

A Framework for Using Popular Music Videos to Teach Media Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the use of popular music videos as a tool for teaching media literacy. First, the article addresses the importance of music videos as popular culture, what other music video research has examined, and what features make music videos a good fit for in-class work investigating media and popular culture. Then the article details a single-class activity for introducing and teaching media literacy through the use of music videos. To achieve this objective, the article also proposes a set of original music video-specific discussion questions. Finally, a particular music video is considered to illustrate possible results of this activity and the broader issues that may arise from class discussion.

KEYWORDS:

Communication, Media, Media Studies, Popular Culture, Pedagogy, New Media, Digital Media, Media Literacy, Media Education, Music Videos

Although popular music videos have long been criticized for their superficiality, fast edits, and sensational content, features like these help make the videos an excellent teaching tool, effective for getting students' attention and exploring broad issues. Many educators may be skeptical about or may have never thought about the benefits of using music videos in the classroom—thus the shortage of research on this approach. Cayari wrote about students creating music videos in order to learn music and technology skills. Maskell discussed the use of music videos for teaching English, saying the content has “huge potential for use across the entire English curriculum” (54). There is still, however, much to uncover about the myriad possible uses of music videos as a pedagogical instrument.

With a focus on popular music videos, this essay discusses their importance, describes an activity using them to teach media literacy skills, offers some new music video-specific ideas for introductory media literacy exercises, and shares example results of the activity. This information may appeal to a wide range of educators, especially media and popular culture scholars teaching undergraduate college courses such as Media and Society, Media Literacy, or Introduction to Popular Culture.

Although the pedagogical value of music videos remains formally under-recognized, many have thoroughly established why music videos are an important and potent way to learn about life around the globe. “Music television deserves serious attention from students of popular culture” (Goodwin and Grossberg ix), proclaimed the introduction of *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, the influential collection edited by Frith, Goodwin, and Grossberg. Supporting this call to study music videos, Austerlitz saw them as a “fascinating oddity” (1) and a “compelling marker of cultural history” (1). He concluded that the music video’s “triumphs render it a subject worthy of deeper study and attention” (1). In summarizing the state of music video research and demonstrating why they are more than just entertainment, Straw wrote, “music videos are increasingly seen as elements within complex assemblages of image and sound that circulate the world and are recombined within a variety of diasporic media, from satellite television networks through DVD and Internet video clip sites” (3176).

Consideration of certain music video research trends indicates their diverse potential. One major trend adopts a media effects perspective and examines how music videos influence the ways audiences think and behave, especially younger groups like adolescents, teens, or college students. Studies have looked at music video effects in terms of sex, such as how kids imitate the content (Ey and Cupit), how they sext (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, and Walrave), and what their attitudes are toward sex (Aubrey, Hopper, and Mbure; Beentjes and Konig; Kistler and Lee; Zhang, Miller, and Harrison). Others have researched music videos' effects on perceptions of rape (Burgess and Burpo; Sprankle, End, and Bretz). There is also much work on the influence of music videos on how people think about gender-specific ideas related to misogyny (van Oosten, Peter, and Valkenburg) or bodily self-perception (Mischner et al.).

Overlapping with work that emphasizes effects, there is a trend of research interested in representational patterns in music videos. Gender often emerges as a main focal point, such as Wallis's content analysis of differences in gender displays. Many have also tied race to genre, with rap being a dominant line of inquiry (Balaji; Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang; Zhang, Dixon, and Conrad). Overall, work on representation has spanned topics like sexual objectification (Aubrey and Frisby; Frisby and Aubrey), sexuality (Turner), and violence (Aikat; Smith and Boyson; Thaller and Messing).

Such trends show the utility of music videos in media research, popular culture studies, and beyond. In addition, music videos are characterized by a combination of features that make them an ideal fit for in-class activities about media and popular culture:

1. They are conventionally short, compared to a full movie or television episode.
2. They are often familiar, which benefits group discussion because many students bring background knowledge.

3. They are common online, which makes it simple for instructors to find multiple good examples.
4. They are easy to access, such as the free official content available on video-sharing sites like YouTube or hosting services like Vevo.
5. They are often controversial, working as a compelling catalyst for critical discussion and thus able to help students identify important issues, then articulate their views on social or political matters.
6. They are commonly imitated on the Web, as evidenced by remakes, parodies, satires, and mash-ups that have become a common way for lovers and haters—including amateurs, professionals, and people in between—to express themselves online.¹
7. They are popular culture, as a collective form and as individual artifacts, which gives them instant student appeal and significance as a teaching tool.

ACTIVITY: POPULAR MUSIC VIDEOS AND MEDIA LITERACY

The following activity is a productive way to use music videos to introduce and teach media literacy. This exercise is intended to occur in class and requires the instructor's use of an Internet-connected device that can play music videos viewable by the whole class at once (e.g., via projector or on a large monitor). Objectives include these:

1. The exercise will (A) strategically use music videos as a teaching tool, (B) demonstrate the importance of critical thinking about music videos, and (C) demonstrate the importance of critical thinking about popular culture.
2. Students will (A) strengthen media literacy skills and (B) increase comprehension of popular music videos as a significant form of entertainment media.

