DILEMMAS OF FEMININITY: Gender and the Social Construction of Sexual Imagery

Linda Kalof*
State University of New York at Plattsburgh

This work builds on an interactive, interpretive approach to the study of cultural texts in an investigation of how images of gender and sexuality in music television (MTV) are read by the audience. After viewing a music video by Michael Jackson, 80 respondents described the video’s portrayal of feminine and masculine images. A content analysis of the respondents’ open-ended descriptions of the images indicate that there are significant gender differences in how young women and men socially construct the meaning of femininity in the video, particularly concerning the intersection of gender, sexuality and power. There are no major gender differences in the interpretations of the masculine image. The findings show that MTV texts have multiple meanings for the audience, and the interpretations of sexual imagery reflect traditional gender ideology about gender and sexuality.

This is a study of how young people interpret the images of gender and sexuality as portrayed in the “texts” of music television (MTV), one of the most widely consumed forms of popular culture among adolescents. The research builds on the assumption that gender and sexuality are social constructions, or “interactional accomplishments,” situated in and shaped by patriarchal cultural myths as articulated in the popular culture (Denzin 1992). The ideological “codes” for gender and sexuality are learned early in the socialization process, entrenched during adolescence and transmitted in large part by the popular culture. An exploration of how the audience interacts with and interprets MTV imagery advances our understanding of how “ideological meaning is coded into the taken-for-granted meanings that circulate in everyday life” (p. 34). It demonstrates how contemporary ideology can be revealed in text which is read as a “fact” but is only a myth (Barthes 1972).

While MTV has historically reproduced and maintained a gender ideology of male power and dominance of men over women (Lewis 1990), little is known about how viewers actually interpret these messages. Texts have multiple meanings because readers create texts as they interpret and interact with them (Denzin 1992). This research explores how the reading of an MTV text differs among young viewers according to their interpretation of the ways in which gender, sex and power are intertwined. I argue that gender

* Direct all correspondence to: Linda Kalof, Department of Sociology, State University of New York, Plattsburgh, NY 12901.

The Sociological Quarterly, Volume 34, Number 4, pages 639-651.
Copyright © 1993 by JAI Press, Inc.
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.
ISSN: 0038-0253.
socialization and gendered experiences have led to different patterns of reality construction, so that the same text will be read differently by women and men, reflecting and reinforcing patriarchal ideology concerning the relationship between gender, sexuality and power.

BACKGROUND

The cultural images of femininity, masculinity and female-male relationships have an enduring quality. Indeed, the portrayal of men as powerful and women as powerless and constantly trying to “entertain, please, gratify, satisfy and flatter men with their sexuality” (Millett 1970, p. 81) has historically been a consistent theme within the popular culture. For example, in a study of popular fiction for women since 1940, Cantor (1987) found that the electronic and print media present messages that women are subordinate to men both in society and in female-male relationships, that men are powerful, and that women depend on romance for happiness. Cantor concluded that the media produce stories and articles that carry a basically conservative message: “Happiness depends on having a heterosexual relationship . . . (and) the ideal is to get the ‘protection’ of men as sexual partners” (p. 210). Further, in a study of the form and structure of the soap opera, Cantor and Pingree (1983) found that while over the years soap opera content has changed, the change has been in the portrayal of sexual relationships and morality, not in the portrayal of gender roles.

Popular culture scholars have only just begun to analyze the cultural content and impact of music television. Research has found MTV to be, like other areas of the popular culture, decidedly sexist in orientation (Brown, Campbell and Fischer 1986; Sherman and Dominick 1986; Vincent, Davis and Boruszkowski 1987). In a study of MTV content, Vincent et al. (1987) found that 74 percent of 300 sampled videos portrayed women in traditional, stereotypical roles. It was common for women to be used exclusively as decorative objects, and there were very few videos in which men and women were treated equally. Baxter (1985) notes that although music video content stresses sex, it is sex with an adolescent orientation in which fantasy exceeds experience, and sexual expression centers primarily on attracting the opposite sex.

