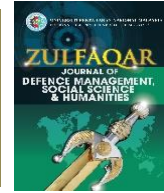




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LISTENER'S PERCEPTION ON SEXIST WORDS IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN HIP HOP LYRICS

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ABSTRACT

The study on gender has always been an important research area in the field of popular music studies. While most studies focus on the content analysis of the popular music, there is still a need to research on listener's perception of popular music lyrics. This study examined 30 listener's perception on sexist words in selected 20 Malaysian hip hop lyrics. A total of 13 sexist words were analysed using text analysis. To further facilitate the data, the listeners were also given 9 random lyrics which contained sexist words and were asked to rank them from positive, negative or neutral. The data was then tabulated using Google Form. The results showed that listeners are aware of words that denote women to a lower level and yet the words are still used on women, perhaps due to dissatisfaction. The findings show that the respondents are merely going by the flow of what media puts forward which can be related back to the agenda set by the media.

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Introduction

Media representation of gender has always been an avenue for discussion among researchers in media study. Women are constantly at the receiving end of media when it comes to their appearance and capacity as a woman while men are portrayed as dominant and providers for the woman (Unger & Crawford, 2004). Larson (2006) also added that the music industry has a proneness for presenting women as sexually charged without any real talent. This media representation thus affects the way viewers' view each gender as media works as an image creator in deciding how to represent men and women to a certain extent, and these images are fixed upon viewers as the standard way for men and women to operate and act as individuals. This image representation also affects how Malaysians view the opposite gender. With the launching of 1Malaysia, gender equality plays a major role in improving how Malaysians perceive the opposite gender. The Ministry of Education has introduced moral based subjects to instil the values of gender equality yet cases such as rape, murder and abuse are still rampant in Malaysia with 22,134 children sexually abused from 2010 until May 2017 (Malaysiakini, 2017). Cases such as these can hinder the efforts by the Malaysian government in propagating gender equality in the home, workplace and society at large, as states in the *Dasar Wanita Negara*.

Azmawati (2006) concurred that women are still considered a marginalized group in terms of politics, social and economy. This has been proven by Alagappar and Selvaratnam (2014) in their study where they found that the media depicts women in traditional gender roles in which beauty receives prominence and

women are defined by the number of children and men they have in their lives. The media, therefore, can be seen as the culprit of these representations as it is able to reach out to every corner of the world and influence the thoughts from the youngest to the oldest. Media contents which include porn and sex are rapidly shown in movies, music and other media. Such programmes will influence the minds of the viewers in playing out the exact scenes in real life.

One such genre in media is music which is seen as a battlefield for feminist researchers (Wood, 1994). Music encompasses a variety of genres and for this study, hip hop will be the focus. Hip hop culture was created in the early 1970's by Clive Campbell (KOOL HERC) while living in the economically beaten South Bronx, exposing the listeners to social problems such as drug abuse, racism and gang violence (Chang, 2005). As hip hop turned into a global phenomenon, the choice of language, fashion and ways people interacted with each other began to change (Pittsburgh, 2008). According to Hays (2018), hip hop started as a revolutionary form of music but large music corporations prefer to produce images that sell while creating a blatant link between hip hop and pornography. The over sexualisation of women can be seen predominately in the lyrics used in hip hop. Women are degraded to mere sexual matters whereas men are portrayed as a powerful gender. In hip hop, many of the lyrics and images portray women of all ethnicities as sexual objects and depict the exploitation of and violence against women (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). This also includes stereotyping women in conforming to a certain 'mould' that becomes credible.

These images and name calling may influence the social values of Malaysian viewers and can play a role in how they treat the opposite gender. Apart from that, there are only a few researches conducted based on the Malaysian hip hop scene such as by Basri, Ibrahim and Samani (2010) and Fazleen (2011). These scholars looked at music videos in the Malaysian hip hop scene focusing on appearance, dressing and less on the word choice use and meaning. According to Penn (2009), American hip hop includes violent and abusive lyrics that could possibly mirror other illegal social problems and women are portrayed as whores and assets worth no more than existing for men's sexual pleasures. In accordance to that, the current study will attempt to see if these allegations are true in the Malaysian hip hop context. According to Davey (2008), 80 percent of hip hop music that is currently on the top ten lists around the world contains violence against group members and women. The lyrics praise the acts of beating up another person, mocking and dehumanising women or even worse shooting them, for example "*Lyin' in the street, Gotta bullet in your chest, another drive by shooting, Effective and the best, Home boy was D-O-A, Shot 'em twice in the head, Something that he did, Something that he said*" (Gang Violence, Wasted Youth).

