Mitchell, Halsey, Jill Scott, Indigo Girls, Melissa Etheridge, Tracy Chapman, India Arie	1

Referring to Table 3.4, Beyoncé was again on top, followed by Lizzo, Pink, and Taylor Swift in second place. Furthermore, Table 3.3 shows that 37 women chose artists they could relate to because these artists reflected aspects of themselves. During the thematic analysis, ideas of vulnerability, being unapologetic, going against the grain, body positivity, authenticity, self-acceptance, and confidence were identified. These ideas were found to be interconnected facets of “being oneself,” rather than separate themes.

For example, one participant mentioned, “Dolly Parton. She is true to herself and doesn’t give a shit about what other people think of her.” Another stated, “Lizzo, because she embraces her body the way it is, and shows that no matter who you are, you're able to pursue your dreams.” A third respondent shared, “Honestly Miley Cyrus, because she can be confident and obnoxious.” Another added, “Lizzo. She is a bigger woman but thoroughly talented and is all about body positivity. As a fluffier girl, I can relate to her, and it makes me feel like I can do skinny girl dance moves without people thinking that I'm too fat to be twerking.”

This highlights the significance of artists who embody and celebrate their true selves, resonating with and empowering their audiences by reflecting diverse facets of individual identity and creating space for women to feel more comfortable to be themselves.

The second most common theme, with 27 responses, was "like me" in some capacity, which could be related to sexual identity, cultural identity, or even the identification of mental health conditions.

For example:

- "Indigo Girls, Melissa Etheridge, because they are out, vocal queers, also have families, and are relatable."

- "Marina Diamandis. Her music is campy, fun, and unique, which matches how I portray myself, yet deals with topics that are important and relatable to me: feminism (gender oppression), mental illness and loneliness, and not feeling normal."

- "Taylor Swift. We are the same age, ethnicity, and hair color, and we seemed to go through similar life experiences at the same time."

- "Pink. She's a mom; she isn’t the traditional small feminine body and she embraces her own form of sexy and doesn’t care. I can relate to her age, as she is only slightly younger than

me, and she wears what she wants, says what she wants, and is unapologetically herself, and that is who I can relate to. Confidence and power."

- "Pink, because of her struggle and criticism about her femininity and feeling beautiful. In my own life, I've sometimes felt clunky and not pretty."

- "I find it difficult to relate to any recording artists/celebrities in general, but I do feel somewhat represented by Renee Rapp as a white lesbian who talks nonstop without filtering my thoughts."

- "Mothica. She has been through some rough things in her life, but she has channeled that into her music, and I relate very much to a lot of it. She sings about mental health, eating disorders, body dysmorphia, addiction, and similar. I feel less alone and more seen when I listen to her songs concerning mental health and eating disorders."

This diversity of responses demonstrates how deeply women identify with various aspects of female recording artists, ranging from shared experiences and cultural backgrounds to personal struggles, reinforcing the importance of representation of all intersectionalities in the music industry. Women want to feel seen, heard, and represented as their whole complex selves.

In responses, talent and musicality were represented n=17 times, highlighting various aspects such as lyrics and musicianship. One participant mentioned, "Ariana Grande. I've been listening to her since my teenage years. I love her music style and her voice. Listening to her has helped me improve my singing, and, of course, I find her songs very inspiring." Another participant related to Joni Mitchell, stating, "I'm also a singer/songwriter, and I relate to the poetry of her lyrics and her use of alternate guitar tunings." These responses show how the talent and musicality of female recording artists resonate with their audiences, inspiring listeners on both personal and professional levels.

Multifaceted representation was mentioned 15 times. One respondent shared, "I would say I most relate to Meg Thee Stallion. On the surface, I think people focus on her style of music and how she dances, but I relate to her because of her range. She's smart, with a range of goals. She has a great sense of humor. She's a family girl. In short, she has layers. She's not JUST about the 'hot girl shit.'" Another respondent highlighted, "Erykah Badu, she is not only physically sexy, but she is intelligent and badass. I feel empowered when listening to her music." This multifaceted presentation of these artists allows listeners to connect with them on various levels beyond the surface.

Non-sexual or "for the girls" themes were mentioned 14 times. One respondent stated, "Sabrina Carpenter: sexy but not for the male gaze," while another commented, "Pink - doesn't oversexualize to sell herself and her music." Another respondent emphasized, "Beyoncé - her lyrics aren’t sexualized but focus on women and confidence." These responses reflect a trend where female recording artists are seen as empowering, not necessarily by adhering to social expectations of centering men and being sexualized, but by conveying messages of self-confidence and solidarity with women.

Finally, strength and helping others were both represented six times. One respondent said, "Queen Latifah. Her creativity, art, talent, and flow. Her representation and poetic lyricism. Her representation as a purely talented woman with intelligence and strength in the hip-hop culture among men and various cultures were well respected and appreciated." Another noted, "Pink - she's tough, no-nonsense, and exudes strength." Regarding Beyoncé, one participant shared, "Beyoncé stands out to me not just for her musical talent but also for her advocacy for social justice and empowerment, especially for women and people of color. Through her music, performances, and philanthropy, she has become a symbol of strength, resilience, and

self-confidence to me." Another participant added, "Beyoncé advocates for herself and others and stands up for what she believes is right, all because it is the right thing to do. She helps others see their worth." Women relate to strength and independence as well as those that help and advocate for others.

Overall, participants relate to female recording artists that are authentically themselves, represent all the complexities and nuances of womanhood, and/or embody characteristics that inspire others.

From your experience, which female recording artist do you feel is most empowering to women, and why?

Table 3.5 shows the results for the frequency of themes seen in which female recording artists are most empowering to women and why. The theme seen in most answers was being yourself, which included vulnerability, unapologetic, going against the grain, body positivity, authenticity, self-acceptance, and confidence. The runner-up was the idea of "doing it for the girls" or being nonsexual (n=31), next was the theme of strength and independence (n=19), then the participants that named just the artist (n=17), following that was being relatable or representing one's cultural or intersectional identities tied with multifaceted representation (n=13), then talent, artistic style, and musicality (n=12), and finally helping or advocating for others (n=9).

Table 3.5: Why participants feel empowered through their chosen female recording artist

Theme	N
Being yourself: vulnerability, unapologetic, against the grain, body positivity, authenticity, self-acceptance, confidence (@)	33
Non-sexual/for the girls (^)	32
Strong/Independence (&)	19

Named Artist Only (N)	17
Like me/relatable/cultural representation ($) and Multifaceted (+)	13
Talent/Artistic style/Musicality (%)	12
Helps Others/Advocate (#)	9

To add to the identified themes for why a female artist is empowering, the following artists were identified to be the most empowering to women, see Table 3.6. Beyoncé came in at the top again (n=21). Taylor Swift was second (n=16), then Lizzo (n=10), Pink (n=6), Dolly Parton (n=4), Adele, Alisha Keys, Lady Gaga, and Rihanna tied (n=3), and finally India Arie, Megan Thee Stallion, Miley Cyrus, Celine Dione, and Aretha Franklin (n=2). For a complete list of responses, see Table 3.6.

Table 3.6: Most named Artist: Most Empowering to Women

Artist	**N**
Beyoncé	21
Taylor Swift	16
Lizzo	10
Pink	6
Dolly Parton and Rihanna	4
Adele, Alisha Keys, Lady Gaga, , Miley Cyrus	3
India Arie, Megan Thee Stallion, Celine Dione, Aretha Franklin	2
Laney Wilson, Madonna, Lauryn Hill, Anyone who sings of their own sexual pleasure, Janelle Monae, Natalia Lafourcade, Kesha, Whitney Houston, Karen Carpenter, Leah Song, Chole Smith / Starling Arrow, Mitski, Billie Eilish, Ashniko, Alanis Morissette, Selena Gomez, Amanda Palmer, Katy Perry, Ariana Grande, Lana del Rey, Princess Nokia, Ashnikko, The Chicks, Missy Elliot, Kelly Clarkson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe	1

As shown in Table 3.6, yet again, Beyonce is the top of the charts with N=21. Next is Taylor Swift with N=16, Lizzo with N=10, Pink with N=6, Dolly Parton and Rihanna with N=4, following Adele, Alicia Keys, Lady Gaga, and Miley Cyrus with N=3.