Observers of youth culture suggest that the traditional portrayal of gender and sexual images have important consequences on adolescent consumers of popular culture. For example, Brake (1985, p. 166) argues that adolescent females receive “distinct signals about the cult of femininity” from popular fiction and the mass media, and these cues have a central theme—romantic attachment and dependency on men. But the ways in which young people construct, interact with, and interpret the imagery in music television is rarely the focus of scholarly research. For example, in a comprehensive analysis of the MTV industry, Kaplan (1987) focuses on MTV as a powerful production-consumption tool that sells images, styles, and albums, but she does not address how MTV is actually received by teenagers. Yet, it is critical to examine “how interacting individuals connect their lived experiences to the cultural representations of those experiences” (Denzin 1992, p. 35).

There is evidence that viewers make connections between MTV texts and their personal experiences. For example, Abt (1987, pp. 106–107) found that teenagers, particularly young women, are more likely than other consumers to report personal connections or conscious “bridging experiences” with music videos. Teen viewers are also highly involved in music television, and videos often remind them of people or things that happen
in their daily lives (Abt 1987). In a study of gender ideology and MTV, Lewis (1990) argues that MTV’s “female-address videos” have had an important impact on the female audience. She discusses the history of MTV as a popular culture product that reflects an ideological struggle over gender inequality, and, as textual readers, women bring psychological, sociological and political interests to their interpretations of female video texts. Finally, in an analysis of how MTV is received by the audience, Brown and Schulze (1990) researched the effects of race, gender and fandom on the interpretation of scenarios in Madonna’s music videos. Their analysis of college students’ reactions to two of Madonna’s videos shows that there are gender and racial differences in how the scenarios are received by the viewers.

My work focuses on the active role viewers assume in constructing their interpretations of the images of gender, power and sexuality in one of Michael Jackson’s music videos, “The Way You Make Me Feel.” This study explores the meanings attributed to MTV imagery by analyzing young viewers’ descriptions of gender and sexuality as portrayed in the video. Jackson’s “The Way You Make Me Feel” was selected as the music video viewing source for this study for a number of reasons. First, during the initial stages of the study period (Fall 1987-Spring 1988), the video was very popular among adolescents and considerable “air-time” was devoted to it. Second, the video depicts strikingly traditional images of gender and sexuality. Thus, the Michael Jackson video was considered to be an ideal source to discover the ways in which young people perceive the expressions of popular culture as “vehicles for the transmission of patriarchal myths and attitudes” (Sheffield 1987, p. 186).

The video portrays Michael Jackson as a young man who becomes infatuated with a beautiful woman as she walks down a dark, urban street. Michael Jackson follows, indeed stalks, the woman, singing and dancing his adoration for her, becoming more insistent on his need and desire for her, and clearly not allowing the woman to escape his attention. The young woman says nothing, initially ignoring and rejecting him, but eventually warming to the “cat and mouse” game. In the end, she opens her arms to him after a somewhat frightening and threatening scene which suggests a gang rape by a group of tough street men, implying that beautiful women are in danger unless they have a man to protect them.

I read the Jackson video as a text laden with ideological messages that validate patriarchal gender arrangements, e.g., that women can and should use their sexual attractiveness to get the attention of men, that men must pursue women to convince them that they are sincere and that women, in order to avoid appearing promiscuous, should reject initial advances and then finally submit to the desires of men. In addition, this video is a good example of what Lewis (1990) identifies as MTV’s male-oriented address that dominated the video industry until the recent advent of female MTV performers with a female-oriented address, such as Tina Turner and Madonna. The image of “the street” was MTV’s preferred address to male adolescents and evoked “male-adolescent discourse by representing boys’ privileged position . . . (w)hen girls appear, they were represented as equal participants in the symbolic system of the street, but functioned as devices to delineate the male-adolescent discourse” (Lewis 1990, pp. 43–44). But while the messages and symbolism of the Jackson video appear distinct and clearly conveyed, the goal of the project was to understand how the teenage viewer constructs the images of gender in the video, particularly the relationship between gender, sexuality and power.
METHOD

