

## “Let’s talk about sex baby”

*What youth consider to be good music for good sex*



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Word count: 10,000

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June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016

## **“Let’s talk about sex baby”: What youth consider to be good music for good sex**

### **Abstract**

Academic research on youth’s media consumption and their sexual lives has predominantly focused on sexual risk behavior. Countless scholars argue that sexual lyrics influence youth to engage in early sexual intercourse, have unsafe sex and develop distorted notions of gender relations. The approaches of these media effect studies include experimental designs and questionnaire-based research. Four problems can be identified with these studies. First of all, youth are positioned as non-reflexive, cultural dopes. Secondly, youth-centered approaches are lacking, which leaves out their own understandings and negotiations of these media texts. Thirdly, the focus is predominantly on risk behavior, thereby ignoring a major part of their sexual experiences. Lastly, the discourses of sexualization are interwoven with stereotypes about young girls and ‘ethnic’ youth. This study attempts to go beyond this one-sided perspective on youth, sexuality and media consumption by focusing on youth themselves and on ‘good’ sex. It aims to answer the question: What do youth consider to be good music for good sex and how do they make sense of their musical choices? This question was addressed by means of an innovative ‘music voice’ approach, which required participants to create their own playlist of music for good sex about which they were subsequently interviewed. Youth’s narratives demonstrate that they do not primarily draw upon the ‘sexualized’ music that is discussed in media effect studies. Moreover, songs are included on the basis of beat rather than lyrics and interpretative meaning. The way in which the beat is experienced by respondents subsequently influences the ways in which they implement music in their sex lives. Furthermore, when discussing sexually explicit lyrics, respondents voiced critical reflections and made a distinction between the content of these songs and their personal notions of good sex.

**Keywords:** youth, sex, music, music voice, sexualization

“Exposure to sexual content in music, movies, television and magazines accelerates white adolescents’ sexual activity, and increases their risk of engaging in early sexual intercourse” (Brown et al., 2006 :3).

## **Introduction**

The abovementioned quote is illustrative of a field of research that assumes a relationship between media exposure and sexual ‘risk’ behavior among youth<sup>1</sup>. These studies are concerned with the media consumption of youth as they argue that the images and texts within these media are highly sexual in nature. Research has shown that sexual talk and behavior are prevalent on television and have increased over time (Kunkel et al., 2007), that advertisements in magazines have become more sexual in nature (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004) and that degrading sexual references are common in popular music (Primack et al., 2008). Because sexuality is a sensitive concept that is not always discussed with people in one’s direct environment, media consumption is considered to play an important role in teaching young people norms and values (L’Engle et al., 2006). The prevailing assumption is that young adolescents internalize media images which guide their sexual attitudes and future behavior. This might lead to what others have deemed ‘dangerous’ behavior such as being more accepting of rape-supporting attitudes (Lanis & Covell, 1995), stronger endorsement of a sexual double standard (Zhang et al., 2008) and a likeliness to approve of pre-marital sex (Greeson, 1986).

Music is a medium which is salient in the discussion regarding the sexualization of youth. The importance of music has been observed in early research. Especially during adolescence, music gains significance as opposed to traditional media such as the television (Larson & Kubey, 1983). Music is frequently listed by youth as a secondary activity; it provides a background to primary activities such as dancing, parties and doing homework (Arnett, 2002). The prominence of music in everyday life has increased further with the advent of mobile devices that allow individuals to take their music with them wherever they go (Bull, 2005). In this way, music can now also be used as a means to manage space and time while travelling between places (Bull, 2005). Another important development is the emergence of online streaming sites such as Spotify. Spotify offers more than 20 million tracks and this abundance of music has changed the ways in which people manage and collect

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘youth’ in this study refers to the fluid category as conceptualized by UNESCO: “as a person between the age where he/she may leave compulsory education, and the age at which he/she finds his/her first employment” (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/youth-definition/>) In this study the age group that is referred to is between 18 and 25 years old.

their music. Nowadays, users do not need to buy albums and CDs anymore, but can pick and choose individual tracks that they like (Torrens & Hertzog, 2004). In other words, online streamers are not bound to one particular album, artist or genre, but have the possibility to create their own playlists, consisting of all their favorite songs.

The integral role of music in the lives of youth has sparked interest in the effects of listening to music on youths’ sexual attitudes and behaviors. Similar to studies concerning other media, the consumption of ‘sexualized’ music has been linked to so-called ‘risk behavior’ including early engagement in sexual intercourse (Brown et al., 2006), self-sexualization of women (Hall et al., 2012), and the perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles (Arnett, 2002). Approaches of such studies include linking outcomes of media consumption surveys to sexual attitudes and behavior (e.g. Brown et al., 2006; Pardun et al., 2005) and experimental designs (e.g. Kalof, 1999; Kistler & Lee, 2009).