Table 3.7 reveals the seven themes identified in the thematic analysis of this question which revealed consistent themes with the previous question, which female recording artists participants most relate to, although with varying frequencies. Same as the previous question, the most common reason for choosing these artists was their authenticity and unapologetic nature, as exemplified by 33 respondents mentioning some facet of “Being Yourself.” One participant admired Madonna for her fearless career approach, noting, "Madonna, at the peak of her career, did what she wanted regardless of the consequences. I respect that." Another expressed appreciation for Janelle Monae's expressiveness, stating, "I don't know if she speaks to everyone's experiences, but she's very unapologetic and expressive. I feel like she is able and willing to make what she wants and what speaks to her and others, rather than being completely tied down by general society limits." These responses show the significant impact that female recording artists can have when they boldly express their individuality and challenge social expectations.

However, for this question, the second most commonly mentioned theme is being non-sexual or "doing it for the girls," with 32 responses, unlike the previous question regarding which female recording artists participants most related to, where "like me" was the second most common theme. This highlights that although women may identify with certain female recording artists, this does not necessarily translate to feelings of empowerment from them. Instead, the consistently high frequency of Beyoncé being chosen and the significant number of white women surveyed indicates that women do not always feel empowered by those who represent

them specifically. It is more important that these artists are "doing it for the girls," rather than merely representing their specific identities.

For example, one participant mentioned, "Beyoncé's music often features themes of empowerment, confidence, and independence, resonating strongly with women around the world. Her songs like 'Run the World (Girls)', 'Independent Women,' and 'Flawless' celebrate female strength, resilience, and self-assurance. Additionally, Beyoncé's advocacy for gender equality, body positivity, and social justice further solidifies her impact as a role model for women." Another participant added, "Alicia Keys. Alicia's lyrics encourage women to strive for success and self-awareness. She reminds women that we are empowered to live our lives and make choices without the need for approval from a man."

These responses indicate a sense of female solidarity, suggesting that even though a female recording artist may not represent them entirely, women are empowered by those who lift up other women, "do it for the girls," and decentering men.

Next, at n=19 is strength and independence. When asked which female recording artists participants relate to, strength was mentioned only 6 times. However, when asked who empowers them, strength became a more significant theme. One participant stated, "Beyoncé - she's not afraid to be a strong woman, speaks her mind," while another remarked, "Aretha Franklin. She is the epitome of not letting anyone—man, woman, record label, or society—stop her." A third respondent added, "Natalia Laforcade is independent, keeps her relationships away from scrutiny, and is not a mother."

It is also interesting that the underlying theme was going against the grain. Since strength is often tied to masculinity, the idea of a woman being strong seems to challenge social norms inherently. For instance, one participant noted, "not afraid to be a strong woman." This suggests

that themes of strength and independence not only resonate deeply with women when considering empowerment but also challenge social norms, highlighting the importance of redefining these traits within a gendered context. The idea of an "independent" woman, as if it's an anomaly, perpetuates stereotypes, reinforcing the notion that women generally depend on men, despite the fact that most women support themselves. This framing is patronizing, as women exist without men—they are simply women, not "independent" women. In all actuality, men depend on women. Redefining strength and independence in a gender-neutral context challenges traditional narratives, allowing for a more inclusive understanding of these traits free from gendered constraints.

Multifaceted and representative were emphasized equally, with each theme being mentioned 13 times. For instance, one participant highlighted, "Billie Eilish is another female recording artist widely regarded as empowering to women. Her music often delves into themes of self-expression, individuality, and mental health, resonating with listeners, particularly young women, who relate to her honest and unapologetic approach. Eilish's unique style and persona challenge traditional beauty standards and gender norms, encouraging fans to embrace their authenticity and reject societal pressures." They added, "Through her music and public statements, Eilish advocates for self-acceptance, body positivity, and empowerment, inspiring women to embrace their imperfections and celebrate their differences. Her rise to fame at a young age also serves as a testament to the power of self-confidence and perseverance, encouraging her audience to pursue their passions fearlessly."

Another respondent mentioned, "Amanda Palmer. She just does whatever she wants, and I admire that. I think that’s the best way of empowering women, showing them that there is no right way to be a woman." These responses highlight the importance participants place on seeing

female artists as comprehensive human beings who are more than just sexualized entities. These artists empower by embodying and advocating for a broader spectrum of womanhood, challenging the narrow confines typically imposed on women in the entertainment industry.

12 participants highlighted musicality and talent as significant factors in feeling empowered by female recording artists. One participant expressed, "Dolly Parton. Just the sheer range of all of her amazing songs over time cover the multitude of experiences just being a woman. I think any woman can relate to her songs and that feeling of connectedness, the community of women is empowering in itself." This sentiment underscores the impact of Parton's extensive and relatable discography, which resonates with the diverse experiences of women, fostering a sense of empowerment through shared narratives.

Another participant cited a historical figure, stating, "Sister Rosetta Tharpe, she was a trailblazer and pioneer of early rock and roll and electric guitar. She's not too well known in the mainstream, but was an incredibly powerful performer and an important figure in music history." This response highlights the empowerment derived from recognizing and valuing the contributions of groundbreaking artists like Tharpe, whose talents and pioneering spirit broke barriers and paved the way for future generations of women, inspiring women to acknowledge and celebrate the often-overlooked achievements of female musicians in shaping the musical landscape.

Finally, the theme of helping others and acting as an advocate appeared nine times. One participant shared, "Dolly Parton - her work continues to connect with women of all generations and is continuing to evolve. She uses her sexuality as power - but not sexual - she also uses her power for good in the world." Another noted, "Adele, as she tailors to helping women overcome normal situations." These responses explore how female recording artists who advocate for and

support women's needs, both through their music and in their public lives, empower their audiences.

From your experience, which genre of music do you believe is the most empowering for women, and why?

Table 3.7 displays the top responses for the genres that were identified as the most empowering to women. Pop was the most frequent (n=23), then any genre (n=20), Rap/Hip-Hop (n=18), Soul and Neo-Soul/Soul (n=8), Country (n=7), and Rock (n=6).

Table 3.7: Most Empowering Genre to Women

Genre	n
Pop	23
Any Genre	21
Rap/Hip-Hop	18
R & B	15
Soul /Neo-Soul	8
Country	7
Rock	6
Folk or Folk-rock,	4
Danceable music and Alternative	2
top charts, ballads, inspiring, electronic, punk rock, ballads, metal, gospel, jazz, bounce, indie, songwriting	1

Below, table 3.8 shows the most to least frequent themes as to why the genre was perceived as the most empowering to women. However, most participants did not explain n=31. The top-named theme was relatability and representation with n=17, being yourself was named n=15 times, invoking feelings or emotions and talent, artistic style and musicality were mentioned n= 10 times, “for the girls” or nonsexual was indicated and a woman in a man’s world

received n=9, freedom and self-expression were mentioned n=7, and strength and independence n=5. For a complete list of themes, see Table 3.8.

Table 3.8 Themes for which genre is the most Empowering

Theme	Frequency
No Explanation (NE)	31
Like me/relatable/cultural representation ($)	17
Being yourself: vulnerability, unapologetic, against the grain, body positivity, authenticity, self-acceptance, confidence (@)	15
Invoking Feelings or Emotions (E)	10
Talent/Artistic style/Musicality (%)	10
Non-sexual/for the girls (^)	9
Women in a Man's World (WM)	9
Freedom and Self Expression (SE)	7
Strong/Independence (&)	5
Autonomy (A)	4
Social Justice (SJ)	4
Multifaceted (+)	3
Story or Story Telling	3
Helps Others/Advocate (#)	2

Table 3.7 shows the most frequently identified genres. Pop was the most frequent (n=23), then any genre (N=20), Rap/Hip-Hop (n=17), Soul and Neo-Soul (n=8), Country (n=7), and Rock (n=6).

