
PRIMING “BITCH” SCHEMAS WITH VIOLENT AND GENDER-OPPOSITIONAL FEMALE RAP LYRICS: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF EFFECTS ON TOLERANCE FOR AGGRESSION AGAINST WOMEN

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Hasta la vista, bye bye, kiss ya kid
It's the gangstrasis, what you think this is, nigga
Calm yourself, its just a little robbery
You got stricken with the poverties, callin me
Call me sunshine, pussy spread like the rainbow...
I practice this for a livin like the Buddhism...
Ask Tina, nuttin got shit to do with me and you
Or the 44 [gun] under the pillow...
You got stuck and left naked with a hard penis
And now I'm the shit
Go by the name of Little Kim the Queen Bitch...
(Jones & Willis, 1996, track 4)

This verse is from Kimberly Denise “Lil’ Kim” Jones’ song entitled “Spend a Little Doe.” As the title and chorus (not included here) suggest, the message is “love equals money.” Romantic relationships succeed if men spend a sufficient amount of money on their women. The beginning of this song contains a fictitious dialogue between Lil’ Kim and her estranged boyfriend after she has been released from prison. She served a three-year sentence for a crime in which he also appears to have been a participant. She blames him for her incarceration because he turned her in to the police and convinced her to cop a plea (1-3 years). In return for her silence and in the name of love, he promised to make her rich. She is also bitter because he severed contact with her during her imprisonment. When she queries him about his behavior, he replies “I aint wanna see my bird in no cage, but I’m ready to take care of you now.” We hear the gun cock. She blows him away. To paraphrase rock star Tina Turner, love has nothing to do with it.

Some feminists argue that this type of female rap discourse is political and that the female moves from object to subject. Skeggs (1993) maintains that female emcees (rap artists) “assert control over their own sexuality by shifting from a receptive position to a demanding position.” While such discourse paints a woman who is far from submissive, I argue that she has not truly moved from a position of object to subject. When Lil’ Kim says, “Call me sunshine, pussy spread like the rainbow... I

practice this for a livin like the Buddhism” (Jones & Willis, 1996, track 4), her agency (avenging perceived wrongs) is achieved via symbolic prostitution (hooks, 1992, pp. 68-69) – a system of female oppression in which the most agency a female typically has is in deciding how she will be “screwed.” The fraught movement is between two walls of bipolar extremes of Black female sexuality in search of a healthy balance.

I argue that the hypersexual and violent female discourse does not achieve this balance. Rather, it is accommodative as opposed to transformative because racist and sexist stereotypes remain unchallenged (Broughton, 1987, as cited in Sampson, 1993). Regarding interracial and interclass stereotypes, Landrine (1999) found that participants ascribed negative labels to lower-class and Black women, such as “confused,” “dirty,” “hostile,” “impulsive,” “superstitious,” “confused,” “irresponsible,” and “illogical.” Contrariwise, White women and middle-class women were more likely to be described as “competent,” “dependent,” “emotional,” “intelligent,” “passive,” “warm,” “vain,” “talkative,” and “suggestible.” Moreover, Gan, Zillmann and Mitrook (1997) found that exposure to sexual rap music by Black women led to unfavorable evaluations of Black women, but not of White women.

According to Wyatt (1997, pp. 32-34), sexual and violent portrayals of Black women perpetuate existing stereotypes and consequently, aggression against them may be perceived as justified. She describes the “she-devil” image, as exemplified in the aforementioned lyrical passage by rap artist, Lil’ Kim:

The she-devil typifies all of the most negative characteristics attributed to African-American women before and during slavery – the immoral, conniving seductress who loves sex anytime, anywhere, and will do anything to corrupt a man...and feel no remorse... Given their corrupt behavior, they deserved whatever they got.

