

More than Video-Girls: African American Teenage Girls Respond to Images of Women in Hip Hop

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ABSTRACT

This study is about how African American Teenage girls critique music videos, specifically Hip Hop videos. This is a cursory study to counter the current research that portrays the gender identity of young black women as a tangle of pathology. The opinions of 12 teenage girls between the ages of 13 and 17 are compared and contrasted with the theory of major authors in Sociology, African American studies, Women's studies, and pop cultural studies. These girls are given an opportunity to have their voices incorporated into the academic critiques of the culture that they both shape and participate in.

Introduction

There seems to be a gulf between academic writings of media imagery of black women and the experiences of teenage women in Hip Hop. Many authors have attempted to analyze this culture as an important form that shapes the lives of youth, yet very few have directly incorporated the views of youth into their critiques. Those that do, mainly focus on boys, as if girls in Hip Hop are an anomaly. Maybe this is because women are often portrayed as poster items in Hip Hop; pretty things that are used as a decoration or status symbol. That idea has carried itself over into the way that teenage girls critique Hip Hop.

This research project focused on black teenage girls is an attempt to evaluate how they view the role of women in Hip Hop images using videos as the focal point. This is a cursory study that counters much of the current research on teenage girls, which implies that teenage girls are passively consenting to the objectification they experience as women in the Hip Hop generation.

Literature Review

In *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose states that music videos are "a collaboration in the production of popular music" (Rose, *Black Noise*, pg.9). The music video is a more crucial outlet for rap artists, Rose argues, than for artists working in any other genre; they have allowed Hip Hop cultural style to facilitate a transnational dialogue in a society that is highly segregated by class and race.

Bikari Kitwana suggests in his book *Hip Hop Generation* that women try to justify the misogyny within Hip Hop by disconnecting themselves from the negativity by saying "that's not me" (Kitwana, *Hip Hop Generation*, pg.86). He believes that young women see themselves as Hip Hop fans before they acknowledge gender. The Hip Hop generation has been labeled slackers, confused, and lost by the baby boomer generation; they feel an obligation to defend this culture from the scrutiny of the mainstream.

In “The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood”, Patricia Hill Collins explains that historical objectification of the black female body has provided a prototype for pornography. Collins believes that the image of the sexually deviant black woman maintains a system of interlocking race, gender, and class oppression. She states, “...Black women’s treatment also demonstrates how manipulating sexuality has been essential to the political economy of domination within each system and across all three” (Hill Collins, pg.265). She goes on to discuss how the black female body has become a symbol of naturalized sexual voyeurism and manipulation.

Nell Irvin Painter’s case study analyzing media coverage of the Clarence Thomas/ Anita Hill controversy discussed two predominant stereotypes of black women: “Mammy” and “Jezebel”. Though the mammy stereotype has been critiqued frequently, society is not ready to let go of the Jezebel. In her opinion, not many people are aware of or willing to acknowledge the historical sexual abuse of black women, which is embedded in the stereotype of black female hypersexuality.

None of these authors include the perspectives of youth. It is my belief that academic theories only provide partial (and perhaps distorted) truth if they do not include the experiences of those they are meant to represent.

Methods

The methods utilized for this study were focus groups. Participants were recruited from three community programs. Drawing upon the interests, four two hour-long focus groups were organized during the summer of 2004. Each focus group averaged about between three and four girls.

In each focus group, a participant chose a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. One or two videos were shown, and then the girls were asked a series of questions. My role was solely as moderator of these discussions. A total of five videos collected from call-in request shows on the MTV and BET networks were used. The videos were by Petey Pablo (“Freak-a-leek”), Twista (“Overnight Celebrity”), Ying Yang Twins (“Salt Shaker”), Ludacris (“Splash Waterfalls”), and Slum Village featuring Kanye West (“Selfish”).

After each focus group, recordings were transcribed. During the week, the girls were called for phone interviews based on recurring themes from the tapes. Once the data was collected, it was compared and contrasted the opinions of the girls with the analyses discussed in the literature review.

Results/Discussion—Displays of Bodies

The girls discussed the ways in which black women are stereotyped within Hip Hop media. Much of our discussion was about the narrow definition/representation of femininity within the images. One 14-year-old in particular, Lani, was unimpressed with the fact that only one beauty standard was presented in the videos. When asked to describe the women, she said,

All of these girls look exactly alike. They’re all light skinned with weaves and half-naked; you can’t even tell that they black, ... There ain’t hardly any girls in these videos who are thick...They have thick thighs and big butts, but they all skinny with little stomachs; women don’t really look like that in everyday life. It’s like they said ‘Oh, let’s just give them a little black features so that we get black peoples attention’ but all they did was get a bunch of women who don’t look like average black women.

