

Hip-Hop: An Emerging Carrier for Feminist Expression

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Abstract. African youths utilize Hip-Hop culture to express their resentment and rebellion against mainstream culture and external oppression, reflecting the instinct of underprivileged people to pursue their rights and freedom. However, during the process of resistance and self-expression, they often neglect to respect other, more vulnerable groups, such as women, ultimately leading to oppression and rebellion within Hip-Hop community. When people rebel against certain authorities, they may unconsciously create new forms of inequality and violence. This paper explains how men in Hip-Hop rap objectify women, and how female rappers, having been influenced by feminism, use music to fight back. The research is conducted by collecting references about Hip-Hop music, analyzing the differences between a large number of male and female Hip-Hop songs in terms of lyric content, music videos, and target audiences, and investigating the improvements in female rappers' status in the Hip-Hop world. According to the study, in Hip-Hop music, men objectify and degrade women through lyrics containing sexist and misogynistic language, the objectification of women's bodies in music videos (MV), and disrespectful attitudes toward women. To fight back against the situation, women draw on Black feminism and express dissatisfaction through music.

Keywords: hip-hop, feminism, lyrics, rebellion

1. Introduction

In 1974, African Americans predominantly inhabited the borough of the Bronx, a part of New York City situated in the uptown area north of Manhattan. The Bronx could largely be characterised by unemployment, one-parent families, low income, criminal activity, and youngsters in group formations with nowhere in particular to go [1]. To find ways to express anger and resentment toward such a terrible social situation, African youths created Hip-Hop music. As a powerful and influential form of self-expression among underprivileged groups, Hip-Hop has an influence that even intersects with the feminist movement—raising questions about its role in promoting or challenging gender equality. This paper aims to investigate the relationships between Hip-Hop music and feminism, including women's fluctuating status in the Hip-Hop music field, how feminist ideas are manifested in Hip-Hop lyrics, and what strategies women use to reverse the man-dominated music world. To conduct this research, the author collected references, conducted case analyses of female Hip-Hop artists, and explored Hip-Hop's historical background. The study can

not only enrich the study of Hip-Hop and Feminism, but also enhance awareness of gender equality, thereby promoting a freer and more equal Hip-Hop cultural atmosphere.

2. Features of early Hip-Hop music: the oppression of women

This section will explore the oppression of women in Hip-Hop music from two perspectives. Firstly, it will examine the marginalized status of women in Hip-Hop music. Secondly, it will analyze the harm to women's rights caused by lyrics in Hip-Hop music. Detailed discussions are presented below.

2.1. The marginalized dilemma of women in Hip-Hop music

Marginalized or oppressed groups often show rebellion against mainstream authorities. For instance, African youths use Hip-Hop music to express their resistance. However, while striving for their rights and freedom of expression, they often forget to respect other groups, like women, creating new forms of injustice. Collins [2] contends that individuals can simultaneously be oppressor and oppressed. Yong [3] also states that within an oppressed system, people intentionally harm more vulnerable groups.

On a global scale, African men are the oppressed. However, within the Hip-Hop culture, African men become the oppressors, venting their anger and resentment on women, which is manifested in both their attitudes toward women and Hip-Hop music.

In the 1970s, the musical activities connected with hip-hop were dominated by men, apart from a few women who were part of someone's crew [1]. Several reasons contributed to this phenomenon. Firstly, hip-hop and rap music traditionally have been overwhelmingly masculine expressions [1]. At that time, there were stereotypes about women, and female rappers were considered inappropriate to create music filled with masculine themes, creating a high-entry barrier for women. Secondly, as the accompanying music for breaking street dance, hip-hop had a competitive nature [1]. This highly competitive environment was seen as more suitable for men, which further marginalized female rappers. In addition, according to Larsen [1], gang-related formations were prevalent in the Hip-hop community. It was essential for rappers to belong to a certain group. However, there were a few gang-related formations that accepted women. The lack of acceptance further exacerbates the absence of female rappers.

The scarce number of female rappers had to rely on male musicians to survive in the Hip-Hop music industry. When discussing hip-hop, we see how Black women's identities are shaped by the desire to succeed within this male-dominated industry, thus leading to them aligning themselves with personas that appease societal expectations [4]. According to Moultrie, the term "video vixen", which referred to a highly sexualized figure with an attractive physique, is connected to this phenomenon. Black women are forced into specific stereotypes, regardless of how they see themselves.

