

Blurred Lines

Blurred Lines: A look into music and how it affects the mind,  
emphasizing the objectifying of women

**\*\*Working Title**

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## **Introduction**

Music defines our culture. It is with us everyday. Throughout history, music has evolved and changed with our changing culture. From classical to rock to rap and hip-hop, music has special and different meanings to different people and age groups.

There is no doubt, however, the music has become more explicit. With the more explicit terms, it often takes on the role of affecting our minds. "Three leading cognitive psychologist and neuroscientists specializing in music as well as internationally renowned musician discussed how structured, organized sound has the power to move us, literally and figuratively (Bourne, 2013)." This recent study, along with others has brought about a deep research connection: music and the mind. With lyrics in some genre's getting more explicit, people being more open with sexually explicit lyrics, and a more open society, the lines between what is right and wrong are often blurred.

The song, Blurred Lines by Robin Thicke, which hit top charts Summer 2013, has become popular but also a scapegoat for feminist around the world. It has created uproar between generations and different age groups. With racy lyrics, a scandalous music video with scantily clad women, and many sexual references, the song has indeed blurred the lines of what society has deemed appropriate and what it hasn't.

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This study will be over the song Blurred Lines but also music as a whole. This study will focus on how music is defined in society and defined to us personally. Music can and does define how we see people and how we respond to people. Scientists have found that music stimulates more parts of the brain than any other human function (Mannes, 2011).” This song, among others, could affect the people listening and define their actions.

### **Rationale**

This study is important because it speaks to all generations about the perception of music and how it influences our minds. This studied will be argued through a series of surveys that will included questions about music perception and the song, Blurred Lines. This study will also contain in-depth interviews and a focus group gaining further insight to the feelings and thoughts of how people perceive certain types of music and their thoughts.

At the completion of this study, I expect to be able to understand the way people see songs, particularly Blurred Lines and their understanding if and how it affects the thoughts and actions of people. This study reflects my interests in studying media and how media affects different ages and sexes. My initial role in choosing this topic was because I was unsure of the actual meaning of the song, more focused on the catchy tune. After further listening, I realized the extreme objectification of women in the song and that it wasn't just a catchy tune. Without realizing it, members of the listening audience, myself included, listen to songs without realizing the true meaning.

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Further, this topic grabs my interest on music and how society changes the music that we listen to. Songs like, Blurred Lines are catchy but the awry lyrics can denounce a song. An examination of the listening audience is critical because it explores thoughts on music and how women and men can be objectified.

### **Literature Review**

Music is a universal sound. There are different backgrounds and cultures and different people who listen to a certain music that fits them. However, there are songs that cross the cultural marks and are known throughout different states and countries. Blurred Lines, hitting the Billboard Top 100, brought controversy in early 2013 because no one knew the real meaning and the extremely degrading lyrics made women out to be sex objects.

With music ever changing, we are left to listen to the latest hits and what is on the radio. However, in further research of music, certain songs and sounds affect the mind. In the study by Janet E. Bourne titled Conference Report: "Music, Mind, and Brain" Theme Program at the Annual convention of the Association for Psychological Science, it goes into detail about music and the way it can affect our mind explaining "the origin of top-down influence on the auditory brain, looking at dynamic activity in distinct regions and the use of syncopation in dissociation the beat and sound (Bourne, 2013)." Understanding the way music can affect the mind is complex, but this can explain why some beats are catchier than others, like Blurred Lines.

Some people tend to be into certain types of music just for the beat and not the actual lyrics. Music can be generational as well. During the early growing years,

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music can be more influential. “The reminiscence bump is a finding that human beings have stronger memories for items (such as music) that they were introduced to between the ages of 16 and 28 years compared with time periods before or after (Bourne, 2013).” This could explain why Robin Thicke hit it big with the Billboard 100 crowd. The age that music is sticking with people is during those extreme growth years emotionally and physically.