Refer to Table 3.8 for the themes associated with empowerment and genre selection. The themes stayed consistent with the previous questions. However, the themes of women in a man's world, freedom and self-expression, invoking feelings and emotions, social justice, autonomy,

and storytelling were added to this analysis. Representation was the highest at n=17, highlighting the importance of diverse perspectives in music. One participant mentioned, "I don't think there is any one genre of music that is most empowering; I think it just depends on what the individual prefers and feels speaks to them. Individual women may find different genres to be empowering due to their personal lived experience and preferences." Another participant noted, "Pop. Many of the songs touch on concepts pertaining to empowerment and self-love. They are also relatable".

Being Yourself was identified 15 times as an empowering theme associated with specific genres. One participant explained their choice of R&B/Soul, noting, "R&B/Soul. These artists lay it all out without sugarcoating anything. Their lyrics address women's issues and offer encouragement in all scenarios." Another participant highlighted Pop music for its impact, saying, "Pop music often features catchy melodies and uplifting lyrics that promote themes of self-confidence, resilience, and embracing individuality." These responses illustrate how particular music genres can foster a sense of empowerment through feelings of authenticity and truth.

Invoking feelings or emotions was noted 10 times. One respondent highlighted, "Ballads, they contain a lot of emotion," emphasizing the depth and emotional range of this genre. Another shared, "R&B, for me personally, feels like it's most empowering for women because it's very soulful. It evokes feelings of want, yearning, and sometimes pain," pointing out how the soulful and emotive nature of R&B deeply resonates and empowers.

Musicality and talent were noted 10 times. One respondent stated, "Rap/Pop. Both are aggressive/energetic and radiate confidence in the melodies and beats they use," highlighting the genre's dynamic nature and how its musical elements contribute to a sense of empowerment.

Another shared, "Country music and reggae because these are lyrics-oriented genres, not just for fun but also for the message conveyed by the lyrics of the song," underscoring the importance of meaningful content in music.

Non-sexual or "for the girls" themes were mentioned 9 times. One respondent emphasized, "Neo-soul/R&B. Those genres allow you to have a range of emotions that isn't reliant so heavily on sex," noting the importance of emotional depth beyond sexual themes. Another added, "Pop music. These styles seem to have lyrics about women very often," showing how women's perspectives add to empowerment perceptions.

Women in a man's world themes appeared nine times. One participant mentioned, "Country music! It is a genre I always only heard men sing, but more women are engaging in this genre, and it's incredible," highlighting the shift in representation within a traditionally male-dominated genre. Another respondent emphasized, "Hip-hop and R&B have also been influential in empowering women by providing a platform for female artists to express themselves authentically and address social issues such as sexism, racism, and body positivity. Artists like Missy Elliott, Nicki Minaj, and Lizzo have challenged stereotypes and paved the way for female empowerment in the male-dominated hip-hop industry." This response stresses how female recording artists make strides in genres typically dominated by men, challenging norms and widening perceptions of womanhood. Space seems to be synonymous with empowerment.

Freedom and self-expression themes appeared seven times. One participant mentioned, "Historically, I feel like rock artists have greater freedom of self-expression than most pop artists. I really looked up to women who played guitar and wrote their own songs when I was a kid, and was inspired to follow suit. All genres can be empowering though!" Another respondent emphasized, "Indie music. The genre implies more creative (and general) freedom for the artists,

and I think that's more empowering than any genre specifics, or how sexual the music and artists are." These responses accentuate how different genres offer varying degrees of creative freedom, allowing female artists to explore diverse themes and self-expression. This freedom, in turn, resonates with and empowers their audiences, showing the importance of authentic artistic expression in empowering women. Where there is space, there is freedom.

Strength and independence were mentioned five times. One participant noted, "Pop—so many songs about powerful women," while another added, "They use music to convey messages of empowerment and strength to their audiences." This general response highlights how music can be associated with messages of strength and empowerment, contributing to its perceived positive impact on listeners.

Autonomy was also mentioned four times. One participant stated, "Maybe ones that encourage more songwriting? Where they have more of a voice and a say in what they want to do." Another responded, "Hip hop! My first experiences hearing women talk about their own agency, and especially sexual agency, was through several female hip hop artists in the 1990s and early 2000s." This suggests a connection between musical genres that encourage female artists' autonomy and their ability to resonate with and empower women, particularly by promoting agency.

Social justice was mentioned four times. One participant stated, "Alternative/punk rock is the most empowering for women because the genre as a whole is about criticizing society and rejecting social norms, which is exactly what feminism and empowerment are about." Another added, "Hip hop is empowering for women because it explores a broader range of social issues that women face." This suggests that musical genres with themes of social critique and challenging norms can resonate with and empower women.

Story or storytelling was mentioned three times. One participant noted, "Folk, R&B, Hip Hop - powerful, authentic, truth-telling, storytelling," while another stated, "Country - it has a story." This demonstrates the significance of narrative in music, showing how storytelling within various genres can empower women by reflecting their experiences and truths, reinforcing their identities.

Helping and advocating for others was mentioned twice. One participant said, "Country… with that said, I have a slightly different definition of empowerment. Empowerment to me is not about the music itself nor is it about sexuality. Empowerment to me is more about what you do with music. While I'm not a huge Dolly Parton fan, I believe what she has done with her fame and her ability to give back to her community—and I'm not talking about Tennessee or wherever she lives—is what is empowering. She has used her fame and considerable resources to help fund education, business, housing, disaster relief, up-and-coming artists, and so many other efforts and programs that benefit people, and THAT is what I find empowering. Her efforts are not based on any race or gender, and I find that empowering." This highlights the importance of artists using their platforms to contribute to social causes, demonstrating that empowerment extends beyond musical content to how artists leverage their influence for the greater good–how they use their power can empower.

How do you view women who sing, dance, or wear sexualized content?

Table 3.9 shows the results of the item assessing perceptions of sexualized content, the themes varied in frequency. The most common theme was Supportive/Go Girl! with n= 47 mentions, followed by Autonomy, Agency, and Consent noted n= 35 times. The themes Range/Depends and Negative/Reflective of Society each appeared n= 29 times, indicating varied and critical perspectives. Freedom of Self-Expression received 20 mentions, while Don't Care

had n= 16. The theme of Objectification was identified n= 14 times, Confidence n= 10 times, and the least frequent, Negative/Reflective of the individual, garnered n= 7 mentions, highlighting a spectrum of viewpoints ranging from supportive to critical.

Table 3.9: How do you view women who sing, dance, or wear sexualized content?

Theme	Frequency
Supportive/Go Girl! *	47
Autonomy, Agency, and Consent (A)	35
Range/Depends +	29
Negative/Reflective of Society #	29
Freedom of Self-Expression &	20
Don’t Care ^	16
Objectification @	14
Confidence =	10
Negative/Reflective of the individual (cheap, tawdry, low self-esteem, low self-worth) $	7

Table 3.9 shows the results of the item assessing perceptions of sexualized content, with varying themes in frequency. The most common theme was Supportive/Go Girl!, with 47 mentions. Comments included, "You go girl!" and "As amazing queens," "Supportive," "Powerful, free, brave," and "Slay queen!" This theme reflects a supportive perspective, encouraging women to embrace their sexualized choices.

This was followed by Autonomy, Agency, and Consent, which were mentioned 35 times. Comments included, "Their own boss," "Hot (bark bark bark), let women live! Let them wear what they want and feel safe doing so," "I think it's cool and fun if they're enjoying it! All for it, if it's driven by their own choices," "If it's their own choice, then they are free to perform in a

sexualized way, especially if it empowers them and gives them confidence. Everyone should be free to embrace their body for themselves, without fearing judgment or being overly sexualized by the media," and "In performance, I think it’s fine if they feel comfortable." This theme highlights the importance of individual choice and self-determination in the context of sexualized content, emphasizing the freedom for women to make their own decisions regarding their bodies and self-expression.

