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Rap Music: Gender Difference in Derogatory Word Use

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Much of the literature relating to rap assumes such music contains violent and misogynic lyrics. Before exploring the possible deleterious effects of rap lyrics, it is critical to go back to the source and listen to the music. Our work examines the frequency of six profane words in randomly drawn rap music and how this differs between female and male artists. A content analysis of 180 randomly drawn songs from 18 randomly drawn artists was conducted. We expected that male artists would use more profane words compared to female artists. We also expected more profanity, by both male and female artists, to be directed at women. Our data show that the use of general profanity is most common in rap lyrics followed by profane words aimed at men. Male artists are significantly more likely than female artists to use profanity in their lyrics.

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Much of the literature relating to rap assumes such music contains violent and misogynic lyrics. While some researchers examine social effects of violent lyrics (Anderson et al. 2003; Fried 1996, 1999; Johnson et al. 1995; Ballard and Coates 1995; Johnson 1996; Adams and Fuller 2006; Diamond et al. 2006; Chen et al. 2006) others call for censorship of such lyrics (McLeod et al. 1997; Thompson et al. 1990). Given the diversity of rap artists, it is important to carefully analyze the content of rap lyrics to better understand the music. Before exploring the possible deleterious effects of rap lyrics in the social fabric and how to appropriately respond, it is critical to go back to the source, the lyrics, and hear what they actually say. Our work examines the frequency of six profane words in randomly drawn rap music and how this differs between female and male artists.

Origins of Rap Music

Rap music emerged in New York City in the mid-1970s (see Sullivan 2003). Lynch and Krzycki (1998) write that rap music is the story and voice of the streets. Specifically, rap was a story of life on urban streets in the United States from the perspective of low-income minority groups (see Sullivan 2003; Rose 1995; Decker 1993). Today, rap music is a distinctive musical genre heard around the world (McGregor 1998). Raps' fans initially were primarily Black and Latino; however, as Rose (1995) notes, by the late 1980s rap music was enjoyed by a race diverse audience as well as an increasingly global one (see Delgado 1998; Bennett 1999). As Lynch and Krzycki (1998) remind us, mass-produced popular culture, of which rap music is very much a part, is "owned, produced, and controlled by a monopolized, mass-media entertainment industry" (324). In fact, Powell (2000) argues that corporate marketing and control of rap music has led to the political marginalization of rap lyrics.

Prevalent themes in rap music are nation-consciousness (Decker 1993), oppositional culture (key ideas include distrust, anger and resistance) (Martinez 1993; 1997) and critique of a perceived racist and discriminatory society (Berry and Looney 1996; Martinez 1994; 1997). Further, violence and sexual conquest (dominance and control) are images in many popular rap songs (see Harvey 1999; Pinn 1996; Pemberton 2001; Henderson 1996). Notably, media concern about violent crime being fueled by rap lyrics fell flat in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Violent crimes around the nation reached record lows as rap music continued to enjoy wide spread popularity (Johnson et al. 1995).

Rap Music and Gender Concerns

Little research attention aims to differentiate rap lyrics and how they may differ by the gender of the artist. Indeed, Rose (1995) argues that rap is a music genre that has historically been dominated by male artists (see too Haugen 2003; Kitwana 2002). Ransby and Matthews (1993) argue that rap music is very male centered and feeds sexual oppression (see too Wester et al. 1997). Instead of helping forge a more egalitarian gender relationship, Ransby and Matthews (1993) and Wester et al. (1997) argue that rap music aims to emulate a hierarchical gender arrangement consistent with the dominant U.S. culture. Adams and Fuller (2006) write that misogyny "in gangsta rap is the promotion, glamorization, support, humorization, justification, or normalization of oppressive ideas about women" (940). Adams and Fuller (2006) make the argument that rap music demeans black women by objectifying them—they are only useful as sex objects or objects of abuse. In the end, they posit that black women are disposable and of no

use to black men (Adams and Fuller 2006).