Lani described the contradiction between traditional black beauty standards and those presented in mainstream Hip Hop images. Although the videos contained black women, they only had light skin and long hair; they did not represent the range of appearance of actual black women.

Many of girls noted that western beauty standards are being attributed to black women in order to appeal to a vast market. Theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks understand that mainstream images of black women usually contain lighter skin women who “pass” for other races, which reinforces “themes of black woman’s passivity, objectivity, and malleability to male control” (Patricia Hill Collins, pg.259). By constantly showing lighter skin black women, there is a combination between characteristics commonly associated with white femininity (beauty, chastity, etc.) and the hyper-sexuality that is attributed to black femininity.

The participants also discussed the ways in which female bodies were physically displayed in the videos. They tended to comment on style of dance and wardrobe. It became clear that the girls had a complex relationship with the style of dance and the way that it was portrayed. As Nikita, a 15-year-old from San Francisco explains it:

It’s not the dances that are nasty; I like the dances. I dance like that when I go to parties. As a matter of fact, I watch the videos so that I can learn the dances. I think more women should do dances this way, then maybe they wouldn’t be so shamed of their curves...It’s just when you see it on TV and they (dancers) all naked, and the camera is pointed right on their butt or all in they stuff (crotch), it looks hella nasty... They don’t even seem like women, just walking butts and breasts jiggling all over the place. It’s crazy.

On the one hand, the girls see this style of dancing as an outlet of creative expression. It also boosts their self-esteem to see women participating in movement that accentuate the curves of the female body. Yet at the same time, it is disturbing for them to see women’s bodies dissected in such a routine manner on television. As another 15-year-old named Deja explained when responding to Nikita observations, “it’s like the girls aren’t even good enough to have faces or something, so they just show bodies”.

According to McNall, camera shots focused on the sexual parts of the female body are a way of taking away human qualities and reducing them to objects. They no longer represent full people; rather they are the sum of fragmented parts. The power is shifted to the male performer, making him the main focus and the women objects within his control. By having camera shots that are focused on the rear end, women are reduced to animals. McNall states, “the rear-entry position photographs tell that they are animals...because they are the same as dogs – bitches in heat who can’t control themselves” (McNall, 197-98). When reduced to sub-humans constantly in heat, the lines of desire and consent become blurred and sexual manipulation becomes justifiable.

Stereotypes of Black Femininity

The girls observed the role that money represented dominance and power. They noted almost all the videos (Ludacris being the exception) had men using monetary value to lure women. In fact, the majority of the time the women were overtly wielding their sexual power in order to receive money. The most notable example of this was Twista’s “Overnight Celebrity”. The entire video is about the rapper using his status to give the girl fame if she dates him. A few of the participants saw this as a way of positioning black women within the “gold digger” or whore stereotypes.

Some of the girls also expressed their disapproval with another stereotype of young black women—the “baby-mama”. This is a fairly new concept mostly used mostly in reference to young black women (in teens and early twenties). It is used to refer to a woman who has had a child (or multiple children) with a man outside of marriage who she no longer has a relationship with. It is a label that implies, to a certain degree, promiscuity. Kalika mentioned briefly that the only time that women aren’t shown sexually is “if they’re a grandma or they’re arguing.” When I asked her to expand on her comment, she stated, “there are all these stupid baby-mama songs where the girl is shown in the video nagging at the man and yelling at him for not doing something right...if you never met a black woman before, you’d think that all we do is yell at people and shake our asses all day long.” The images of the nagging “baby-mama” play into the

stereotype of black women as angry, irrational and emasculating. It further fuels the perception that black women are in constant battle with black men over power. These portray women as treating their men like children. In representing black women as threats to masculinity, these images fuel gender antagonisms within the black community.

Black Masculinity

Much of the conversations also focused on the ways black masculinity is constructed in videos. When responding to the fact that all of the videos had scenes with women dancing against the men seemingly detached from the exchange, a thirteen year-old-girl who I call Jamie noted, “who just stands there while someone dances against you? If someone wants to dance with you, then you both dance. Who does that?” At this point, Lani responds to her question by saying, “If they (the guys) were to dance with them they would risk not looking cool and lord knows they can’t do that”. This exchange between Lani and Jamie led into a discussion of the importance of looking cool for young black men.

