

Sex Sells: Sexiness and Perceived Competence in Male vs. Female Rock Musicians

Elizabeth Henze

Faculty Sponsor: Betsy Morgan, Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the question: is it necessary for female musicians to be highly sexualized? One hundred and ninety two undergraduates from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse listened to a sound clip while viewing a picture in which a model's gender (male vs. female) and appearance (sexy vs. neutral) was manipulated. They rated the musician on their musical competence and future potential. I hypothesized that 1) sexily clad female musicians would receive higher competence and potential ratings than neutrally clad female musician and 2) male respondents would give higher competence ratings to the sexily clad female compared to the sexily clad male and vice versa for female respondents. Results indicated that the sexily clad musician was perceived the as significantly more competent than the neutrally clad musicians. Also, an interaction was found in attractiveness ratings between participant's and model's sex. Differences in competence, success and musical ability ratings warrant additional research as well as differences in gender trends.

INTRODUCTION

"Music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn. They teach you there's a boundary line to music. But, man, there's no boundary line to art." ~ Charlie Parker.

When it comes to creativity, limitations are rarely enforced, making musical expression very liberating for both musicians and listeners. However, "making it" in the world of music definitely has limitations – especially when it comes to female musicians.

The popular music scene represents a wide variety of musical styles including rock, blues, and jam bands. Although these bands play different styles of music, they all have a disproportionate number of male to female musicians (Daughtry, 2002). In fact, the history of western music reflects this male majority, and music history courses reflect this imbalance (Karpf, 1994). The rise in blues and jazz of the 1920's brought more women in the scene, as female vocalists created greater range in tone (Daughtry). However, historical analyses of early female musicians indicate that female singers were often viewed as "eye candy" and were paid less than their accompanying male musicians (Daughtry).

Today, women are more prominent in the music scene. However, the male to female musician ratio still favors men, and the majority of female musicians are vocalists rather than instrumentalists – especially in rock and roll. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame started in 1986 to honor musicians who "have contributed to the energy and evolution of rock music," and every year, new groups are inducted (Crampton & Rees, 2004). So far 188 music groups have been inducted. Of those inducted, only 29 contain female musicians. Some are all female bands; whereas, others have both male and female members (Crampton & Rees, 2004). There are a total of 40 female musicians in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, 36 are vocalists, 3 are vocalists and instrumentalists, and only 1 female instrumentalist (Crampton & Rees).

Recent reviews of these female rockers indicate a higher emphasis on appearance than musicality. Schilt (2003) compared the reviews of punk bands and "angry-women music" of the early 1990's. For example, a review of Fiona Apple used terms like, "the pouty bee-stung lips," "the taunt, pierced belly exposed by a flouncy shirt," and "the cascading brown hair, and those eyes ... Is this the next waif supermodel?" to describe her performance (Schilt, 2003, p13). Schilt argues that these reviews focus very little on musical ability and/or confuse musical abilities are often confused with their visual images and style. The majority of female rockers today maintain a highly sexualized appearance (Schilt, 2003). This trend raises the question "is it necessary for female musicians to have a highly sexualized appearance to make it in the male-dominated scene of rock music?"

Sut Jhally, a Professor of Communications at the University of Massachusetts, is known for his research concerning the perception of women in the media. His movie, *Dreamworlds 3: Desire, Sex, & Power in Music Videos*, critically examines the representation of women, men, and sexuality in music videos throughout all genres. Jhally (2007) found that “women in music videos are usually barely dressed, and when they do wear clothes they tend to be low-cut and skimpy tops, stockings, and lingerie.” Analyses of women in music videos suggest that camera angles are highly sexualized and focus on disconnected body parts. In addition, women perform provocatively for the camera (e.g. undressing and touching themselves). Jhally believes this highly sexualized appearance has set the standard for all women in the music scene, arguing that in order “to gain success in the world of popular music, female artists have to adopt the same visual conventions that are used in music videos by male artists,” (Jhally, 2007). Jhally provides examples of several female artists who entered the scene with a neutral appearance yet quickly conformed to the highly sexualized standards including: Jewel, Mariah Carey, Christina Aguilera, and Jessica Simpson. Men are rarely portrayed in this highly sexualized manor in music videos (Jhally).