The Jackson video was shown to 80 young women and men, ranging in age from 13 to 22 years and primarily from white middle- and working-class backgrounds. The youngest respondents (13 to 16 years) were recruited on a volunteer basis from a large metropolitan neighborhood in Northern Virginia. Written permission was obtained from parents to have the children watch and discuss the Jackson video, and the young teens were shown the video in five-person, same-gender focus groups. After watching the video, the teens were asked to respond to the following questions on a self-administered open-ended questionnaire: 1) “What is the image of women (men) as portrayed in the video?” 2) “What adjectives or verbs would you use to describe the image of women (men) as portrayed in the video?” and 3) “Does the video remind you of anything in your personal life, such as specific relationships, people or situations?” After the questionnaires were collected by the investigator, the teens were asked to share their reactions, and the three questions were discussed in an open format to focus the group discussion of music television. The older respondents (17 to 22 years) were undergraduate students at a state university in upstate New York. These college students were recruited from two classes in research methods, and they received course credit for participation in a research project. Students viewed the video at the beginning of the class session, and immediately after watching the video, each student was asked to respond to the above questions using a self-administered open-ended questionnaire.

The open-ended responses were analyzed for content using a procedure and categories developed as part of an earlier study of MTV image interpretations (Kalof 1990). In this pilot study, 39 respondents similar to those used here viewed 42 different music videos (between 6 and 13 different videos each) for a total of 283 viewings during a four day period in October 1988. For each video watched, respondents wrote a brief, open-ended description of the video’s portrayal of gender and sexuality. This large number of responses on a large sample of videos was content analyzed using a “gender-blind” protocol in which the analyst did not know the gender of the respondent. The goal of the content analysis was to identify gender image categories as constructed by the viewers. Every effort was made to preserve the viewers’ interpretation of meaning and to insure that the resulting categories provided a reasonably exhaustive list of gender images as read by the viewers of MTV texts.

The major image categories were then employed in a second pass through the 283 observation sheets to code the frequency with which an image description fell into one or more of the major categories. In general, it was not difficult to assign responses to categories because there were strong textual cues used by nearly all respondents in their descriptions, and their descriptors (words and phrases) were used to operationalize specific categories. For example, “strong, dominant, confident, forceful, superior, in control” were coded into a Powerful/In Control category, “unsure, insecure, inferior, less dominant, low self-esteem” were coded into a Indecisive/Submissive category, “scared, frightened, trapped, helpless” were coded into a Vulnerable/Weak category, and so on. The open-ended descriptions of imagery in the Michael Jackson video were content analyzed using the same categories as in the pilot study. An image was considered dominant if the respondent observed and wrote about only one image category or if one image was clearly primary and structured most of the written description. In 95 percent of the cases a single image was dominant in the respondents’ written descriptions. In the case
of multiple images that seemed of equal weight to the respondent, the response was placed in an "other" category. Each response was coded independently by two coders. An initial round of coding produced agreement between the two coders on the dominant image categories for 81 percent of responses. Any responses for which there was disagreement were discussed and recoded after an agreement on the appropriate category was reached. The final step in the methodology was to compare the responses from females and males to capture gender differences in interpretation.

It is important to note that the content analysis method used in this study is not thoroughly reader-responsive and restricts the analysis of how readers interpret MTV texts. Content analysis inevitably stresses the manifest content of specific messages (Woollacott 1982). My strategy is a hybrid that tries to build on the insights of contemporary cultural theory but also produces sufficient information for an examination of gender variation in textual readings. Respondents constructed their interpretations of the video and expressed that interpretation on response sheets that structured their response only to the extent that it directed their attention, after the fact, to the male and female images in the video. The content analysis of these responses then imposes categories on those interpretations. This compromise is still reasonably faithful to the readings of the teenagers watching the videos and yields substantive rather than just statistical conclusions (Tesch 1990, p. 25) about the reading of MTV texts.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the results of the analysis of the open-ended descriptions of gender image in the Michael Jackson video show that there is a large gender difference in the interpretation of the female image, but essentially no difference in the interpretation of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of Respondent</th>
<th>Female (N = 34)</th>
<th>Male (N = 46)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female Image</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful/In Control</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable/Weak</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teasing/Playing Hard-to-Get</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive/Indecisive/Submissive</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male Image</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful/In Control</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable/Weak</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Chi-square = 10.79, df = 4, p = 0.02
**Chi-square = 0.13, df = 2, p = 0.93
Numbers expressed as a percent
the male image. For the female image, chi-square = 10.79, df = 4, p = .029, and for the male image, chi-square = 0.136, df = 2, p = .930. Thus, the association between gender and the interpretation of the female image is significant at a level of .03, but there is no relationship between gender and the interpretation of the male image.