The themes "Range/Depends" and "Negative/Reflective of Society" each appeared 28 times, indicating varied and critical perspectives. Furthermore, these two themes often overlapped, indicating a connection between mixed perspectives and negative reflections of society. One participant stated, "Even as a lesbian, I don’t necessarily love it, but I don’t judge others who do. I think this has more to do with my own self-image than of others." Another mentioned, "I think it's fun content, and I don't appreciate how it is often demonized and equated to a woman's worth. At the same time, I am aware of how exploitative the industry can be, and think that sometimes calling it 'empowering' might be a bit too far. I think neutrality about it, where it is neither demonized nor expected/encouraged, would be best. But also, I adore how unabashedly sexual some women performers can be if they want to be." This range of responses continued with another participant saying, "I think that although it's true that women can choose how they want to behave, I'd wonder how much of this behavior is influenced by mainstream media expectations. I'm supportive of them, but I just hope that is what they want to do and not something they feel pressured by producers, executives, other males, etc., to be and do." Another remarked, "Many seem to do it for attention, which I interpret as pandering to the already sexualized view of women. This seems to undermine the feminist empowerment agenda. But when combined with musical lyrics ABOUT female empowerment (Cardi B, Meghan Thee

Stallion, Lizzo, etc.), I see a feminist controlling their own narrative of sexualization." Lastly, a participant expressed, "I have mixed views about it because on one hand, yes, women should be able to sing, dance, and sexualize themselves in a way that they feel empowered. Also, the appearance of these artists makes an impact on young impressionable girls, and I don't agree with the sexualizing of the female body." This range of thoughts around female sexualization and empowerment shows a critical understanding as well as the importance of whose narrative, agenda, and pleasure is being centered and why.

The theme "Freedom of Self-Expression" received 19 mentions. Responses included statements like, "I think they are confident and should be able to celebrate their bodies and sexuality freely," and "I'm pro body expression and freedom." Meanwhile, the "Don't Care" theme had 16 mentions. Participants expressed sentiments such as, "You do you," "Same way I see women who don't," and "I don't really have an opinion; at the end of the day, it is their bodies, and they can choose what to do!" These responses highlight a spectrum of attitudes toward sexualized content, ranging from supportive of personal freedom to neutral, reflecting a variety of personal perspectives on how sexualized content is viewed.

The theme of Objectification was identified 14 times, with participants expressing concerns about how female artists are perceived, particularly by men. Comments included, "People, mostly men, see them as a piece of ass than [as a] person," and "I feel that they are sexualized for men." Another participant noted, "I don't think the body needs to be objectified so much." Additionally, concerns were raised about performance styles, as one respondent stated, "Singing and dancing is fabulous, but overtly sexualized dancing and tiny clothing is, to me, part of objectifying women." These responses demonstrate concerns about the sexualization of female artists within patriarchy and its greater impact on society.

The theme of Confidence was noted ten times, reflecting positive perceptions of female artists who choose to express themselves through sexualized content. Participants commented on these artists' confidence, with remarks such as, "They are confident in themselves," and "Good for them. If that makes them feel confident, then it is totally supported." Others expressed, "I don't judge; if that's what makes them feel confident, then I am glad." This sentiment was echoed by another participant who stated, "I think they are confident and should be able to celebrate their bodies and sexuality freely." These responses suggest a supportive view toward artists who find empowerment and self-expression through their sexualized performances.

The theme "Negative/Reflective of the Individual" was identified seven times, indicating a more critical view of sexualized content. Responses included remarks such as "I usually see it as cheap and tawdry," and "I think they need therapy to discuss their self-worth." Another comment expressed concern about the public perception of female artists: "I believe it's hard to take them seriously or see them as good role models. Yes, we should be able to flaunt our bodies, but too many women use it to get the wrong attention." These responses suggest that some viewers interpret sexualized content as a negative reflection of the artist’s character and values.

Identify a song by a female recording artist that you find empowering. What aspects of the song (lyrics, tone, music video, etc.) make you feel this way?

See table 4.1 for a list of all songs listed with a frequency of 2 or higher. Beyonce is at the top again with 12=n mentions, Pink with n=6, India Arie, Alicia and Keys Miley Cyrus with n=4,finally Billie Eilish, Lady Gaga, Lizzo, Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B, Rachel Platten and Taylor Swift with n=2.

Table 4.1 Empowering Song by a Female Recording Artist

Artist/Song	Specific Song	Frequency
Beyonce		12
	"Run the World"	2
	"Sorry"	1
	"Best Thing I Never Had"	1
	"My Power"	1
	"Formation"	1
	"If I Were a Boy"	1
	"Single Ladies"	1
	"Me, Myself, and I"	1
	"Don't Hurt Yourself"	1
	"Irreplaceable"	1
	Every song by Destiny’s Child	1
Pink		6
	"So What?"	3
	"Raise Your Glass"	2
	"Don’t Let Me Drink"	1
India Arie, Alicia & Keys Miley Cyrus		4
	"Video" by India Arie	3
	"Girl on Fire" by Alicia Keys	2
	"If I Ain’t Got You" by Alicia Keys	1
	Name only (Miley Cyrus)	1
	"Flowers" by Miley Cyrus	3

Billie Eilish, Lady Gaga, Lizzo, Megan Thee Stallion & Cardi B, Rachel Platten & Taylor Swift		2
	"My Future" by Billie Eilish	1
	"What Was I Made For" by Billie Eilish	1
	"Born This Way" by Lady Gaga	1
	Name Only (Lady Gaga)	1
	"Good as Hell" by Lizzo	2
	"WAP" by Cardi B and Meg the Stallion	1
	"Hot Girl Summer" by Meg the Stallion	1
	"Fight Song" by Rachel Platten	2
	"mirrorball & mastermind" by Taylor Swift	1
	"Bejeweled" by Taylor Swift	1

Review table 4.2 for the most frequent themes identified in the most empowering songs to women. The most frequently cited was talent and musicality with n=34, then strength and independence with n=33, being yourself at n=29, “like me” with n=16, multifaceted having n=10, and nonsexual or “for the girls” with n=8.

Table 4.2: Empowering themes in songs

Theme	n
Talent/Artistic style/Musicality (%)	34
Strong/Independence (&)	33
Being yourself: vulnerability, unapologetic, against the grain, body positivity, authenticity, self-acceptance, confidence (@)	29
Like me/relatable/cultural representation ($)	16
Multifaceted (+)	10
Non-sexual/for the girls (^)	8

Named Artist Only or No Answer (NE)	21

See Table 4.1: Beyoncé remains at the top with 12 mentions, Pink with 6 mentions, India Arie, Alicia Keys, and Miley Cyrus with 4 mentions each, and finally Billie Eilish, Lady Gaga, Lizzo, Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B, Rachel Platten, and Taylor Swift with 2 mentions each.

Review Table 4.2 for the most frequent themes identified in the most empowering songs to women. Talent and musicality was noted 34 times. For example, one participant mentioned, "Don't Hurt Yourself (Beyoncé) - aggressive and it's like rap meets rock beats, it's amazing," while another cited "India Arie's song titled Video - the lyrics are empowering." Additional comments included, "Wide Open Spaces - Dixie Chicks (The Chicks). Lyrics," and "God is a Woman (Ariana Grande). Lyrics, music, and beat." These responses highlight the significance of lyrical content, musical style, and overall artistry in shaping perceptions of empowerment.

Strength and independence were themes identified in 33 responses. One participant said, "Any song by Mariah Carey. I love her femininity and strength." Another noted, "Pink - So What. She's not dependent on a man, and she's going to live her life the way she wants to live it!" Similarly, another response highlighted, "Video by India Arie is empowering self-love and independence in women." One participant praised Miley Cyrus's song "Flowers," saying, "I just love the concept – I can take care of myself better than you can take care of me. I feel like men have been leaning on the idea that women should put up with whatever they do because they need men to take care of them - emotionally, physically, etc." Another response mentioned, "My Power by Beyoncé. I feel like the song really embodies the inherent power of a woman, and I love how she used African artists in the song." Additionally, a participant emphasized, "Beyoncé's song 'Who run the world (girls)' shows how strong women are despite the challenges

we face." This demonstrates that many participants percieve strength and independence as empowering factors.

Being Yourself was a theme identified 29 times. One participant said, "Jill Scott - 'Womanifesto': 'I am gifted I am all of this / And indeed the shit / Clearly I am not just an ass.' She lets them know she's more than just her looks. Encourages men to go deeper and women to stop accepting less." Another response mentioned, "Nightmare by Halsey. This song is all about being a bitch and owning it." Another response shared, "Hot Girl Summer by Meg Thee Stallion as an example again. I love that the song is so fun and encourages women to enjoy the season and be their hottest selves for themselves. She looks and sounds like she's having a great, fun time with this song, lyrically and in the music video/other performances, and that's empowering to me. Seeing women embrace this agency and lift up others to do the same is empowering to me." These responses reflect the importance of songs that promote authenticity, confidence, and agency, empowering women to embrace their true selves.

