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An exploration into the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture as a form of misogyny or empowerment in the eyes of the viewer

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An Exploration into the Objectification of Self in Female Hip-Hop Culture as a Form of Misogyny or Empowerment.

This research paper explores whether the presentation of self in female hip-hop culture is a form of objectification or misogyny in the eyes of the viewer, using a Black feminist conceptual framework. While there is an existing body of research surrounding the objectification of women in mainstream media, less academic attention has been given to the objectification of Black women's sexuality. This paper explores the performativity of Black female hip-hop artists to understand the effects upon audience perceptions of Black womanhood. This study argues the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture is misogynistic in relation to deeper societal and cultural issues faced by Black women historically - grounded in racism. This study contributes to gaining profound insight into what shapes and influences perceptions and expands our understanding of race and the ways in which racism is perpetuated in popular culture.

Keywords: Feminism, gender, race, culture, objectification, misogyny

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study is to explore whether the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture is a form of misogyny or empowerment in the eyes of the viewer. The representation of Black women in female hip-hop culture has already been referred to as 'objectification' and 'misogynistic' in literature, through the use of sexual images that are influenced by male sexual pleasure (Espin 1996). Misogyny has been defined as "a sexual prejudice, fear or hatred of women that is symbolically shared among men in society" (Gilmore 2001, p.9). According to Levy (2005) popular culture makes sex

culture acceptable by glorifying images of semi-naked women in magazines, films and music videos.

While there is an existing body of research surrounding the objectification of women in the mainstream media, there is lack of academic attention towards the objectification of Black women's' sexuality. Researching Black women's perceptions to the performativity of Black female hip-hop artists' contributes to gaining profound insight into what shapes and influences their perceptions; and expand our understanding of race and popular culture on the ways in which racism is perpetuated.

Within Black feminist literature it has been widely argued that the sexuality of Black women has always come under more intense scrutiny than non-black women, with negative stereotypes that originate from slavery which are perpetuated. Hooks (1981) argues there is more emphasis on Black men when race is discussed in feminist literature. When females are discussed in feminist literature, it is focused on White women. This study is motivated by the need to understand how the dominant discourses in female hip-hop culture are perceived by Black women, as a form of misogyny or empowerment and voice the affects this issue has on Black womanhood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A brief introduction to hip-hop culture

Historically hip-hop music has been used as a therapeutic tool to voice and express issues, concerns and interests of Black African American citizens (Hadley and Yancy 2006). While hip-hop music originated as a Black cultural form of expression, it has been popularized by other cultures that have started to embrace it globally. Hip- hop is a male dominated industry (Fuse 2013) that has been scrutinised for its misogyny and objectification of Black women (Gil and Moras 2012). As a cultural text, hip-hop has always visually and vocally represented women as 'hoes, tricks, bitches and gold diggers' (Elan 2012), reducing Black women to physical objects for aesthetic pleasure, while glorifying pimp performativity and encouraging misogyny (Quinn 2000).

In the early nineties when some Black female rappers began to gain recognition, there were two distinct ways of representing themselves. Successful female hip-hop rappers such as Da Brat (see figure 1) adopted a masculine style as a way of expressing the dominant fashion in male hip-hop culture. On the other hand, rappers such as Foxy Brown presented themselves in a more sexualised way (Osiyale 2013) (see figure 2).

Figure 1: Da Brat (Discogs 2015)
Available from: http://djnastyboy.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/foxy-brown- candy-promo-cd-single-2001.html [Accessed 15 May 2015]

Figure 2: Foxy Brown (DJ Nasty Boy 2013)
Available from: http://djnastyboy.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/foxy-brown- candy-promo-cd-single-2001.html [Accessed 15 May 2015]

The visual representation of women in the media

In this industry, which has been described as 'misogynistic', "for women to gain acceptance they required male sponsors" for support and credibility (Kubrin and Weitzer 2009, p.29). For example, Lil' Kim was affiliated with rapper Notorious B.I.G to

gain more recognition and acceptance. Therefore, the 'objectification' of self in female hip-hop can be seen as a way of mirroring pre-existing male industry practices. This is shown in ways that are deemed acceptable, and sexually pleasing for a predominantly male audience, in order for females to be successful (Howard 2014).