Another issue that hip hop lyrics also seem to glorify is the anatomy of a woman. This indirectly leads to eating disorders and other emotional problems among teenage girls who feel that to be accepted by society, the ideal media image for women must be achieved (Davey, 2008). Hip hop lyrics also encourage drinking and sex - two social problems which can become major issues for children today (Hargreaves, 2000). Incorporating gender discrimination and other social problems, hip hop can be assumed as an active time bomb which can create chaotic consequences to society in terms of language, gender and the future generation. The study, therefore, provides a lens not only for the increased incarceration of women but also how this degradation is constructed through the selected lyrics. Apart from that, the study also focuses on the awareness of Malaysian listeners on the underrepresentation of women in the selected hip hop lyrics.

Literature Review

This study will focus on Agenda Setting Theory as it focuses on how the media shapes and influences issues based on importance.

Agenda Setting Theory

The idea of the agenda-setting role of the media can be traced back to a book, '*Public Opinion*' by Walter Lippmann (1922). In his first chapter 'The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads,' Lippmann argued that the media creates pictures of the world and informs viewers about the world events. However, he anticipated that the pictures provided by the media were most of the time incomplete and distorted. People can see only reflections of reality (not reality itself) in the news media, and those reflections provide the basis for perceptions about the world. Lippmann's idea that the news media influences the pictures in viewers' heads was put to an empirical test in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw during the 1968 presidential election of the United States. At the time, the existing theory was that the mass media had only limited effects on the public.

Agenda Setting Theory in its most basic sense is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media (Lippman, 1922). Agenda Setting Theory changed the notion of what to how media affects work at a micro social level and as such, although individual autonomy is pertinent, viewers often choose what issues to indulge in based on issues pre-determined by the media (Matei & McDonald, 2010). Instead of directly implanting issues into the brains of viewers, media constrains and nudges the possible ways in which viewers can view reality. Research in Agenda Setting Theory has proven to evolve into other areas of mass communication research as stated by McCombs and Shaw. Agenda Setting Theory which is naturally incorporated in studies of political issues and news coverage was tested in the music industry by Burns (1998). Burns used a survey and content analysis method to find an agenda setting effect on the listeners of a country radio station. The songs they heard on the station were perceived as the most popular songs at that time. This created a high importance among the songs being played. Just as news stories that are given a credible amount of attention are considered issues of high importance, songs that are given a credible amount of attention are considered issues of high importance, thus proving that agenda setting can reach beyond the bounds of political and news coverage issues (Reinisch, 2003).

Lippman further stated that media power is not restricted to selecting and transmitting issues but is actively involved in the configuration and reconfiguration of frames. This function is especially evident in mass media namely music. Conway and Jefferey (2008) and Boczkowski and Limor (2011) argued in their respective studies that Agenda Setting Theory is the most effective means of how viewers receive and understand their news. In their study, Conway and Jefferey found that there was a higher recall of information that is seen as negative compared to that of positive. This can be linked to the representation of women in the hip hop lyrics as they are underrepresented and words used to describe women tend to linger in listeners' mind compared to positive things mentioned in the lyrics. This theory is relevant to the study as it focuses on how the perceptions of listeners towards woman are based on the lyrics. The theory is also relevant as some of the lyrics focus on the representation of women, and how society should view them generally as a person.

Methodology

Content analysis is seen as a method for summarising any form of content by taking into account various aspects of the content for the study. This approach enables a more objective evaluation than comparing content based on the impressions of a respondent (Mani, 2012). This approach produces data from real world settings where the "phenomenon of interest unfold naturally" (Patton, 2002:39). This approach is also referred to as quantitative analysis of qualitative data (Maxwell, 1992). Since content analysis uses documents or texts as a form of reference, this approach is appropriate for the study as it "provides knowledge and understanding of the content under study" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992:314). In this study, qualitative content analysis is defined as subjective interpretation of the content of the document through a systematic process of coding. The artists were chosen based on the recommendations by the salesclerks in the music stores. It was important to get the salesclerks' feedback because they have the sales record for each album. Only those artists who were pioneers in the Malaysian hip hop scene, around the year 1995 and upcoming and latest were selected for this study. This is done to achieve a fair balance of lyrics between the old generation and the new generation of hip hop artists; and since this study uses English language, the researcher had to take into consideration lyrics that were written in English only as the researcher was not able to translate the non-English lyrics. This will help to maintain the authenticity of the meaning.