The approaches of these studies are problematic in four ways. Firstly, adolescents are treated as so-called ‘cultural dopes’. A relationship between exposure to sexualized media and sexual notions is assumed and the research serves as a means to ‘confirm’ this presumption. In this way, these designs ignore the bi-directional connection between media exposure and social attitudes of consumers (Ward, 2003). Secondly, a youth-centered approach is lacking. The starting point is music that is deemed sexualized by the researchers, whereas adolescents decide for themselves which music (videos) they consume, based upon their own preferences (Arnett, 2002). By not letting participants reflect upon the sexual explicitness of these media, these studies fail to capture how the meanings of media texts are negotiated by adolescents. Thirdly, these studies focus on ‘risk’ behavior. Instead of examining the complex nature of sexuality, which includes positive associations, the focus is on negative consequences such as teenage pregnancy and STD’s (Chandra et al., 2008; Collins et al., 2004). Fourthly, the discourse regarding youth and sexuality is ethnically marked and gendered. Sexualization is posed as a ‘girls only’ issue by situating women as victims of sexualization (Egan & Hawkes, 2008), and discourses of whom provide ‘the risk’ focus around stereotypes of ethnic minority youth, such as black young males as hypersexual (Ferber, 2007).

The majority of the aforementioned studies are conducted in the US, where panics about sexualized media are prevalent and sex-education focuses around abstinence-only policies (Stranger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Nonetheless, concerns about sexualized media are also expressed in the Netherlands, where sex education is part of the curriculum. An illustration of this is the ‘slow sex manifesto’ which was issued in 2008 by the political left and signed by various Dutch politicians, professors, sociologists and journalists. It claims that the media

have become more sexualized and portray a distorted image which increasingly determines our sexual notions. The manifesto calls for ‘slow sex’ as a solution for youth to develop a different attitude towards sexual lust. ‘Slow sex’ is sexuality based upon equality and pleads for attention and respect for your partner and yourself. Initiating sex before marriage is ratified, as long as it is free of force and suppression. In the manifesto, a call for new media-education courses is expressed, as a means to teach youth these values. Furthermore, it is argued that alternative content should be displayed on public television channels to provide a new point of reference for youth’s sexual notions. This ‘slow sex manifesto’ indicates that concerns regarding media consumption and the subsequent sexualization of youth are prevalent in the Netherlands as well. Therefore, it will be interesting to see how youth that live in the Netherlands make sense of their sexual notions and if/how they relate this to their music consumption.

In light of these concerns and the identified problems in current research, this study aims to reverse the dominant discourse and will focus on youth’s conceptualization of their own sexuality and the music that they associate with ‘good sex’. Whereas the sexual attitudes and behaviors of youth have been a central topic of research, notions of ‘good sex’ are generally left out. This paper aims to fill that academic gap and change the negative discourse of sex and ‘danger’ into a positive discourse which focuses on pleasurable sexual experiences of youth in the Netherlands. A ‘music voice’ approach will be used in which participants function as collaborators of the research and take on an active role in constructing and explaining their own notions of sexuality. Using this innovative approach allows for novel and different results to emerge which can provide insight into youth’s experiences with music and good sex. This study aims to shed a new light on the topic of youth, media and sexuality by posing the following question: What kind of music do youth consider to go with ‘good sex’ and how do they make sense of their ‘good’ musical choices?

The remainder of this article will provide a brief theoretical overview of the literature concerning music and the way in which it is experienced and utilized in emotional and physical contexts. This will be followed by an explanation of the research design and a presentation of the main findings. The article concludes with a discussion of the insights that are gained from this study and its implications on further research within this field.

### **Music, emotion and the body**

The aforementioned media effect studies primarily focus upon the long term effects that music may have on youth, such as a distorted image of gender relations (Arnett, 2002),

objectification of women and sexual permissiveness (Kistler & Lee, 2009). The source of these distorted notions is assumed to lie within the musical lyrics and/or music videos (e.g. Hall et al., 2012; Kistler & Lee, 2009). By taking these musical aspects as a starting point, these studies make use of what DeNora (2000) labels musical framing. Musical framing entails that musical materials are considered parameters that are used to frame dimensions of experience (e.g. interpretation and perception). By using this frame as a starting point, these studies aim to investigate the links between musical properties (i.e. lyrics) and non-musical matters (i.e. sexual notions).

However, the assumption that musical properties lead to particular attitudes fails to capture the underlying mechanisms that constitute such outcomes. Brown et al. (2006) for example, measured the Sexual Media Diet of their respondents by analyzing the ‘sexual nature’ of the media that youth frequently consumed. They looked at the amount of sexual content, but did not address the nature of this content. By linking the consumption of sexual media to sexual notions without taking the nature of these sexual displays into account and without examining the way in which these images are received by the respondents, they fail to explain how sexual notions of youth are developed in relation to media consumption.

Furthermore, previous studies have indicated that listeners are not mainly concerned with the interpretative meaning of music, but also value how music makes them feel (Bolderman, forthcoming). This means that they are not solely attentive to the interpretative meaning of music (i.e. the lyrics), but are also experiencing the music on a more subconscious level. Studies which have focused on listener’s experience of music have found that people associate particular songs with specific places and memories of place (Bolderman, forthcoming) and that youth create personal playlists based upon previous experiences and memories (Hagen, 2015). These findings show that people have personal associations with music, which influence the way in which music is experienced. A song can therefore not be regarded as a simple stimulus that elicits a general response, as media effect studies have suggested.

