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A rhetorical analysis of the meaning of the "independent woman" in the lyrics and videos of male and female rappers

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ABSTRACT

Using the concept of intersectionality, this rhetorical analysis combines feminist and critical cultural theories to explore the meanings of the "independent woman" in the lyrics and respective videos of male and female rappers. Findings indicate both groups use misogynistic language to describe women and juxtapose images of independence with material wealth. However, male rappers are more likely to include messages of beautiful, overachieving women paired with average men while female rappers focus on their own sexual prowess. Also worth noting is while male rappers highlight domestic skills such as cooking and cleaning, female rappers do not mention them at all. Based on viewer feedback, it appears very few viewers explore the true meaning of independence and relationships. This study is of significance because rap music is a large part of popular culture that scholars must continuously analyze for new messages and meanings.

KEYWORDS: independent woman, rap music, hip-hop, feminist theory, critical cultural studies.

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Introduction

The definition of an "independent woman" in the *Urban Dictionary*, a searchable archive of contemporary American slang, is "a woman who pays her own bills, buys her own things, and does not allow a man to influence her stability or self-confidence. She supports herself on her own entirely and is proud to be able to do so." Conversely, bloggers, YouTube viewers and feminists also have vastly different ideas about an "independent woman." For example Darryl James, a blogger and author of "Bridging The Black Gender Gap," asserts that the phrase "independent woman" has gone excessively far and its meaning is inconsistent and in many ways "cartoonish, mannish and just plain unattractive." He adds that in the quest for so-called "independence," some women have given up substantial portions of their womanhood, which has been detrimental to fostering meaningful relationships in the black community (James, 2004). Similarly, Tina Portis, an entrepreneur and former single mother of three, depicts independence as a natural part of adulthood. Her 2010 video clip posted to YouTube has 15,387 views to date and hundreds of comments. In the video, she asserts that independent women do not need a pat on the back for doing what grownups are supposed to do: pay their bills; buy houses and cars, etc (Portis, 2010).

Historically, Wallace (1979) asserted that the myth of the black superwoman essentially consists of stereotypes deeply rooted in slavery, or the idea that although "lazy," black women are able to do more physical labor than the average woman, they consistently sacrifice themselves for others, have no emotion, and are really just "men." She adds that the matriarchal structure of black families led by a strong black woman during slavery is often credited for the emasculation of black men and subsequently the dysfunctional nature of the black family. She writes: "Less of a woman in that she is less 'feminine' and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman" (p. 107). These myths of the black superwoman have helped shape the negative perceptions of black women as a whole, which carries over to present day stereotypes found in imagery of the "independent" black woman.

This variance in viewpoints underscores the importance of studying the phenomena of the "independent woman" in the 21st Century. There is much interest in how rap lyrics may contribute to sexism within the family, community, and society (Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2007; Kubrin, 2005; Zillmann, 1995). Researchers have found rappers place an emphasis on controversial themes such as drugs, violence, materialism and misogyny (e.g. Krohn and Suazo, 1995; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2007; Kubrin, 2005). Additionally, rap songs are more likely to place female characters in positions of objectification than males. However, these studies neglect to compare how male and female rappers differ in their messages. In addition, few studies have analyzed representations of "independence" in rap music and videos. To fill that gap, this essay explores current representations and offers solutions to improving them.

Rap music is a large part of popular culture that scholars must continuously analyze for new messages and meanings (Pough, 2002). Furthermore, popular culture is an important source of ideas that can shape people's perceptions of themselves and other people; and the content of popular music may have a great influence on adolescents as they employ it for self-identity formation (Collins, 2004; North, Hargreaves, O'Neill, 2000).

Review of the Literature

For feminist theorists, there is no dispute that media function ideologically with other social and cultural institutions to reflect, reinforce, and mediate existing power relations and ideas about how gender is and should be lived (e.g. hooks, 1992; Van Zoonen; 1994; Carter and Steiner, 2004). Feminist theorists have long asserted that mass media serve as instruments to transmit stereotypical, patriarchal and hegemonic values about women, which in turn make hierarchical and distorted sex-role stereotypes appear normal (e.g. Carter and Steiner, 2004). Van Zoonen (1994) summarized this "transmission model" as a media reflection on society's dominant social values that symbolically belittle women, either by not showing them at all, or by depicting them in stereotypical roles (p. 17).