Johnson et al. (1995) write that some critics of rap music believe that rap lyrics help shape attitudes and behaviors regarding the appropriateness of violence against women. Today, there is much interest in how rap lyrics may contribute to sexism within the family, community, and society. This perspective tends to ignore the contributions of female rappers (see Haugen 2003; Sutton 1995). Skeggs (1993) argues that many female rap artists ridicule the idea of women as sexual objects relegated to powerless positions in the family and the society at large (see too Decker 1993; Armstead 2007). Rather, Skeggs (1993) hears a message of resistance against tradition and the celebration of autonomy. Little discussion or research examines differences in lyrics between female and male rappers. Armstead (2007) argues that African American female rappers “defend women against sexist assumptions and misogynist assertions made by their Black male counterparts, and they attempt to build their female audience’s self-esteem and raise consciousness levels” (109). However, Armstead (2007) posits that because these female rap artists see the feminist movement as composed primarily of heterosexual, white and upper middle-class women, they do not generally self-define as “feminists” and do not want to be seen as anti-Black male (see too Rose 1995). We hypothesize that male rap artists will include more profane words in their lyrics compared to female rap artists. Further, we expect that both male and female rappers will express more profanity toward women (bitch, ho) than toward men or the language in general. While our work is limited, in that we look for the occurrence of specific words in lyrics, our findings will help forge a better understand of sexist language in rap lyrics and how that differs by the gender of the rap artist.

Perceived Concerns Regarding Rap Music

As McLeod et al. (1997) write, many believe rap lyrics are harmful to both youth and the society as a whole (see too Fried 1999; Rudman and Lee 2002). Specifically, if young people hear profanity and/or sexist lyrics in rap music does this shape behavior? Concerns center on whether or not rap lyrics lead listeners to exhibit aggressive behavior or use profane language. Others (Krohn and Suazo 1995; McLaren 1995; McDonnell 1992; Cummings and Roy 2002; Valery 1998; Kopano 2002) suggest that rap music has significant benefits. Rap provides a voice, they maintain, for those excluded from mainstream society as well as serving as a vehicle to raise awareness about social issues. Still, rap music has been the focus of critical and media concern when looking at song lyrics (Fried 1999).

Lynxwiler and Gay (2000) maintain that there has been a collective effort to define rap music as a type of audio pornography that endorses sexist and violent ideas and behaviors. Binder (1993) argues that the media characterizes rap and heavy-metal music differently. Namely, concern about rap centers on how lyrics may provoke violent crimes among listeners. On the other hand, violence caused by the listeners of heavy metal is thought directed at self (specifically drug abuse or suicide) (see Anderson et al. 1998, 2003; Bargh et al. 1996; Maxwell 2001; Ballard and Coates 1995; Ballard et al. 1999; Arnett 1996). These concerns, Binder (1993) maintains, are related to the perceived race of each audience.

Who Listens to Rap Music?

Fans of rap continue to be stereotyped as young and African American/black, while listeners of heavy-metal are seen as young and white. Not surprisingly, rap music became the

focus of public concern when worrying about the meaning and effects of song lyrics (see Greenwald and Banaji 1995). Kuwahara (1992) found that approximately 30% of black college students listened to rap music often. More black men than black women listened to rap music. Kuwahara (1992) maintained that most white students, regardless of gender never (or seldom) listened to rap music. By the late 1990's, Spiegler (1996) found that the majority of those under 20 years of age liked rap music. Further, the influence of rap music expanded to fashion among this age group. Berry (1994) also posits that rap lyrics are empowering and provide positive identities for low-income listeners (see too Lena 2004).

Sample Selection

In order to gain an adequate and unbiased sample of rap artists, an inventory was taken of the rap artists carried at a large music store in a metropolitan mall. This inventory was done by hand and designated the gender of the rap artist. The sample was limited to single artists. While some rap artists include the work of others on their albums, the primary credit associated with the music is the artist on the cover. Consumers buy the work primarily because of the featured artists even if the album includes some work by others. Thus, we maintain that there is a real difference between single rap artists compared to artists who are part of groups. The list of artists obtained from this music store is presented in Table 1. The sample was further restricted to artists who have been in the industry for at least three years. These artists have survived the initial test of time and have earned an established reputation in the industry.