Relatable was mentioned 16 times by participants. "Crimson and Clover covered by Joan Jett. It's one of the first songs I remember hearing where a woman was singing romantically about another woman," one participant noted. Another mentioned, " ‘9-5’ by Dolly Parton. It’s a jam! Me and my girls blast it at the end of a long workday cleaning up. Just very relatable and makes you feel good." And another shared, "Raise Your Glass by Pink – Bold, celebrates different, love the chorus: 'So raise your glass if you are wrong in all the right ways. All my underdogs, we will never be, never be anything but loud and nitty gritty dirty little freaks.' As a Gen X'er, I was always the weird one, the goth, the freak, and too gay or too dark. This song makes me feel seen and sexy as I am." Participants want to see past just appearance, and see their

lived experience in songs. Representing the fuller and more realistic view of womanhood through various lived experiences leads to empowerment through song.

Multifaceted, mentioned 10 times, emphasizes the complexity of women's experiences. One participant noted, "All-American Bitch by Olivia Rodrigo – I like the tone of the music, how it goes from more mellow to more rock, capturing the nuance that women can be more than one thing and sometimes paradoxical. I also just love the line 'I know my age and I act like it,' which goes against the social norm of women needing to act mature, highlighting that sometimes just having fun is alright." Another participant shared, "Bodak Yellow by Cardi B. As with most of Cardi B's music, she speaks out against women who judge her for using her sexuality to improve her socioeconomic status. The message of the song is essentially, 'Because I was a stripper, I earned enough money to get out of the ghetto, and now I'm the one calling the shots sexually. Instead of powerful men using me, I'm rich and famous enough to turn the tables and use them.'" Representing the multifaceted nature of womanhood allows more diverse perspectives to be represented and empowered.

Non-sexual, "for the girls," was mentioned eight times. One participant highlighted, "'Irreplaceable' by Beyoncé is a classic female empowerment anthem. The lyrics are the perfect mix of sassy and empowering, and the tone of the song is nonchalant yet strong and assertive, stating that her (ex)partner 'must not know about her' because she can replace him in a minute. It's empowering because she's asserting that if someone doesn't treat her the way she deserves, she is a great catch and can easily find someone else." Another participant shared, "Erykah Badu's 'Clever.' The lyrics are relatable and empowering. It is about being sexy because of her talent and intelligence, not her physical appearance." This theme reveals the importance of

content that empowers women by focusing on their intrinsic qualities and agency, rather than adhering to social expectations.

Empowerment through Sexualization Scale

A scale comprising 9 test items concerning empowerment through sexualization was subjected to reliability analysis. The resulting reliability statistics, as seen in Table 4.3, revealed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .835. This coefficient suggests a high level of internal consistency among the items in the scale, indicating that the items consistently measure the same underlying concept.

Table 4.3 Sexulization and Empowerment Scale

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach’s Alpha	number of Items
.835	9

The items used for the ES scale were as follows:

(2). How empowering do you find lyrics that objectify men in songs by female artists?

(4). How empowering are dance movements that are often viewed as sexualized (e.g., twerking), when performed by women?

(5). How empowering are sexualized lyrics sung by female recording artists to you?

(6). Do you believe that when women shake their bottom, it is always sexual?

(7). Do you feel empowered when you are sexualized, for example, wearing lingerie or doing a sexy dance?

(8). How empowering do you find the use of revealing clothing in music videos and performances by female recording artists?

(9). To what extent do you agree with this statement?: Songs by female recording artists that center on their own sexual pleasure provide a form of empowerment different from those that primarily appeal to male desires.

(10). To what extent do you agree with the statement: Being able to express myself sexually without judgment is empowering?

(11). Do you believe that sexualization can have positive effects, such as increased confidence or feeling desirable?

T-Test With Race/Ethnicity and ES Scale

As shown in Table 4.4 The Independent Samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of perceptions of Empowerment through Sexualization (ES) between people who identified as “white”, “European,” and “white and European,” (M = 34.89, SD = 8.56) which were labeled as “1”, and individuals that did not fall into the previous categories as BIPOC (M = 38.24, SD = 7.73) which was labeled as 2. Although the mean empowerment score was higher for BIPOC participants, the difference was not statistically significant when equal variances were assumed, t(97) = -1.882, p = .063. Similarly, no significant difference was found using the t-test with equal variances not assumed, t(45.348) = -1.799, p = .079.

These results suggest that while there are differences in how empowerment through sexualization is perceived between the two groups, these differences are not statistically significant and are of modest practical significance.

Table 4.4
Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for Empowerment Through Sexualization by Race/Ethnicity

variable	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	SE Mean
Empowerment	White	34.8929	8.56063	1.61781
Empowerment	BIPOC	38.2394	7.73021	0.91741
Ethnicity	White	1.2500	0.44096	0.08333
Ethnicity	BIPOC	1.3239	0.47131	0.05593

SE = Standard Error.

Correlation with Age and the ES Scale

A correlation was run to explore the relationship between age and Empowerment through Sexualization, as seen on Table 4.5. The results indicated a small, negative correlation between age and ES scores ($r = -0.187$), suggesting that older participants might perceive less empowerment through sexualization compared to younger ones. However, this correlation did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.064$), suggesting that while there may be a trend, it is not strong enough to assert a definitive relationship within this sample.

This slight negative correlation might imply that as individuals age, their perceptions of empowerment related to sexualization could diminish, possibly due to changing social roles, personal values, or life experiences. It could also indicate that there are differences in how generations experience and percieve empowerment through sexualization. Nevertheless, the lack of statistical significance indicates that if this effect exists, it is likely small and could be influenced by other unmeasured variables such as cultural background, educational level, or personal experiences with empowerment and sexualization.

Table 4.5 Correlation Between Age and Empowerment Through Sexualization

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	n
SE2.0 vs. Age	-0.187	0.064	99

Note: A negative Pearson correlation indicates an inverse relationship; however, the relationship here is not statistically significant.

Correlation with age and Sexualized Dance Movements

Although no significant correlation was found between age and empowerment through sexualization (ES), a significant correlation emerged between age and perceptions of empowerment from sexualized dance movements, such as twerking. The analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation ($r = -0.246$, $p = 0.014$) among the 99 participants, suggesting that as age increases, the perception that such dance movements are empowering decreases. This weak negative correlation, seen in table 4.6, indicates that younger individuals are more likely to view sexualized dance movements as empowering compared to older individuals. This difference may be attributed to generational variations in attitudes and the dissemination of sexualized dance moves and empowerment, where younger individuals, influenced by contemporary cultural trends, often associate expressions of sexuality with empowerment, autonomy, and confidence. These findings underscore the importance of understanding age-related variations in perceptions of empowerment in discussions surrounding gender, sexuality, and cultural influences. They also highlight the need for further research to explore the underlying factors shaping these perceptions and their implications for societal discourse on body positivity, sexual expression, and empowerment.

Table 4.6 Correlation Between Age and Perceptions of Empowerment from Sexualized Dance Movements

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Age and Perceptions of Empowerment from Sexualized Dance Movements (e.g., twerking)	-0.246*	.014	99

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Regional Empowerment through Sexualization

Table 4.7 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the Empowerment through Sexualization Scale (ES) across various regions (NewLOC), revealing diverse perceptions of empowerment through sexualization. In the Southeast, the average ES score is 35.3889 with a standard deviation of 9.31248 among 18 respondents, indicating moderate variability. Conversely, the Northeast shows a higher average score of 41.7333 and less variability (standard deviation = 6.73442) among 15 respondents, suggesting a more uniform and positive view of empowerment through sexualization. The Midwest, with just 6 respondents, presents a relatively high average score of 39.1667 but also the highest variability (standard deviation = 11.12505), reflecting diverse views. The West, hosting the largest group of 38 respondents, records an average score of 37.3947 with a standard deviation of 7.09221, indicating moderate variability. Outside the United States, 22 respondents yielded the lowest average score of 35.1364 with a standard deviation of 7.90597, pointing to significant differences from domestic views.