This 'hypersexual' objectification as a form of visual representation has been carried through today as a cultural norm in female hip-hop culture. It is important to note that in addition to the physical representations of self by female rappers, the lyrical content of rap lyrics used by both males and females has also been referred to as being misogynistic. For example, 'Bitches Ain't shit' by Dr Dre ft Snoop Dogg includes lyrics such as: "bitches ain't shit but hoes and tricks, lick on these nuts and suck the dick" (Metro Lyrics 2015). It is through the misogynistic nature of hip-hop culture that female rappers have 'reclaimed' the derogatory term 'bitch' - usually negatively referred to in hip-hop when addressing women - as a way of describing a positively empowered woman in the context of sexuality and success (Keyes 2004). However, it has been argued that the media and popular culture reinforce stereotypical images of Black women - who make up the majority of female rappers - and their sexuality as a tool to be exploited for profit (Layne 2014; Gil and Moras 2012; Fraizer 2013). This is increasingly noticeable when viewing female rappers in hip-hop videos and the way they objectify themselves, which will be explored in more detail.

The male gaze theory developed by Mulvey (1989) described the ways in which audiences are expected to view images of women from a straight males' point of view, by sexually objectifying women's body parts on screen. The theory examines how this negatively influences the ways in which women are encouraged to sexually view themselves as objects. Yet, this theory falls short when attempting to analyse the media's portrayal of Black women as a marginalised and often ignored group (Rhodes 1989; Hooks 2000). One way of distinctly observing the objectification of Black women is through the observation of hip-hop music videos and the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture. Previous literature has emphasised the hip-hop industry's misogynistic nature, but has not questioned the accountability held by female rappers for the sexual representation of themselves, and their ability to control their own image. The reasons for this are to be explored further below.

Sexual objectification and Black female sexual identities

Mainstream feminist theory, developed from the second wave of feminism, presents shortcomings in primarily focusing on the oppression of White middle class women, while ignoring the oppression experienced by women of colour (Hooks 1997, cited by Squires and Kemp 1997). While gender inequality was an issue for White women, from a Black feminist perspective, racism and gender should be treated equally as core issues regarding women's oppression in Western society (Carby 1982; Rhodes 1989; Whelehan 1995; Easton 1996; Squire and Kemp 1997; and Collins 2000; Coleman and Davis 2001; Gil and Moras 2012). Studies surrounding race, gender and class suggest the notion of sexuality and beauty in the media's representation of women is viewed differently when applied to Black women in mainstream culture (Easton 1996; Collins 2000; Oppliger 2008; White 2013; Fraizer 2013). For this reason, the oppression of women through sexual objectification must be observed in a manner that takes the experiences of all women into account. According to Collins (2000, p.129): "Black women's bodies signal 'sexual deviancy' in society, and these controlling images of Black women are based on Black women's American history".

A recurring theme throughout Black feminist literature has been the historical oppression and exploitation of the Black woman's body, which has continued since the

transatlantic slave trade (Szymanski et al. 2011). Black women's bodies are frequently presented as 'exotic, deviant and abnormal', (Hobson 2005; Ndlouv 2011; Gil and Moras 2012) with their sexual identities being constructed as less feminine and more animalistic (Hooks 1981). An example of this is the case of Sarah Baartman whose body was on display in a freak show in nineteenth century Europe because of her large buttocks and labia, which were described as "highly unusual body features" (Original People 2013) – (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Sarah Baartman freak show exhibition (Jezebel 2014)
Available from:
http://jezebel.com/saartje-baartman-the-original-booty- queen-1658569879 [Accessed 15 May 2015]

Female rapper Azelia Banks, however, argues that these negative perceptions of Black women as a form of sexual oppression are 'culturally appropriated' when they appear on White women (Chang 2014). Said's (1979) texts on Orientalism and the Western world's perception of women of colour as 'other' and 'exotic' support this claim.

When reflecting these historically stereotypical images of Black women against hip-hop culture and its misogynistic discourse, it appears that the industry reinforces these sexually 'deviant' depictions in the media (Cheers 2008; Craft 2010; Durham et al. 2013). This supports Frazier's (2013) study which suggests the media's sexual objectification and stereotypical portrayals of Black women's sexuality has negative social implications for Black womanhood. Similarly, Lamb and Peterson (2012, cited by Fraizier p.10) in agreement with Levy (2005) questions the notion of sexual empowerment, and its effect on adolescent girls, implying that:

"Girls may emulate a pornografied version of sexuality that feels
empowering, when it in fact replicates very old exploitative scenes
of male voyeurism and women's victimization and/or oppression."