**Interpretation of the Female Image**

The most striking difference is in the interpretation of the young woman in the video as vulnerable and weak. Whereas 26 percent of the female respondents described the woman as vulnerable (scared, frightened, trapped, helpless), only six percent of the males had the same interpretation of the female image. Of course, one explanation of this finding is that females are more likely to recognize the predicament of the pursued and somewhat frightened young woman. One female respondent wrote that the woman was “scared by the young man stalking her . . . he won’t let her get away,” and another young female respondent noted that the woman was “helpless because she couldn’t get away from the men.” That women are more likely to “see” the female’s vulnerability is captured in the comment made by one respondent: “This video reminds me of when I’m walking alone and men harass me in the same manner.” Indeed, one third of the women in the sample noted that they were reminded of personal experiences “when you walk by men,” such as staring, unwelcome comments, and, as one young woman put it, “noises and sighs about the way you look and dress.”

On the other hand, male respondents were much more likely to construct the female image as a tease, or playing hard-to-get, with 35 percent of the males noting this as a major image, compared to 18 percent of the female respondents. As one young male viewer noted, “women are supposed to play hard to get and make the male suffer.” Another male wrote that the “woman is running away from the man even though she is having fun doing it.” Further, a number of the men in the sample made personal connections with the video by noting that the female character reminded them of women they had known in the past, current relationships, or the cultural expectations of masculinity which encourage female conquest. These connections were evident in statements such as “I’ve just started dating a new girl and I feel I’m trying to impress her to ‘win her over’,” “guys always have to start the relationship,” and “it reminds me of how I’m always chasing my girlfriend.”

Another important gender difference is found in the reading of the female image as powerful versus indecisive and submissive. Approximately one-third of the female respondents described the woman as powerful, in control and independent. Most of these image descriptions dealt with the woman’s physical attractiveness and sensuality. As one young woman wrote, “the woman was gorgeous and she knew it.” Another female respondent commented that the female image “reminds me of what I’m supposed to look like when I go out and what pleases men.” This tendency to associate feminine physical attractiveness with power and control is illustrated by one 13 year old female’s comment that the woman was “attractive, in control, excited and playful.” In addition, some older female teens wrote that the woman was “rather aloof and unafraid,” “provocative, energetic, streetwise and independent,” and “sought after, needed, untouchable, beautiful.”

On the other hand, one-fourth of the male respondents described the woman as submissive and indecisive. These men seemed to focus more on the observation that the woman finally submitted, or gave in to the advances of the male pursuer. As one 19 year old male
noted, the woman is “a conquest . . . plays hard to get at first but then is submissive.” Another male respondent wrote that the female image was “less powerful and had no control . . . If you bug her long enough she will eventually give in.” Overall, while the male respondents tended to construct the female image as teasing and hard-to-get (35 percent) or submissive and indecisive (24 percent), women tended to describe her as either powerful and in control (29 percent) or vulnerable and weak (26 percent).

**Interpretation of the Male Image**

Two major male image categories emerged from the interpretation of the Jackson video: 1) powerful and in control (decisive, forceful, persistent, confident, bold, aggressive, dominant, demanding), and 2) vulnerable and weak (infatuated, inferior, looking for sex, needing to impress). Both female and male respondents had strikingly similar readings of the male image in the Jackson video. For example, 62 percent of the females and 65 percent of the males interpreted the male image as powerful and in control by describing him as the one who “pursues and should be able to get what he wants,” “is self-centered and can have whatever he wants,” and “goes after what he likes and shows the women how much he is in control.” As one young man explained, “the men have to be the go-getters . . . If they see someone they want, the man is expected to make the first move.”