So why is sexuality important for female artists to be successful rock stars? Music sales reflect the larger advertising world where it has been established that “sex sells.” Reichert (2002) found that both male and female participants were more likely to report favorable attitudes, interest, and purchase intent to magazine covers featuring an opposite-sex model. Reichert (2003) conducted a similar study using car advertisements. Participants viewed two identical automobile ads – one featured only a car while the other had a scantily clad woman standing next to the car. Participants were asked to rate the cars on varying qualities. Results indicated that the car with the woman was perceived as more appealing, more lively, and more youthful, as well as better designed, faster, more expensive, and less safe than the car without the model. In both studies, sexual appeal heightened potential consumer interest and influenced their perceptions of the marketed object in a positive light, reinforcing the use of sex in advertisements.

Generally speaking, there are some predictable appearances associated with sexiness for both men and women. Women are seen as sexier when they wear more makeup, low-cut shirts, high-heeled shoes, and have tousled hair (e.g., Branstiter, Glick, Johnson, & Larsen, 2005). Research on male sexiness has found that “toned” or “built” physiques receive higher sexy ratings and are associated with traits such as dominance, volatility, and less commitment to one’s partner (Frederick & Haselton, 2007).

The proposed study explores the question, “what is the relationship between a sexy appearance and perceptions of musical competence and potential for male and female rock musicians?” I hypothesize that 1) sexily clad female musicians would be viewed as having higher competence and more potential than neutrally clad female musicians, whereas respondents would not differentiate between sexy and neutral male musicians and 2) male respondents would give higher competence ratings to the sexily clad female compared to the sexily clad male whereas females would give higher competence ratings to the sexily clad male compared to the sexily clad female.

METHODS

This study is a 2x2x2 factorial, between-subjects design with three independent variables: gender of participants (male vs. female), gender of musician (male vs. female) and appearance of musician (sexy vs. neutral). An online survey was emailed to approximately 310 students in an introductory psychology class, of whom 207 responded. However, incomplete surveys were thrown out which resulted in data from 192 (41 males and 151 females) participants. 90 % of the participants were Caucasian; where as 6% were Asian, 2% were Hispanic, 1.5% were other and .5% of participants were Native American. Participants filled out a consent form received one point of extra credit as incentive.

The survey consisted of a musical video clip with a still photo and a 30 sec original instrumental rock segment. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four photo conditions: sexy or neutral attire and male or female musician. The musicians were photographed holding an electric guitar, wearing similar colors and in a similar pose (see appendix A). The models were instructed to look down to avoid giving any facial cues that could potentially influence the participants. For the sexy condition, the male musician was shown as shirtless whereas the female musician wore a low cut top as well as high heels. For the neutral condition, each model wore a black t-shirt and blue jeans. While respondents viewed the photos, a 30sec music clip was played. This clip was instrumental to allow congruency between the photo and the model, and was original to avoid participant familiarity. After viewing the photo and music clip, respondents rated the musicians on attractiveness, competence and sexiness on a six point Likert scale (1=low, 6=high) as well as the potential success and musical ability of the musician on a seven point Likert scale (1=low, 7=high). Respondents were then asked demographic information such as gender, age, major and musical preferences and experience.

RESULTS

An ANOVA test found a significant difference in competence ratings based on the models appearance regardless of gender. The sexily clad models were seen as more competent compared to the neutrally clad models. No significant differences were found in ability or success ratings based on the model’s appearance. No significant difference was found in sexiness ratings based on the model’s appearance (see Table 1). Success ratings for the male model was slightly higher than for the female model, regardless of appearance, and approached significance (see Table 2). Female participants, on average, gave significantly higher attractiveness ratings than male participants, regardless of the model’s gender (see Table 3). Success ratings yielded a similar trend and approached significance ($p = .092$). Results also indicated an interaction between the model’s sex and the participant’s sex for attractiveness ratings. Male participants gave higher attractiveness ratings to the female model and female participants gave higher ratings to the male model (see Figure 2) $F(1, 7.25) = 5.32; p = .02$. For the whole, ability and success were correlated at $r(203) = .41, p < .05$. However, competence and success were correlated at $r(203) = .19, p < .05$ and ability and competence were only correlated at $r(203) = .18, p < .05$. This pattern of correlation was similar across sex of participants, sex of picture, and sexiness of picture.