Lamb and Peterson's (2012) study helps to question the sexual objectification of self by female rappers, whose performance of sexuality will certainly be viewed differently by different audiences. Lamb and Peterson offer areas for further research into exploring how girls of different ages and races interpret and respond to sexualized media (Lamb and Peterson 2011) - questions that this paper seeks to answer. In addition, Fredrickson and Roberts' Objectification Theory (1997) provides more insight into how women are presented as 'objects of desire' in the media, arguing that women internalise these images, making physical appearances a valued tool to be judged upon (cited by Szymanski et.al 2011). Since the sexualised view of Black women through the media's lens is negative, female oppression has to be addressed taking race into consideration, in order to grasp the influencing factors on the ways in which self-objectification is experienced by women (Hooks 2000; Szymanski et al. 2011).

The commodification of the Black female body

The sexual objectification of female bodies has been used as a marketing tool by industries and organisations to help sell values, ideas and ideal lifestyles (Leiss 1990; Wolf 1991; Manca 1994). Hip-hop culture discourse and images portray a 'preferred reading' (Rojek 2002) for the viewer to look at aspects of Black culture, with music videos depicting images of 'sexuality, powerful men, conspicuous leisure, as well as reinforcing cultural stereotypes (Gil and Moras 2012). However, reflecting on current studies surrounding misogyny and objectification, the argument presented is that young

women irrationally imitate these images, and female hip-hop rappers are unaware of their own self objectification. Many female hip-hop rappers such as Nicki Minaj and Lil' Kim (see figure 4 and 5) have attempted to challenge the misogynistic view of hip-hop and reclaim their sexual selves (Alexander 2014).

Figure 4: Nicki Minaj (Mail Online 2014)
Available from: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2721381/Miley-Cyrus-spoofs-Nicki-Minajs-controversial-bootyful-album-art-superimposed-image-featuring-throwback-Disney-days.html [Accessed 15 May 2015].

Figure 5: Lil' Kim (Amazon 2015)
Available from: http://www.amazon.com/Magic-Stick-Explicit/dp/B00123D3WQ [Accessed 15 May 2015].

When defining the concept of female empowered sexuality, Gentile's (2007) focus group research on popular culture and female sexuality describe "girl power" as being "women who are confident, can perform the same tasks as men and receive equal recognition and self-respect" (Gentile 2007, p.5). The concept of female empowered sexuality arose from the third wave of feminism in the 1990's, as a critique of the second wave of feminism. This wave has been referred to as "lipstick" or "grrl" feminism (Krolokke and Sorensen 2006). Lipstick feminism has been described as the movement where "femininity is flaunted, while stubbornly venturing into male- dominated spaces" (Krolokke and Sorensen 2006, p.17) as a form of celebrated female sexuality and empowerment.

The concept of Black female empowered sexuality within third wave feminism is explained by Perry (1995), giving insight into hip-hop culture for female rappers as a means of conscious 'sexual liberty and afro-centric self-admiration'. This suggests that Black hip-hop feminism uses "sexual subjectivity to empower self" (Perry 1995, p.524-525). This embracive approach reverses the historically oppressive views of the Black female body and threatens prevailing Western beauty ideals. On the other hand, Hooks (1991); Collins (2000); and Gil and Moras (2012) believe that the sexualised images of Black women promoted by the media have been commoditised under capitalism, and must be understood as "a reflection of White patriarchal control of Black sexuality" (Gil and Moras 2012, p.129). Layne (2014) adds that the objectification of self by female rappers for capital gain is "indicative of a Eurocentric based ideological hegemony onto an oppressed subcultural group", which is rooted in the historical oppression of Black women in postcolonial Western society.

This view reinforces the Black feminist argument that women's oppression cannot solely be viewed from a position of gender, but suggests race and racism is an influencing factor in the representation of Black female rappers in a 'White owned space' (Durham 2010; Gil and Moras 2012). According to Gil and Moras (2012, p.130) "hip-hop music is situated within a White patriarchal culture industry", where the images of Black female rappers are based on the same images perpetuated from slavery, which they argue reinforces White supremacy and oppression. However, hip-hop feminist studies stress that Black women do not see themselves as 'victims' of objectification. From a female rapper position, it presents an opportunity to reclaim their sexual identities as a form of empowerment (Davis and Coleman 2001; Baker and Galasinski 2001; Durham 2010).

Postmodern theory describes the collapse of high and low cultural entertainments suggesting that culture can now be bought or sold (Barker 2012). It

disregards any theories claiming to offer total answers and is useful in analysing popular cultural trends. From this perspective, Jason (1991, p.5) claims that "social deviance that might have been imagined extreme, no longer scandalise anyone", suggesting that the sexual objectification of self has become normal. Furthermore, Hip-hop culture has been described as a "subcultural means of opposition" as it was originally used to represent the voices and concerns of African-Americans (Best and Kellner 1999, p.14; Phillips et al. 2005), as a marginalised group in society, with ideas that "threaten the dominant White (male) power structure" (Rollins 1991). When applied to the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture, from a postmodernist perspective, it should be viewed as a form of empowered rebellion. Using postmodern theory justifies Perry's (1995) claim that the sexual objectification of female rappers is as form of power and liberation rather than misogyny. Additionally, postmodern theory is useful for considering the topic area from a different point of view in relation to cultural phenomena and changes in contemporary society.