In contrast to the long-term effects that media effect studies are concerned with, other work has suggested that music also evokes more elusive, short-term effects. An important reason for music consumption is mood-regulation. Regulation of moods and emotions can be both conscious or unconscious and can be targeted at different emotional aspects, such as subjective experience, behavioral expression or physiological responses (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). Saarikallio & Erkkilä (2007) found that music created strong affective experiences for adolescents. DeNora (2000) also states that music can provide an example for

styles of being and that it may be perceived as representing various parameters of both emotional and embodied conduct. An example of a situation in which music can help to set the mood is in intimate interactions. In interviews with 52 women about the role of music in their intimate encounters DeNora (2000) found the use of music to be most prevalent among younger women who were in early stages of their relationship. The ones who used music explained that it contributed to the intimate interaction and that it served both as an aid to relaxation as well as a motivator for engaging in sex.

Because sex has both an emotional as well as a physical aspect, the role of music in relation to the body also needs to be considered. The influence of music on physical exercise has been investigated in previous research. Several studies have found that participants reported lower perceived exertion when exercising with music as compared to exercising without music and that exercising with music was deemed more pleasurable (Thornby et al., 1995; Edworthy & Haring, 2006).

However, the presence or absence of music is not the only thing that matters, various musical aspects also affect how people perform in those activities. The pace of music has been suggested to influence physical performance. In sports such as aerobics, fast music is typically used (Karageorghis et al., 1999). This could be because it is considered to create a more upbeat and positive mood in comparison to slower music, and could thus create a good atmosphere for working out. Moreover, fast music is more arousing and may therefore produce higher levels of performance. Lastly, the pace of music can influence the pace of the exerciser. Edworthy & Haring (2006) found that the speed of the music affected the speed at which participants ran on a treadmill: faster music produced faster speeds.

Synchronization ties into this notion of pace and performance. Anshel & Marisi (1997) found that synchronized movement to music increased bicycle endurance when compared to asynchronized movement or the absence of music. This sentiment was echoed in a study by Karageorghis et al. (1999) who found that aerobics instructors strongly prefer to use synchronous music in their classes as it positively affects performance.

These studies show that different musical aspects can bring about changes in human bodily processes, whether these are in the form of internal emotional states, physiological states or behavioral movements (DeNora, 2000). Considering that sex is both an emotional and a physical conduct, it will be interesting to see if and how these findings correspond with the way in which music is used for sex. However, it should be noted that music cannot be regarded as simply acting on the body. The changes in bodily conduct are not accomplished by the music in its own right, but rather by means of active sense-making on behalf of the

recipient who works with the material, instead of being acted upon. For this reason, music can rather be seen as a potential source with which listeners engage and work to change their emotional and physical being. Taking these prior findings into account, it is interesting to inquire how youth negotiate the relationship between music and sex and which elements they draw upon to make sense of their choices.

## **Methodology**

This study aims to tap into youth’s perspectives of ‘good music’ and ‘good sex’ and how they negotiate the relationship between the two. Because no previous studies have directly involved youth’s perspectives on sexuality and connected these to their own musical preferences, this study was inductive in nature. An innovative ‘music voice’ approach was used, which required participants to make a playlist of songs that they considered an expression of, or setting the mood for, good sex. The method proceeded with an in-depth interview about the contents of the playlist.

The ‘music voice’ approach is a derivative of the Photovoice method which holds that no one is in a better position to understand and explain the issues of a particular group than the people within that group (Strack, Magill & McDonagh, 2004). Photovoice stems from feminist standpoint theories which provide marginalized individuals with epistemic privilege, since they know different things than those who are privileged because of what they experience and how they make sense of these experiences (Desyllas, 2014). Research is often conducted *on* these marginalized groups rather than *with* them. Because this is the case for youth as well, this method was chosen since it can reveal in-depth information that may not have been captured by means of other approaches (Maclean & Woodward, 2012).

## ***Procedure***

Sex and music preferences for the bedroom are very personal and intimate subjects which require a certain level of trust between the interviewer and respondent. For this reason, an approach similar to the one used by Reijnders (2015) was adopted. Friends, family and acquaintances were interviewed to ensure that the respondents would feel comfortable to discuss these matters in sufficient depth. Consequently, the recruitment of participants started with asking close friends, family and colleagues to participate and proceeded with a snowballing technique in order to reach a more diverse group of adolescents.

Respondents were selected based on the criterion that they were between 18 and 25 years old. Because a diversity in terms of ethnic, educational and social background was preferred, these factors were also taken into account during recruitment. Fifteen respondents



took part in this study, who were between 18 and 25 years old, who had different ethnic backgrounds and whose educational level ranged from vocational education to university masters<sup>2</sup>.

Participants were asked to develop their own playlist with music they considered to be an expression of, or setting the mood for, good sex. *YouTube.com* was used as a platform to create this playlist. Respondents were provided with a link to a playlist which was shared between the participant and myself. This provided them with the possibility to add songs to the list at any time. These songs would become immediately visible on the list, which was situated on my own YouTube account. This allowed for sufficient time to look at the playlist in advance, so that the interview questions could be informed by the respondent’s specific musical choices.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. General questions about the playlist guided the interview, but sufficient space was provided for participants to add their own topics. Moreover, their personal stories could lead to the development of new topics which were included in the subsequent interviews. In this way, each interview also had the potential to guide the next and questions were added during the process of data collection.