Likewise, in conducting a quantitative research, this study administered a survey using Google Form to gauge listeners' awareness on gender stereotyping of women in the selected lyrics. The reason for using Google Form is because it is relevant, quick and can reach intended respondents fast using social media and communication media. The specific link is sent to the recipients, and upon answering the questions, Google Form will update the relevant data respectively. The survey for this study was adopted from Cundiff's (2013) study on *The Influence of Rap and Hip-Hop Music: An Analysis on Audience Perceptions of Misogynistic Lyrics*. Cundiff in her study examined how selected college students perceive and respond to the portrayal of women when exposed to misogynistic hip hop lyrics. For this study, the survey did not mention misogynistic to the listeners as the study was more interested in the level of awareness of the listeners in terms of gender stereotyping. The items used in the study are divided into four parts namely background information, preference of music, knowledge on terms used in hip hop lyrics and sample lyrics to test respondents' knowledge on underrepresentation of gender. The survey was administered through social media and emails by sharing the link.

For this research, snowball sampling is used to recruit respondents for the study. Snowball sampling is used where potential participants are hard to find. It is called snowball sampling because (in theory) once a ball is rolling, it picks up more snow along the way and becomes larger and larger (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This design is quite useful in this study as respondents are identified using social media, for example, Telegram, e-mails and Facebook. In this design, the researcher identifies the four different age groups which are not selected through probability methods. This group is then used to locate others who possess similar characteristics and who, in turn are able to identify other respondents. Since the research looked at different age groups, the researcher divided the survey into four main age groups, namely 18-25, 26-35, 36-42 and 43-above. The researcher selected four people from each age group to continue the snowball sampling. These four people were selected due to their interest in music, personal background and their list of friends in social media.

Findings

This study looks at the perception of listeners; therefore, how the listeners convert their understanding to their own social life is pertinent in this study. The listeners too play an important role as they are the first-hand receivers of the media. Therefore, their understanding of women in the selected lyrics will allow the researcher to understand how the media manipulates the minds of listeners in shaping an idea or notion on gender representation.

To gauge the respondents' understanding on sexist words, respondents were given 13 sexist words taken from the selected hip hop lyrics used in this study. Respondents were instructed to rank which word they considered had a positive, negative or neutral connotation/meaning when used on a woman. The feedback is illustrated in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Respondents view on Sexist Words

Words	Agree it is Degrading (%)	Disagree it is Degrading (%)
Chick	27	39
Baby	20	50
Baby Girl	20	50
Bomb Girl	21	38
Witch	47	21
Devil	45	21
Bunnies	44	22
Honey	21	41
Girl	20	47
Bitch	19	48
Whore	49	25
Slut	50	20
Hoe	46	21

Terms of endearment such as *honey*, *baby* and *baby girl* are defined as an example of sexual harassment among the unprofessional expressions, even if the speaker means no harm in saying them (Pesce, 2017). But, the findings in this study show that these words are considered not degrading when used on women. The word *hoe* on the other hand, is derived from the root word 'whore,' that denotes a woman who engages in promiscuous sexual intercourse, usually for money (McWorther, 2010). 46 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that this word was degrading when used on a woman, while surprisingly 21 percent strongly disagreed that the word *hoe* was considered sexist. The word *hoe* moreover, has become a routine bit of slang as it is used in television and mainstream media as if it is now officially unmoored from its literal meaning (Keller, 2017). Stankiewicz (2008) who studied how *bitch* is used in rap music, noted that the word is popular both in a negative and a positive light because of its relationship to the patriarchy. The dominant role and conditions of patriarchy help enable the widespread use and acceptance of the term both as misogyny, and also as a form of empowerment used to counter patriarchy. That said, most scholars, linguists, and women alike would agree that the word has not really been rehabilitated to mean something wholly positive. Undoubtedly, the word *bitch* carries various meanings depending on the person uttering it and the intention of the speaker. More often than not, the word is used as an insult. Historically, *bitch*

referred to a female dog in heat, but in today's society, it has taken on new meanings. According to Farzaneh (2016), *bitch* is defined to be an "annoying and whiny female" and "a whipped guy who does whatever his girlfriend tells him to."