Mainstream hip-hop music, therefore, is a money making industry (David 2015). From a capitalist viewpoint, the main aim of a performing artist is to sell music and attain capital for record corporations. Recording artists themselves have very little control over their image (Layne 2013). Yet, as discussed, the sexually demeaning images depicted of Black female rappers often reinforce stereotypical views of Black women and their bodies for economic profit (White 2013). Moreover, from a Marxist theoretical perspective it can be argued that the objectification of self of female rappers is a form of 'capitalist exploitation' (Blackledge 2006) where female rappers, such as Nicki Minaj, have been able to market their bodies. This supports the assertion that the sexual objectification of self in female hip-hop is a 'false sense of empowerment', and is sexually exploiting (Lamb and Peterson 2012) for the benefit of the music industry.

According to Durham (2010) hip-hop encourages particular race, gender and class statuses for young girls, and the ways in which female rappers portray themselves can have a negative influence on the ways in which Black women are viewed as a group, as well as Black womanhood. In contrast, the objectification of self of female rappers can be seen as a form of empowerment in today's postmodern society, in which power and influence lie with the individual (Davis 2013). For example, the term "bitch" presents a new appropriated meaning in female hip-hop culture to "reflect the height of their success as a form of empowerment" (Elan, 2012). Rapper Trina, proclaimed herself as being "tha baddest bitch", which has been defined as "a self-respected strong female who is ready for anything physically, emotionally and intellectually" (Urban Dictionary 2007).

In summary, there is a lack of clear understanding as to whether the objectification of self in female hip-hop is regarded by the consumer as misogynistic or a form of empowerment. This study aims to offer further insight into this subject by way of focus group research with Black women with the objective of identifying differing attitudes and perceptions towards the objectification of Black female hip-hop artists in female hip-hop culture.

METHODS

Research objectives and questions

While there is an existing body of research surrounding the objectification of women in the media, there is lack of academic attention towards the objectification of Black women's sexuality. The objective of this study is to explore whether the objectification

of self in female hip-hop culture is a form of misogyny or empowerment in the eyes of the viewer. The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What are Black women's perceptions to the way that Black female rappers are represented in hip-hop culture?
2. What affects does the representation of female hip-hop artists have on Black womanhood?
3. How can the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture be linked to Black feminist literature?

Conceptual Theoretical Approach

Black Feminist theory is the conceptual theoretical approach chosen for this study. The rationale behind the selection of this approach is that mainstream feminism benefits middle-class White women and their experiences, while marginalising or ignoring the oppression of Black women's experiences interlinked through race, gender and class (Hooks 2000), as according to Collins (2000) each system needs the other in order to function. Collins (2000) argues that the scholarly work of Black feminists has been suppressed or ignored within the academic arena. While some White feminists do acknowledge the need for diversity, many still exclude women of colour from their work, or "handpick the voices of Black women that are considered 'safe' to avoid criticism that they are racist" (p.6). Black feminist theory is a justifiable approach to this study as it privileges the voices and experiences of Black women.

Research Methods

Whilst there is an existing body of research surrounding the objectification of women in the media, there has been a lack of academic attention given to the objectification of Black women's sexuality, particularly, within the context of hip-hop culture. The research questions that guide this study, therefore, were:

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2. What affects does the representation of female hip-hop artists have on Black womanhood?
3. How can the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture be linked to Black feminist literature?

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Concerned with exploring people's attitudes and experiences, as well as cultural trends in society, this study called for a qualitative methodological approach. Therefore, focus groups were chosen to "explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas" (Denscombe 2010). According to Berg (2007) the advantages of using a focus group method are that it is a reliable way to gather detailed insight, which might be otherwise difficult to obtain. It is through this method that the experiences of Black women can be shared, discussed and reflected upon with others, ensuring trustworthiness of the data. The focus group was conducted using a discussion guide. Black female hip-hop music videos were also shown as context for the discussion but these will not form part of the data analysis. The research received ethical approval according to the Bournemouth University Ethics Code of Practice. In the discussion which follows, pseudonyms i.e. "participant F or (PF)" were used to ensure their identities remained anonymous in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1999).