Listening to music can bring pleasure as well. “Common to most of us is that we find great pleasure in listening to music. Indeed, music is consistently rated to be among the top 10 things people find pleasurable in life (Gebauer, Kringelbach, Vuust, 2012).” Dancing to songs, singing along to songs, and listening to music can bring each one of us a different kind of pleasure or escape that we are looking for. Music is a controversial topic because of songs like Blurred Lines. “Music is pleasurable when expectations are fulfilled, but probably even more so when they are slightly violated (Gebauer, Kringelbach, Vuust, 2012).” Just like anything, music can cross the lines of appropriate and not appropriate and can violate certain limits parents have set on children, people have on themselves, or even what societal limitations. Certain types of music can create this sense of escape and feeling for some that other types can't do.

Lines of feminism also are often crossed in music. Lyrics like, “I know you want it,” from Thicke's song Blurred Lines are objectifying women and making them seem like objects. “In domains in which the sexes recurrently faced different adaptive problems, evolution is likely to have fashioned different adaptive solutions

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(Kuhle, 2012). Some of these adaptive solutions are continuing to objectify women in a way in which it becomes normal for society.

A new, post-modernist feminist is coming out though. In a study by Angela Carter titled *From New Woman to "New" Feminism: some thoughts on the Post - Feminist Era*, the "New Women" is described as "well-educated, ambitious, career-driven and with no interest in getting married (Carter, 1984)." The marriage part in this new 21<sup>st</sup> century may be true but the rest sounds far from the women that are described and shown in Thicke's song *Blurred Lines*. Even today, women are still looked at and often treated as uneducated sex objects. "Indeed class, race and sexuality as aspects of the female experience became divisive and dividing forces within feminism (Carter, 1984)." These dividing forces are what makes it okay for society to portray women in this way but the lines are very blurred on whether it is right or should be deemed appropriate. Feminism back then and now seems to fight against a "common enemy (Carter, 1984)," which in this case can music and its objectifying manner on women.

However, it is true that "young women today dissociate themselves from feminism ( Carter, 1984)." That is seen more and more. Women are now embracing the more sexual roles which is making it okay to be talked about in an objectifying manner, like in the song *Blurred Lines*.

Overall, music is a big stimulation in the way we think, talk, see, hear, and do certain things in the day-to-day routine. The song, *Blurred Lines* has only spurred controversy that has been going on through generations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study will focus on the dialogic theory. Dialogue is more than talking. This pertains to communication in multiple ways. First thought of by Mark Buber, it covers the differences between monologue and dialogue. Simply put, “contact with others’ ideas and the need to articulate one’s own ideas in conversation can transform individuals’ understandings (Worhan, 2011). Hearing certain things, like music can control our communication practices.

“Dialogue is conscience-oriented (Jans, 1999).” The Dialogic theory comes into play because this part of theory is based on the principle and hearing and believing in the right thing. This theory pertains to the type of music and the type of thoughts I will be studying and more-over help settle the case of music affecting the mind.

## **Method**

For this study, I interviewed people between the ages of 18-50. The subjects were both male and female to get qualitative research on both sides of the spectrum. For this study, surveys were distributed via Qualtrics online through social platforms like Facebook and Twitter. There was a focus group held on the West Texas A&M University campus with 7-12 participants. There were also two in-depths interviews held between male and female subjects to gain a further understanding of the research question.

This three-fold procedure was used because it hit on all markets of the research subjects. I was able to hit the younger, millennial audience via social media

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and get a more in-depth insight with the older generations using focus groups and the in-depth interviews.

## **Results**

### **Participants**

The participants for this study varied in age and gender. I was looking to obtain samples from females and males between the ages of 18-50. The reason behind such a large gap was to find out the different views on this subject through the generation since society has changed drastically in a short amount of time.

I gathered information from this age range mostly through online surveys but was able to go more in-depth with interviews and a focus group with some of the younger, millennial participants.