Kleinman (2009) also noted that some women feel empowered by the word, but that does not mean they are empowered by it. The word *bitch* is so splintered that it is unclear where the word stands today. But perhaps the problem is not really so much how women are addressed, rather it is how they are treated. The term *bunnies* on the other hand is seen more as a form of endearment (Cole, 2018), but surprisingly 44 percent of the respondents agreed that it was degrading when used on a woman. The words *witch*, *devil*, *whore* and *slut* which denote a promiscuous woman were voted as the most degrading words when used on women. This proves that the respondents are aware of words that denote women to a lower level and yet the words are still used on women, perhaps due to dissatisfaction. The findings show that the respondents are *merely* going by the flow of what media puts forward which can be related back to the agenda set by the media. To further evaluate respondents' views on gender stereotyping, the survey also put forward nine lyrics taken randomly from the list of selected lyrics used in the study. The lyrics contain sexist words and stereotype women as sexual human beings. The respondents were requested to choose if the lyrics were positive, neutral or negative to their understanding.

Respondents' Feedback on Selected Lyrics

To further gauge the respondents' understanding on sexist language and gender stereotyping, nine lyrics containing sexist words were selected from the 20 lyrics used in the study. It must be mentioned here that the lyrics in this section are labelled with no reference to the list of lyrics used in the previous sections. Respondents were requested to select from a Likert scale list if they found the lyrics to be positive, negative or neutral. The results of the findings are as below.

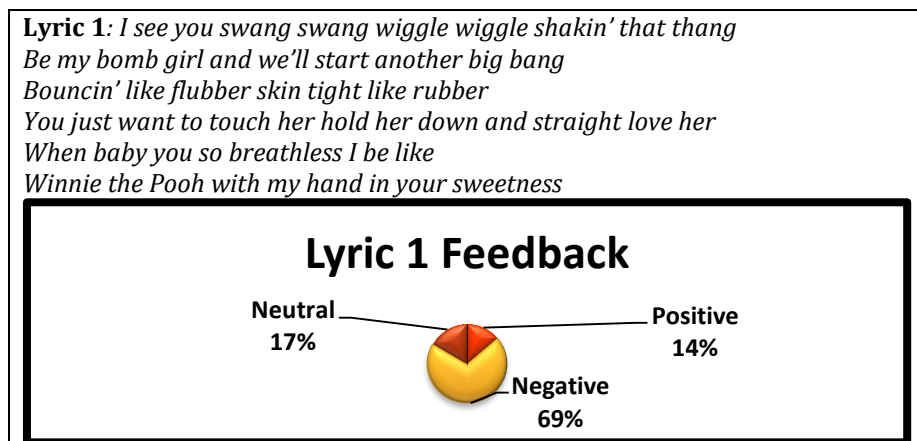


Fig. 1: Respondents' Feedback on Lyric 1

In Lyric 1, 69 percent of the respondents stated that the lyric was negative, while 14 percent read the lyrics as being positive. This lyric describes a sexual connotation of how a man is inviting a woman to have sexual intercourse with him, which will leave him feeling happy like Winnie the Pooh enjoying his honey. It is therefore evident that respondents can distinguish sexist to non-sexist lyrics when they are provided with the opportunity to read the lyrics rather than merely listen to the lyrics.

Lyric 2: *My modes is closed but I'm still getting connections
While you getting your reset, I'm rubbing on your chick's mid-section (Speaking in the middle) I'm travelling in between peaks (Getting somewhere) treasure hunting (searchin' for hidden treats)
I got all the stuff that she wants all the stuff that u lack*