### *Analysis*

The music voice approach generated two sources of data: a playlist and a corresponding interview. Both elements needed to be analyzed in order to get a thorough understanding of the ways in which music for good sex were negotiated and experienced by the participants. A grounded theory approach was used for this analysis. Involvement in data collection and phases of data analysis took place simultaneously, with the first analysis informing the next interviews. The interviews were analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis. This is in line with grounded theory procedures, as the process started with open coding and proceeded with constant comparison between the interviews in order to form middle-range theories (Charmaz, 2003). These theories informed the content of the theoretical framework.

Because playlists have not been incorporated in a similar fashion in prior studies, analysis was guided by Photovoice approaches (e.g. Oliffe et al., 2008). Firstly, the playlist and interview were analyzed alongside each other, in order to link the participants’ understandings and perspectives to the content of their own personal list. This contextualized the data and provided insight in the ways in which the participants experienced the music. Secondly, the playlist itself was analyzed in terms of musical genre, featured artists (one artist

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<sup>2</sup> An overview of the respondents can be found in Appendix I

dominating the list, male/female ratio), general feel of the songs, beat/text ratio of the songs and pace of the songs. Moreover, the songs that respondents elaborated on during the interview were also analyzed separately in terms of the aforementioned characteristics. In this way, the narratives of the participants could be extended and complemented with an additional reading of the material. Finally, the playlists were compared to one another in order to see if any trends could be observed.

## **Analysis**

### *Youth’s personalized playlists*

As a first step in the analysis, the respondents’ playlists were compared to the music that is commonly used in media effect studies. Do they listen to the same music that these studies discuss? If so, do they only listen to these types of music and how do they reflect upon their musical choices?

The lists show that there is a lot of personal variation in what youth consider to be good music for good sex. This variation was evident within the sample, but was also observed within the individual playlists. However, a striking similarity between the lists is that almost every one contained at least one hip hop/R&B song with sexually explicit lyrics. Hip hop fandom has been argued to play a significant role in youth’s objectification of women and sexual permissiveness (Kistler & Lee, 2009) and exposure to sexual rap has been proposed to lead to a negative assessment of women’s personality, and sexual aggressive behavior (Barongan & Nagayama Hall, 1995; Gan et al., 1997). Nonetheless, the discussions of these songs reveal interesting notions.

First and foremost, none of the respondents used this type of music exclusively in their playlists, but rather combined the sexually explicit songs with songs that were more mellow and romantic in nature. An example of this can be found in the playlist of Thomas, a 24-year old, Dutch guy who works as a fire marshal. His playlist featured 8 songs, among which the hip hop/rap song “Or Nah” by Ty Dolla \$ign, The Weeknd, DJ Mustard and Wiz Khalifa. The song talks explicitly about sex and the hook goes as follows:

Is you really 'bout your money or nah?  
Can you really take dick or nah?  
Can I bring another bitch or nah?  
Is you with the shits or nah?  
Or nah, or nah  
Would you ride for a nigga or nah?

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Would you die for a nigga or nah?

Would you lie to a nigga or nah?

Or nah

*(Ty Dolla \$ign – Or Nah ft. The Weeknd, Wiz Khalifa and DJ Mustard)*

When discussing the contents of this song, he explained:

*Thomas:* That one is really on the edge you know. That one is really... rough lyrics. It doesn’t try to sugar-coat it, you understand.

*Interviewer:* No because when would it be too much for you, if we look at the lyrics for instance?

*Thomas:* Yes well, like I said, when you are busy with a girl and you just want a romantic evening and ehr... then you put on that song and you see her looking like “What the fuck” then that one’s too much you know.

This part of the conversation shows that Thomas actively comments on the lyrics; he mentions they are “on the edge” and would only use the song in specific circumstances. He explained that he definitely would not use this song when he would be with a girl whom he had just met. This indicates that he is cautious about giving off the “wrong” impression and anticipates how such a song might be received by the other. Furthermore, he acknowledges that it would not be very fitting for a romantic evening. Instead, he talked about another song that was included in his list. The bluesy ballad “Gotten” by Slash and Adam Levine was more romantic in nature and its chorus is as follows:

And I've been saving  
These last words for one last miracle  
But now I'm not sure  
I can't save you if  
You don't let me  
You just get me like I never  
Been gotten before  
Like I never been gotten before

*(Slash ft. Adam Levine – Gotten)*

When talking about this song, Thomas explained the following:

*Thomas:* But I think it is a beautiful song. I mean you could put it on because it is so mellow...

*Interviewer:* But what is it that connects you to this song? Do you have specific

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memories about it or something?

*Thomas:* Ehr.. Yes I do know that it works well, you know

*Interviewer:* Oh you have tested it?!

*Thomas:* You know. It was good in setting the mood. Just, and also... this was with a girl who was on her way to becoming my girlfriend, and then it’s a song that goes well with that.

