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A Content Analysis of Representations of Women's Bisexuality in American Popular Music, 2008-2018

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Recommended Citation

Hintz, Haley D., "A Content Analysis of Representations of Women's Bisexuality in American Popular Music, 2008-2018" (2020). *Oswald Research and Creativity Competition*. 27.
<https://uknowledge.uky.edu/oswald/27>

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University of Kentucky

Lewis Honors College

A Content Analysis of Representations of Women's Bisexuality in American Popular Music,
2008-2018

Haley Hintz

May 2019

Abstract

This paper closes the gap in research which has long neglected the study of representations of women's bisexuality in American popular music. Previous research has concluded that in all forms of media including magazines, television, music and films, references of bisexuality or bisexual people make up less than 1% of instances (Bond 111). This paper studies how bisexual women are erased and depicted in popular music by coding released singles (n=184) categorized using Billboard's "Top 40 Year-End Artists," charts from 2008-2018. This research found these singles to portray women/women narratives into the following three categories: 1) portraying behavioral bisexuality, 2) portraying stereotypes of bisexual women, or 3) portraying romantic scenes of same-sex female attraction. While examining how gender expression has an influence on the way the video is perceived by an audience, this analysis considers varying manners in which sexualized scenes in music videos are illustrated. The findings reveal that representations of bisexual women have been scarce and often negative. Included is a discussion of how bisexual-identifying artist, Halsey, has challenged pervasive stereotypes of gender and sexuality in her field.

Introduction

In a post-modern society, music and music videos are consumed on an unprecedented scale and have the ability to shape identities of the listener and the discourses in society. In order to have a hit in popular music, scholars have argued that producers have historically preferred to award record deals to white, heterosexual, and cisgendered people; therefore, queer women in popular music are "variously misrepresented, falsely represented, or negatively represented" while heterosexual artists are overrepresented (Railton and Watson 18). Many times, various

sexual minorities are not even represented at all leading to the erasure of their identities. In all forms of media including magazines, television, music and films, references of bisexuality or bisexual people make up less than 1% of instances (Bond 111).

In popular music, forms of the misrepresentation of queer women became apparent in 2003 with a performance extremely provocative for its time. Britney Spears, Madonna, and Christina Aguilera made the decision to kiss one another during a performance of “Hollywood” for the MTV music awards. In just seconds, many stereotypes were featured including the indecisiveness of bisexual women to kiss more than one person in a night. By portraying Madonna in a masculine presentation and Britney Spears as a virginal woman, the performance played upon the male gaze as the camera actually pans to the reaction of a male audience member. This performance was not about showcasing authentic attraction to women, but it was an “economically motivated packaging and marketing of sexual controversy” (Diamond 107).

While there have been analyses of gay and lesbian representation in musical discourse, to date, there has not been a content analysis which examined similar representations of bisexual women by artists in American popular music because “disbelief in the existence of bisexuality has led to the neglect of bisexuality in all forms of research” (Rust 209). This paper aims to contextualize evidence that has found that 33.1% of heterosexual college women indicated that they have kissed another heterosexual girl at a party (Yost and MCarthy 2012). By examining the released singles of the of the *Billboard* “Top 40 Year-End Artists,” from 2008-2018, I seek to analyze the songs and music videos which feature a women/women narratives and categorize them as follows: 1) Portraying “behavioral bisexuality” defined by scholars “heterosexual-identified women engaging in homoerotic behavior with other women, usually in front of men

and in social settings like fraternity parties, bars and clubs” (Fahs 1), 2) portraying negative stereotypes of bisexual women, or 3) romantic portrayals of same-sex female attraction.

Additionally, I will highlight how the only explicitly bisexual-identifying artist in the *Billboard* “Top 40 Year-End Artists” charts, Halsey, has challenged stereotypes of bisexual women spread in popular music within the last decade with her careful use of pronouns and politically charged messages. It is important to note that the way in which I use the term *bisexuality* is “the quality or characteristic of being sexually attracted not exclusively to people of one particular gender” as defined by the Bisexual Resource Center.¹

Methods and Results

This research features a theoretical sampling of artists in the “Top 40 Year-End Artists” archives from *Billboard*’s official lists from the years 2008-2018. Out of the all artists who made this list in the past decade, 7 women and 1 man (n=8) were found to have songs featuring various narratives of queer women while also singing about heterosexual relationships in other songs that they had released.