The maintenance of an identity of cool, or “cool pose” as Richard Majors calls it, is an essential coping mechanism used by young black men in low-income backgrounds. It is structured upon the preservation of the black male as being aloof, unemotional, and in constant control. He is to never show emotion unless it is anger; other emotion is deemed feminine. This combats the lack of control he feels on the inside as the result of not having control over his social environment. Majors argues that cool pose is a response to living in a society that praises the material markers of manhood that are not always accessible to black men from low-income backgrounds. Rather than allow themselves to display self-pity, they have their own ritualized masculinity connected to style of dress and body language. They must display a strong sense of power over universal belongings, which are their physical body and women. Although cool pose helps young black men maintain self-esteem, it can be emotionally restrictive and damaging to their relationships with other blacks, especially women.

Gender Norms

A few of the girls felt it important to understand that gender relations portrayed in the videos are not specific to black culture, rather they are reflections of the way gender relations are structured within the larger society. When the girls were asked to assess if the images of women in the video were representative of all black women, Shayla, a 17-year-old, explained,

All girls are taught to want the same things...No one calls Cinderella a ho when she married Prince Charming. Why did she marry him? Because he was cute and he had money and everyone loved him. Those are things that girls are taught when they are little that they are supposed to want. It's not fair that when a black woman wants a man who has a job or money she's a gold digger or a whore.

Like the other girls, Shayla was aware of the ways in which the meanings of gender change when race is involved. Some would argue that the stereotyped history of the black woman as prostitute is at fault for this pattern. Instead of seeing these women as wanting to be with the most suitable mate possible, the assumption is that they only see men as vehicles for financial gain.

Consumers of Hip Hop

Deja believes that the market of people consuming Hip Hop music is an important reason to criticize the imagery seriously. She explains:

I read somewhere that eighty percent of the people who buy rap music are white. People need to think about that so that they understand the type of videos and songs that they sell. We can look at that stuff and see that it's fake and make fun of it. For them it might be real. That might be the only way that they get to know black life is through Hip Hop.

Deja notes that as many non-black Americans experience these images, the stereotypes become legitimized in their mind.

Another problem that many of the girls had with the videos was that they do not include alternatives to the young, gold-digger image often shown. When I asked the groups what they thought needed to be changed in order to improve the image of Black women seen in videos, the most common answer was to include some variety. Melody explains:

It's not as simple as just switching to the complete opposite of what we see now; if I were to see nothing but black women in business suits on TV, I would be irritated...They need to stop showing the same type of woman over and over again. Maybe then it would be hard to define all black women as one thing, cuz that's the problem. We aren't all one thing.

These images become repetitive reminders of what black women are supposed to be, sending these girls the message that if they don't fit this standard, they are not complete representatives of black femininity. In this sense, the stereotype becomes the standard.

Limitations

The biggest limitation to my study was my sample size. I was only able to interview twelve girls, all of which had similar backgrounds. My conclusion might have been somewhat different if I had a larger sample size of girls from different backgrounds. This is a preliminary project; I plan to conduct further research on this topic in the future.

Conclusion

My goal was to bridge the gap between the academic writings on Hip Hop and the experiences of actual teenagers. I sought to open a dialogue including both generations. For them, not being able to define their own femininity and sexuality is a way of assuming power as social agents. These stereotypes add to the frustration of being part of a culture that is already under constant surveillance. As Richard Majors has observed with regard to black males, "... life is a relentless performance for the mainstream audience and often for each other...part of acting in a theater that is seldom dark." A majority of the participants believe that artists and producers must make an effort to show the fullness of black culture; then the generalizations about black sexuality would not be so easy to make. The girls know that when people see these images on television, they become present in their thinking process. For these girls, these videos hold many clues to understanding and breaking down the barrier of gender conflicts.

In closing, I want to assert the significance of this type of research. It is important that the world of academia acknowledge these voices. Teenagers hold substantial power as social and political agents. As one of the participants, Kalika, stated, "People only see us when we're buying stuff, like that's all we are—consumers. But we know what things mean socially. We are not as oblivious and ignorant as everyone thinks." We need to acknowledge teenagers as more than empty vessels to be filled; they play a significant role in the creation and critiquing of theory.

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