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The portrayal of women in hip-hop songs and culture has been a hotly debated topic since the subculture entered mainstream media. Women have been reduced to either eye-candy or the recipient of verbal abuse within hip-hop lyricism and imagery. Misogyny in hip-hop reflects broader societal attitudes, norms, and plays into racial stereotypes that plagues the African American community. Women have attempted to regain control of their image in hip-hop; however, they are typically more scrutinized than their male-peers are (Holler, 2021). Hip-hop has created a dangerous cycle of objectification and sexism for women regardless of their level of involvement in the subculture.

Hip-hop is a cultural phenomenon that developed in low-income neighborhoods located in New York during the 1970s (Murray, 2004). In marginalized minority communities it is more common to find hypermasculine men who uphold patriarchal values. This means that men are supposed to be the dominate, breadwinner and women are supposed to be the submissive, homemaker. Hip-hop prides itself in creating and fostering an environment for real, authentic black men (Murray, 2004).

This in turn creates a negative environment where men are conditioned to believe that dominance and aggression is acceptable. Although this may reflect the societal values and the norms of the 20th century, times have changed and hypermasculinity and aggression are no longer desirable traits in men. Hip-hop continues to profit off an outdated racial stereotype because its foundation has been laid on creating aggressive, powerful men and submissive, beautiful women.

Another issue that systemically plagues hip-hop is the male gaze. The male gaze was a term created and coined by feminist Laura Mulvey in 1973 (Masterclass, 2022). The male gaze refers to the way that media and literature views women from the cisgender heterosexual (cis het) male perspective. It often objectifies women as highly sexualized objects of male pleasure who exist solely for men to view, own, and conquer (Masterclass, 2022). This means that women must act and dress in ways that are aesthetically pleasing to men as their thoughts and desires are not as important.

Male rappers will create music videos with the sole purpose of showcasing beautiful women who are dressed in next to nothing while provocatively dancing on screen. The visual representation often prioritizes male viewers' fantasies and desires. Although female rappers may create oversexualized personas in attempts to regain control and power, they fall victim to the male gaze as well. Female rappers sometimes use sexually charged imagery which align with the male gaze by emphasizing how physically attractive they may be.

The male gaze continues to dominate hip-hop culture as it pairs perfectly with the rampant problem of hypermasculine men. Rappers tend to release music that is riddled with calling women degrading names or enticing violence against women (Holler, 2021). Male rappers often create a bad boy, player persona within their music that focuses on having multiple women, a plethora of money, and luxury items. There is nothing wrong with flexing one's materialistic objects; however, treating women in the same manner directly leads to objectification of women. Hip-hop songs often focus on women's physical looks, reinforcing their role as a sexual object for pleasure versus while also focus on degrading women for being "gold-digging hoes" (Holler, 2021). Misogynistic

images and themes have become entirely too normalized within the hip-hop community as rappers continue to profit off degrading women.

Hip-hop has capitalized from power dynamics present from both its own community and society in general. There was a noticeable shift in the content produced from rappers when hip-hop was commercialized in the 1990s. Hip-hop was once a culture that prided itself on being raw, authentic, and bringing socio-political awareness to the black community (Murray, 2004). Once the mainstream media sunk their fangs into hip-hop, the culture artificially evolved into what it is today.

Record labels incentivized rappers such as Ice Cube and The Notorious B.I.G. to sell-out and create music focused on money and power. Once other rappers caught on to this, rap became inflated with meaningless music and a breeding ground for showing off wealth and power (Murray, 2004). Although misogyny and objectification were present in rap music before, it became a focal point after the commercialization of rap in the 1990s. Hip-hop had a very jarring shift into the rat race of money, power, women, that is still present to this day.

In the 1990s, male artists began to capitalize off women in numerous ways. The famous term, “sex sells” was used to justify blatant objectification of women in rap content. Male rappers would profit from a woman’s sexuality and try to argue that, “sex sells” while using women for their own financial gains. Women are often depicted through sexualization and objectification with explicit lyrics and imagery that reduce them to solely physical attributes and sex appeal.

This portrayal also creates power dynamics and further enforces patriarchal gender roles. In music videos, women are shown in submissive roles, often serving or an accessory to the rapper. This further solidifies that women exist solely to be used by men for their own gains. Queen Latifah was amongst one of the first female artists to dismantle this practice by introducing feminism to hip-hop culture (Karanja, 2024). Although she created a rather impressive legacy, her efforts were somewhat unsuccessful as there are not enough women in the industry to continue fighting for what she started (Ishikasachdeva, 2020).

Since hip-hop is predominately rooted in the male gaze and upholding harmful stereotypes, it leaves a few lingering questions regarding female rappers. Placing the role of being both empowering, non-sexualized, and successful is a difficult task for a female rapper. Female rappers can create their own hypersexualized persona, but many wonder how much of it is what they want versus what a record label wants. As previously stated, the music industry is male dominated which can further restrict women from finding chart-topping success without playing into some form of the male gaze.

Although it seems like more women are becoming successful rappers, roughly twenty-one percent of rap artists are female (Ishikasachdeva, 2020). The current industry is profiting off objectification and exploitation of women, until there is more female representation, rap is left in a harmful limbo. On the other hand, women can opt to speak out about the injustices they face within hip-hop; however, it could be detrimental to their career. The commercialization of hip-hop set a precedence that if an artist does not follow what a label wants, they are often dropped or their music is no

longer promoted (Murray, 2004). If male, socio-political rappers had to change their identity to conform to the new industry standards, women have little to no chance of fighting back in the current climate.

Although women have been entering the rap game at increasing speeds, they continue to face objectification and mistreatment by their peers (Holler, 2021). Female artists often must navigate a challenging landscape in which their male-peers have little to no respect for them and the general population thinks that they are too vulgar and sexual (Holler, 2021). In hip-hop, women are expected to dress scantily, play into power dynamics, and accept lyrics that contain explicit violence towards them. Female rappers are often trapped in the cycle of, “if you cannot beat them, then join them”. If they do not accept the premise of blatant misogyny, they often do not see success. Female rappers tend to see more success than their male peers; however, they must conform to a hypersexualized stereotype to do so (Asare, 2021).

Female rappers have begun to capitalize on the harmful stereotypes enforced by record labels and their male peers. Although women are reclaiming their power within the rap community, they must cater to some form of the male gaze (Ishikasachdeva, 2020). This makes sense as hip-hop is a male-dominated art form; however, women face harsher criticism for doing the same thing that their male peers are doing. For example, “WAP” by Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B was deemed vulgar and disgusting (Holler, 2021). Male rappers are allowed to degrade and objectify women without facing backlash; however, when women attempt to reclaim their own power, they are scrutinized for rapping about the same topics.

In conclusion, hip-hop has created a dangerous cycle of objectification and sexualization of women. Hip-hop continues to perpetuate misogynistic stereotypes that women solely exist to be submissive and sexually attractive to men. Although women have attempted to dismantle this stereotype, it continues to be a male dominated space. Women cannot partake in hip-hop in the same way that their male-peers do without receiving significant backlash. Until more men within the rap community decide enough is enough, women will continue to face misogyny and objectification.

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