In addition to reifying the sex vamp, late 20th century and post-millennium “she-devils” in rap music are characterized as materialistic gun-toting “gangsta bitches.” According to bell hooks (1992, pp. 68-69), this “what’s love got to do with it” sentiment underscores the convergence of power and sexuality. Women who have been abused and objectified have turned the tables and are now on the hunt. Eroticism is not pleasure-based. It is ruthless and violent – a tool to manipulate men and exact revenge on them by any means necessary. Black female sexuality is fictively constructed as “bitchiness” and commodified in the music industry as sexual service for money, power and respect.

“I’m a Real Bitch!” – Appropriation of “Bitch” and Its Meaning in American Society

Adding fuel to the fire, several female emcees have donned varied self-titles of “bitch” as expressions of independence and resistance to sexism. For example, Mia X (southern-based) refers to herself as “boss bitch” (Mia X & Mystikal, 1997, track 4), Lil’ Kim (east-coast-based) reigns as “queen bitch” (Jones, Broady & Myrick, 1996, track 9), and more recently Trina (also southern-based) squeakily screams that she is “the baddest bitch.” This sentiment also crosses race and class boundaries. For example, Producer Jane Sparango of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* says that she is no longer concerned about being demanding on the job; she now equates the term “bitch” with “smart woman” (Dowd, 1991).

Historically, males have attempted to temper female tenacity, sexuality, independence, and aggression via “bitch” and other gendered epithets (Collins, 1998, pp. 79-94; Crenshaw, 1993). Consequently, many women have embraced this term as a badge of honor. Contrariwise, males who exhibit those same characteristics are more apt to be perceived as shrewd or tough. Even when a male is referred to as a “bastard” or a “son-of-a-bitch,” the insult does not wound as deeply as when a female is called a “bitch.” For a male, the insult is an indirect attack on his mother, rather than a direct attack on his masculinity; for a female, the implication is that she is somehow less than female – that she has unladylike qualities. My point is that there appears to be no male-equivalent for “bitch” in the cold universe of hate speech.

The pejorative use of the word for woman originated in the 14th century (Ayto, 1990, p. 64). “Bitch” was defined as “a she-dog, or doggess: the most offensive appellation that can be given to an English woman, even more provoking than that of a whore, as may be gathered from the regular billingsgate or St. Gile’s answer – ‘I may be a whore, but can’t be a bitch’” (Grose, 1931, p. 37; Partridge, 1967, p. 57). Another proverbial saying (18th century) was “the bitch that I mean is not a dog” (Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary, 1989, p. 152).

These definitions seem to speak more to issues of morality. However, other meanings refer more to temperament and personality, such as maliciousness, unpleasantness, selfishness or ambitiousness. More recent definitions refer to behaviors or things, such as complaining or anything that is difficult or unpleasant (Atoon & Janssen, 1997). These newer definitions either describe a female or ascribe female characteristics to a male, act, object or experience. For instance, to refer to a man as a “bitch” is to emasculate him; he has allowed another person to dominate him; he has been “punked” or “sissified.” To say that “life is a bitch” or that “traffic is a bitch” means that it is unpleasant and probably beyond one’s control – like an uncontrollable woman. When one “bitches,” one is committing the act of whining, complaining or

nagging. These acts are also characteristic of the female who is described as a “bitch.”

Smitherman (1991) calls this semantic inversion (reversing the meaning of a word). Common in many West African languages, this process is also a feature of Black English. For instance, in Mandingo, *a ka nyi ko-jugu* literally translates into “it is good badly” (Smitherman, 1991). While semantic inversion is indeed possible (as in the above example), I concur with cultural critic Haki Madhubuti (as cited in Kitwana, 1994, pp. 26-27) that there are words (e.g. bitch, whore, nigger) that are so deeply rooted in negativity, that they cannot be “de-stereotyped.” For instance, Beatty (2000) found that female emcees who lack agency (in terms of writing and production) use the term more often than high-agency females to degrade women – as opposed to using it in a “positive” way (Beatty, 2000).