Another 20 percent of the women and 20 percent of the men interpreted the male image as vulnerable and weak, primarily because of the character’s infatuation with women and sex. For example, comments in this category included the following from young women: “he is submissive,” “ridiculous and hard up,” and “portrayed as macho, but actually inferior to women.” One male respondent observed that “men were depicted as believing they were in control of the situation when in fact I think the women were.” Another male respondent explained the male’s behavior as a typical masculine reaction to a beautiful body with his observation that this is “a man who wants to let a woman know what her image is doing to his behavior.” Thus, the findings indicate that there is essentially no gender difference in the interpretation of the male image, with the same proportion of female and male respondents constructing the masculine image as either powerful and in control or as vulnerable and weak.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This research shows that there are multiple interpretations of MTV texts, and the reading of a text is an interactive, interpretive process of viewers who make sense of the text according to their gender identity and their experiences as gendered individuals. The same music video, or cultural event, was read differently by young women and men, and there were also diverse readings within gender. The findings of this exploratory study of the reading of MTV imagery substantiate Denzin’s (1992) claim that media content does not have the same meaning for all viewers, that the “meaning of a text is always indeterminate, open-ended, and interactional” (p. 32), and that text meanings arise from connections viewers make between the text and their lived experiences.

The cultural representations of gender and sexuality encoded into the Jackson video show, at least to this reader, traditional gender arrangements and sexual interaction, e.g., men should pursue women, and women should not give in too easily. Analysis of the viewers’ descriptions of sexual imagery in the Jackson video reveal the different inter-
pretations of this ideological message. First, young women and men construct very
different meanings of femininity. While women tended to read the female image as either
powerful and in control or vulnerable and weak, men tended to construct the same image
as teasing and hard-to-get or submissive and indecisive. Clearly, the reading of the female
image is an interpretive process of gendered viewers and the connections that they make
with their gendered experiences. These connections are evident in the responses of both
women and men who described in a variety of ways their personal experiences with the
traditional cultural expectations for gendered social and sexual interaction. For example,
women described a powerful female image as a woman who is “attractive, provocative,
needed, independent.” I believe that these women have made a connection between
femininity, physical attractiveness, sexuality, and power. As an ideological message, this
is the cultural expectation that women can and should use their sexuality to gain control
over men and relationships.

The tendency for women to read the female image as powerful could also be explained
using the concept of “access signs” in female-address (Lewis 1990). With the recent
emergence of female address in MTV, an access sign system has developed “in which the
privileged experiences of boys and men are visually appropriated” and females execute
take-overs of male activity and space (Lewis 1990, p. 109). Thus, the young woman in the
video might have been considered by some female viewers as powerful and in control
because she entered the male domain of the street.

Women were also more likely than men to observe the female as vulnerable and in a
threatening situation. Again, this finding is further evidence of the connections viewers
make with texts based on their gender and their experiences. Vulnerability to sexual
assault is a woman’s reality because in our culture “rape is indigenous, not exceptional, to
women’s social condition” (MacKinnon 1989, p. 172). However, it is interesting to note
that of the 80 respondents only two mentioned rape as one of the messages of the Jackson
video, and both of these respondents were male. The finding that many women noticed the
female’s vulnerability, but did not read the text as a potential rape may be because rape
myths and the adversarial nature of female-male relationships are read as “facts.” As
MacKinnon (1989) argues, “(t)he assumption that in matters sexual women really want
what men want from women, makes male force against women in sex invisible . . . It
makes rape sex” (p. 141). Thus, the male aggressiveness in the video was read not as a
potential rape, but rather as normative behavior in the process of negotiating a “relation-
ship.” Researchers have found that adolescents view male-against-female sexual aggres-
sion as a typical, and sometimes acceptable, part of intimate encounters (Goodchilds and
Zellman 1984), and that younger women in particular tend to subscribe to the ideas that
men will always be on the prowl and that women will always be treated as sex objects
(Lott, Reilly and Howard 1982). Indeed, even nine- to eleven-year-old children have been
found to organize into opposing, gender-segregated groups which tend to “enhance social
distance, asymmetry, and antagonism between girls and boys” (Thorne and Luria 1986, p.
188).

While male respondents also noted female sexuality as an important aspect of the video,
they were much more likely to interpret it as a teasing sexuality, and the woman was often
described as indecisive and submissive. This reading of the female image is consistent
with the prevailing belief that women offer token resistance to sex, that they say no to sex
when they really mean yes, and that their resistance to sex is not to be taken seriously
(Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh 1988). Thus, my research indicates that the different
interpretations of femininity arise not only from the connections that gendered individuals make between the text and their personal experiences, but also from the ideological meaning of femininity, sexuality and power in our culture.