This part of the conversation shows that “Gotten” has a totally different meaning for Thomas than “Or Nah”, even though they are both included in his list of good music for good sex. The romantic lyrics of “Gotten” proved it suitable for a night with the girl he was getting serious with, whereas “Or Nah” could give off the wrong impression and was not deemed appropriate when attempting to create a romantic mood. The fact that songs with such distinct messages are included in the playlists of the participants, indicates that the respondents’ notions of sex are not univocal. Moreover, Thomas’s considerations show that youth do not act as cultural dopes, but reflect upon their musical choices. Throughout the interviews, respondents were critical towards the lyrics of such songs and distinguished the expressed sentiments from their own notions of good sex. They negotiate and think about in which context(s) the different songs are “appropriate”. When discussing these choices, they clarify that they anticipate the response of the other which shows that they take the other into account when selecting music for sex.

Respondents also showed a second way in which they demonstrated that hip hop/R&B were not exclusively drawn upon to inform their notions of good sex. A clear example of this is the 20-year-old Sunnery, who does promotional work and mainly listens to R&B and hip hop with his friends or when going out. However, when it comes to sex, he explains:

“And ehr, yes, I am very much into hip hop and R&B but when I am talking about sex for instance, that is something special of course, and then I search for songs that are more special to me, songs that fall a little bit outside my genre, so that it is also more special for me, so to say.”

Even though he is a fan of hip hop and R&B music, Sunnery sees sex as something special, something for which he likes to put on music that he does not hear on a daily basis. Kistler and Lee (2009) argue that fans of hip hop are more likely to develop distorted sexual norms. However, by explaining that he only listens to hip hop and R&B in specific contexts and does not like to use it for sex, Sunnery separates his notion of good sex from the perspectives expressed in this genre. His playlist included songs by Lorde, The Black Keys and The xx,

who make indie pop. In other words, Sunnery shows that fans of hip hop music can make use of a different genre to inform their sexual attitudes and behavior.

A final striking difference between media effect studies and youth’s perspectives is the musical aspects that are focused on in their discussions of music and sex. Whereas media effect studies are mainly concerned with the lyrics of particular songs and their corresponding music videos, participants refer to other elements, such as voice, artist, music video and personal memories. Huma touches upon a few of these elements when discussing her choice for the song “Partition” by Beyoncé:

“Beyoncé is just sex. When I hear Beyoncé I also immediately associate that with sex” [...] “I probably also associate it with sex because of those clips. Because that’s somewhere in the back of your mind is it not?” [...] “*Partition*. *Partition* I think is... well yes probably one of the first times I had sex on music.” (Huma, 24, Afghan, studying to become English teacher)

Huma’s account shows that the artist also plays an important role in sexual associations with music. Because she finds Beyoncé attractive, she associates her voice with sex. This notion of the artist as a sexual being was touched upon by other participants as well, whose favorite music songs were from artists that they considered to be good-looking. By explaining that “Partition” was the first song she ever had sex to, Huma also touches upon the importance of personal connections with a song. Memories were a central feature in the associations that respondents had with a particular song. These memories are what make the song truly special for a specific person. In terms of these personal associations, the interviewees drew upon previous sexual experiences where music was playing in the background, but also referred to scenes in movies and series which were romantic and/or sexual in nature that were accompanied by music (e.g. “Magic Mike” theme songs).

Besides these elements, one musical aspect stood out for most of the respondents, namely the music’s beat:

“No, when I created this list I did not focus on that, but a little bit more on the beat and what kind of... the feeling I get with that.” (Anisha, 24, Surinamese, master student)

“[...] I never listen to the lyrics of the music. No I am really more, you know, instruments and music and melody and rhythm, the beats that they contain. That’s

what matters to me most.” (Malika, 23, Angolese-Portuguese/Dutch, shop assistant)

These quotes show that instead of focusing on the interpretative meaning of the music, youth seem to be more concerned with the beat and how the sound of the music makes them feel, as previous research has suggested (Bolderman, forthcoming). They draw upon their own experiences, associations and imagination to think about what they want to achieve with the music. Although they discuss the explicitness of lyrics when talking about “misogynistic” songs, they explain that the text is not what matters most. These explicit songs are not included because their interpretative meaning resonates with their own notions of good sex, but rather by virtue of their beat and its influence on their feelings.

All in all, these narratives show that media effect studies leave out a significant part of the listening experience. The interviews demonstrate that youth do not solely listen to sexualized songs, that they actively and critically reflect upon the content of such songs and that they do not find lyrics to be the most important factor when looking for good music for good sex.

#### *Making sense of their musical choices: The importance of beat*

In terms of beat, respondents distinguished between music they associate with sex and music they would put on during sex. When discussing the songs they associated with sex, the beat did not really matter. Music that would be used during sex, on the other hand, had to have the right beat. Respondents explained that the beat could not be too loud or fast, as this could distract them. Instead, the focus was on mellow and slower beats that were deemed appropriate during sex.

The songs that respondents would not put on during sex but nonetheless associated with sex, were songs that they associated with dancing. They explained that the beat of these songs would not be suitable for sex – as they are generally faster and louder in nature – but that they felt that these were good songs to dance to. Dancing, in turn, was associated with sex, as this statement by Naomi, a 22 year old Dutch law student, illustrates:

“But I associate dancing also very much with sex and I find these sensual songs to dance to. And I also enjoy dancing with a man on these songs, and then dance in a sexual manner as well. Ehr, so that’s why I feel that they belong in this playlist. Because it, it brings out my alter ego sort of, I think. You know, I am not always like that, but with these songs on you think like “Well, I really like dancing to this song”. Yes, you feel sexy and you think “I make some of these sexual moves” and ehr, he can

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feel the way your body is and if you already have a bit of tension with that person, that can be very intense. And I actually quite like that.”