Sampling

The sampling method for this study was influenced by the requirement to solicit the views of young Black women. Initially a purposive sampling technique (Denscombe 2010) was used to source participants via the Bournemouth University African Caribbean Society that currently has up to 300 members. Further members were recruited using a snowballing technique (Walliman 2011) by sending invitation emails to some of the Bournemouth African Caribbean Society Facebook members, recruitment posters and referrals. Additional participants for the study were recruited through convenience sampling at the university campus. The final sample comprised nine Black female participants.

Analysis

An inductive approach was followed. According to Thomas (2006, p.238) an inductive approach is used to "allow research findings to emerge from frequent, dominant or significant themes inherited from the raw data". Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the focus group transcript by rigorously examining, and re-examining themes, repeated patterns and concepts within the data in rich detail (Braun and Clarke 2006). Latent themes were identified i.e. those "underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.13) by first reading and interpreting the transcripts, highlighting and noting patterns, meanings, key words and issues. These were initial codes that were then collated and categorised into initial themes. A priori coding was created to link the relationship of these data categories back to the research questions. The categories were then refined using colour coding to develop final themes.

FINDINGS

The following section presents an interpretive analysis of the key findings from this research. The following four main themes have been identified: cultural norms and stereotypes; the commercialisation of hip-hop culture; body image and influence and the battle between race and gender. These themes will be reported on below in relation to the research questions of this study.

Black women's perceptions of the way Black female rappers are represented in hip-hop culture

(1) Cultural norms and stereotypes

The first part of the focus group discussion began with the topic 'hip-hop misogyny'. The term 'misogyny' has often been poorly defined. For this reason, a music video depicting 'hip- hop misogyny' was shown to help the participants get an overall idea of what the hip- hop industry is like within that context. The participants were shown the "what's your fantasy' music video by Ludacris and were asked their opinions of the video. The overall perception of the video was negative. Five of the participants voiced the feeling that the over sexualisation of women in hip-hop culture seemed "normal", with many agreeing with the comments. Participant F stated: "when you think about it, it's so bad but then it's become the norm". The prevailing emotion in the room suggested that the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture was expected.

Following from this, two participants voiced their concerns about the ways in which these 'normalised behaviours and representations' were not solely reflective of hip-hop culture, but Black culture as a whole. Participant A showed concern about hip-hop culture and women, expressing that Black viewers subconsciously watch the videos and know it is not reflective of Black culture in society. Yet other ethnic groups gain their understanding of Black culture through these channels as agents of socialisation. It was further expressed that the representations of Black women in the media is controlled and stereotyped to fit other audiences' perceptions of a preconceived 'truth'. Some of these representations were Black culture as a 'party culture', emphasis on 'big butts' on Black women, and Black women as over sexualised 'hoes'. The emotion in the room was shared surrounding these issues.

Participant A highlighted three stereotypes based on some readings she had come across about the representations of Black women in the media. These were "jezebel, mammi and the angry Black woman". She described the jezebel as having light skin and being sexualised; the mammi is a fat dark skinned woman that resembles a man and the angry Black woman as emasculating black men. The idea suggested after watching the music video's in part three of the session is that the Black female rappers in the videos tended to embody and perpetuate some of these suggested stereotypes. In addition, Participant C gave new insight into the ways in which Black women are objectified. She suggested that "African culture has influenced the way we see women" stating that in African culture women are not valued but instead inferior to men. She stated that Black women's position in African culture is not exactly 'slave' like, but women are 'expected to stay in their spot'. This view alternatively shed more light on cultural depictions of Black women from a traditional standpoint, which may be useful for discussion in understanding and identifying where this misogynistic hip-hop culture derived from. Furthermore, some participants voiced that the overall negative perception of hip-hop culture was not reflected in UK hip-hop culture. Participant A mentioned the effect of cultural imperialism, with others arguing that the focus surrounding hip-hop was always on America. She highlighted how the affects of hip-hop culture and its representations affect Black people all over the world and it's "almost suffocating".

(2) The commercialisation of hip-hop culture

An interesting view that was shared by some participants was that the misogynistic nature of hip-hop culture was solely for commercial and financial gain and nothing more. Suggesting that the supposed empowerment of female rappers was part of a culture in society where sexuality can be used for success and power. Participant C made an interesting point that 'underground hip-hop' - in other words, less mainstream hip-hip with developing artists - do not market themselves in the same ways, yet still manage to reach the same audiences. She also suggested that the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture was a result of lack of talent and pressure. Hyper sexuality was seen as a tool used to stir up audiences and gain attention to make up for a lack of talent. In addition, it was stated that the artists have a pressure to be successful, and there might be a fear amongst female rappers of underperforming if they do not use their sexuality to their advantage.