According to Kitwana (1994, p. 27), these “artists participate in the commodification and [simultaneous] distortion of ‘Blackness’ [and femaleness] and, therefore, their own degradation.” In these contexts, “Black women...are objectified and these distorted images are bought and sold as music.” The connotations of “bitch” are not only characteristically female, but also have racial undertones. In other words, Black females who define themselves as “bitches” feed both sexist and racist images of themselves.

Stereotyping and Theory

Addressing internalized stereotypes and the “she-devil” image, Black women (across age, education, and class boundaries) endorsed the beliefs that some women are more promiscuous and sexually manipulative than others. Moreover, they believed that some women experience rape more frequently than others (Wyatt, 1997, pp. 36-38). Further, hooks (1992) identified two myths about Black women. First, successful Black women are believed to be controlling, overly ambitious, arrogant, and conceited. Secondly, they are often believed to succeed in the job market at the expense of Black men because they are “two-fers” (both female and minority). So, it appears that both intraracial *and* interracial stereotypes define Black femaleness as “bitchiness.” Even further, Johnson, Trawalter and Dovidio (2000) found that exposure to Black male-perpetrated violence in rap videos elicited more dispositional attributions of the Black male’s behavior than the White male’s behavior from *both* Black and White participants. Thus, it is likely that “gangsta bitch” (violent) behavior, too, elicits dispositional attributions.

These “she-devil” or “bitch” images are also pervasive – surfacing not only in hip-hop and other media, but also in “political rhetoric about pregnant teens” (Wyatt, 1997, p. 33; Crenshaw, 1993). Unless one lives under a rock or in a cave, it is difficult to escape these stereotypical images. Devine (1989) found that people are equally

knowledgeable about cultural stereotypes, regardless of degree of prejudice. Although some women may feel that the embodiment of sexiness and danger is empowering, it has the disadvantage of depersonalizing and objectifying her, as well as activating particular stereotypes – making them more accessible in memory.

In addition to the empirical evidence, anecdotal evidence also supports the notion that stereotypical images of Black women are often chronically accessible with or without recent activation (priming). Psychiatrist Dr. Gail Wyatt tells her tale of being mistaken as a prostitute by two young White men while waiting for her family in a hotel lobby (Wyatt, 1996, p. 28). More relevant to hip-hop is an incident that involves hip-hop artist Lauryn Hill (formerly of The Fugees) and her appearance on the late-night television show *Saturday Night Live*.

Not only is Hill multi-talented – her debut solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), went multiplatinum and won five Grammys – she also is a mother and an activist. She founded a nonprofit organization called The Refugee Project to help educate inner-city children and increase awareness of people in developing nations, such as Haiti and the Congo (Johnson, 2000; Lauryn Hill Says..., 2000). Her lyrics are spiritual, and socially and politically conscious. Few would dispute that she is a positive role model. However, she was asked to appear in a skit entitled Pimp Chat – about a street hustler with a talk show. Her role – a prostitute, commonly known as a “hoe” (Farley, 1999). Why not have her portray a priest, chef, construction worker, student, salesclerk, nurse, teacher, elf, or even a talking tree? (And I’m sure we can all think of a number of alternative roles.) But she was asked to play – a hoe?

There are several lines of research that explain why exposure to a few members of a stereotyped group could have serious implications or ramifications for subsequent judgements of ambiguous targets or other members of that group. First, Tversky and Kahneman (1974) found that people rely heavily on a small sample to make judgements – unaware of the impact that this biased sampling may have had on their perceptions. Similarly, Lewicki (1985) found that a single instance of a detail in a particular interaction is capable of influencing one’s subsequent behavior. Further, researchers (Borgida & Nisbett and Nisbett & Borgida, as cited in Johnson, Trawalter & Dovidio, 2000) have shown that people ignore more important base rate information and rely on a single salient instance of a behavior to make judgements.