Of these eight artists, all released music videos (excluding songs from Christmas albums or movie soundtracks) were coded based on the presence and gender of 1) a love interest character, 2) intimate physical touch, or 3) kissing. This was done to examine the frequency and type of women/women sexual instances as opposed to women/men sexual instances in order to analyze the content that artists were comfortable presenting in different relationships. Videos which were not about love, sex, desire, breakups *etc.* between a couple were dropped from further analysis.

Out of all of their released music videos combined (n=184), it was found that 12 total singles contained imagery or lyrics which met one or more of the previously stated criteria for woman/woman coding and 81 met criteria for woman/man coding (see table 1).²

Table 1
Frequency of Sexual Instances

	Woman with Man		Woman with Woman	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Portrayal in Video				
Kissing	87.8	14	14.2	2
Physical Touch	90.7	39	9.3	4
Love Interest	82.4	28	17.6	6
Total	87.1	81	12.9	12

The 12 songs featuring woman/woman imagery were then divided into three categories for further analysis based on their characterizations of a woman/woman narrative. The three categories included 1) behavioral bisexuality (n=5) 2) negative stereotyping (n=4) and 3) romantic portrayals of two women (n=3).

Only the years 2008-2018 were considered because the most recent archival data which exists in Billboard is from the year 2018, and I sought to analyze a decade worth of content dating back to 2008. I chose to analyze the top year-end artists instead of the top year-end singles in order to observe the percentage of queer narratives as opposed to heterosexual narratives by particular artists.

Discussion

Behavioral Bisexuality

To begin, like the Britney Spears, Madonna, and Christina Aguilera MTV award show moment of 2003, some of the songs coded for analysis contained traditional narratives of so-called behavioral (or sometimes called compulsory) bisexuality. This term is carefully defined as “women engaging in homoerotic behavior with other women, usually in front of men and in social settings like fraternity parties, bars and clubs” (Fahs 1). The songs which feature this narrative include “Who Owns My Heart” and “We Can’t Stop” by Miley Cyrus, “I Kissed a Girl” by Katy Perry, and “Break up with your Girlfriend, I’m Bored,” by Ariana Grande.³

In each video stated above, the literal audience of the video as well as the audience of the characters within the video hold great importance because the choreography, imagery, and actions of the video are all catered to a male viewer. This phallogentric idea is backed by the notion that a man would find the women in the video appealing and “exist as the basis for pleasure in looking at another person as an object” (Mulvey 845). In these music videos, the physical touch between women is negotiated in a way which is *sexy* but not overtly *sexual*. For example, in Katy Perry’s video, there is never a moment where Perry embraces another woman romantically even though that is the entire basis of the song. Instead, women pose near Perry in lingerie. Likewise, in Ariana’s video, she flirtatiously touches the woman of interest, but the video is cut off just before their lips touch. The artists make sure not to include too much representation of sex between the women due to the fears that the audience response will switch from supporting the teased-out sexualities to disgrace in their representations of queerness. As shown in Table 1, images of physical touch or kissing between women is less likely to occur in music videos than when the plot of the video is between a man and a woman likely due to the stigmatization of same-sex sex.

The party-like settings in which the videos take place are reflective of research that found that of heterosexual-identifying women who have made out with girls at a party, 56% reported that their motivation was the attention of a male onlooker (Yost and Mearthy 15). In Cyrus's "We Can't Stop," she is first seen binge drinking, then is portrayed as sexually dancing with girls at a party, and later seen with dancing with men in the video contributing her attraction to women to drunken antics. More problematically, Grande's "Break up with Your Girlfriend, I'm Bored," is filled with overt examples of the male gaze. The camera pans to shots of the male character watching Grande longingly but only once she begins showing affection towards the woman in the video. In the end, Grande grabs the woman's face as to kiss her and the man looks devastated when his reaction is shown. The pleasure in viewing heterosexual girls kissing has "long been a staple of male fantasy but has only recently graduated from the shelves of pornographic videos to mainstream movies and television shows" (Diamond 105).

However, for this fantasy to be realized, gender plays an important role in the conversation. This strategy for shooting a video to please the voyeuristic man has specific standards of hegemonic femininity. Unfortunately, the videos are usually more successful when the women are traditionally feminine, often white, and comply to the beauty standards. Perry, Cyrus, and Grande cast women with long hair and show them in heavy makeup with little clothing.⁴ Individual body parts are zoomed in on by the camera where they are objectified for their chest or bottom as something to "try on."