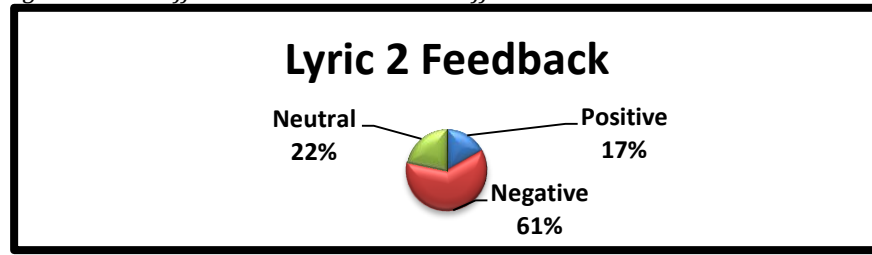


Fig. 2: Respondents' Feedback on Lyric 2

In Lyric 2, 61 percent of the respondents regarded this lyric as being negative while 17 percent voted it as being positive. 22 percent of the respondents, on the other hand, could not decide accurately and voted this lyric as being neutral. This lyric places the male figure in a boastful mode 'I got all the stuff that she wants that u lack' portraying the male figure as the epitome of a perfect male.

Lyric 3: *Giving' me love and you're hugging' on these nut you be rubbing'
Punk short I kept you on the same level
You had to be greedy and play me out like a little devil
Let the Underground know the kind of witch you really
You'll sell your own ass to be a superstar*

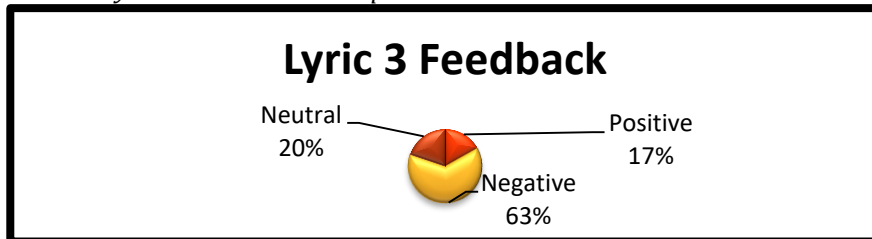


Fig. 3: Respondents' Feedback on Lyric 3

Lyric 3 discusses how the woman is portrayed as someone who has cheated on the male, and an opportunist who will do anything to be famous to the extent of having no pride in herself. This lyric garnered 63 percent negative votes and 20 percent respondents found this lyric to be neutral.

Lyric 4: *got personal trainers to take care of my cardio
And Playboy Bunnies to bring me milk and oreos
a dozen hunnies and
parios to chill wit' me
and my boys at our pool parties*

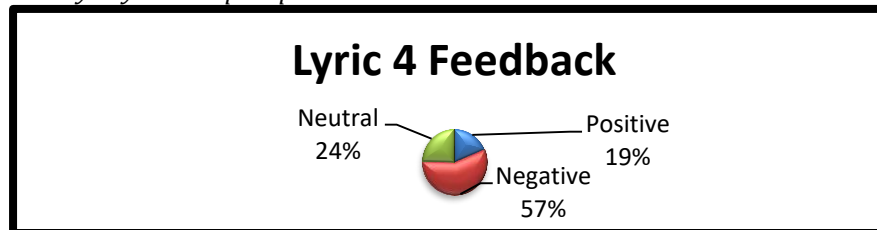


Fig. 4: Respondents' Feedback to Lyric 4

Apart from being portrayed as sexual items for the pleasure of men, some women are also portrayed as maids who must please the men's sexual and personal needs. In Lyric 4, women are described as 'playboy bunnies and hunnies' who are doubled up as waitresses to cater to the men's personal needs. In this lyric, 57 percent respondents voted the lyric as being negative whereas 19 percent voted the lyrics to be positive.

Lyric 5: *now throw your hands up like you havin' pom poms
and if you think you're sexy you bons bons
and keep on bump and grinding to the song
'till your skirt fall off and everybody sees your thongs*