### **Survey**

The survey that was given via Qualtrics and distributed on different social platforms had a total of 82 responses. The respondents varied from the ages of 18-50. The breakdown is as follows:

18-25: 50 responses

25-32: 10 responses

32-40: 6 responses

40-50: 6 responses

50+: 10 responses

The 50 + responses will be helpful in gaining qualitative information on the higher age range and a higher generation. There were 32 male responses and 47 female



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responses that took the survey. The majority of respondents obtained a bachelor's degree with a variety of the respondents with a Masters or some college experience.

One of the questions asked was relationship status. This was important for qualitative analysis because sometimes depending on relationship status, your view on men and women can change. The results are as follows:

Single: 42 respondents

Married: 22 respondents

Divorced: 2 respondents

Dating: 14 responses

From this survey, it showed the different responses on what types of music they are listening to, where they listen to the music and also gained understanding of the "popular" songs on the Billboard charts. The survey participants varied in music selection. Rock and Roll had the most fans with Rap/Hip-Hop at a close second. The rest of the answer varied from Christian, Country, and Pop.

Most of the participants listen to their music in the car with iPhone and iPod coming in second. At school, work, or at home were some other places that music was listened to.

When asked about awareness of the song Blurred Lines, 57 survey participants heard of the song compared to 58 participants knowing the song by Miley Cyrus, Wrecking Ball. The song Blurred Lines scored a 4.21 on a scale of 10 to likeness.

When asked if music affects the way we think, 52 said that it did with 20 saying it did not. As to why people listen to music, the answers were varied. Some

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based it off of mood and how music can uplift, calm them, pump them up, distract them, relax them, and the list goes on. Some said that to them, music is an emotional connection. Music is for the enjoyment and the experience which goes along with the research that was stated previously.

When asked about music affecting generations, the answers, again, varied. The main message from the majority of the participants is that the lyrics have changed over the generations and that, in turn, is what affects society.

The survey proved to have findings that matched the research that has already been done. The number of respondents and varied age and sex allowed for good qualitative information.

### **In-Depth Interviews**

I obtained two interviewees for the in-depth interview portion of the qualitative research. One male and one female were interviewed. These interviews were used to gain further insight on how people think of music and also, how people think of the song Blurred Lines.

All information of the subjects will remain confidential because of the exclusivity of the study. The information obtained is locked away in a secure file. Both interviewees answered questioned voluntarily and were told they could leave at any point in time. There was no compensation for this study. One interview was conducted in person and the other via email.

### **Findings:**

Both participants were asked the same set of questions ranging from type of music they listen to, to their thoughts on Blurred Lines. The female of the study is 30 years

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old, married with two kids. The male is 33, single and no kids. This allowed for a range of ideas and thoughts based on single and married people. Some answers were similar, while others varied. In regards to how hip-hop music represents women, there was a negative connotation. Both subjects stated that the music is already objectifying women and that this concept is not new to the music industry. The male had a different take in saying that this objectifying is not one-sided. He stated that women objectify men just as much as men objectify women in music.

Both agreed that the music artists are mainly responsible for the way they are treated because of their music. Superior was a word used for both in those artists may think they are superior because they can objectify certain types of people.

The female went more in-depth because of her answers that led to different questions. She went into great detail of music changing around feminist movements. She described women taking control of their lives, which in turn, was responsible for the shift of women having power over themselves and their sexuality.

When asked about the meaning of the song, Blurred Lines, the male was at first; unsure while the women participant knew it was about "owning women." The male states he has never listened to it all the way through but thinks it's about non-consensual sex while the women says it's a power thing: men dominating a women.

When asked if society has become more accepting of music that objectifies a certain gender, the answers again varied because of male and female but both had some similar points. Both subjects agreed that music is desensitizing a lot of what we used to think of as a not so hot topic: sex, drugs, alcohol. It is stated that people

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will be drawn to controversy and songs that make an uproar and that is what Blurred Lines does.