Ardener (1975) posits that women and men in patriarchal, capitalist societies tend to form two distinct circles of experience and interpretation, one overlapping the other (cited in Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). The masculine circle converges with the norms of society, providing a masculine signature and overriding the feminine circle. Women can either try to translate their points of view into a masculine mode or try to separate alternate models of communication. Therefore, women's perspectives are often not openly articulated. As a result, their expression is muted (e.g. Orbe, 1998; Collins, 2000).

Muted group theory sees language as excluding and demeaning women based on several factors, including words to describe them. For example, "stud," and "playboy" are popular words to depict promiscuous men. Conversely, less appealing words, such as "slut," "hooker," and "whore," are used to describe promiscuous women. Worth noting is that muting is not the same as silencing. It is successful only when the non-dominant group ceases to develop alternate communication styles to express their experiences and code their messages. Muting is relevant to this study, which compares male and female messages of "independence," because it looks at whether songs by female rappers are successful in counteracting negative messages presented by their male counterparts.

While early feminist theorists emphasized the commonalities of women's oppressions, they tended to neglect profound differences between women in terms of class, age, sexuality, religion and race. Debates about the adequacy of gender as the central concern of feminist theory led to the useful concept of intersectionality, which emphasizes that women do not experience discrimination and other forms of human rights violations solely on the grounds of gender, but for many reasons, including age, ethnicity, class, and sexuality (Ludvig, 2006). An intersectional approach to analyzing the disempowerment of marginalized women attempts to capture the interaction between two or more forms of subordination such as race, ethnicity, and class.

Rap Music

Traditionally, African American youth mainly utilized rap music as a form of opposition to attract attention toward social issues. Rap music served as a means of reflection on poverty, police violence, discrimination, apartheid and hostility in their neighborhoods (Cheney, 2005). However, at some point rappers changed their focus. Some studies suggest rap music promotes violence, drug use, sex and materialism, while others have accused the genre of being overly

sexist, and degrading toward women (Kubrin, 2005; Zillmann, 1995). Colorism is also prevalent, according to Shaviro (2005) who found female beauty in rap videos is often portrayed as coming as close to whiteness as possible, without actually being white. Colorism describes the perception that society gives individuals with lighter skin advantages over those with darker skin (Kubrin, 2005). Shaviro, 2005 stated:

> Hip hop videos today tend to value the same near-anorexic slimness as mainstream white culture does—together with light skin, and long, straight (fake as well as processed) hair. Most recently, there has also been a tendency to focus on women who are "multi-racial," i.e. black and Asian. (p. 69)

Consequently, scholars often link rap music to black male identity, which may lead to an increase in themes of sexism and misogyny, hatred or contempt of women (Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2007). Examples of misogyny include lyrics that refer to woman as "bitches" and "whores" and spotlight male dominance in relationships and sexual prowess (hooks, 1992; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2007). Many rappers exercise what Michael Eric Dyson calls "Femiphobia," the desire to assert black male subjectivity in rap music sometimes at the expense of black female subjectivity or by suppressing women's bodies (cited in Perry, 2003). Social hierarchy also plays a role in the content of rap music. When one group, such as black men, is not completely empowered but has a stronger or higher position in the hierarchy, they are likely to attack or oppress groups under them (e.g. Rose, 1995; hooks, 1992; Krohn & Suazo, 1995).

According to Rose (1995), the negative stories narrated in rap music may serve to protect young men from the reality of female rejection; tales of sexual domination falsely relieve their lack of self-worth. hooks (1992) characterized rap music as a field that male rappers must intensely labor and maintain to sustain patriarchy. hooks (1992) mused "what better group to labor on this 'plantation' than young black men." hooks adds that mass media in general institutionalize white and male supremacist ideologies, which produce "specific images, representations of race that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation and overall domination of all black people" (p. 2). This exploitation often results in unappealing and dichotomous stereotypes of black women: for example, the sexually promiscuous black woman, also known as the "oversexed-black-Jezebel," is an extreme opposite of the "mammy," who is nurturing and passive, and the "welfare cheat" who lives lavishly off public assistance. In the end, certain qualities attached to black women allow people to justify their oppression (Collins, 2000).