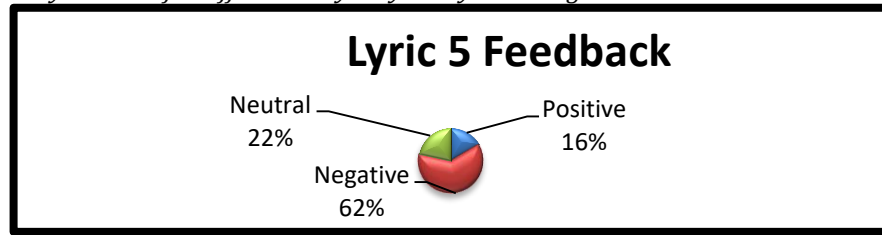


Fig. 5: Respondents' Feedback to Lyric 5

Lyric 5 sets the scene in a pub where women are asked to dance sexily until their nudity is exposed. 'Grinding,' also known as juking, freak dancing or freaking, is the latest genre of dancing. It is a type of close partner dance where two or more dancers rub or bump their bodies against each other. This is generally with a female dancer rubbing her buttocks against a male dancer's crotch area (Hanna, 2010). This dance genre is portrayed as being very sexual. 22 percent of the respondents voted Lyric 5 as being neutral whereas 16 percent voted it as positive. Most of the respondents voted this lyric as being negative (62 percent).

Lyric 6: *Never mind you're hard to get
We'll see how you are when I'm making you wet
I don't lie but I'm one of the best
So don't drive by without giving me a test
I'm star in the making*

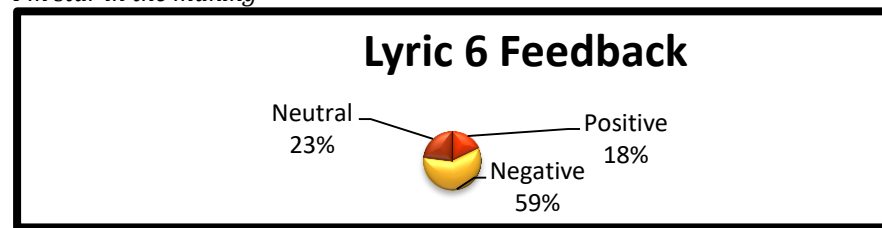


Fig. 6: Respondents' feedback to Lyric 6

In Lyric 6, the woman who is portrayed as aloof but is tamed by the artist having intercourse with her. Lyric 6 suggests that with sex, a woman can be shaped according to the male's needs. A woman can be educated and confident, but all this can be broken down when a man makes love to her. This lyric suggests that sex can be used as a weapon to destroy or break down a woman's confidence. This lyric was voted as being negative by 59 percent respondents while 18 percent respondents voted this lyric as being positive.

Lyric 7: *Now she really wanna do me
Take her back home,
now she wanna get it on
She said, she's in the zone
And I'm turning her on
So we, walked through the door
Then we, got on the floor
She's like, papi you ready
I'm like, I got some more move*

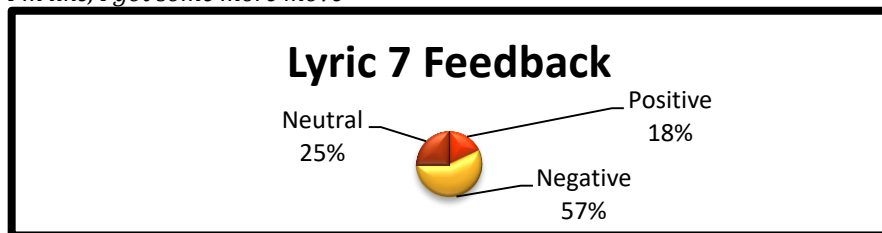


Fig. 7: Respondents' Feedback to Lyric 7

Sexual connotations are evident in Lyric 7 as this lyric mainly illustrates sex and how the woman is 'in the zone' for the man. Lyric 7 suggests that sexual intercourse is a priority in a woman's mind. Boastfulness is also evident - 'I got some more move.' 57 percent respondents found this lyric to be negative while 18 percent voted it as positive.