The overall average ES score across all regions stands at 37.2929 with a standard deviation of 8.07270, underscoring substantial global variation in how empowerment through sexualization is perceived.

Table 4.7 Regional Empowerment through Sexualization Perceptions

Region	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Southeast	18	35.3889	9.31248
Northeast	15	41.7333	6.73442
Midwest	6	39.1667	11.12505
West	38	37.3947	7.09221
Outside the United States	22	35.1364	7.90597
Total	99	37.2929	8.07270

How Comfortable do you feel expressing your authentic self in your workplace?

Looking at Table 4.8, N=5 (5.1%) respondents felt "Not at All comfortable" (1), N=12 (12.1%) indicated "not comfortable" (2), N=28 (28.3%) felt neutral (3), N=35 (35.4%) felt comfortable (4), and N=19 (19.2%) felt very comfortable (5).

Table 4.8 How comfortable do you feel expressing your authentic self in your workplace?

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Not at all Comfortable	5	5.1
2	Not comfortable	12	12.1
3	Neutral	28	28.3
4	Comfortable	35	35.4
5	Very Comfortable	19	19.2
total		99	100

When respondents were asked how comfortable they felt expressing their authentic selves in their workplaces, which was a survey item inspired by Scheim and Bauer's (2019) Intersectional Discrimination Index (InDI) and intended as a measure to explore intersectionality concerning female recording artists and sexualization, a varied distribution of comfort levels emerged. A small percentage of respondents, 5.1% (n=5), felt "Not At All Comfortable" in their workplaces, indicating significant apprehension about being their true selves in professional settings. An additional 12.1% (n=12) felt "Not Comfortable," further reflecting the discomfort some individuals experience in expressing their authentic identities at work. A sizable proportion, 28.3% (n=28), reported neutral feelings, suggesting a balanced perspective on how much they can be themselves in their work environments. Meanwhile, 35.4% (n=35) reported feeling "Comfortable," indicating a notable level of ease in presenting their authentic selves at work. A further 19.2% (n=19) felt "Very Comfortable," reflecting a high degree of confidence in

their authenticity in the workplace. Despite this varied distribution of comfort levels, no significant statistical findings resulted from this variable, highlighting the complexity of measuring intersectionality and its impact on perceptions of self-expression in relation to sexualization in the music industry.

How comfortable do you feel in public without any makeup?

Referring to Table 4.9, n=5 (5.1%) respondents felt "Not at All comfortable" (1), n=7 (7.1%) indicated "not comfortable" (2), n=21 (21.2%) felt neutral (3), n=16 (16.2%) felt comfortable (4), and n=50 (50.5%) felt very comfortable (5).

Table 4.9 How comfortable do you feel in public without any makeup?

Rating Scale	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Not at all Comfortable	5	5.1
2	Not comfortable	7	7.1
3	Neutral	21	21.2
4	Comfortable	16	16.2
5	Very Comfortable	50	50.5
total		99	100

When participants were asked about their comfort level in public without wearing makeup, a diverse range of responses was observed, as summarized in Table 4.9. A minority of respondents, comprising 5.1% (n=5), expressed feeling "Not at All Comfortable" (1), indicating a significant level of discomfort when appearing in public without makeup. Similarly, 7.1% (n=7) indicated being "Not Comfortable" (2), suggesting a notable degree of unease with their natural appearance in public settings. On the other hand, a considerable proportion of participants, 21.2% (n=21), reported feeling neutral (3), indicating a balanced or indifferent stance regarding the absence of makeup in public. Moreover, 16.2% (n=16) reported feeling

"Comfortable" (4), signaling a moderate level of ease with their appearance without makeup. In contrast, the majority of respondents, accounting for 50.5% (n=50), expressed feeling "Very Comfortable" (5), highlighting a high level of confidence and comfort in presenting themselves without makeup in public. These findings demonstrate the diverse attitudes and perceptions individuals hold regarding makeup and its role in public appearance. Despite this exploration, no significant statistical findings were detected with this variable. Nonetheless, it's worth noting the varied attitudes and perceptions individuals hold regarding wearing makeup.

Discussion

The questions that were explored for this research were what women think about the sexualization of female recording artists and their music and what music genres, songs, and artists make them feel empowered. How do women perceive the sexualization of female recording artists? How does this perception relate to their sense of empowerment? How do different intersectionalities relate to women's perceptions of the sexualization and empowerment narratives presented by female recording artists? The key findings will be explored, followed by future research will be discussed, and suggestions for improvements and refinements.

Key Findings

The study revealed a consensus among women that female recording artists are frequently sexualized. However, this sexualization is not universally seen as empowering. Rather, empowerment is more often associated with attributes such as authenticity, resistance to social norms, and the artists' abilities to relate with the personal experiences and identities of the listeners. For example, artists like Beyoncé, who stayed the most frequently mentioned artist in every category, who are seen as authentic, multifaceted, and harness their platform for both personal expression as well as social activism are often seen as empowering. These findings echo

the work of scholars like hooks (1984) and Davis (1983), who discuss empowerment in terms of overcoming oppression and resonating with individual experiences of listeners. Furthermore, the responses aligned with Payne & Halliday's (2023) analysis of how women identify with the multifaceted depiction of artists like Meg Thee Stallion who show a full range of womanhood. The participants answered that they want to see women depicted as fully human and comprehensive beings–not just ornaments.

Most participants also agreed that the ability to express oneself sexually without judgment is empowering. They noted that songs by female recording artists, which focus on their own sexual pleasure, provide a distinct form of empowerment compared to those primarily designed to appeal to male desires. This perspective aligns with Ward's (2016) differentiation between sexuality and sexualization, underscoring the need to explicitly measure and operationalize these concepts separately. By distinguishing between genuine sexual expression and sexualization intended for male consumption, researchers can better understand the nuances of empowerment in the context of female sexuality.

The survey demonstrated high reliability in testing the constructs of empowerment through sexualization. Additionally, there was a significant correlation between age and empowerment through sexualized dance moves, with older participants less likely to find empowerment through such expressions.

The Complexity of Sexualization and Empowerment

The study highlighted a complex picture of how sexualized expressions are perceived across different demographics. Younger participants, for example, were more likely to view sexualized dance movements as empowering compared to older participants, suggesting generational shifts in how empowerment is conceptualized. There also showed some differences

in perceptions depending on region, however a larger sample would be needed for further exploration. The need to delineate between sexual and sexualizing (Ward, 2016) also added to the complexity.

Intersectionality and Empowerment

Intersectionality emerged as a critical aspect of how empowerment is perceived. The data showed that different aspects of identity, such as race/ethnicity, region, and age, intersect to influence perceptions of empowerment in the context of music. The varied responses might reflect broader social dynamics where certain groups may feel more empowered to express themselves due to lesser social constraints or greater acceptance in their communities. This finding reveals the importance of considering multiple axes of identity in discussions of empowerment, resonating with Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality.

Implications for Future Research

The findings suggest several avenues for future research. First, with a Cronbach's alpha score of .835, the Empowerment through Sexualization (ES) scale has proven to be a reliable tool for assessing perceptions of empowerment among female recording artists, and potentially in other contexts where empowerment through sexualization may be present. Its consistency has made it invaluable for capturing the complex ways in which women may perceive empowerment through sexualization. Moving forward, it is essential for researchers to continually revise and iterate on the ES scale to ensure it remains relevant and inclusive, accurately reflecting the diverse and intersectional identities of participants.

Furthermore, continuing to revise and iterate on how intersectionality is included in surveys for future research into how different identities impact perceptions of sexualization and empowerment could provide deeper insights into the intersectional dynamics at play.

Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how perceptions of empowerment evolve over time as cultural and social norms shift.

The intersectionality wheel question was an innovative approach to measuring more diverse and multifaceted layers of oppression. However, the participants found inconsistency with the readability of the wheel depending on their device, some people may have suffered survey fatigue, and others did not understand what the ask was. There were 80 out of 99 respondents that identified as she/her, 7 that identified as they/their, and 1 that identified as she/they, 10 that identified as he/him and 1 as he/they. However, 25 people indicated that they were in the power rung for gender which was only for cis gender males. Due to this incongruence, the data was left out of the results. However, if tweaked for readability, consistency, and clarity, this could be a powerful tool in analyzing varied intersectionalities–providing a deeper understanding of layers of oppression and their effect on human behavior and perceptions of empowerment outside of the normal confines of race, gender, age, and education.