That there were more diverse, contradictory readings of the image of femininity than of masculinity is intriguing. Perhaps the respondents constructed clearer images of masculinity and power because masculinity has clearer and more defined boundaries in our patriarchal culture, while the boundaries of femininity are unclear and ambiguous. The character of femininity as expressed in patriarchy has long been a focus of sociological theory. For example, Simmel (1911/1984) argued that the lives of women resist expression in an objective culture that is defined in male terms.6

More recently, in analyzing the cultural construction of the sexual character of femininity and masculinity, Connell (1987, pp. 186–187) suggests that it is likely that “actual femininities in our society are more diverse than actual masculinities” because femininity is always constructed in relation to the global dominance of heterosexual men. Since femininity is not constructed around dominance over the other sex, there is no pressure to subordinate or negate other forms of femininity in the way hegemonic masculinity must subordinate other masculinities (Connell 1987, p. 187).7 Another explanation for the multiple interpretations of femininity can be found in the argument that “female” and “woman” are unstable notions, with unfixed and troubled meanings because of their significations only as relational terms (Butler 1990). Further, Irigaray (1981) claims that women are not even representable because “female” eludes representation in a patriarchal society. Finally, the ambiguous nature of femininity has captured the attention of anti-feminist scholars. In her recent book extolling the truth of sexual stereotypes and the biological basis of sex differences, Paglia (1990) argues that male sexuality is compartmentalized, with singularity and focus; whereas, female sexuality is contradictory and ambivalent, her eroticism diffused, and her sexuality shrouded in mystery. These theoretical excursions into the nature of femininity would be greatly advanced with more empirical support, particularly research that explores the multiple meanings rendered to femininity in popular culture texts.

Further research is also needed on the methodology for investigating readers’ interpretation of MTV and other texts. Traditional content analysis has been criticized for its limited ability to discover the hidden meanings of a text. For example, Wollacott (1982) has argued that the analysis of meaning and of ideology embedded in media text is best undertaken from a semiological approach which focuses on text as a discourse that signifies “different values and codes depending on how they are articulated as signs within a discourse” (p. 94). But this approach is limited in its ability to “unpack” variation in the interpretation of a text across readers. The strategy of open-ended readings of a video by teenagers, followed by content analysis and textual analysis of their reports, provides a compromise. But far more methodological work is needed to develop effective ways of examining variation in textual readings across and within social groups. In addition, it should be acknowledged that I have myself imposed a discourse on the respondents’ interpretation of MTV imagery which were read as texts, and even my reading of the texts is not a privileged, correct reading.8

This study is based on a music video text with very pronounced gender images and where a central theme is heterosexual interaction. Thus, the results reported here may not generalize to the interpretation of other MTV texts, particularly to those with less distinct reflections of feminine and masculine roles. But this work has identified an important
aspect of the social construction of femininity, sexuality and power that deserves further attention in a larger study of music video imagery, and these exploratory results have important implications for further research.

First, more attention must be given to how the audience receives media messages. While studies which analyze content from the trained eyes of the researcher are vital and should continue, more sophisticated insight into how media messages are interpreted by the audience is needed. Media research must also expand its focus on characteristics of the audience which can be used as criteria for comparing different interpretations of the same media event. More emphasis must be placed on how readers interact with and interpret media text. It is particularly important to investigate how imagery and meaning are interpreted given the social construction of reality within a specific attribute of gender, race, class and culture, because both consciousness and behavior develop in social interaction with others (Gerson and Peiss 1985). Thus, meaning is “not fixed in a universal empirical ‘reality,’ but in the social situation of the viewer” (Fiske 1987, p. 117).

Second, much more research is needed to disentangle the “definitions of the situation” as understood by young people, particularly in how they construct and give meaning to images, objects and messages in their daily worlds. If we act on the basis of our definitions and if women define female sexual attractiveness and male pursuit as a form of power in MTV imagery, it is possible that these characteristics are also defined by young women as desirable and powerful in the social organization of adolescent relationships. It is at this point that Barthes’ (1972) argument that ideology is read as fact becomes most salient. The finding that young men may not hold the same definitions of femininity, sexuality and power adds much complexity to the issue. Indeed, it is important to note that the same MTV female image of sexuality which was defined as powerful by many young women was interpreted by many young men as teasing and playing hard-to-get. As Gerson and Peiss (1985) note, gender consciousness recognizes the privileges and responsibilities which are associated with being female or male and which are “socially constructed and specific to a particular culture at a given point in time” (p. 325).

