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Degrading lyrics linked to earlier teenage sex

By Steve Connor, Science Editor

Study says those who listen to explicit songs more likely to be sexually active

Teenagers who listen to rap and pop songs with degrading sexual lyrics are more likely to engage in precocious sexual activity than their contemporaries who listen to songs that, though explicit, are not considered to be sexually degrading, a study claims.

Researchers say they have found a strong link between early sexual experiences and popular songs that have offensive lyrics which degrade people – usually women – in a sexually explicit manner.

They do not, however, have any evidence that it is the music causing teenagers to become sexually precocious, only that the two are likely to go together in a world where many youngsters spend more time listening to music than to studying at school.

“There does seem to be a strong association between sexual experience and music with degrading lyrics, and yet the same relationship does not hold with non-degrading lyrics in other sexually-explicit songs,” said Brian Primack, an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh who carried out the study.

The scientists surveyed more than 700 American schoolchildren with an average age of 15 to see how often they listened to songs with different lyrical content. Of the 300 or so popular songs analysed, a third used sexually explicit language and, of those, two thirds used degrading lyrics that demeaned people sexually.

Popular songs by the American rapper 50 Cent and rap duo the Ying Yang Twins were among those found to have degrading lyrics.

Two criteria were used in establishing whether lyrics were degrading. The words had to be based on a purely physical, non-emotional description of sexual activity and there had to be a “power differential”, with one sex expressing physical dominance over another, Professor Primack said. An example of a non-degrading sexual lyric was: “Come a litter closer baby, I feel like srippin’ it down.” While a degrading lyric would be: “After you work up a sweat you can play with the stick.”

Each child was also interviewed about his or her sexual experiences to see if there was any link with the type of music they listened to on a regular basis. “This study demonstrates that, among this sample of young adolescents, high exposure to lyrics describing degrading sex in popular music was independently associated with higher levels of sexual behaviour,” Professor Primack said.

“In fact, exposure to lyrics describing degrading sex was one of the strongest associations with sexual activity. These results support the need for additional research and educational intervention in this area,” he said.

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