Heteronormativity, the assumption that heterosexuality is the default or normative sexual orientation, deeply permeates popular music culture. This makes it challenging to unpack people's perceptions of female sexualization without adopting a heteronormative lens in surveys and research methodologies. This then perpetuates heteronormativity by reinforcing the notion that heterosexual perspectives are the standard, thereby marginalizing non-heterosexual viewpoints. Surveys and research tools, designed within this framework, implicitly validate and propagate heterosexual norms and values, while simultaneously rendering non-heteronormative experiences invisible or less valid. Despite efforts to represent all viewpoints, this cultural bias often limits the inclusivity of diverse sexual perspectives. However, as Richardson (2017)

suggests, the inclusion of open-ended responses can provide a more nuanced perspective, allowing for the expression of non-heteronormative views. Future research should explore creative approaches to inclusivity in survey design, ensuring diverse voices are represented.

In academic and social research, the practice of categorizing individuals into racial and ethnic groups such as "white" and "BIPOC" is widespread. These categorizations aim to facilitate the analysis of data across different demographics but often contribute to the "othering" of non-white populations. This not only reinforces a binary perception of race—implicitly positioning white as the norm and BIPOC as the deviation—but also overlooks the rich diversity within each group, effectively whitewashing and erasing unique cultural differences.

Using broad categories like BIPOC can be problematic as it tends to homogenize vastly different cultures, experiences, and historical backgrounds into a single category, diluting the specific experiences of individual groups under the BIPOC umbrella. Furthermore, the term "BIPOC" itself, while intended to highlight the unique oppression and challenges faced by these groups, can inadvertently perpetuate othering by framing these groups in opposition to "whiteness" rather than acknowledging each group's intrinsic cultural value and identity independent of a white/non-white dichotomy. This was a challenge when looking at the race/ethnicity question and deciding how to analyze it since the non-mutually exclusive and unique identities that were selected raised ethical concerns with how to categorize the information into groups for analysis. Although a T-test was run that put people into categories of “white” or “BIPOC,” it is important that we are reflecting and refining this practice to be more inclusive, intersectional, authentic and comprehensive with the results. Similar to “race records”, creating this categorization can further segregate and lead to a misunderstanding of the full picture and erases everyone not within the binary.

In the future, what if the question remained the same, allowing for unique representation, with a question added along the lines of "If you had to identify with one group over the other, please rate highest affiliation to lowest". This may not be the best, but it is important that researchers continue to revise and iterate on existing systems so they continue to be accurate measures of identity and not archaic out of touch systems. If race is a social construct, let's co-construct it. Let's continue to revamp and redefine these measures–bringing everyone to the table to do so.

Our study observed a difference in the scores of Empowerment through Sexualization (ES) between BIPOC and white participants, although the results were not statistically significant. This finding invites further investigation into how empowerment through sexualization is perceived across different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Future research could benefit from a larger participant pool, which might provide a more definitive understanding of these dynamics. Expanding the sample size could help clarify whether the trends noted in this study hold more broadly and could allow for a deeper exploration of the nuanced ways in which race, ethnicity, and culture influence perceptions of empowerment in diverse populations.

Moreover, to move towards a more inclusive and accurate representation of all groups, it is essential to approach demographic categorization with sensitivity and specificity. Researchers should strive to recognize and respect the distinct identities within the BIPOC category by providing options that allow individuals to self-identify with more specificity, avoid framing research outcomes solely in terms of deviations from the white norm, thereby fostering an environment where all racial and ethnic backgrounds are valued equally, incorporate a more

comprehensive intersectional analyses that acknowledge and address the complexities of individuals' identities and experiences.

Furthermore, the qualitative responses significantly enriched the quantitative data. Future research should incorporate more open-ended questions to deeply explore individuals' perceptions. It would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study that includes focus groups, allowing for an examination of how group discussions about empowerment might influence participants' perceptions over time. Additionally, follow-up interviews could be employed to uncover subtleties and complexities in the data, providing a richer understanding of the shifts in participants' views on empowerment. This aligns with Richardson (2017) recommendations of allowing more unrestricted voice and qualitative information when studying empowerment.

Embracing the full spectrum of intersectionalities and identities allows for a richer, more thorough understanding of the social dynamics at play, ultimately leading to more effective and equitable solutions. This approach would not only enhance the robustness of the findings but also contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of empowerment across different racial and ethnic contexts.

Finally, it is paramount that researchers take a critical approach by examining the historical context through a critical lens to unpack stereotypes and better understand current trends. Too often, we are saturated by contemporary cultural perspectives, causing us to overlook deeply entrenched stereotypes, false narratives, and pseudoscience. Before delving into the topic, it is essential to thoroughly explore the historical context to effectively understand how to measure, frame, and analyze the results. This comprehensive approach ensures a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the issues at hand.

Methodological Considerations

The study's methodology presents opportunities for refinement. The use of a list of artists may have primed participants to think about empowerment in specific ways. Future studies might consider open-ended questions about artist influence without providing a list to see how respondents independently conceptualize empowerment. The intersectionality question at the end needs to be tweaked for consistency, readability, and clarity. This item could then provide valuable data across a spectrum of experiences to help better understand and reveal how people perceive empowerment through sexualization based on their collective similar experiences. Moreover, expanding the demographic scope to include more diversity in gender could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different groups perceive the sexualization and empowerment of female artists.

This exploratory study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics between sexualization, empowerment, and female identity within the context of music. By highlighting the role of authenticity and intersectionality, it challenges the music industry and audiences to rethink the narratives we celebrate and promote. Moving forward, embracing a more inclusive and critically aware perspective on empowerment could foster more genuine representations of womanhood in the music industry, thereby enhancing perceptions of empowerment among women.

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Appendix A

Dissertation Survey: Shake Ya Ass, but Watch Yourself**:** *An Intersectional and Decolonial approach to exploring the sexualization of female recording artists and the Empowerment of women in the United States*

Definitions so we are all on the same page:
Empowerment: Empowerment is when you feel like you have the power to do things and make choices.
Sexualization: This refers to when someone's value comes primarily from their sexual appeal or behavior, rather than their other qualities or achievements.
Intersectionality: How different aspects of a person's identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) combine and contribute to unique experiences of advantage or discrimination.
Marginalized: is when someone is not treated as importantly or given the same chances as others because of things like where they come from, the color of their skin, gender identity, or because they might need extra help in some ways. It is like being left out or pushed to the side while others get to be in the center and have more opportunities.

Perception and Influence

1. Which of the following female recording artists do you find empowering? *Check all that apply*:

- ☐ Patrice Roberts
- ☐ India Arie
- ☐ Taylor Swift
- ☐ Katy Perry
- ☐ Adele
- ☐ Ariana Grande
- ☐ Beyoncé
- ☐ Rihanna
- ☐ Christina Aguilera
- ☐ Lady Gaga
- ☐ Madonna
- ☐ Jennifer Lopez
- ☐ Selena
- ☐ Mariah Carey

- ☐ Alicia Keys
- ☐ Whitney Houston
- ☐ Shakira
- ☐ Britney Spears
- ☐ Janet Jackson
- ☐ Billie Eillish
- ☐ Miley Cyrus
- ☐ Bessie Smith
- ☐ Big Freedia
- ☐ Lil' Kim
- ☐ Shenseea
- ☐ Nicki Minaj
- ☐ Tracy Chapman
- ☐ Lauryn Hill
- ☐ Cardi B
- ☐ Megan Thee Stallion
- ☐ Doja Cat
- ☐ Ma' Rainey
- ☐ Fiona Apple
- ☐ Ella Fitzgerald
- ☐ Erykah Badu
- ☐ Nadia Batson
- ☐ Stevie Nicks
- ☐ Nailah Blackman
- ☐ Koffee
- ☐ Spice
- ☐ Cher
- ☐ Cyndi Lauper
- ☐ Karol G
- ☐ Olivia Newton-John
- ☐ Aretha Franklin
- ☐ Jewel
- ☐ Alison Krauss
- ☐ Janelle Monáe
- ☐ Pink

- ☐ Lizzo
- ☐ Gwen Stefani
- ☐ Celine Dion
- ☐ Dolly Parton
- ☐ Janis Joplin
- ☐ Kesha
- ☐ Alanis Morsette
- ☐ Joni Mitchell
- ☐ Missy Elliott
- ☐ Billie Holiday

Sexualization and Empowerment

Please answer the questions from your perspective, not women in general.