The sampling frame was divided by gender. Then, for both men and women, nine artists were randomly selected for a total sample of 18 rap artists. Next, ten randomly drawn songs from each artist were selected. Thus, our total sample consists of one hundred and eighty randomly drawn songs from eighteen randomly drawn songs from these eighteen artists. The program MusicMatch Jukebox Basic was used to select the 180 songs. This program allows one to search and randomly retrieve songs from past albums by the artist.

Methodology

This work rests on a content analysis of frequently heard words in selected rap music in order to better understand differences in the use of derogatory words between female and male rap artists. Once the sample of songs was selected, a list of possible words to be content analyzed was constructed. First, the work of one male artist was examined in order to formulate an initial list of possible words. Initially, eight words were included. They were: bitch, ho, dick, nigga, fuck, shit, pussy and damn. These words were selected because they were heard most frequently. After replicating this process for a female artist, we pared this list to six words. We focus on the frequency of six profane words in rap lyrics that we suggest are generally related to men (dick, nigga), women (bitch, ho) or the language generally (fuck, shit). Adams and Fuller (2006) argue that the terms bitch and hoe are used to describe a "certain type of woman" and that the images these words produce help create women's oppression. While some might argue that these words are not always derogatory (or meant to be derogatory) within the context of rap music (especially the use of dick, nigga), we maintain that these words are heard as general profanities within the society at large. For example, in Mystikal's "Pussy Crook," one hears: "Dick don't fail me now" "Be advised he is armed with dick" or "Mystikal medicine Man Big truck nigga." His expressions for women include: "That's the type of Bitch ya don't touch" or "betcha I could sex the ho." In this song, one also hears a liberal use of "Fuck it fuck it" "Fuck

you like I ate my vegetables” “Shit, It’s time for” or “shit he is in a big truck.” In a Daily Collegian Online article (Santana 1994), the author maintains that gangsta rap must be on the hate lists of many feminists because the lyrics claim that women are nothing but bitches and ‘hos.

From the ten randomly drawn songs from the work of each artist, we coded how many times these words appeared. Next, we re-coded our count into two categories: whether the word appeared one or more times compared to none at all. Another re-code includes three categories: whether or not the word appeared 0 times, 1-3 times, or 4 or more times.

We tested two primary hypotheses that were derived from the literature. First, we expect that there will be more profanity generally in lyrics by male rappers compared to those by female artists. Second, we expect that there will be more profane words, by both female and male artists, to be directed at women (bitch, ho).

Results

Of the words we coded, the most frequently occurring were fuck (heard a minimum of 124 times in this sample), shit (minimum of 124) and nigga (minimum of 122) (see Table 2). Nigga was said a minimum of 70 times in one song (58 of our songs did not include the word). Fuck appeared a minimum 47 times in one song (56 of our songs, or 32% of the sample, did not include this word). Bitch had a high of 30 appearances in one song; followed by shit (appearing a minimum of 27 times in one song); ho (a minimum of 19 times in one song); and dick (appeared a minimum of 12 times in one song). We heard more profane words expressed toward the language generally (fuck and shit) than toward females or males. General profanity (fuck and shit) appeared a minimum of 248 times in our songs; followed by profane words directed at men (nigga and dick) which had a total of 166 occurrences. The words that appeared least frequently were profane words toward women (ho and bitch). These words appeared a minimum of 157 times in the songs in our sample (see Table 2).