Participant C voiced that, as a viewer, she felt as though she was just a target for advertising. She explained that hip-hop culture was very materialistic and that music videos were used to promote this lifestyle. "Sexuality is used to incite us. They sell their community for coins". She believed that, overall, hip-hop artists had maintained a "slave mentality" in the sense that Black men and women in hip-hop are reinforcing stereotypes to please audiences and make money, even if it means portraying themselves and community in a negative light. Yet, Participant B suggested that this was down to how the viewer wants to look like it. In agreement, Participant S2 felt that the female rappers were confident in how they behaved - suggesting that in some aspects their portrayals could be seen as rebelliously empowering.

The effect the representation of female hip-hop artists has upon Black womanhood

- Body image and influence

Body image and influence was the second topic that frequently came up during the discussion. Concern was raised surrounding the amplified body images of Black female rappers such as Nicki Minaj, and the glorification of these body types in hip-hop culture. While Participant B suggested that "men are at the mercy of naked women" in hip-hop culture, Participant F voiced that within this industry, the beauty standards differ. She stated that it's a particular body type that the hip-hop industry glorifies and promotes, with other participants agreeing. A majority of participants said that in recent times, 'oversized buttocks' was a growing trend in the industry. This view was compared to five or six years ago when being skinny was glorified, suggesting that the hip-hop industry has always perpetuated the wrong images of Black women and their bodies as 'over sexualised, desirable objects'.

It was expressed that as Black women, they have been conditioned to like these negative portrays and even desire to embody it, even though in their opinion it is wrong. Much concern was expressed around the influence these depictions have on the youths and non-black ethnic groups. Participant S1 gave an example of how men from other ethnicities would be attracted to her based off society's stereotypes of Black women and their bodies. Stating that she believes it's the media's portrayal of Black women and their bodies that influence the way men of other ethnicities see her, merely for her 'big bum' for instance.

Moreover, the topic of skin tone and having light skin was frequently mentioned amongst participants questioning why the Black women at the forefront of hip-hop culture are always light skinned. This helped make links between Participant A's

comment about the different stereotypes of Black women, stating that lighter skinned Black women were seen as 'more sexualised and desirable'. Participant T2 stated that a lot of the Black women in the media begin to "bleach themselves", questioning why the representations of Black women in the media "cannot just stick to the traditional beauty". The general feeling amongst participants was that besides what female hip-hop rappers wore or rapped about, attention must be paid to their overall image and the messages that it is sending to the youth and the influences that it has on people in society. Whether it is reinforcing stereotypes, or youths emulating these images, most participants felt that it was wrong, yet so ingrained as the cultural norm.

The link between the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture and Black feminist literature - The battle between race and gender.

While race was a core issue, gender also seemed to be an underlying concern for some. When the participants were asked for their opinions on how female rappers were presented, two of the participants felt that the objectification of self of female rappers could be seen as a form of empowerment with the 'independent woman' movement in Black female hip-hop culture. Yet they both mentioned how it differs on the ways in which the viewer wants to view the women. Participant F suggested that female rappers were "taking characteristics of how a man should be" which is risky for Black women when aligned against societal stereotypes. The 'angry Black woman as emasculating' is one of the suggested stereotypes that are being perpetrated by Black female rappers. The participant stated that "it's hard for Black women to be independent in a positive light without being labelled an "angry black woman". It was expressed that this is due to the fact that many of these rappers are Black, as well as female in a male dominated industry. This suggests that the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture cannot be empowering when Black women are involved because of the stereotypes associated with being a 'strong Black woman'. The participant followed on saying "we can't really win".

Moreover, participants questioned why other Black women in the music industry, such as Beyoncé, cannot represent Black women in a positive light, when they have the power and influence to do so. Some felt that rappers such as Nicki Minaj fuel negative stereotypes that overshadow other Black women's efforts for positive representations. Some participants felt that the images and musical success of Black female rappers is controlled by the music industry, and their representations are for commercial gain. The idea that people would rather see a naked woman, than a fully clothed woman was shared in agreement amongst participants because these images are more "memorable".

Summary

Participants felt there was a 'double standard' around the over sexualisation of Black women in the media when non-black women would decide to represent themselves in a similar light. Participant T1 argued, "when a non-black person does these kinds of stuff, like Miley Cyrus, they get massive praise for it" - with a majority of the participants agreeing highlighting this double standard. Many voiced that they felt as though the media only shows one main image of Black women which is negative, without compensating for it with other positive images. When participants were asked how these representations made them feel as Black women, the majority were "embarrassed; angry; shocked" suggesting "it's got to change", with only one participant saying "controversially, in regards to that music video - desirable". However, it was expressed that hip-hop music had changed along with societal changes from a movement that

speaks out against social injustices, to one for commercial gain. The issue amongst the women was that the Black community allowed for this negative representation to manifest, instead of speaking out against it. Instead they continue supporting these rappers and their music.