Finally, this important difference in the social construction of femininity, sexuality and power creates a predicament particularly troublesome in youth cultures, which are, as noted previously, considered by some observers to be already strikingly sexist, male-oriented, and adversarial. This exploratory study establishes that young women and men may construct different meanings of the same image of femininity. These meanings not only reinforce traditional views of gender and power, but they may also exacerbate the continued exploitation of female sexuality. This dilemma is perpetuated by the cultural preoccupation with female sexuality as a commodity to be bought, sold and used in the negotiation of power and status in a patriarchal culture.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

I thank *The Sociological Quarterly* reviewers and editor for their valuable comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to Muriel Cantor and Thomas Dietz for encouragement and suggestions during this project. This research was supported in part by a grant from the Center for Population Options (CPO). The opinions expressed in this work are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of CPO.
NOTES

1. The lack of racial and class variation is a weakness of the sample. There is some evidence of racial differences in perception of music videos (Brown and Schulze 1990), and there may be interaction effects between race of performers and race of viewers. Such differences might be particularly striking for a Michael Jackson video since Jackson is noted for a physical appearance that is somewhat androgynous and that lies between stereotypical black and stereotypical white features. Indeed, Jackson has been described as a performer who “erases and detraumatizes” boundaries of gender, age and race (Garber 1992). It is probable that there are also class and regional differences in perception. The effects of these viewer characteristics should be systematically examined in efforts that go beyond this exploratory study.

2. In this initial study of MTV images, Kalof (1990) found a large gender difference in the interpretation of female images in approximately 42 different MTV videos. Six key categories emerged in the description of the female images: using sex as a weapon, sex object, passive/indecisive, love dependent, competitive/aggressive, and vulnerable/weak. Women were much more likely than men to describe the females on MTV as individuals who use their sexuality as a lure to get attention. In addition, while MTV major performers are primarily male, female images were “noticed” far more often than male images by both female and male respondents. Finally, there was no gender difference in the description of male images in MTV. Both female and male respondents interpreted the male images as controlled/decisive, in pursuit of women, love dependent and competitive/aggressive.

3. While the Passive/Indecisive/Submissive and Vulnerable/Weak categories may seem similar, there are clear distinctions between the two. A “scared or frightened” female image was coded into the Vulnerable/Weak category, and those respondents reacted to the helpless or threatening situation the woman was in. An “unsure” woman who could not make up her mind about Jackson’s overtures and/or who submitted to him in the end was coded into the Passive/Indecisive/Submissive category.

4. For the female image, the “other” category included a number of observations which described the woman as a sex object. This interpretation was frequent among male respondents who observed that the female was “sexy, attractive, and desirable,” with one young man commenting that “she turns me on.” Interestingly, the young women in the sample noted the female’s attractiveness, as well, but again differently from the men. For example, a number of young women commented on the female’s “beautiful, skinny body,” and some women noted that she was “sexy, stylish, sleek and pretty.” I have chosen not to specify sex object as an additional category because, while a stereotype, it does not have clear implications regarding power and control in gender relations. For the male image, the “other” category includes descriptions of Jackson as a “feminized” character, “a talented dancer,” “a person not to be taken seriously,” “streetwise,” “childish,” “fun,” and “a pervert.”

5. I am grateful to Norman K. Denzin for this comment on methodology.

6. In an earlier essay on fashion, Simmel (1903/1971) also suggested that women use fashion to express an individuality that they are denied in male culture.

7. Connell (1987, p. 188) also argues that “emphasized femininity,” as a form of femininity based on compliance to the wishes and desires of men, is not only a cultural conception promoted in the mass media but is also a cultural package used in interpersonal relationships.

8. Thus, as Denzin (1992, p. 39) warns, it is possible that I have created the subject matter I wish to analyze.

REFERENCES