We hypothesized that there would be a significant gender difference in the overall use of profane words; however, our data do not support this proposition. However, if we just look at gender differences in regard to the use of specific words (ho, nigga and fuck instead of ho/bitch, nigga/dick and fuck/shit), then gender differences emerge. Female rappers said the word “ho” less frequently than male rappers. Among female artists, 20% said “hoe” at least one time. A third (33.33%) of all male artists said hoe at least once. Female rappers were more likely to never say the word “ho” (54.55% of the time the word never appeared in their work) than male artists (45.45% of those who never said hoe were men) ($t = -2.03$; $p = .04$; see Table 2). Male rappers were significantly more likely to use the word “ho” in their lyrics compared to female rappers. Notably, the majority of female rappers, in our sample, never use the word “ho” in their work.

Of those who said nigga the most times (4 or more), 61% were male rap artists. Only 39% of female rappers said nigga this many times ($X^2 = 6.55$; $p = .04$; see Table 2). Of those rap artists who said fuck once or more, fewer were women (44%) compared to men (56%). Of those who never said fuck, 62.50% were women; 37.50% men ($t = -2.27$; $p = .02$). Of those who said fuck those most times (4 or more), 65% were men while only 35% were women ($t = -3.15$; $p =$

.002; see Table 2).

Our data support the idea that male rappers say the word “nigga” significantly more often than female rappers. Notably, the same pattern holds for the word “fuck.” When rappers use these two words repeatedly (4 or more times), most likely it is a male rapper delivering these particular words in their lyrics rather than a female rap artist.

Our hypothesis that there would be significantly more profane words in male rap lyrics compared to female rap lyrics was not supported. However, if we restrict our analysis to a single word that expresses profanity toward women, men or the language generally, gender differences emerge. Specifically, female rappers were less likely to use the word ho, nigga or fuck in their music compared to male rap artists. We did not find significant gender differences in the use of the words bitch, shit, or dick in the lyrics of male and female rap artists.

We did not find support for our hypothesis that more profane words, by both female and male artists, would be directed at women. Rather, we found that a word we defined as derogatory to men (nigga) occurred more frequently than either profanity directed at women (bitch or hoe). The most frequently occurring profane words in our sample were directed at the language generally (fuck and shit). Our work does support the idea that female rappers were significantly less likely to use the word “ho” than male rap artists. Still, words that we defined as derogatory of women (bitch, ho) were the least frequently occurring profanities we heard in this sample of music.

Summary and Conclusion

Much of the early research in this area neglects to compare lyrics in rap music and how they differ by gender. Our work shows that gender differences in rap lyrics exist *if* you define profane words narrowly. Female rappers were significantly less likely than male rappers to use the words hoe, nigga or fuck in their lyrics. We expected male and female artists to direct more profanity toward women. This proposition was not empirically supported. Rather, the words (nigga) and (shit and fuck) were most apt to appear in rap lyrics not those aimed at women (bitch or hoe). Male rappers were more likely to use “nigga” in their lyrics than female rappers to use “ho.” Perhaps this is because, within the industry and rap culture, “nigga” is not seen as a profane word.

The word “bitch” appears much more frequently in these rap lyrics than the word “ho.” Male rap artists were more like than female artists to use the word “hoe”; however, female rap artists were just as likely as men to use the word “bitch.” Much concern centers in the literature around these two words as many argue that they are misogynistic and help create and sustain women’s oppression (see Adams and Fuller 2006). While we are sympathetic to this argument, our empirical work found that these two words were not the most frequently heard derogatory words in rap music. Again, one might argue that these two words have more of a negative connotation than others in these lyrics. Still, “ho” is not a commonly heard word in these rap lyrics.

Our work does suggest that female rappers were less likely to use profane words in their lyrics compared to male rappers. Perhaps it is not wise to lump together rap music as a whole.

Oftentimes when one hears discussions about the impact of rap music on listeners, many appear to assume that virtually all rap artists are of a particular gender. For example, Ballard, Dodson and Bazzini (1999) argued that rap music did not tend to inspire listeners to be prosocial compared to listeners of pop lyrics. Kobin and Tyson (2006) suggested that rap/hip hop music might facilitate an empathetic connection with others in urban settings. The presumed deleterious or possible positive effects of rap music tend to be lumped together as a whole (see too Rubin et al. 2001). Researchers interested in rap lyrics may want to take into account gender differences in future work. Clearly, lyrics differ between female and male artists. Little attention focuses on female rap artists and how their lyrics may impact listeners. Rather, attention in rap literature published to date focuses on male rap artists or rap artists in general (is the presumption that all rap artists are male or that gender makes no difference).

