

Dissenting Voices

Volume 9 | Issue 1

2021

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Repository Citation

Louis-Jean, Isaiah (2021) "What are the effects of American Culture on International Female Youth?" *Dissenting Voices*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/dissentingvoices/vol9/iss1/6>

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What are the effects of American Culture on International Female Youth?

This research examines what American media (specifically music videos) sells to its audiences and what various self-identified young adult cisgender women from various global perspectives take away in terms of beauty standards, culture, and social interactions. Although American media can be positive and stimulate revolutionary social change, much Western media promotes negative internal feelings for many foreign female youths.

The impact of American culture on other civilizations is widespread and well known. For example, if you were to look up the top 10 songs on any music chart in any country in the world, most likely these songs will be made from American media. However, if you were to look at this same information, you would find that songs of other cultures do not have nearly the same impact. This is not only evident through pop culture but also the many American behaviors and customs adopted by citizens of distant countries. Interestingly, this idea can be viewed through a feminist lens. Studies have shown that most young adult women deal with body image issues and are more accepting of unrealistic female representations and gendered behaviors learned through the media. This research will be looking into what American media (specifically music videos) sells to its audiences and what various self-identified young adult cisgender women from

various global perspectives take away in terms of beauty standards, culture, and social interactions. Although American media can be positive and stimulate revolutionary social change, much Western media promotes negative internal feelings for many foreign female youths.

This paper is rooted in a qualitative focus group I personally conducted. It utilizes the thoughts and feelings of six young female foreign exchange students from Jamaica, South Korea, France, and Japan. The study conducted looked at two main questions: First, what are the opinions of female foreign exchange students regarding Western media and second, what patterns do these opinions show? These questions build on previous research. In other studies, we can see that there is a correlation between Western media, foreign culture, and body image that clearly illustrates this work is rooted in feminist methodology.

The procedure of this focus group was simple. We viewed four music videos: (1) *Anaconda* by Nicki Minaj (2014); (2) *Tainted Love* by Marilyn Manson (2001); (3) *Bad Romance* by Lady Gaga (2009); and (4) *Kick the Dust Up* by Luke Bryan (2015). I chose to utilize music videos because this form of media takes a relatively short time to portray a message

with an accompanying song. Especially if the song is a massive hit, it will attract a massive audience, so it was important for me to see what these short videos portray. After this we engaged in an open discussion stimulated by a few questions to help extract some specific information I was searching for. We established a working agreement to be respectful and clearly communicate. I had established friendships with those who were in my study, so they were not completely unknown to me. I also hoped this would help my participants feel comfortable watching and discussing sexuality and objectivity honestly. The only ethical issue raised was the privacy of our focus group, so I planned to conduct the focus group in a secluded room with just the participants and myself. All findings were confidential during the actual talk as well as after.

Findings from my study are interesting and support the fact that Western media negatively affects young foreign girls and women. We watched each video entirely and then paused for a brief discussion on how the video affected each participant. We began with “*Anaconda*” by Nicki Minaj. This video, a hip-hop track from 2014 rapped by an African American female, includes erotic dancing and many sexual innuendos. The opinions for this video illustrate a lot of

discomfort. The dancing in this video simulates a variety of sexual poses and my participants felt it symbolically was reinforcing females as porn stars and sex workers. Many participants used words like “disgusting”, “degrading”, and “harmful” to describe the video. My participant from Jamaica highlighted how the video only includes a disproportionate amount of light skin and dark skin African Americans. She noticed how there were more light skinned dancers, who were spotlighted more and were more likely to be seen surrounding Minaj herself. The darker skin dancers were often placed in the back or to the side. This realization illustrates that Western media, willingly or not, takes part in colorism.