As Naomi symbolizes, there are a number of parallels between dancing and sex. Both are physical acts that can be performed alone or together with someone else. When you dance together, dancing provides a way to explore your connection, in a physical manner. By moving on the music, you are not only able to experiment with your own body, but the other is able to sense your body too, as Naomi explains. This non-verbal interaction allows for an exploration of connection and chemistry; both parties can ‘feel’ whether it is there or not. The music creates the context for this exploration of chemistry and bodily connection. Both parties are adapting their moves to the music and when they can ‘vibe’ when dancing together, this might lead to a willingness to explore this connection further. In this way, dancing can become a way to get into the mood for sex.

Apart from these parallels between dancing and sex, there are also two important differences between the two. First of all, dancing almost exclusively takes place when there is music playing, whereas this is not necessarily the case for sex. Secondly, with dancing the main aim is usually for people to dance in accordance with the beat and move synchronously with the music, whereas again for sex this does not have to be the case. These differences are also implied in the responses that participants gave when asked about how they used music in their sex life. Youth either used (1) no music for sex, (2) music to set the mood for sex, or (3) music during sex.

These three scenarios all demonstrate a different relationship that respondents have with the beat of the music. They have different notions concerning the role of the beat; they think about what the beat can or cannot do. In the first scenario, in which participants do not use music during sex, they explained that they either found the beat too distracting or too intimidating, as 22 year old Dutch master student Sanne illustrates:

“[...] but not too, too many beats and shit, because that will only distract you and I think that that is a thing anyways, I think I would be too distracted by music”

She explains that she would be too distracted by music and therefore never uses it in her sexual encounters. Even though she does not like to use music in a general sense, she specifically refers to the beat when talking about distraction; too many beats will work in a distracting manner and songs that contain this would therefore not be suitable during sex.

When respondents mentioned that they used music to set the mood for good sex, they emphasized the influence of music upon affective states of mind:

Definitely. You know, the mood you create with a certain type of songs. Then you can see what’s there. Look, if you don’t have any music and you would be laying in bed with someone and you are kissing or something, then a song indicates the mood so to say. You know? With some songs it becomes, ehr, it gives a sort of, ehr.. I don’t know. It makes it easier to try things so to say. (Jay, 20, Surinamese/Dutch, part-time vocational student)

Here, Jay explains that music can help to set the mood and make the setting more intimate. During this conversation, he explained that he feels more comfortable touching a girl’s butt, when music provides the appropriate setting for him to do so. It is evident that the beat of the music is not used to synchronize the physical movements, but rather to create a setting in which one feels comfortable to explore the possibility of getting intimate. Without music, Jay would not feel comfortable to touch a girl, but the right music stimulates him to try and do so. DeNora (2000) explains that it can be difficult to verbalize dispositions and that music can serve as a non-verbal, aesthetic means for instigating scenarios and associated desires. Jay’s narrative is an illustration of this notion: he might not be sure whether the girl wants to be touched but feels that when the music creates a more intimate setting, he is more able to try and see where it goes. In this case, music works as a motivator, as found in previous interviews by DeNora (2000).

The third manner in which music was used by the participants was to synchronize the physical movements with the songs. Sunnery arranged his playlist in such a way that the music could guide him through the sexual act:

“Well I, I always make my playlists in three segments, really just foreplay, sex and after just a bit of chilling. And that’s also what I base my music on, more slowly in the beginning, more relaxed. Then actually bang-music just bang-bang-bang and then slowly cool down like.” (Sunnery, 20, Surinamese/Dutch, promotional work),

It is evident that Sunnery wants the music to play synchronous with the physical movements during sex. He explained that he first thought about how long sex usually takes. Then, he created a list with a number of songs in each segment so that the duration of a specific “part” of the sex (such as foreplay) corresponded with the number of songs in that segment. His explanation of this processes indicated that he had carefully thought about each step.

Speed is the main criterion that Sunnery used to divide his playlist. His first songs



were more mellow and slower, whereas the songs in the middle were faster but were again succeeded by slower songs for “cooling down”. In this way, his narrative shows similarities with findings of earlier studies that link speed to physical performance. Fast music is more arousing and can therefore lead to higher intensity of physical performance (Edworthy & Haring, 2006). Furthermore, synchronization of movements is central in sports such as aerobics, where songs are also divided in a warming up, high intensity exercising and a cooling down (DeNora, 2000). In this way sex can be regarded as a physical act in which the individual tries to work with the music. This negotiation can work both ways; at times the music might guide the physical conduct, however, it could also be that at any point Sunnery chooses to focus on the movements regardless of the music. He explained this negotiation when talking about being guided by the music. Sunnery did not mind when the movements did not always correspond with the music. However, he mentioned that one song was a song where “if you haven’t come yet as a guy, you should put some force behind it”, indicating that you would need to adapt to the music in order to be finished “in time” before the cooling down songs start to play.