Table 1. Competence, Ability, Success, and Sexiness Ratings Based on the Model’s Appearance

	Model Appearance	M	SD	df	F	p
Competence [^]	Neutral	3.59	1.18	(1,12.1)	9.23	0.003
	Sexy	4.08	1.1			
Ability ^{^^}	Neutral	5.07	1.07	(1, .86)	0.77	0.38
	Sexy	4.92	1.03			
Success ^{^^}	Neutral	3.64	1.02	(1, .9)	0.79	0.38
	Sexy	5.59	1.12			
Sexiness [^]	Neutral	3.95	1.11	(1, .52)	0.4	0.53
	Sexy	3.85	1.13			

[^]scale of 1-6 where 6 is high

^{^^}scale of 1-7 where 7 is high

Table 2. Success Ratings Based on the Model’s Sex

	Model Sex	M	SD	df	F	p
Success	Male	3.73	1.04	(1, 3.9)	3.44	0.065
	Female	3.5	1.09			

*Measured on a scale of 1-7 where 7 is high

Table 3. Attractiveness and Success Ratings Based on Participant’s Sex

	Participant Sex	M	SD	df	F	p
Attractiveness	Male	3.09	1.25	(1,15.2)	11.2	0.001
	Female	3.77	1.16			
Success	Male	3.43	1.14	(1,3.25)	2.88	0.092
	Female	3.67	1.04			

[^]scale of 1-6 where 6 is high

^{^^}scale of 1-7 where 7 is high

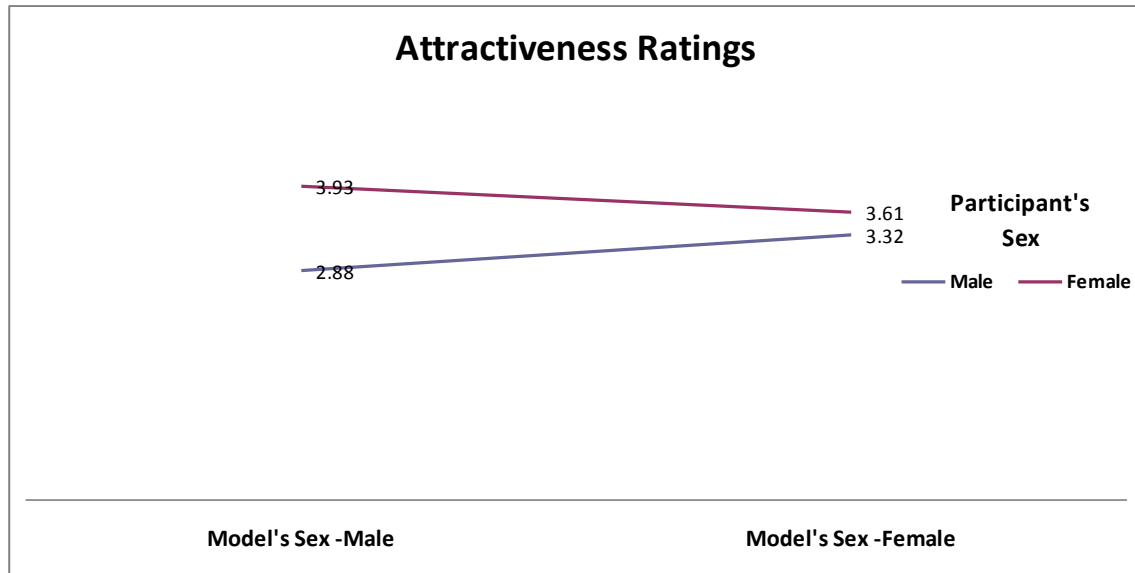


Figure 2: Interaction between Participant's Sex and Model's Sex for Attractiveness Ratings

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the role sexiness plays on perceptions of competence between male and female musicians. I hypothesized that 1) the sexily clad female would receive higher competence and potential ratings than the neutrally clad female musician; where as respondents wouldn't differentiate between the sexily and neutrally clad male musicians and 2) male respondents would give higher competence ratings to the sexily clad female musician compared to the sexily clad male musician whereas female participants would give higher competence ratings to the sexily clad male musician compared to the sexily clad female musician.

The results indicate that participants perceived the sexily clad musicians as more competent than the neutrally clad musicians, regardless of the musician's sex, which supports the sexiness component of my hypothesis. Given the emphasis on appearance in today's society, these findings are not surprising. Images of ideal beauty inundate the media which has become a big part of everyday life. The term "sex sells" seems to describe not only the world of advertising but also the music industry.