After this discussion we moved on to Marilyn Manson’s *Tainted Love*. This video is a hard rock take on a pop classic and features girls at a house party dancing on poles and in lingerie. The views on this video were similar. Many of the participants illustrated how this video made them feel like they must be sexy in order to be valued. The main female in the music video is a modest “nerd” who eventually follows all the other girls at this party and ends up becoming a gothic go-go dancer. Before this she was socially outcast at this party, but once she lets down her hair and rips

off her clothes, she is suddenly loved by everyone. There is another scene where female dancers are seen wearing mascot rabbit heads and wearing lace lingerie while being spanked by Marilyn Manson himself. My participants agreed that these acts are illustrating that women must use their bodies and sexuality to be valued and accepted by society. They felt that even though these women are not particularly famous, they are role models for the audience viewing this music video. Their conformity to these degrading situations speaks volumes to the audience.

The next music video we viewed was *Bad Romance* by Lady Gaga. This video features pop superstar Lady Gaga in avant-garde and revealing fashion. This discussion focused mainly on Gaga’s look. She was mostly in revealing clothing, wearing a lot of makeup, and her hair was extremely bleached blonde. This look reinforced the stereotypical beauty standard established by Western media. All the participants said that after viewing this video, they felt less happy with their looks because they did not feel like they fit the mold of what beauty is. There is another scene in which Gaga is auctioned off by men and “sold” for a billion dollars. Participants again highlighted that her conformity to the degrading acts perpetuate this vicious

cycle.

The final music video we watched was *Kick the Dust Up* by Luke Bryan. This video is a country track featuring scantily dressed women partying in a cornfield. Participants agreed that this video was the most “American” music video and that they would be more apt to view American women as sexualized after viewing this music video. The women are all wearing as little as possible and they seem to be happy in their roles as props for the music video. This video didn’t stimulate too much new dialogue, but the participants felt that the video does illustrate that women need to be sexy, young, and even under the influence of alcohol to be valued and to have fun.

To conclude our discussion, I asked the participants some final wrap-up questions. I first asked, does it matter the gender of who is degrading and oppressing women in their music videos? The women all agreed that it doesn’t matter and that oppression is still oppression. They feel that regardless of the artist who does the oppression, they are still causing harm to the women in the video as well as to the audience watching these videos. I also asked the participants to summarize how they feel after watching these music videos. Overall, the participants unanimously

felt uncomfortable with themselves and had increased self-consciousness. In summary, the feedback I received illustrates there are a lot of subliminal cues reinforcing stereotypes perpetuated by society. The women in my study felt that constantly watching women being degraded and oppressed in music videos negatively impacts their own views on themselves and normalizes this behavior. On top of this, all participants voiced that music videos like these are being regularly produced in their native countries. The impact of these music videos and American media in general is very large and strong.

One may ask, “If American media has such negative effects on young women, both domestic and foreign, where do these practices come from and why do we still use them?” There has been much research done on global beauty standards and practices. What we consider to be modern beauty standards has not always been the norm in American culture. Many years ago the standards were the complete opposite (Lavine et al., 1999). In the 1600s to 1800s, a full figure was considered the ideal for women. It indicated a high socioeconomic status and good health (Lavine et al., 1999; Fraser, 1998). In the 1800s, women were considered sexy and attractive if they were bigger and had

more fat on their bodies. This meant that they had the money to afford food and were able to conceive children (Fraser, 1998). Upper class women wanted more weight on their body in order to illustrate their status and health (Fraser, 1998). Weight on a woman indicated that her husband was successful, and they had ample money (Fraser, 1998). Women began to wear tight-laced corsets to enhance their bodies, which gave them the illusion of a curvy figure. These corsets made the waist unnaturally tiny while emphasizing the curves of the hips and buttocks (Lew et al., 2007). In 1890, *Cosmopolitan* magazine listed the attributes of the most admired American women. They included golden hair, brown eyes, soft and smooth skin with olive tone, little color in cheeks, defined features, and a healthy, curvaceous body shape (Fraser, 1998). However, by the end of the 1800s, food was not as hard to access and the larger size was no longer a sign of wealth and prestige. This then gave rise to the popularity of thinness. (Fraser, 1998). The ideal woman at this time was known as “the Gibson Girl”, created by artist Charles Dana Gibson (Zimmerman, 1997). This sketch was tall, had a slender frame, tiny waist, and dainty features. This was the first constructed image that many women were now trying to emulate

(Austin, 1999).