Secondly, a number of researchers (Linville, Fisher & Salovey, 1989; Judd & Park, 1988; Park & Rothbart, 1982; Quattrone & Jones, 1980) have demonstrated the tendency to perceive out-group members as more homogeneous than in-group members (all as cited in Johnson, Trawalter & Dovidio, 2000). Thus, actions of a few members may be perceived as representative of the entire group. To justify holding these stereotypes, a perceiver may use the “you can take the girl out of the country,

but you can't take the country out of the girl" type of logic. In other words, even if an ambiguous target dresses or speaks differently, a perceiver may believe that negative characteristics are simply camouflaged or lying dormant – despite individual differences.

Thirdly, accessibility of trait information of a particular target may be increased either chronically or temporarily through priming, and via preconscious or postconscious automatic processes (Bargh, 1997), thereby affecting subsequent judgments and behaviors (Devine, 1989; Hansen, 1989; Higgins, 1996; Johnson et al., 1995; Hansen & Hansen, 1988; Srull & Wyer, 1979). Preconscious processes refer to registration below the threshold of awareness. The mere presence of that stimulus triggers the process and it runs to completion without conscious awareness (Bargh, 1997). For example, we don't need to cogitate about the various steps in our morning routine such as turning off the alarm clock, etc. Postconscious processes refer to priming – the increased accessibility or reactivation of schemata, immediately following exposure to a stimulus, in social perception. According to Berkowitz (1984), this activation radiates outward from a particular node along the associative pathways of other nodes. This “residual excitation” remains activated at the node for a brief period, enabling activation of other related thoughts and feelings.

Looking at statistical reports of violence against women, Black females are four times as likely as White females to die by homicide (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics as cited in U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, no. 335). Further, Black females ages 15-35 are more than four times as likely as White females to become victims of homicide involving the use of firearms (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics as cited in U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, no. 136). Regarding sex crimes, the F.B.I. (as cited in U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, no. 329) reported a forcible rape rate of nearly 81 per 100,000 females, ages twelve or older (as cited in U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, no. 336). Moreover, victims of sex crimes are more likely to be assaulted by someone they know and trust, as opposed to strangers, casual acquaintances, or relatives. The rates are staggering.

Thus, we arrive at several questions. Does exposure to violent/gender-oppositional female rap lyrics increase tolerance for aggression against females, in general – Black females, in particular? Do adolescent girls express more gender-oppositional beliefs and attitudes following exposure to this type of rap music? And do these effects differ as a function of gender? Unfortunately, the empirical literature on the effects of music has yet to answer these questions. As in many areas of research (Reid, 1990; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1993), the “black sheep” treatment of intersections of gender, race, and class has prevented these close cousins from bonding at the tables of various types of analyses.

Aggression/Violence and the Role of Social Information Processing

Gender-oppositional and aggressive scripts may have serious implications for the physical and emotional well-being of females. Based on information processing theory, observation of violent female models can influence attitudes that serve as heuristics for future behavior. Heavy consumers of this subgenre of rap are more likely to hold more positive attitudes toward aggression (particularly in heterosexual relationships) because they perceive aggression as normal. Thus, these scripts may become chronically accessible to adolescent girls, influencing them to (consciously or unconsciously) place themselves in volatile situations with mates (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Huesmann, Moise & Podolski, 1997; Huesmann, 1998).

If there was (at least) a healthy balance of conscious and gangsta-oriented hip-hop, we would have less cause for concern. However, with few exceptions (i.e. Lauryn Hill), females who espouse a gangster-oriented discourse have been the voices of Black womanhood in commercialized hip-hop in recent years (Morgan, 1997). So, yes, we have a problem.

Further, of the few empirical rap music studies that have focused on aggression, fewer have investigated effects on women. *None* (Johnson, Jackson & Gatto, 1995; Johnson et al., 1995; Barongan & Hall, 1995; Wester, Crown, Quatman & Heesacker, 1997) have looked at effects as a function of gender of artist. Given the collective evidence (real-world statistics, anecdotal, and empirical), future research should endeavor investigations of race, class, and gender intersectionality. We should not only ask ourselves why particular phenomena occur, but also what the effects are. Future research should be a series of excavations – picking at the fossil of patriarchy and its frequent intersection with racism.

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