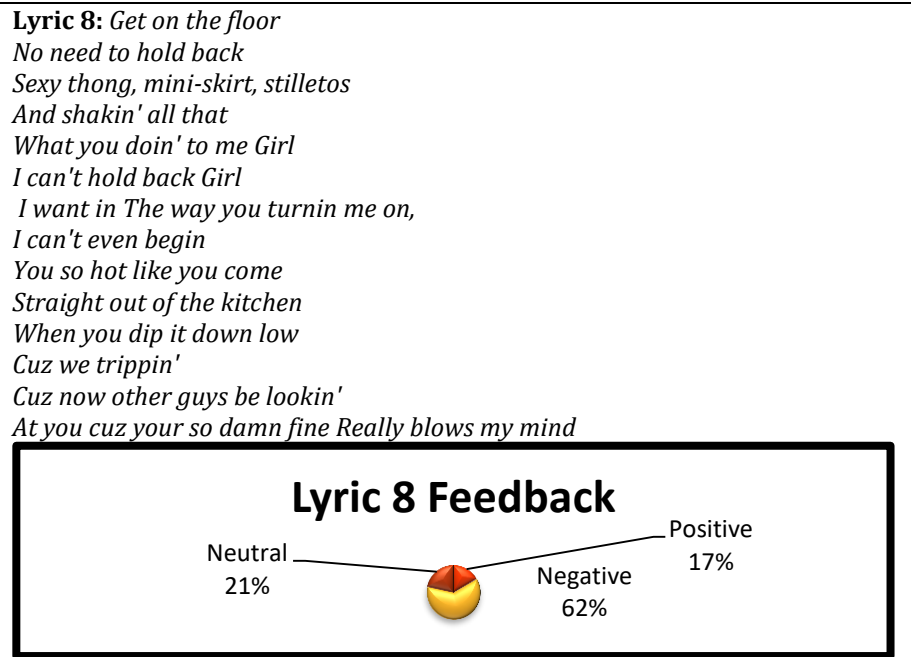


Fig. 8: Respondents' Feedback to Lyric 8

Sexual connotations are evident in Lyric 8 as the woman is portrayed as someone in a sexual attire; *sexy thong, mini skirt, stilettos*, and is ogled by other men in the room. In the rap world, women represent success, and they are treated almost as accessories; a means for rappers to prove that they have made it to the top. This lyric garnered 62 percent negative votes from the respondents and 17 percent of the respondents voted this lyric as positive.

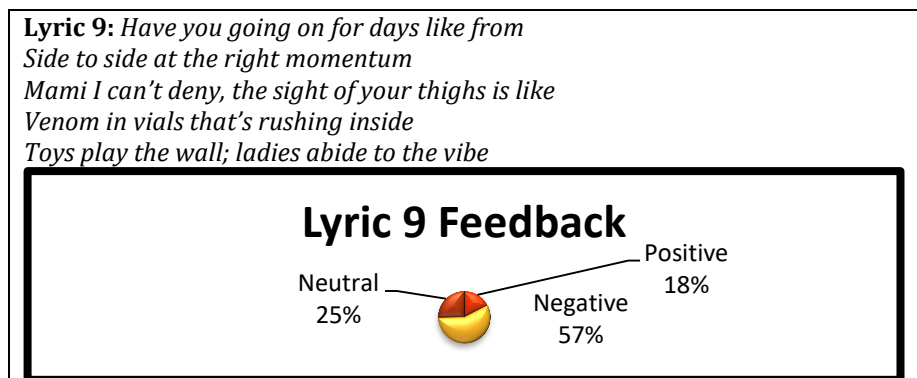


Fig. 9: Respondents' Feedback to Lyric 9

Lyric 9 also suggests sexual connotations, and how a woman is requested to abide to the man's movement and needs. Lyric 9 garnered 57 percent negative votes, 25 percent neutral votes and 18 percent positive votes from the respondents.

Conclusion

The findings from the study prove that the respondents are aware of words used to stereotype women such as *baby, honey* and *girl* but do not consider these words as sexist. Nonetheless, words such as *whore* and *slut* are degrading when used on women. The awareness of the listeners implicates that the listeners understand stereotyping on a surface level as their knowledge could be based on what the media feeds them. It must be mentioned that words such as *baby* is commonly used among couples, and therefore it has

been accepted as a term of endearment. Both genders agree that the word *baby* for example is not considered sexist. This leads to the question on how much the media has influenced listeners in their perception on words of endearment. From the data gathered and as mentioned above, not all of the lyrics are prone to sexually objectify women as the themes varies from family, survival, brand and women. The respondents, on the other hand, do not condone to explicit use of sexual terms for women but are also unaware that using endearment words on women is also stereotyping them. This study looks at only selected English hip hop lyrics in Malaysia without considering other languages. It would therefore be interesting to look at the other three main languages used in Malaysia such as Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil, and study how these lyrics portray women and the recurring themes that appear in their lyrics respectively. Apart from that, a vast variety of respondents from different backgrounds could also be included in the future study as to provide a more in-depth analysis on the awareness of gender stereotyping among respondents.

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