This focus group research suggests the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture as misogynistic has become the norm, and is expected by Black female rappers. Objectification as a form of empowerment in the eyes of the viewer was not shared amongst participants. The feeling was that there were broader issues that needed to be addressed in regards to Black culture. The ways in which Black people are influenced by the music; the ways in which people of other ethnicities view Black culture; the idea that Black women accept these messages; and the stereotypical barriers that confront Black women in positions of power, were all suggested areas of concern. According to Participant A "Black women are either invisible or hyper visible" in the media and it is an issue that needs to change.

DISCUSSION

In this section, key thematic findings are expanded upon to offer further insight into Black female hip-hop culture as understood through the lens of Black feminist literature – principally, Hooks (1981) and Collins (2000).

Cultural norms and stereotypes

It is apparent from the primary research conducted that this group of Black women felt that ideas of what constitutes Black female hip-hop culture is based largely on negative stereotypes, which participants felt were further perpetrated by the rappers themselves and related to broader issues. The viewers' perceptions of Black female hip-hop culture was that it is represented as a site for acts of sexual deviance to occur, primarily through the objectification of the Black female body. It has been argued that the media is the main driving force behind these stereotypical perceptions that are recognisable by Black women, but not accepted as an accurate representation of Black womanhood. As stated by Participant A; "What I don't like about it is with the subconscious, we watch it and we know that that's not reflective of Black culture, in society".

"But even when you look at history, the history of the Black people, you can see how we've been treated... Black men were seen as lazy and Black women were seen as hoe, and nothing else has changed".

This statement is consistent with Hooks (1981) and Collins' (2000) work, which considers how the devaluation of Black womanhood is based on "sexist and racist assumptions" (p.13). This is further justified by Said's (1979) text on the representation of 'other'. Both the findings from primary research and scholarly texts confirm the argument that the objectification of Black female sexuality emerged from racist stereotypes during slavery and the patriarchal oppression of men, from which a "devaluation of Black womanhood occurred, and has not altered since" (Hooks 1981, p.53).

The battle between race and gender

Key concerns surrounding the battle between race and gender, in relation to Black female rappers' adoption of 'masculine characteristics' in female hip- hop culture suggested that:

"We are trying to be like independent Black women…so we are like
kind of leaving our feminine side as women, I think as women it's
hard as well because you are labelled black angry women so it's
like we can't really win".

When assessing the concept of 'emasculating Black men' in the context of Black
female empowerment, stereotyping and assumptions about Black female characteristics
arise (as previously discussed). The issue presented is that mainstream feminism
encourages the fight for gender equality, and female empowerment. However, it has
been interpreted from the findings that Black women cannot be both empowering and
feminine. Instead, as two participants suggested, Black female rappers are labelled
"angry or negatively stereotyped as the independent Black woman". Hooks (1981)
argues that the role of White slave colonisers and their responsibility in emasculating of
the Black male is minimalized and instead blamed on Black women. It is these
characteristics that have been adopted by Black female rappers in hip-hop culture,
which can be interpreted as a form of empowerment against patriarchal control in the
hip-hop industry. Furthermore, Hooks (1981) states that White patriarchal control is
ranked by social hierarchy of White men, White women, Black men then Black women
(p.52). The implication of these representations in female hip-hop culture is that while
Black female rappers have the opportunity to challenge dominant male and white power
structures, their 'empowerment' is hindered by controlled racial stereotypes and
assumptions.

Body image and influence

While some Black feminists believe that the Black women's bodies can be used as a site
for empowerment, the attitude amongst a majority of the participants contrasted with
this view. Only one participant perceived the objectification of Black women's bodies as
being 'desirable', and even so, it was expressed amongst others that there is a specific
type of 'desirability' of Black women's sexuality, which is shown in female hip-hop
culture. Participants felt that Black women with lighter skin complexions were preferred
within the industry, and there was a preference for exaggerated large buttocks and
curvy figures. These are body types which many participants felt were not attainable for
some Black women and not truly reflective of the image of "traditional" Black women.
Participant S1 shared her experience of how the glorification of certain Black female
body ideals affects her as a Black woman. The implications of these representations in
Black female hip-hop culture are clearly reflected in the ways in which men of other
races perceive Black women and their bodies. Referring back to Black feminist
literature, it has been stated that during slavery Black women's bodies "caused White
men to lust" (Hooks 1981, p.33). It was during this period that the image of Black
women's bodies was reconstructed as 'promiscuous sexual savages' while White
women's bodies were seen as 'pure and innocent', exempt from such criticism (Hooks
1981; Collins 2000). Two participants referred to the stereotypes attached to
objectification of self by Black female rappers' bodies as a 'double standard', with one
stating:

"With English people, like sorry, obviously they're not going
through this double barrel thing that black women have to go
through, because like when, when an English person does like these
kind of stuff like Miley Cyrus, they get massive praise for it."

The 'appropriation of Black culture' can be linked to themes surrounding the
commercialisation of hip-hop culture and will be discussed in the following section.
Most of the concern from primary research surrounded the influence perceptions of

Black female beauty ideals and attractiveness may have on Black womanhood and the ways in which other ethnicities view Black women.

The commercialisation of hip-hop culture

Developing the discussion within the previous section further, Participant A suggested that "Black women are either invisible or hyper visible", thus reinforcing the arguments made by Black feminist theorists. The perception expressed by Black women towards the commercialisation of hip-hop culture was that sexual objectification is used to entice the viewers. Black feminist theory addresses how the capitalist system oppresses the bodies of Black women, by maintaining images that construct them as 'objects' in the market. These images are based on assumptions that derive from slavery, where Black women's bodies were openly sold and exchanged on the market (Collins 2000). Many participants felt that sexual objectification was a requirement in the industry in order to be more memorable in the music business. However, Participant C argued that it was wrong that Black female hip-hop rappers "can sell your community for coins". As stated in chapter two, many Black female rappers have little control over their image (Layne 2013). This view, based on controlled images of Black women within the capitalist system, is consistent with Gil and Moras' (2012) study that suggests these negative stereotypes are reinforced because the hip-hop industry is a 'White owned media space', that largely reflect a radicalised discourse to maintain White supremacy. From a Black feminist standpoint, this suggests that the objectification of Black female rappers' bodies is considered justifiable, based on the assumption that 'sexual deviance is already part of the nature of Black women's promiscuous sexuality'. As Collins (2000) analysis argues, ideas of White supremacy depend on perceptions of racial difference.

Further considerations

An area to be considered is Black female rappers' accountability. The group participating in this study felt that they were not empowering Black womanhood even though they had the power and influence to do so. Postmodern theory argues that popular culture gives people the power to control their own image, at a time in society where sexual images of women are glorified. Furthermore, third wave feminism encourages female empowered sexuality. However, this study has found that embracing Black female sexuality as a form of empowerment and resistance cannot be fully attained. This is because Black women's bodies are attached to pre-existing racial stereotypes where Black womanhood and sexuality is viewed collectively. Black feminist theorists argue that it is not empowering for Black women unless their sexuality is viewed equally, with the consideration of both race and gender. Black women have to fight both interlinking oppressions of both racism and sexism (Collins 2000), and according to Participant F – "we really can't win".

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the objectification of self in female hip- hop culture and whether it is a form of empowerment or misogyny in the eyes of the viewer, using a Black feminist conceptual framework. The research was motivated by the need to understand how dominant discourses in female hip-hop culture are perceived by Black women and its effects upon Black womanhood. The findings suggest the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture for a majority of the participants is not empowering for Black women

and Black womanhood. The dominant view amongst the participants was that the objectification further perpetuates negative stereotypes about Black women as a collective group. Black feminist literature and primary research both found the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture is misogynistic, in relation to deeper societal and cultural issues faced by Black women historically - grounded in racism.

This study is different from other studies as it has explored the objectification of self in female hip-hop culture from a position of empowerment and misogyny from the eyes of the viewer, to understand Black women's perceptions to these representations and builds upon existing Black feminist research on Black women's oppression. The key findings link to the academic field and reflect existing Black feminist theoretical arguments. However, the limitations of this research is that the views of Black female hip- hop rappers were not solicited, which would have provided further insight into the issue of empowerment in female hip-hop culture. Limitations of the research method are acknowledged, based on the researcher's subjectivity in the interpretation of data using a thematic analysis method. This is because thematic analysis allows flexibility and researchers judgement in the interpretation and analysis of data. Recommended areas for further research have been identified. The focus group participants suggested hip-hop culture from a UK perspective needed to be explored because studies predominantly focus on the United States and its influence. Furthermore, interviewing Black female hip-hop artists on the topic of objectification through the eyes of the performer is suggested.

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