Empowerment: Empowerment is when you feel like you have the power to do things and make choices.

Sexualization: This refers to when someone's value comes primarily from their sexual appeal or behavior, rather than their other qualities or achievements.

2. How empowering do you find lyrics that objectify men in songs by female artists?
Not at all Empowering 1 2 3 4 5 **Absolutely Empowering**

3. In general, including both visuals and lyrics, how would you rate the level of sexualization of female recording artists in the United States?
Not at All Sexualized 1 2 3 4 5 **Highly Sexualized**

4. How empowering are dance movements that are often viewed as sexualized (e.g., twerking), when performed by women?
Not at all Empowering 1 2 3 4 5 **Absolutely Empowering**

5. How empowering are sexualized lyrics sung by female recording artists to you?
Not at all Empowering 1 2 3 4 5 **Absolutely Empowering**

6. Do you believe that when women shake their bottom, it is always sexual?
Always Sexual 1 2 3 4 5 **Could mean anything**

7. Do you feel empowered when you are sexualized, for example, wearing lingerie or doing a sexy dance?
Not at all Empowering 1 2 3 4 5 **Absolutely Empowering**

8. How empowering do you find the use of revealing clothing in music videos and performances by female recording artists?
Not at all Empowering 1 2 3 4 5 **Absolutely Empowering**

9. To what extent do you agree with this statement?: Songs by female recording artists that center on their own sexual pleasure provide a form of empowerment different from those that primarily appeal to male desires. **Strongly Disagree** 1 2 3 4 5 **Strongly Agree**

10. To what extent do you agree with the statement: Being able to express myself sexually without judgment is empowering?
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 **Strongly Agree**

11. Do you believe that sexualization can have positive effects, such as increased confidence or feeling desirable?
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 **Strongly Agree**

Reflection and Personal Experience
12. From your experience, which female recording artist do you most relate to or feel represented by, and why?

13. From your experience, which female recording artist do you feel is most empowering to women, and why?

14. From your experience, which genre of music do you believe is the most empowering for women, and why?

15. How do you view women who sing, dance, or wear sexualized content?

16. Identify a song by a female recording artist that you find empowering. What aspects of the song (lyrics, tone, music video, etc.) make you feel this way?

Demographics/Intersectionality

Intersectionality: How different aspects of a person's identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) combine and contribute to unique experiences of advantage or discrimination.

17. Education Level

Directions: Please enter your total years of education. For example:

- High school graduate: 12
- Bachelor's degree: 16

18. Race/Ethnicity (check all that apply)

- ☐ Caribbean
- ☐ Black/African-American
- ☐ African
- ☐ More than one race
- ☐ More than two races
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Arabic
- ☐ Hispanic/LatinX
- ☐ European
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Alaskan Native
- ☐ Native Hawaiian
- ☐ Pacific Islander
- ☐ Indigenous
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Indian
- ☐ East Asian
- ☐ Central Asian
- ☐ Indian (Asian Continent)
- ☐ Middle Eastern
- ☐ White

19. How comfortable do you feel expressing your authentic self in your workplace?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 **Very Comfortable**

20. How comfortable do you feel in public without any makeup?
Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 **Very Comfortable**

21. **Age**
22. **Gender Pronouns**
she/her
he/him
they/them
Other:

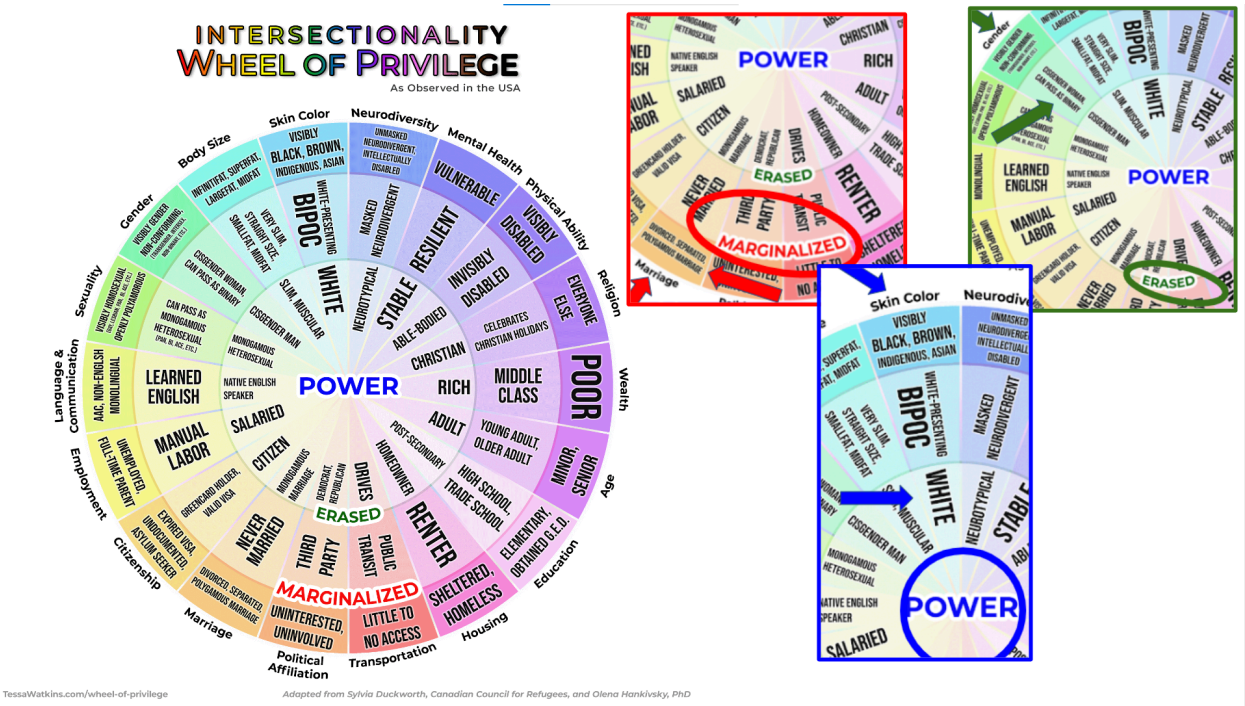
23. **Cultural/Ethnic Background**

24. Where do you see yourself as "being from" despite where you live:
Northeast
Southeast
Midwest
West
Outside the United States

25. For each intersectional category, please look at the picture of the "Intersectionality Wheel of Privilege" by Duckworth and Hankivsky and indicate if you identify in the "marginalized" rung, "erased" rung, or in the center of "power". This helps understand the intersectionality of your experiences. **Please note** - if you are taking this on a phone, you may need to scroll across for the correct rung. Pinch your screen to zoom in on the wheel for more clarity

Ex: a divorced white woman would be in the "power" center for skin color, "erased" rung for gender and "marginalized" rung for marriage.

Cisgender (**cis**): means that a person's gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a straight male born as a male, or a straight woman born a female.



	Power	Erased	Marginalized
Gender	☐	☐	☐
Body Size	☐	☐	☐
Skin Color	☐	☐	☐
Neurodiversity	☐	☐	☐
Mental Health	☐	☐	☐
Physical Activity	☐	☐	☐
Religion	☐	☐	☐
Education	☐	☐	☐
Wealth	☐	☐	☐
Age	☐	☐	☐
Education	☐	☐	☐

Housing	☐	☐	☐
Transportation	☐	☐	☐
Political Affiliation	☐	☐	☐
Marriage	☐	☐	☐
Citizenship	☐	☐	☐
Employment	☐	☐	☐
Language and Communication	☐	☐	☐
Sexuality	☐	☐	☐