Preparation: Prior to class, carefully select a popular music video accessible online and useful as a teaching tool. Billboard charts and YouTube's "Popular on YouTube" section are helpful starting points. The instructor should select something that will resonate with students; this can be based on recency or the interests and personalities of the class. I suggest watching the video many times before class. It is also essential to research the video's production background and popular reception. Immediately before class begins, it is smart to prepare the music video for easy start-up and test all necessary technology—video connection, audio levels, video start function, video end point.

Execution: Once class begins, start the activity by announcing its order (i.e., discuss media literacy, watch music video, analyze video alone and then together) and expected outcomes (i.e., enhance media literacy comprehension and skills).

PART 1: INTRODUCE MEDIA LITERACY AND MUSIC VIDEO-SPECIFIC FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

First, I explain media literacy and the following five key questions of media literacy, using visual aids like PowerPoint slides and the Center for Media Literacy's website, medialit.org:

1. Authorship: "Who created this message?"
2. Format: "What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?"
3. Audience: "How might different people understand this message differently than me?"
4. Content: "What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?"
5. Purpose: "Why is this message being sent?"

As justified in the rationale above, we then briefly discuss why music videos are media content worthy of critical thought.

Next, to successfully analyze popular music videos and expand on the preexisting five key questions of media literacy, I propose the following set of original follow-up questions that are music video-specific—four follow-ups for each of the main questions—to help prompt critical thought and advance media literacy about popular music videos:

1. Authorship: “Who created this message?”
 - a. Who is explicitly identified as a creator?
 - b. Who created the song?
 - c. Who created the music video?
 - d. What are some major components of the music video that people created?
2. Format: “What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?”
 - a. What techniques are used in the music?
 - b. What techniques are used in the music video?
 - c. How does this music video seem influenced by popular culture?
 - d. How has this music video seemingly influenced popular culture?
3. Audience: “How might different people understand this message differently than me?”
 - a. Who do you think are some target audiences for this music video?
 - b. What components of the music video indicate its target audience?
 - c. What parts of the music video seem open to interpretation?
 - d. What parts of the music video seem controversial? To whom?
4. Content: “What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?”
 - a. How does the music video convey this?
 - b. How do you think this relates to the music video’s creators?
 - c. How do you think this relates to the music video’s target audience?
 - d. What may have caused these representations and omissions?
5. Purpose: “Why is this message being sent?”
 - a. Why was this music created?
 - b. Why was the music video created?
 - c. Why was the music video created for this format? (I.e., cable television, the Web, DVD, etc.)
 - d. Who would benefit from the music video’s popularity?

PART 2: WATCH A MUSIC VIDEO

After focusing on media literacy questions, introduce the music video by identifying the song and performer. I find it useful to informally survey how many students know the song or artist and how many *like* the song or artist. It is crucial to establish the significance of studying this artifact. For instance, instructors should cite facts about awards the artist or song has won, sales information like albums or singles sold, rankings from Billboard/Nielsen chart data, concert grosses, YouTube views, and social media metrics (e.g., how many likes or followers an artist has online). It is best also to show students visuals like a Twitter feed or Billboard.com article to support those claims. This will help students recognize the significance of putting popular culture under the microscope—this is not just a song but a social phenomenon that deserves to be studied, and the class is learning a system for accomplishing that.

Here it is helpful to notify students that after watching the video once, they will need to answer and discuss the five media literacy questions and music video-specific follow-ups. Thus, as they watch, students should think about answers to the questions, which they may wish to quickly review before watching the video at this point.

PART 3: PRACTICE MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS BY DISCUSSING THE MUSIC VIDEO

Solo: After watching the video, students should individually write answers to each media literacy question and the follow-ups. When dealing with time constraints for this in-class activity, I advise students to focus on answers that come easiest, instead of straining to complete all questions (i.e., quality over quantity). This is a good time to encourage optional Internet use for those with enabled devices. Answers are possible with only a pencil and paper, but Web-based research will probably strengthen responses.

Small groups: After the solo work, students form pairs or triads and share their findings with each other. They should consider what they learned from peers to expand their answer list and prepare for a full-class discussion.

As a class: After the small group work, reconvene as a class and watch the video for a second and final time. This provides a chance to see more, helps solidify what students learned so far, and refreshes memories for the following discussion.

I then lead a Q&A through each of the five key media literacy questions and follow-ups. Instructors should seek many answers to each question, solicit like and unlike observations across the group, and play devil's advocate to help students form their opinions.