These accounts show that beat is a central feature in the discussion whether music is appropriate for sex. The perceptions of what role the beat may play inform the ways in which music is used within the sexual encounter.

### *How is youth’s use of music related to their notions of good sex?*

The analysis so far has shown what youth consider to be good music for good sex and how they make use of music within these encounters. Implicit in their stories are notions of what they consider to be good sex, on which I want to elaborate below.

A first notion that is salient in their discussions is time. The connection between taking time for sex and playing music was made both by participants who enjoyed using music and participants who did not use any music at all. Naomi makes this connection explicit in their narratives:

Ehr, I found the times that music was playing the sex to be more intense and it often took more time and it was just.. Everything around it so to say. Then you put on some music, maybe there are also candles and then you do a massage first for instance, and then sex. And then it is very elaborate and you really take time for one another.. And then, with music in the background, it makes it complete. (Naomi, 22, Dutch, law student)

Naomi explains that music is a part of good sex, and simultaneously implies that good sex involves taking time. By creating a playlist, or making sure that appropriate music is playing, you are investing your time in setting the mood. It contributes to an atmosphere where there is a cozy ambiance and where both parties are relaxed and want to invest time in one another to have a good time together.

Time goes hand in hand with the notion of investment, which was also implied in discussions of how music was utilized. Illustrative of this is Sunnery’s narrative which showed that he had put effort in creating a good playlist. He actively sought appropriate music and from time to time re-evaluated his choices. His division of the playlist in the three different segments also demonstrates that he had taken the time to determine the duration of each ‘step’ and had categorized the music accordingly. Additionally, Sunnery had looked at the ‘vibe’ of each song, as this had to be in accordance with the nature of each ‘step’ in the sexual act as well. In this way, his account implies how extra investment is made in order to ensure that the sex will be good. Participants who preferred sex without music on the other hand, also invested in sex itself, but in a different way. By mentioning that music would distract them from focusing on the task at hand, they illustrate that they wish to invest their time and energy in making sure that they engage in good sex. In this way, investment can work both ways and is a notion that is implied in almost any account of good sex.

Furthermore, anticipating on the other was commonly referred to when discussing good sex with the respondents. They stressed that sex is something you do together, and that you therefore should pay attention to what the other person enjoys and think about their possible expectations. In their accounts of good musical choices, participants also expressed this sentiment. As illustrated in the first section of this analysis, they reflect upon their choices and think about the different contexts in which particular songs would be appropriate. They acknowledge that a particular song can sometimes give off the wrong impression and therefore underscore that you have to take the other into account while selecting music, as Jay (20) explains:

I think that it would be very scandalous, so to say, imagine that you, or if you are busy or you are engaged in a sort of foreplay or whatever, and a song would come on that is inappropriate and that she would say “Okay you know what? Let me take over the music.” or whatever. That would be really quite scandalous you know? If she does not like that type of music and because of that cannot get into the right mood, you know. Then you have put really wack music on a list. You know what I mean?

Here, Jay stresses that it is very important to select the appropriate music, because otherwise the mood will be ruined immediately. He sees selecting the wrong type of music as something shameful and feels that you should think about how the songs would be received by the girl. Again the focus is on investment which requires anticipation of the other’s response.

A last notion that youth emphasized when conceptualizing their perception of good sex, was feeling comfortable. They explained that only when you are comfortable in your own skin, you can really open up to the other person and enjoy the sex. Music can also aid in this regard; participants explained that they selected music that they liked and felt comfortable with, so that they would feel more at ease during sex. In this way, music affects their inner state; songs that they enjoy listening to or that they are familiar with, make them feel relaxed and help them to get into the mood for sex. This was also illustrated in the aforementioned narrative of Jay in which the music made him feel comfortable to make the interaction more intimate. Malika, a 23 year old Angolese-Portuguese/Dutch shop assistant echoed this sentiment by explaining that she felt awkward when in the absence of music. These notions indicate that music can have an empowering effect and can therefore contribute to what youth conceptualize as good sex.

In short, these reflections show that youth forge links between their use of music in their sexual encounter and their personal notions of good sex. Whereas these were not always explicitly related to one another during the conversation, their motivations and reflections show that notions of good sex guide the way in which they make use of music.

## **Conclusion**

The current study aimed to move away from existing media effect studies *on* youth, and move towards research *with* youth. By means of a participatory music voice approach, the goal of this study was to shed light upon how youth give meaning to music within the realm of their sex lives. This new approach allowed for novel results to emerge which contradict the existing assumptions about youth and music in different ways.

First of all, the focus of media effect studies is upon the sexually explicit music within the hip hop/R&B genre. However, the playlists of respondents showed that they do not solely listen to this genre but combine it with other genres. Furthermore, they negotiate the appropriateness of the genre in specific contexts. This is either done by choosing songs of different genres to include in the playlists that can be used in different settings and circumstances of the intimate interaction, or by only listening to R&B/hip hop music in other social situations than during sexual encounters.

Moreover, the point of departure within these media effect studies are the lyrics of the songs and/or their accompanying music videos. However, participants explained that they do not relate their sexual associations with music primarily to lyrics or music videos, but to the beat of the music. Their focus is on experience; the essential consideration is how the beat makes them feel. This notion echoes prior findings that listeners are not primarily concerned with interpretative meanings of music, but rather with how the music may influence their feelings (Bolderman, forthcoming).