After many decades of constantly changing societal beauty standards, the Barbie Doll and *Playboy* magazine were introduced in 1959. This began to set more unreasonable standards of beauty for women (Frith et al., 2005). The Barbie Doll had large breasts, long blond hair, a tiny waist, narrow hips, and long legs. Many young girls and women were determined (and still are) to look like Barbie (Frith et al., 2005). Between the 1970s and the 1990s, there was an overall emphasis on weight loss. Thinness was promoted continuously as the ideal body shape (Barber, 1998). This ideal became so severe and unrealistic that women could not achieve these standards without severe dieting, excessive exercise routines, surgery, and other unhealthy behaviors (Lavine et al., 1999). In an intersectional lens, researchers conducted studies including Caribbean women. These studies confirmed that African women have a cultural tolerance for being overweight and obese as compared to European and Caucasian American women (Barber, 1998). The underweight and extremely thin female body shapes were associated with malnutrition, poor health, and poverty in the African community (Lavine et al., 1999). In times of slavery, many slaves were subjected to the deprivation of

food. The poor nutritional content of this diet did not supply enough calories or nutrients. Slaves became deficient in calcium, vitamin A, and thiamine, thus more susceptible to diseases (Fraser, 1998). This historical background can explain the difference in views between the racial groups. In American culture, being white and thin has become the most accepted characteristics of physical attractiveness. Globally, women rely on television and fashion magazines to determine beauty. These and many other forms of media encourage body image dissatisfaction among women. Instead of reflecting on cultural values, many international women turn to mass media for expectations and social norms and as a gauge of what is normal (Frith et al., 2005).

One could say that this paper offers the few feminist views of Western media but regardless, there are many studies looking at American media and foreign culture. In many online photo galleries, one can see the “American” ideals in many foreign countries. For example, we are shown very thin and “naturally” beautiful women in France, we are shown thin noses and rhinoplasties in Iran, and in Japan we see the use of umbrellas to avoid sun and keep pale skin and the use of chemicals to straighten hair. These ideals are mainly

seen in Western cultures such as the United States and Great Britain. The most likely way these ideals have been translated is through the intake of media such as TV, movies, and music videos which have depicted these ideal beauty standards. An interesting study sought to look at skin bleaching in Jamaica. A woman named Jody Cooper said she “didn't make a conscious decision” when bleaching her skin. (Frith et al., 2005). She just grew up seeing it and was following the women she looked up to. Through the information this study is giving, one can see that the people (specifically young women) of Jamaica are being influenced by the images and messages being shown to them by the predominantly American media. With a large level of body image dysphoria and eating disorders among females globally, numerous researchers claim that Western media are powerful contributors to the propagation of the idea that American beauty society is desirable (Zimmerman, 1997). According to Fraser (1998), 50 percent of women in a study compared themselves to models in advertisements half the time or more. These advertisements, in turn, made them dislike their body. American ideas of what represents socially acceptable beauty fail to recognize both the races

and genders of minorities and distant cultures.

Throughout the years, numerous researchers have delved into body image disturbance research. Negative verbal comments from family and friends, mental and physical risk factors, low self-esteem, and media images and messages all contribute to body image dissatisfaction among women. Some say it is very hard and even impossible to prove that media can cause or effect one's behavioral pattern. The research I and others have conducted makes it clear that American media and society are causing great dissatisfaction among women and girls around the world. American media perpetuates the idea

that American beauty standards are the most attractive and what women all around the world should strive for. The global audience absorbs music videos and media perpetuating these negative standards, demonstrated by negative comments and low self-esteem in young girls and women. International audiences also recreate similar media in their own countries. It is clear to see that women globally are negatively affected, and it is important to start discussion of the negativity promoted by American media in order to make life better for women everywhere. Through continuous discussion, analysis, and avocation, we can make this world a truly better place.

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