The genre of rap music enjoys continued success (Watts 1997). Watts (1997) makes the argument that rap has become a type of consumer cultural commodity. Youth have always identified with the music of their generation. Rap music now reaches a broad race diverse and international audience. How gender differences emerge in the lyrics of rap artists is a neglected area of research. Future work that addresses these differences would add much to what we know about this musical genre.

Table 1. Male and Female Single Rap Artists (2004).

Male:

Baby Bash, BackBone, DMX, Baby, Bizzy Bone, Canibus, Big Pun, Cage, Cam'ron, Chino XL, DJ Quik*, Fabolous, Ja Rule, MC Hammer, E-40, Murphy Lee, Jay Z*, Lil Flip, Ludacris*, Method Man, Mos Def, Bubba Sparxx, Wyclef Jean, Tupac, Too Short, Puff Daddy, Petey Pablo, Noreaga, Joe Budden, Chingy, Eminem*, Big Sike, Busta Rhymes*, Big Mike, Kurtis Blow, Slimm Calhous, Cee-lo, Loon, Dr. Dre*, 50 Cents, Ice Cube, Mystikal*, Fat Joe, Nas, Bow Wow, Lil Wayne, Will Smith, LL Cool J, Snoop Dogg*, Scarface, Xzibit, Trick Daddy, Redman, Old Dirty Bastard, Notorious B.I.G., Nelly.

Females:

Da Brat*, Amil, Foxy Brown*, Missy Elliot*, Eve*, Angie Martinez, Lil Kim*, Ms. Jade, Queen Latifah*, Rah Digga*, Trina*, Mystic, M.C. Lyte*, Lady of Rage, Bahamadia, Carlie Baltimore, Gangsta Boo, Lady Luck, Sole?, Mia X

*Indicates randomly selected artists from each list.

Table 2. Number of Times Profane Word Appears in Songs by Male and Female Rap Artists

| <i>Word</i> | <i>Word Count</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | | <i>Cumulative Frequency</i> | |
|--------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| | | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| <i>Ho</i> | 0 | 60 | 72 | 60 | 72 |
| | 1-3 times | 24 | 15 | 84 | 87 |
| | 4+ times | 6 | 2 | | |
| | 1 or more times | 30 | 18 (48 total) | 90 | 90 |
| <i>Bitch</i> | 0 | 36 | 35 | 36 | 35 |
| | 1-3 times | 25 | 37 | 61 | 72 |
| | 4+ times | 29 | 18 | | |
| | 1 or more times | 54 | 55 (109 total) | 90 | 90 |
| <i>Dick</i> | 0 | 68 | 68 | 68 | 68 |
| | 1-3 times | 14 | 20 | 82 | 88 |
| | 4+ times | 8 | 2 | | |
| | 1 or more times | 22 | 22 (44 total) | 90 | 90 |
| <i>Nigga</i> | 0 | 28 | 30 | 28 | 30 |
| | 1-3 times | 19 | 32 | 47 | 62 |
| | 4+ times | 43 | 28 | | |
| | 1 or more times | 62 | 60 (122 total) | 90 | 90 |
| <i>Fuck</i> | 0 times | 21 | 35 | 21 | 35 |
| | 1-3 times | 26 | 32 | 47 | 67 |
| | 4+ times | 43 | 23 | | |
| | 1 or more times | 69 | 55 (124 total) | 90 | 90 |
| <i>Shit</i> | 0 times | 29 | 27 | 29 | 27 |
| | 1-3 times | 34 | 40 | 63 | 67 |
| | 4+ times | 27 | 23 | | |
| | 1 or more times | 61 | 63 (124 total) | 90 | 90 |

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