The role of the beat was of most importance when selecting music for during sex and depending on the connection that respondents had with musical beats, music was implemented in one of the following three ways: (1) by not implementing it at all, (2) by using it to set the mood or (3) by using it to guide the physical movements in a synchronous manner during sex. Their narratives are illustrative of prior findings regarding the influence of music on affective and physical states. Music has been found to be important in mood-regulation (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007), a notion that was salient in the application of music in the sex lives of youth as well. Putting on music created a positive atmosphere in which sexuality could be expressed freely and without constraints. In this way, music empowered youth within their sexual encounters and thereby ensured good sex.

Moreover, music plays an important role in physical performance, especially in terms of sports and exercising (Hagen, 2005). Music was used in a similar vein during the sexual encounter to guide and complement the physical movements. Even though music thus influences inner and physical states of being, it should be noted that youth are by no means passive recipients of the music, whom simply behave as the music tells them to (DeNora, 2000). Instead, their narratives show that they actively engage with the music; they choose their own songs based upon their personal experiences and notions of what the music should reflect. Moreover, if they choose to create a playlist that adheres to a particular order, they can choose at any point in time to deviate from this predesigned structure. The music is considered a guideline which increases their confidence and guides and complements their actions, but is not defining for the sexual act in itself.

A final notion of media effect studies that the outcomes of this research contradicts, is the focus on dangerous sexual notions within the media, that ultimately lead to sexual risk behavior. It has been argued, as in the slow sex manifesto, that alternative images of sexuality should be displayed in the media, in order to ensure a positive effect on sexual notions of youth. Interestingly enough, the notions of good sex as voiced by the participants show striking similarities with the notions of ‘slow sex’ as expressed in the manifesto. As far as the

status of the manifesto at this point in time, no media courses have been implemented. Nonetheless youth seem to be doing exactly what they should be doing according to the Dutch political left. The focus of their notions of good sex is on anticipating on the other, being attentive to what he/she likes, feeling comfortable and investing time. They recognize the misogynistic notions in lyrics, however the way in which they implement songs of this genre in their sex lives shows that the manner in which the music is implemented is in accordance with their *own* notions of good sex, rather than the notions as expressed in the media itself (i.e. the musical lyrics).

The main contribution of the current study is revealing a first insight into how youth interpret and apply music in their sex lives. Although this research contributes to filling a current gap in the academic literature in terms of youth-centered studies, its exploratory nature has raised questions that were beyond the scope of this study.

One interesting notion that is worthy of further exploration is the way in which ethnicity is included in these debates. Discourses around youth and sexuality are intertwined with stereotypes around ethnic youth. This research aimed to address this issue by including participants of various ethnic backgrounds in the sample. Even though the sample was diverse in terms of ethnicity, the respondents did not draw upon their ethnic identity when discussing their musical preferences. Furthermore, the playlists showed that the most featured artists were often from Afro-American descent, a notion which did not seem to stand out for the participants, as none of them elaborated upon this. The design of this study provided room for discussions about ethnicity, however it was not explicitly addressed during the interview. Future research could put this notion more in the forefront in order to examine if and how ethnicity is included in the dialogue of music for sex. However, I would like to suggest that these notions are investigated within a framework that focuses on youth and not on dangers. This allows for a more holistic view of sexuality, which can include negative experiences but definitely also positive ones. The one cannot rule out the other as Salt ‘n Pepa already suggested in 1990: “Let’s talk about sex baby, let’s talk about all the good things and the bad things that may (not) be.”

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**Appendix I: Overview respondents**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Education (highest level completed)</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Parvini (F)	25	Hindustani	Student Small Business and Management (higher vocational education)	Part-time shop assistant (The Body Shop)
Isabella (F)	20	Indonesian/Dutch	One year of vocational education	Currently unemployed
Huma (F)	24	Afghan	Student Teacher English (higher vocational education)	Part-time shop assistant (The Body Shop)
Yasira (F)	23	Moroccan	Master Labor Law	Front office at the municipality
Sophie (F)	23	Dutch	Human Resource Management (higher vocational education)	Internship at Heineken
Richard (M)	24	Dutch	Four years of vocational education	Lifeguard
Berivan (F)	18	Turkish	Student graphic design	Part-time shop assistant interior design store
Sander (M)	25	Dutch	Real estate and Brokerage (higher vocational education)	International Account Manager
Sunnery (M)	20	Surinamese/Dutch	High school (lower vocational education)	Selling memberships & promotional work (Pepperminds)
Naomi (F)	22	Dutch	Law student (higher vocational education)	Part-time at debt restructuring office
Sanne (F)	22	Dutch	Student Master Public Policy	Part-time sales assistant
Thomas (M)	24	Dutch	Two years of higher vocational education	Fire attendant
Jay (M)	20	Surinamese/Dutch	Part-time home study (LOI)	Small company with friend, selling products via social media
Malika (F)	23	Angolese-Portuguese/Dutch	Two years of higher vocational education	Shop assistant (The Body Shop)
Ashna (F)	23	Surinamese	Student Public Management (master)	