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**To Norm or not to Norm?**

Through researching social and sexual norms, one thing that comes to my attention is the need for artists to change their personas to meet a mainstream market. Some artists challenge norms to create a completely new image, and some have to fall into a mold. Artists such as Lil Wayne go from rapping about the hood, and then when they are put into the mainstream eye, change to rapping about their money, hoes, and drugs. What’s even more interesting is the struggle that female MC’s face and how different it is for them to enter the mainstream. The stereotypes surrounding black women are negative enough, and entering a male dominated game makes being a female rapper a very tough career.

Understanding the prominent female figures throughout history and how the game has changed in hip-hop is important to build a base of understanding for the struggles female emcees face. Written in 2000, before the Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj era, *Empowering self, making choices, creating spaces* argues that female rappers are breaking down the stereotypes that negatively surround black women progressively each decade through logos. In the journal entry, Cheryl L. Keyes highlights the four distinct categories that female MC’s fall under throughout history. The categories of queen mother, fly girl, sista with attitude, and lesbian all have different images, voices, and lifestyles that are associated with them.

It all began with the “fly girls” of the 1980’s describing someone “in chic clothing and fashionable hairstyles, jewelry, and cosmetics” (Keyes). Lady B, Sha Rock, and the trio Sequence were all popular fly girls that got their styles from Blaxploitation films, and used it to be considered “fly” by their audiences. This was the first major identity that was built by female MC’s, and it revolved around independence. The 1980’s saw great social, economic, and wealth change, and so it only seems appropriate that the rap game changed along with it. Female MC’s saw this as there chance to differentiate by being “fly”, and with artists such as Salt N’ Peppa and TLC, began to penetrate the male dominated world.

The fly girl trend led to an even more powerful sense of independence for female rappers, and thus the sista with attitude identity was born. Artists such as Lil’ Kim and MC Lyte were seen as sista’s with attitude, and contrasted the “fly girl” persona by being the “bad bitches.” These artists used heavily sexual techniques to grab media attention, and led to the emergence of another category in the late 1990’s. The “queen mother” came along to control all of these “sista’s”, and comprised themselves of being African American icons. The most prominent queen was Queen Latifah, and she was seen as a mature, maternal artist early on in her career at age 21.

The author uses the progression through time from category to category to defend his argument. Black women went from slightly challenging norms with the “fly girl” to strongly challenging them with the “sistas” and the “queens”. This is a valid argument as she wrote the article in 2000, where she was able to analyze from a spectator’s view the change of the female MC through the decades.

A common theme from the transition through categories was that they arose based on a need in the industry. Whenever a group got too big or out of control, there needed to be artists that contrasted or controlled that group, and conformed to the new decade’s norms. The decades preceding the 2000’s were described by the major category of female MC’s that were prominent. However, the late 90’s and 2000’s had major female MC’s that fit into each of these four main categories.

Nicki Minaj would be considered the modern “fly girl”, and with her challenging sexual norms, at times a lesbian. This contrast in category helped her gain the public eye when it was focused on the male “thug” for so long. Beyonce would be considered a queen, as she is a role model for many of her fans. Beyonce created this image with a stellar voice, contrasting lyrics between being an angel and a bad girl. M.I.A. is seen as a “sista” because she challenges norms that exist in her culture. The most evident is a music video that she produced where the women were lightly clothed compared to Middle Eastern standards and were driving around in gaudy cars. Then there were artist that challenged the norms, to create newer ones.

In “Unladylike Divas”, Haugen argues that challenging dominant norms can create new ones. The author uses logos to defend this argument, and provides examples of the artists’ lyrics or actions to explain how they are “unladylike divas.” This scholarly article written in 2003 discusses how Mia X, Lil' Kim, and the Lady of Rage construct identities that challenge social norms to differentiate themselves from the categories of female rappers listed above. The article, however, is set before the breakout of Nicki Minaj, and therefore it still is only examining the beginning of the decline of mainstream MC’s.

“There are multiple axes of normativized behavioral expectations for women in any society. These include kinds of discourse that one can engage in and on the things that can be talked about, including aspects of one's own personal narrative. There are also limits on the kinds of social activities that one can engage in, including the participation in violence and in sexual situations. The failure to engage in any of these activities in the appropriate ways (or, to the same effect, success in engaging in these activities in inappropriate ways) could lead one to be deemed "unladylike" ” (Haugen).

Haugen uses the flashpoint of “unladylike ladies” to mock idea that norms exist to make a women “ladylike.” Through showing how these artists broke out onto the music scene, the author defends his main argument. He uses examples of the contrasting styles of Mia X and Lil’ Kim to strengthen his claim.

Mia X uses her lyrics to let her audience know that she is from the ghetto. Being born in New Orleans, she doesn’t lose her roots, and reflects this in her lyrics. Even though she is from ghetto, she still acts like a diva, thus coining herself the label of “unladylike” diva. “Her performance, and her persona, are both "un-ladylike" and "unlady-like" simultaneously, and that the two are mutually constructing” (Haugen). This contrast sets her apart, as other female MC’s are hood or a diva, and they strongly display either one of these personas. By combining these personas, and staying strong and close to her identity, Mia X differentiates herself from her competition.

On the other hand, Lady of Rage differentiates herself with her name. She identifies herself as being ladylike, however refuses to change her name or lyrics to fit the mold. In her lyrics, she is very assertive and references that she belongs in new female category multiple times. Her voices average pitch is also not that of a typical female that is expected in a dominant society.

The approaches taken by Mia X and Lady of Rage says that they are aware of their main market, the dominant norms that exist, and femininity that plagues female rappers. They both use different tactics to portray a contrasting image. However, they both are assertive and direct in their lyrics, and this helps to break the mold of the typical black women, and become something more.

No matter if an artist is fitting a mold, or breaking one to become famous, she has to be aware that there are stereotypes associated with black women. Female emcees have to be very conscious of this when they are constructing their persona. A present day example of social norms is in Disrespectability Politics, where the author exposes the norms of black women. She argues that black women get no respect and uses examples of Michelle Obama, Jay-Z and social norms to support her case. This article can further explain my question by examining the author’s three main points.

The author lists the three main points that bog down black women, and puts them in the “space between the diss and the respect” (Crunktastic). What puts them into the space is the assumption that black women are forgiving, are attracted to the “reformed bad boy”, and they have a deep love with respectability politics. Respectability politics are the politics associated around creating a family, being in the middle class, and living the American dream. He proves respectability politics with the example of Jim Jones proposing to his fiancé Chrissy after she already proposed to him on Love & Hip-hop. Would this same concept exist in white culture?

He further supports his case that all black women are perceived the same by referencing one of the most iconic black women in America, Michelle Obama. If “Michelle, the country’s leading Lady can’t get no respect” then a “century long project of respectability politics is an utter failure” (Crunktastic). This is the strongest point to support another argument the author alludes to, which is that women, especially black women, are on the bottom of totem pole.

The hip-hop industry is heavily filled with norms that artist have to comply to that take them to the next level in their career. I’m questioning, “Is it better challenge norms or to comply with them to break into the mainstream” to further investigate the root of these personas. Through research, it seems that it depends on the time period and what other artists are doing around you. By answering this question, I can further answer, “Why and how did changing norms decrease mainstream female MC’s to almost zero?” This is an appropriate query because of the nonexistence of female MC’s today. By examining in depth sexual and social norms inside and outside the hip-hop world throughout history, I can further answer this question.

**Works Cited**

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