It also seems to be critical that the viewers are reassured that the women still have some interest in men. Grande carefully arranges her lyrics to address her desire for the man by singing "you can say I'm hatin' if you want to/but I only hate on her 'cause I want you," making it clear that the woman is not her primary interest but her ultimate goal is a relationship with the man.

Similarly, Perry's video ends with her awake in her boyfriend's bed, suggesting that her fantasy of women was only a dream and she can return to her assumed position of compulsory heterosexuality where her dream of women explained as a deviance from the norm (Rich 362).

Whether the elements of the videos are autobiographical and authentic is debatable and the identities of the artists should of course be respected. Only the ways in which the artists have presented the narratives on-screen has been analyzed. The characters of the artists in the video play with behavioral bisexuality because the dueling interest in men and women are shown in the context of a wild environment where the attention of men is a focus. When these types of videos, especially "I Kissed a Girl," clog the mainstream media, they contribute to bisexual erasure because they equate "bisexuality with straight experimentation" (Daw 1).

Negative Stereotyping

The second category of research concerns songs which explicitly reference or imply references to stereotypes of bisexual women. These songs are "Girls" by Rita Ora (feat. Cardi B, BeBe Rexha, and Charlie XCX), "Lost in the Fire," by the Weeknd, "Bitches" by Tove Lo (feat. Charlie XCX, Icona Pop, Elliphant, and Alma), and "Cool for the Summer" by Demi Lovato.

Of the LGBTQ+ community, bisexual women face especially harsh criticism from heterosexual-identifying individuals as well as other queer people. They are often called "internally conflicted, emotionally and psychologically immature, or emotionally unstable" because it is difficult for many people to understand how one can experience attractions to more than one gender (Rust 206).

From the songs listed above, the most shocking video came from "Girls" by Rita Ora featuring Cardi B and BeBe Rexha because of its striking similarity of harmful imagery and

messages as “I Kissed A Girl.” Between these two songs, ten years' worth of content analysis has been sandwiched by videos which make it seem as if little social progress has been made in the ways that popular music musicians talk about female desire and sexuality.

To open the video, Ora stands on a balcony in a jungle-like setting and, from the start, establishes symbolic forbidden fruit that will become a motif throughout the video by making an allusion to the apple in the story of Genesis. The camera pans to a shot of two women framed by the leaves on a bush, clearly hiding from anyone who can see as to imply that they are ashamed of their sexual acts. By teasing around with Biblical themes, a video in popular music which should be attempting to break traditional ideals of sexuality themes reinforces the idea that it is “forbidden” instead of working to establish a new standard of its normalcy. Critics of this argument might say that she has reclaimed the stories of the past by depicting the beauty in female on female sexuality, but the lyrics of the song do not redeem its controversial music video and they further highlight the stereotypes.

For example, in order for videos of female/female desire to become a hit, the artists must set the precedent that the attraction that they feel to women is only temporary and fortify the notion that bisexual women will eventually end up with a man. Charlie XCX appears in the “Girls” video and sings “last night, yeah, we got with a dude/I saw him, he was looking at you” and is quickly followed by Cardi B who says “now I could be your lipstick just for one night.” In “Bitches” Charlie XCX *again* sings “bitches, I don’t trust them but they give me what I want for the night.” In many ways, it seems as if the artists are trying to justify some sort of cognitive dissonance with the audience; so, a juxtaposition of wanting to freely express their love for women but also reassure the listener of the existence of a counter heterosexual desire is apparent. They tell the listener that a temporary attraction to other women is an acceptable and even a

leisurely activity. Yet, bisexual women are often criticized for their attraction to women and the public brushes off their sexuality as a phase. While popular music artists articulate satisfaction in being around a woman, it is only “cool for the summer” as Demi Lovato states because in the future, they will surely restore their heterosexual desires.

To much consternation, these artists have failed to paint a picture of women in monogamous and loving relationships. “Girls” and “Cool for the Summer” both were cast with dozens of women hired to stand, dance, and lay around the featured musical artist as if there is a desire to be with all of them instead of focusing on a narrative of a singular love interest. There is no distinction made between having the ability to different gender presentations and being with multiple people at a time.