Trends in the success ratings did not support my hypothesis. Slightly higher success ratings were given to the male musician compared to the female musician. This may reflect the "male dominated" music scene. However, the fact that this trend was only nearly significant may suggest a changing society, one of which maybe more accepting of female musicians. Lastly, differences in attractiveness ratings based on the participant's sex also support my hypothesis. Male participants perceived the female musician as more attractive than the male musician whereas female participants saw the male musician as more attractive than the female musician. This likely reflects the heterosexual norms.

This study yielded some surprising results. Success and ability ratings had a moderate correlation. However, only a small correlation was found between competence and ability as well as competence and success. Further research may be needed to distinguish between these three variables. Also, gender trends among participant ratings may also provide another area for further research.

LIMITATIONS

However, there are some limitations to this study. The sample was not gender balanced 75% of participants were female, whereas 25% were male. Consequently, the gender results may be skewed. The majority of participants were between the ages of 18 to 22 yrs. Therefore, these findings can't be generalized to all age ranges and may reflect the specific views of this age group. However, this age range does reflect a large component of the demographic most likely to buy music. In addition to the sample, the manipulation for sexily clad did not appear to be as strong as needed. Participants did not perceive the sexily clad musicians as having significantly more sex appeal than the neutrally clad musicians and therefore gave them similar sexiness ratings. Sexiness was a variable of major interest in this study; therefore, this may have a crucial impact on the results. However, despite this lack of

difference, a difference was found in competence ratings between the neutral and sexily clad musicians, suggesting that the intended sexiness did influence participants. I speculate that if the difference in perceived sexiness was stronger, differences in ability and success ratings may have shown the same pattern with the competence finding. Also, a seven point Likert scale was used to measure the competence ratings while a 6 point Likert scale was used for success and ability ratings. This should not have had an effect on the ratings yet it may provide a possible explanation for the difference in the findings for these variables.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

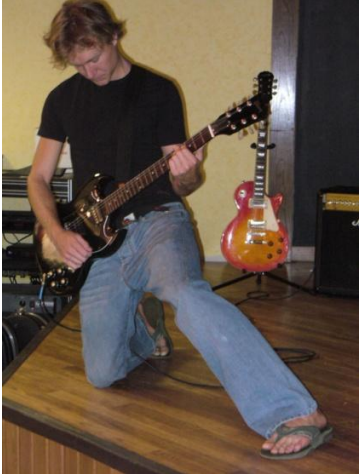

I would like to thank Dr. Betsy Morgan for sponsoring my project as well as guiding me through both the development and completion of this project. I would also like to acknowledge the UW-L Undergraduate Research Grants Program for providing the necessary funds, which made this project possible.

REFERENCES

- Branstiter, H., Gilck, P., Johnson, C., & Larsen, S. (2005). Evaluations of sexy women in low- and high-status jobs [Electronic version]. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 29, 389-395
- Crampton, L. & Rees, D. (2004). *Rock and roll year by year*. London: DK Publishing
- Daughtry, R. (2002). The spirit of '77: Punk and the girl revolution [Electronic version]. *Women & music*, 6, 27
- Frederick, D. A. & Haselton, M. G. (2007). Why is muscularity sexy? Tests of the fitness indicator hypothesis [Electronic version]. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33, 1167-1183
- Jhally, S. (Producer) Jhally, S. (Director). (2007). *Dreamworlds 3: Desire, sex, & power in music video* [Motion picture]. USA: Media education foundation.
- Karpf, J. (1994). Transforming textbooks: Reconsidering the musical canon and music Curriculum [Electronic version]. *Transformations*, 5(1), 32
- Reichert, T. (2003). *Sex in advertising: perspectives on the erotic appeal*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Reichert, T. (2002). Sex in advertising research: A review of content, effects, and functions of sexual information in consumer advertising [Electronic version]. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 19-21
- Schilt, K. (2003). "A little too ironic": The appropriation and packaging of riot grrrl politics by mainstream female musicians [Electronic version]. *Popular Music and Society*, 26, 5-16

APPENDIX

Appendix A. Study photos for each of the four conditions

Gender	Male	Female
Dress Neutral		
Sexy	