Both interviews were a good look at male and female viewpoints and where they differ and where they think similarly. The last question for the female subject regarded her being a mom and her thoughts for her children. She feared for her son to think this way about women and feared for her daughter's emotional toll and not wanting her daughter to think she is worthless.

This take is very interesting and shows that even through society, the same moral values still hold true. Music, and more importantly, Blurred Lines is objectifying women but it could be because of both men and women and their viewpoints.

### **Focus Group**

For the focus group, I held it in the downstairs conference room at West Texas A&M University. There were seven participants ranging from ages 21-25. Two couples were involved, one married and the rest were single. The high millennial audience left for good discussion and allowed to further gather qualitative data regarding music. As the most talked about generation, this twenty something crowd offered helpful insight on the changing society that they grew up in.

Before entering into questions, participants were told this was voluntary and if there was offensive content, they were allowed to exit the focus group. Over the course of the one hour focus group, I showed two videos regarding Blurred Lines and put lyrics on the screen. There was no harm done in any of the questions of the focus group and participants carried out the conversation without any large

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disagreements or violence. All answers and documents obtained are locked in a private file and will not be release.

### **Analysis of Focus Group**

The first thing to start the focus group was watching 1:00 minute of the Blurred Lines video. General thoughts on this video were disgust. Some said that they never want to watch the video again.

After the video was viewed the questioning started. There was a moderator (me) that regulated questions and kept the conversation on task and flowing. There was a predetermined set of questions as to not get off task.

When asked if music objectifies women, the answer was yes with a twist. Almost unanimously, the answer came down to women doing it to themselves even mentioning Miley Cyrus. I then asked what the cause of this was and the answers then went to men. Most agreed it was a man's fault. Again, as with the in-depth interviews, there were a lot of cross answers. The word superior came up multiple times during the focus group stating that "men are superior."

When asked what makes music popular, the answer varied from the catchiness of the song to the way society makes it popular. The content of the song was left out of this.

Switching gears, the conversation went to feminism and the definition of feminism. The answers were that feminism used to focus on equality but now feminism is about payback. Even the men agreed that feminism was almost dead and it was kind of a joke to them. They made a point to say that if a woman is not acting like a lady then how society can or men take them seriously.

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This led to the topic of how a lady should act. The answers here varied from different religious beliefs to how society views a lady. The whole group agreed that there is a double standard for women and that the double standard is almost unattainable.

When asked what Blurred Lines meant, there was confusion: most agreed that the line between yes and no for sex was unclear hence the title Blurred Lines.

At this point in time, I put the lyrics up on the screen for them to read. After reading the lyrics, I then asked what they thought about the song. The definition was still unclear. Words like “domesticate” stuck out to the group. All agreed that the lyrics were confusing and didn’t coincide with the music video at all.

After this, I had them watch a parody video which was a video made by women at Harvard University as an answer to Blurred Lines. The video focuses heavily on the feminist side and portrays men as the sex objects.

The men thought this video was equally as offensive as blurred lines. The girls thought it was funny. All agreed that it was a horrible way to react to the first video.

The closing thoughts were just about Robin Thicke and how his goal was to upset some women of society and he obtained it. Overall, this information from the focus group was valuable in hearing millennial thoughts on music and our ever-changing society today.

### **Discussion**

All the information obtained through each of these studies is valuable. There is, however, a huge gap of studying on how music affects the mind. There is still more

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interpretation on the term feminism and the actual song Blurred Lines itself. Also, of all the participants, they were all from Panhandle areas. This study would be valuable in different cities and bigger range for demographic differences. The subjects interviewed were all Caucasian which leaves this study open for different races as well.

### **Conclusion**

Blurred Lines is a highly controversial song but beyond blurred lines, music is very controversial. The way women are objectified is still a highly debated topic. Also, the way music and certain lyrics affect the mind are all open discussion questions. The different age ranges differ in a lot of views but music and the degrading manner it sometimes exudes is agreed upon generationally as offensive.

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