

Obscenity and censorship



I. Overview

- **Big picture questions**

- How do we determine what is obscene or explicit?
- Is obscene and offensive material harmful to children, adolescents, or adults?
- If obscene material is harmful, should it be censored? What constitutes censorship?

II. The PMRC

- In the early 1980s, heavy metal enjoyed mainstream success with bands like Iron Maiden, Def Leppard, and Twisted Sister.
- Around the same time, MTV was launched and metal bands became a mainstay of the channel.



II. The PMRC

- In 1985, Tipper Gore (wife of Al Gore), established the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) along with the wives of several other prominent politicians.
- The PMRC advocated for the creation of a labeling system that would warn parents of explicit content on recordings.
- A United States Senate hearing involved testimony from representatives from the PMRC, three musicians—Dee Snider, Frank Zappa, John Denver—and Senators Paula Hawkins, Al Gore, and others.

II. The PMRC: “The Filthy 15”

#	Artist	Song title	Lyrical content
1	Prince	"Darling Nikki"	Sex/masturbation
2	Sheena Easton	"Sugar Walls"	Sex
3	Judas Priest	"Eat Me Alive"	Sex/violence
4	Vanity	"Strap On 'Robbie Baby'"	Sex
5	Mötley Crüe	"Bastard"	Violence/language
6	AC/DC	"Let Me Put My Love Into You"	Sex
7	Twisted Sister	"We're Not Gonna Take It"	Violence
8	Madonna	"Dress You Up"	Sex
9	W.A.S.P.	"Animal (Fuck Like a Beast)"	Sex/language/violence
10	Def Leppard	"High 'n' Dry (Saturday Night)"	Drug and alcohol use
11	Mercyful Fate	"Into the Coven"	Occult
12	Black Sabbath	"Trashed"	Drug and alcohol use
13	Mary Jane Girls	"In My House"	Sex
14	Venom	"Possessed"	Occult
15	Cyndi Lauper	"She Bop"	Sex/masturbation

III. Does “obscene” music cause harm?

- *“...there are many songs which include lyrics that may not be appropriate for young children or that send messages that may be dangerous to individuals or society.”* - National PTA Vice President for Legislative Activity Millie Waterman
- *“Some rock artists actually seem to encourage teen suicide. Ozzy Osbourne sings ‘Suicide Solution.’ Blue Oyster Cult sings ‘Don’t Fear the Reaper,’ AC/DC sings ‘Shoot to Thrill.’ Just last week in Centerpoint, a small Texas town, a young man took his life while listening to the music of AC/DC. He was not the first.”* - Susan Baker, wife of treasury secretary James Baker

III. Does “obscene” music cause harm?

- Many songs were grossly misinterpreted at the senate hearings.
- “*Wine is fine but whiskey’s quicker. Suicide is slow with liquor.*”
Suicide Solution by Ozzy Osbourne
 - The song is a denunciation of alcoholism, arguing that it is a slow form of suicide. “Solution” refers both to the resolution of a problem and to a liquid in which other substances are dissolved.
 - Critics were blind to literary technique, often claiming a literal interpretation of “suicide is a solution to your problems.”
 - However, people can interpret song lyrics in many ways.

III. Does “obscene” music cause harm?

- The link between heavy metal and suicide was a subject of public discourse and some parents believed the music was responsible for teen suicides.
 - Ozzy Osbourne and his record company were sued by parents of a nineteen year old who had killed himself. The court dismissed the case.
 - A similar suit against Judas Priest involved two youths who carried out a suicide pact. The suit claimed that the album *Stained Class* contained “subliminal messages” encouraging suicide.
 - The judge ruled that the plaintiffs were unable to prove that subliminal messages were placed on the album, or prove that the messages caused the suicides.

III. Does “obscene” music cause harm?

- There are many metal fans who feel the music actually saved them from killing themselves.
 - *“Judas Priest’s music makes me feel happy and alive. It’s one of the real joys in my life. And I’d like to thank Judas Priest for saving my life many times!”* -A letter published in *Hit Parader*.
- Rates of suicide in young people have been increasing and this trend began before heavy metal emerged and has continued after heavy metal left the mainstream.
- Heavy metal music is associated with a range of benefits to its fans such as regulating mood and emotion, forming individual and cultural identity, and fostering peer affiliation (Olsen et al., 2022).

IV. Censorship

- The outcome of the PMRC Senate hearing:
 - The record industry agreed voluntarily to adopt a labeling system to advise parents about content that was explicitly sexual, referenced drug or alcohol use, or contained graphic language.
 - Many stores continued to carry recordings bearing these labels. Walmart refused to carry recordings with advisory labels, a policy that Walmart continues today.
- The parental advisory sticker evolved to be the little E for Explicit on Spotify.

IV. Censorship

- The PMRC stated that their intention was not to censor but to ask for “voluntary labeling.”
- They also requested that record companies exert pressure on broadcasters not to air explicit music videos and records, and to reassess their contracts with certain stars.
- MTV announced that it would significantly reduce its programming of heavy metal videos in favor of older and top-forty videos.
- Labeling could be considered a form of censorship through economic pressure, although some artists report increased popularity from labeling.

References

- [Teachrock.org](https://www.teachrock.org/)
- Weinstein, D. (2000). Heavy metal: The music and its culture. Da Capo Press.
- Olsen, K. N., Terry, J., & Thompson, W. F. (2022). Psychosocial risks and benefits of exposure to heavy metal music with aggressive themes: Current theory and evidence. *Current Psychology*, 1-18.