ACTIVITY RESULTS

This activity results in valuable dialogues, which will vary based on the video(s) examined. One highly recommended music video to choose for this activity is Katy Perry's 2013 hit, "Roar" (Lipshutz; Perry, "Katy Perry – Roar")². Using this video would give the instructor a chance to talk about Perry's many Grammy nominations, MTV Awards, Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards, and Guinness World Records. The instructor could also discuss her remarkable billion-plus views that place this song in the top ten most-viewed YouTube and Vevo videos (Jang; Lane; "Vevo Top Videos") and made Perry "the first artist to ever have two videos with over 1 Billion [*sic*] views" ("Katy Perry – Vevo"; "Roar10xCertified"). Students respond well to these kinds of arguments for a video's significance and facts like Perry's status as the most-followed Twitter user—with over 75 million followers, she ranks above people like Justin Bieber and President Obama (Perry, "Tweets"; "Twitter Top 100").

Discussing Perry's "Roar" video would likely cause students to answer the media literacy questions and follow-ups in ways that lead to fascinating conversations about the major media literacy concepts. "Authorship" would relate to the song being co-written by a team of professional hit makers including Max Martin, Dr. Luke, and Bonnie McKee (Hampp; Seabrook). "Format" would connect to sexualization, familiar pop song ingredients, and the use of visual effects. "Audience" would lead to concerns about young fans, PETA's objections to the video's use of animals (Boardman; Palmer), or the video's twist ending. "Content" would tie to portrayals of selfies, makeup use, and heterosexuality or sexual orientation. "Purpose" would relate to product sales, promotional culture, the modern music industry, free YouTube content, conspicuous use of Nokia merchandise, and celebrity branding.

This kind of popular music video analysis, based on the five key media literacy questions and follow-ups, enables discussion of many broad issues. In particular, this includes:

1. How race, class, age, and ability are represented in music videos.
2. How gender, sex, sexuality, and sexism are treated in music videos.
3. How beauty norms are reflected in music videos; how this impacts body image, self-esteem, or eating disorders outside music videos.
4. How celebrities appear in music videos; how musicians are positioned as celebrities in music videos.
5. What music videos tell us about censorship, evolving moral standards, political correctness, and cultural taboos.

6. How product placement shapes music videos.
7. How genre affects music videos.
8. How new and digital media impact music videos.

By using this activity, I have found that students thoroughly enjoy practicing and developing critical thinking skills through the study of everyday media and popular culture. The classroom becomes a space where fun and learning can logically and productively intersect. Students become more consistently engaged with class topics and discussions, searching for such intersection. Their media literacy skills improve— instantaneously and long-term—through the type of practice and collaborative critique that this exercise facilitates. As a result, students are more sensitive, informed, and skilled critical consumers of entertainment media.

This essay expands on general media literacy principles and produces original music video-specific questions, enabling systematic use of music videos as effective resources for teaching media literacy and critical thinking about media and popular culture. The five key media literacy questions are a valuable framework for studying popular music videos and exploring the broader issues they raise. Without the media literacy framework, this exercise might allow only surface-level scrutiny. Using the media literacy foundation strengthens, deepens, and formalizes this learning process, enhancing student comprehension, analysis, and evaluation of popular music videos as important media content.

The in-class activity described in this essay is ideal for undergraduate courses, but can be adapted by prefacing the work with level-appropriate lectures about media and popular culture for a variety of potential student audiences, such as tweens, pre-college teens, or graduate students. One alternative to the in-class activity is to remake it as a written test, which would benefit from a rubric used to grade answers. For example, instructors may choose to teach the five key media literacy questions first, then, on the same or a different day, show a music video and require students to answer the five questions and music video-specific follow-ups as a test of knowledge and skills. Other possibilities include a student presentation (individuals or groups pick a modern video, argue for its significance, analyze its content using the music video-specific follow-ups, and consider the implications); a reflection paper (students address the extent to which media literacy about music videos will impact how they think about such entertainment); or a self-produced video essay (students use the media literacy questions and music video-specific follow-ups as prompts for a prepared, recorded oral critique of a popular music video; bonus points to those who share their video essay on YouTube).

Popular music videos have many educational uses, which span disciplines. These videos are excellent instruments, effective for getting students' attention, and helpful for teaching about many complex and meaningful concepts. Educators should therefore embrace and experiment with music videos as a powerful teaching tool.

NOTES

1. By way of illustration, consider the many humorous takeoffs on The Black Eyed Peas song, “My Humps,” which inspired popular online videos by alt-rock celebrity Alanis Morissette, gender-role-defying electronic musician Peaches, and pre-teen remix video YouTube-star MattyBRaps.
2. Here are some other recommended popular music videos that work well for this activity: Michael Jackson, “Thriller”; Madonna, “Erotica”; Shania Twain, “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!”; One Direction, “What Makes You Beautiful”; Robin Thicke, “Blurred Lines”; Pharrell Williams, “Happy”; Taylor Swift, “Shake it Off”; Drake, “Hotline Bling.”

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