Worst of all, The Weeknd sings about his own sexual fantasies of a “threesome” with a seemingly queer woman. He says:

You said you might be into girls
You said you're going through a phase
Keepin' your heart safe
Well, baby, you can bring a friend
She can ride on top your face
While I fuck you straight

This provides only one example of a time when women’s sexuality has been fetishized by men in the media as a way for a man to benefit from a woman’s queerness. This song posits the idea that men need to justify not being the center of a woman’s longing and attention which often results in violence. In this society where heterosexuality is assumed to be the norm, toxic

masculinity causes some men to feel entitled to “deny women of their sexuality or force it upon them” (Rich 638). Often, The Weeknd feels the need to confirm his masculinity by singing about “female characters who are muted, objectified and, with the exception of a few songs, nameless and rid of any agency” as a way to assert power over them (Dhaenens and De Ridder 293). This normalization of violence against bisexual women has real consequences; research shows that 61.1% of bisexual women have experienced intimate partner violence according to the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey. The Weeknd too, exhibits the belief that while this woman may have legitimized attraction to another woman, that the phase will end once he reminds her of the benefits of heterosexuality.

Therefore, while these songs and music videos have been called “gay anthems” in the past, the listener must take a more critical look at the messages that provide a discourse that does not disrupt hegemonic ideas of the objectified, greedy, or confused bisexual woman. Sadly, queer people can feel so erased from the culture that even negative representation in music or media can be celebrated because they feel grateful to be acknowledged at all.

Romantic Portrayals

Of the songs discussed today, there have been instances where popular music artists have succeeded in providing an authentic narrative of female on female desire. These videos include “Te Amo” by Rihanna, and “Bad at Love,” “Ghost” and “Strangers” by Halsey (feat. Lauren Jauregui).

In contrast to the songs discussed above, these videos are not about a general narrative about attraction to women but tell the story of a relationship like most heterosexual love songs in popular music; also, they do not depict wild scenes of parties, or any negative stereotypes of

queer women. Instead, the storyline of the song is about a relationship with *one* person about whom the artist has written and casted one person to play the character in the video. The lyrics of these songs also present an apparent emotional attraction instead of just a physical one which is backed up by sexual elements of a relationship in the music videos.

In “Te Amo,” the video is set in a location where Rihanna and the other woman can be alone. In this case, the female gaze is the most important viewing point because while Rihanna dances, the camera cuts to an image of the woman viewing her. More importantly, the song is about an unrequited and honest love as Rihanna sings “we all need love, and I'm not afraid/I feel the love but I don't feel that way.” In other words, Rihanna is telling her audience while she, in theory, wants to desire the woman, it would not be fair to lead her on.

Most importantly, of all the artists coded for analysis, Halsey represents the only openly bisexual-identifying woman who has made the “Top 40 Year-End Artist” charts within the past 10 years and has had to work hard to overcome the stereotypes of bisexual and queer women that other popular music artists have perpetuated. However, she does not produce music just to trend in the top charts or to profit off of queer-baiting; woven into her music are political and social messages which challenge the standards of femininity and heteronormativity.

Since her debut EP, she has not been afraid to showcase her sexuality in a positive light. While her debut single, “Ghost,” contains lyrics which refer to a male love interest, she boldly casted a woman in her music video at the start of her career as a way to battle the expectation of a male/female relationship from the listener and producers. Without being overly showy, the same-sex couple is seen on a romantic date at an aquarium as well as sexualized in bed like music videos about heterosexual relationships. She is not afraid be an aberration in order to normalize sex between women to the same extent that is has been normalized in the media

between women and men. With a futuristic setting, the video is symbolic of the musical innovations that she will create by being brave enough to protest industry standards by showcasing herself as unapologetically queer and switching between using she/her and he/him pronouns throughout songs on her albums effortlessly. As compared to Katy Perry or Rita Ora who create a vociferous production when the content of their songs are about women, Halsey incorporates queer narratives naturally as a way of simply existing in a way that feel authentic to her.

Additionally, Halsey presents herself in an alternatively feminine way that is not traditional for success on the top music charts. She transitions from wearing long haired wigs, shaving her head, wearing bralettes, and wearing oversized clothing; she does not cater her style specifically to the male gaze and presents her gender differently in each performance. Although mainstream music producers tend to sign high-femme women, Halsey is proving that an androgynous style is sexy and refuses to let the opinions of anyone define her. Many times, masculine presenting queer people of color face harsher backlash than white queer women who may be able to pass as straight. Therefore, Halsey's success is proof that her talent and outspokenness has in some way overcome the precedents set by other artists. In conjunction with her gender fluid style, she also does not conform to gendered expectations of behavior. "Strangers" shows Halsey fighting in a boxing rink against her ex-girlfriend clearly filled with rage and anger as she takes swings. When she was questioned for her outfit choices after the release of *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* she tweeted that "androgyny is f*cking cool and if anyone tries telling you 'how to be a girl' punch them in the face." This feminist attitude empowers her to overcome the gendered binaries that musicians have been placed into as a way to be a role model for her fans to have lacked representation in the past.