2.2. The damage to women's rights in Hip-Hop music

The prevalent sexist and misogynistic content in Hip-Hop music further compounded females' challenges. Hip-Hop music often includes derogatory terms toward women and lyrics that objectify them. Sexism, according to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, is characterized by the belief that the members of one sex are less intelligent, able, skilful, etc. than the members of the other sex, especially that women are less able than men [1]. Larsen also pointed out that the music

industry has a penchant for presenting women as sexually objectified beings rather than individuals with real talent. For instance, in many Hip-Hop music videos, women wear revealing clothing and are filmed from a male gaze perspective. Moreover, derogatory terms like “bitch” frequently appear in the lyrics, which overlooks women’s value as independent individuals. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in a practice called “the Dozens”. In this practice, men demonstrate their wisdom, masculinity, and wit by engaging in rhyming battles. This form of expression is filled with misogynistic language, which inadvertently harms women. These actions not only damage women’s social status and rights but also shape a social concept that links women’s sexual value with their abilities, impairing women’s development in the Hip-Hop music field.

3. The integration of Black feminism and Hip-Hop culture

Female rappers have been influenced by several strands of African and diasporic feminisms, as they adopt progressive ideas and reflect on their circumstances. According to Clark [5], the strands include African feminism, Black feminism, hip-hop feminism, motherism, womanism, transformative feminism, and Third World feminism. These ideologies provide women with basic theoretical inspiration, guiding them to rebel and express their difficulties in both the field of hip-hop and society.

Many studies have demonstrated that hip-hop feminism can help women reshape their image, inspire potential and self-confidence, and elevate the image of female groups in the public eye and status [6]. After absorbing feminist ideas, women begin to criticize the existing authority systems and start investigating how to change the current situation. Rejecting being merely sexual objects, female rappers present their intelligence, aggressiveness, independence, curiosity, and insight by describing their life struggles, achievements, and advanced perspectives in lyrics. They also break traditional social norms, challenging the existing authority through the power of music.

However, “Hip-Hop feminism” is rooted in how Black women embrace their love for Hip-Hop culture while acknowledging the prevalent misogyny within it—a reality that forces them to navigate a complex paradox. Black women have a complex relationship with hip-hop as they navigate finding their identity in a culture that objectifies them [4]. Women who are hip-hop lovers and female rappers try to claim their sexuality and power, but they are doing this within a system that overlooks their qualities that are not related to physical appearance or sexual allure. Moreover, the patriarchal nature of Hip-Hop prevents them from showcasing their complexity or multifaceted identities, instead forcing them to conform to social expectations and mainstream aesthetics.

4. The influence of feminism on female rappers

Women in African Hip-Hop communities create music that reflects the cultural and political environments they live in and often includes important social commentary [5]. For instance, in Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y”, she describes sexual harassment through lyrics “I walked past these dudes when they passed me. One of 'em felt my booty, he was nasty”, and depicts violence in intimate relationships through lyrics “Bad days at work give you an attitude and you erupt. And take it out on me, but that's about enough.” Instead of being limited to revealing gender inequalities, Latifah also expresses her attitudes and provides specific guidance for girls who are in the same dilemmas. For example, in her lyrics, she sings “A man don't love you if he hits ya. This is my notice to the door. I'm not takin' it no more. I'm not your personal whore”, emphasizing the self-confidence and dignity. Women come to Hip-Hop with their stories to tell, with their pain and happiness, with their knowledge, their softness, with their prejudices they suffer for being women,

with their limitations, with their weakness, and their strength [7]. Gradually, more female rappers begin to reveal their consciousness and resistance in Hip-Hop music culture, generating resonance and widespread dissemination.

Some more radical hip-hop feminists and female rappers are not satisfied with just revealing women's dilemmas in daily lives. Through songs and lyrics, they directly reverse gender inequality in sexuality. Initially, men hold the sexual dominance, objectifying women in lyrics, and women are expected to be passive in sexuality. However, female rappers are changing the rules, expressing their sexual desire and autonomy in songs.

According to Kolesová [8], in "Work It", Missy uses lyrics, "I love your braids and your mouth full of fronts", to describe her experience of having relationships with men and following her sexual desires. Women own their bodies, and they decide what they want to do with them. The revolutionary perspective of liberated women owning their sexuality is one of the biggest traits in her lyrics. Moreover, in another Missy's song called "Pass that Dutch", she writes "Misdemeanor on the floor, pretty boy, here I come. I am that bitch y'all slept on." Missy twists the perspective, and this time it is she who chooses the men, and they obediently follow her. She seems to be proud to do whatever she wants, turning the originally derogatory term "bitch" used as a slur by male rappers into a description of herself that she is happy about, although it might trigger people with a different mindset [8]. In addition, female rappers Megan and Cardi B use some vulgar language to describe their lady parts and how they engage in sexual acts. In the song, Megan said, "If he fuck me and asks, Whose is it?/When I ride the d***, I'ma spell my name." [4] She connects the idea of eroticism with power. When participating in this sexual act, Megan still asserts her ownership of her body. She reminds the man that even though she is intimate with him at this moment, this is still her vagina, and her body is not his.

In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", Audre Lorde says, "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling." [9] Specifically, within hip-hop, Black women need to reclaim their agency and sexuality through this erotic power as it poses an ability to overcome rather than to conform [4]. As a result, pursuing sexual gender equality is beneficial for women to reverse the man-dominated world and develop their inner female power.

5. The global spread of Hip-Hop feminism beyond music

Nowadays, the concept of Hip-Hop feminism is not limited to the field of Hip-Hop music. Instead, it has permeated all aspects of life and ultimately achieved global reach. This expansion is deeply linked to the evolving roles of women within the Hip-Hop field.

As women's status and influence continue to rise in the field of hip-hop music, they gain more rights of self-expression and decision-making. The images of female rappers become more diverse, instead of being objectified or merely conforming to mainstream aesthetics. In addition, female rappers do not need to rely on males, becoming more independent. They use their voices and songs to reveal gender discrimination, pursue gender equality in sexuality, and inspire other women to achieve self-fulfillment. This transformation within hip-hop music serves as a manifestation of hip-hop feminism's wide-ranging effect.

This shift in women's roles within hip-hop music not only reflects the internalization of hip-hop feminist ideals but also acts as a catalyst for the movement's expansion into non-musical spheres. Specifically, hip-hop feminism has permeated diverse real-life settings, where its principles are translated into tangible social action. Hip-hop feminism is present in various real-life settings. As Fernandes [7] stated, it occurs in schools, homes, community centers, and performance facilities

where the authors witness how homegirls use the self-critiquing “keeping it real” language from hip-hop culture to challenge misogyny, engage in social activism, and call attention to issues such as sexual violence, gender stereotypes, body images, and love. The confidence and self-awareness gained by female rappers in hip-hop music spread to these real-life settings. Here, younger females are encouraged to express themselves and challenge social norms without limitations.

Moreover, the influence of hip-hop feminism extended to worldwide social media platforms, becoming more famous and influential. According to Durham [10], a group of hip-hop feminists launched an effective campaign on Facebook and Twitter. They pressured a major hip-hop magazine to fire its editor and asked for a public apology for publishing an interview with a popular pimp rapper, Too \$hort, because the rapper advised adolescent boys on how to sexually assault girls. “The swift response to misogynoir not only resulted in a retraction by the rapper but also provided an opportunity for serious dialogue about sexual violence in communities across the country.” [10] Digital activism can be seen as an extension of the female rappers’ fight for equality in hip-hop music, showing the widespread and global impact of hip-hop feminism.

6. Conclusion

The paper aims to explore the relationship between hip-hop music and feminism, including women’s fluctuating status in the hip-hop music field, the manifestation of feminist ideas in lyrics, and strategies to challenge the male-dominated music industry. Initially, women’s status in hip-hop culture is extremely low. They have to rely on males to develop themselves, conform to the mainstream aesthetics, and endure insulting words in lyrics. Being influenced by Black Feminism, female rappers try to use lyrics to criticize misogyny, reveal gender inequalities, and strive for women’s sexual rights. Gradually, the spirit of hip-hop feminism becomes more influential and even achieves global impact.

However, the study has certain limitations. When analyzing feminist ideas through lyrics, this paper only focuses on famous and well-represented songs, instead of conducting a comprehensive and systematic analysis. Then, some important feminist expressions may be overlooked. To address the issue, future research can use databases and technology, exploring more varied types of hip-hop lyrics from different periods.

Future research can focus on “why male rappers are both oppressors and oppressed.” Male rappers hold dominance in traditional hip-hop culture and reinforce gender inequalities, becoming oppressors. On the other hand, they also face competitive peer pressures, social stereotypes about masculinity, and constraints of business rules. In this context, they are also oppressed. Within hip-hop culture, there is a complex oppressor and oppressed relationship. Investigating this topic contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the social structure and power distribution within the hip-hop music field.

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