Fans around the world champion Halsey for her music, gender presentation, and sexuality as she has gained a prodigious following proving to producers that there is a large and needed space for bisexual women in the music industry. From this, it is hopeful that Halsey has paved the way for other queer women in the future to veer from the strict expectations of Hollywood to be an authentic artist which will unequivocally change social perceptions and bisexual stereotypes through increased representation.

Conclusions

In the context of celebrity culture, a decade of fame is a notorious achievement; the musical content produced over ten years becomes the soundtrack of a childhood and the inspiration of a rebellious teenager. Music brings feeling of tears, joy, and celebration, yet, more importantly, the pop culture celebrity has the ability to influence a person's identity. With Katy Perry's ascendancy making her the most followed person on Twitter in the world as well as ranking number 19 on the 2008 *Billboard* year-end charts, her every word and action will be scrutinized, and her music videos have the ability to shape discourses of the era. The media today profits off of portraying celebrities "as examples of what everyone should strive for" (Davisson 4). So, even though "I Kissed a Girl" debuted 10 years ago, artists like Rita Ora are still taking inspiration from the video thinking that it serves as the penultimate success story of bisexual representation. Consequently, stereotypes are being taken from the media and leading to real-world implications like violence or microaggressions against queer people who are not famous.

It is clear that themes of love, sex, and desire flood the content of the Top 40 artists' released singles with findings which show that 70%-90% of songs containing themes relating to sexuality in general (Arnett 254). However, this research shows that within the past decade of popular music, the options for representation of queer and bisexual women are scarce. Although

the work of openly bisexual artists such as Hayley Kioko and Janelle Monet who have not made *Billboard's* year-end lists should not be ignored, it is important to note the types of representation that is available in mainstream popular culture because widespread music has increasingly been used “as a way of interrogating the relationship between music and cultural politics” (Railton and Watson 9).

Thankfully, artists like Halsey are reforming the narrative of bisexuality as something that is not just a phase, experimentation, or drunken antics. Embodying the idea of naturality in her performance of “strangers” in nude costumes on *The Voice* with another woman, she gave the world an example of a beautiful same-sex love story which was not meant to create shock value or capture the attention of men. She uses her platform to be a voice for queer women and be a positive representation for girls and gender non-conforming people around the world. While Katy Perry was able to “leave her brief and titillating queer experimentation phase behind her” after she received criticism, Halsey boldly uses music as a way to advocate for queer and bisexual women throughout all of her albums and creative projects (Keating 1).

By examining the results of this content analysis, I have discovered that American Popular Music allows for some conversations of bisexuality and queer women; however, most of the videos are filled with problematic content. This research was motivated by a desire to bring awareness to the culture of music artists and create scholarship in an area which has been overlooked.

Notes

1. Traditionally, bisexuality has been known to mean having a sexual attraction to *both* genders which suggests that only two genders exist. However, in recent years, the term has been defined more broadly to mean that a person has the ability to be attracted to *two or more* genders.
2. All bisexuality exists on a scale. For example, a person can prefer women but also be attracted to men or the opposite. In creating this table examining the frequencies of narratives of heterosexual as compared to queer narratives, my intent was to show that among mainstream music, the vast majority of representation is of heterosexual relationships; my intent was not to examine the percentage that the artist prefers women to men.
3. Since the release of these singles, all three of these artists have addressed their sexualities in different ways: Miley Cyrus identifies as Pansexual, and Ariana Grande and Katy Perry have chosen not to explicitly label their sexuality but have admitted feeling attraction to other women. For the purpose of this analysis, only the content of the music videos will be observed. In an effort to be respectful of the artists and their chosen identities, I will ignore any autobiographical elements of the music videos.
4. By talking about the feminine presentation and clothing choices of the women, my intent is not to shame them. Instead, I am trying to show a pattern in the proposed desirable packaging of a woman in the music video and the lack of diversity that exists.

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