Maintaining the invisibility of black women and their ideas has been critical in maintaining social inequalities. For example, in her studies of "superwomen," Wallace (1979) suggests black men and women have partially accepted the myths about them, which contributes to the creation of sexual and racial barriers for them as a group. Smith (2000) adds that many black women are unwilling to jeopardize their racial credibility as defined by black men to address the realities of sexism.

Squires (2011) encourages critical communication scholars to identify and promote counter-frames to intervene and counteract stereotypical portrayals in popular culture. She argues that this becomes necessary especially as old discourses of colorblindness morph into celebrations of a ‘‘postracial’’ millennium. “By diversifying our tactics and approaches to the problem, we can creatively and proactively make some headway, and by doing so, set important examples for our students and colleagues in the process” Squires (2011, p. 47).

Scholars speculate black women remain silent for many reasons. For example, Terrelonge (1984) contends that African-Americans have withstood the long line of abuses perpetuated against them mainly because of black women’s fortitude, inner wisdom, and sheer ability to survive. In other words, black women play a critical role in keeping black families together, and they take it seriously. Collins (2000) adds that black women have placed women’s liberation, which might kill some of these negative perceptions, on the backburner because they believe the role of uniting all blacks is more important. Additionally, the black church and historically black colleges and universities, which could empower black women, often serve to subordinate them even further (Collins, 2000; Krohn & Suazo, 1995).

Armstead (2007) argues that while black female rappers attempt to build their female audience's self-esteem and raise consciousness level, they do not generally self-define as “feminists” and do not want to be seen as anti-black male. In addition, scholars often do not take their work seriously. For example, rapper Sister Souljah’s music as well as her autobiography *No Disrespect* (1994) focus on black women’s oppression, offering an important perspective on contemporary urban culture, and contribute to black feminist thought as critical social theory. However, scholars often dismiss her work in academia as being “nonfeminist” (Collins, 2000).

Methods

Inserting texts into the system of culture where they are produced and distributed can help illuminate features and effects of the texts that textual analysis alone might miss or downplay. Such analyses may also illustrate a narrative or story-telling process in which particular “texts” or “cultural artifacts” consciously or unconsciously links themselves to larger stories in the society.

The researcher conducted a rhetorical analysis of collected songs, videos and video comments to compare and contrast perceptions of independence by male and female rappers and audiences. The sample included videos selected via a YouTube search of songs in 2010 containing the keywords “women” and “independence.” This provided an overall sense for how the songs depict “independence.”

The rappers were divided into two categories: male and female. They were: Yo Gotti, Webbie, Drake, Candi Redd, Trina and Nicki Minaj, who all had popular songs focusing on the subject in the late 2000s.

- Webbie released “Independent” on his album, *Savage Life*, on December 8, 2007. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCUiGArhW2M&ob=av2e

- Yo Gotti released "5 Star Chick" or "5 Star Bitch" on May 20, 2009, on Yo Gotti's fifth studio album, *Live from the Kitchen*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mOspKPcw2o
- Drake released "Fancy" on his debut album, *Thank Me Later*, on August 3, 2010. The song features T. I. and his co-producer, Swizz Beatz. (No official video)
- Candi Redd Ft. Rasheeda & Kandi released "Independent Bitches (Remix)" on Jan. 12, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfYyCEnwzCg
- Trina released "I'm Single Again" on April 1, 2008, on her fourth Album *Still da Baddest.* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkOJnpai1MI&feature=related
- Nicki Minaj ft. Ne-Yo released *"*Miss Independent (Remix)*"* on September 22, 2008. (no official video)

Looking at this sample of songs and videos, this study addresses the following questions: 1) What are modern and historical representations of independent women? 2) How do male and female rappers perceive independence? 3) How do their depictions of independent women differ in their lyrics and videos? 4) How do viewer perspectives of these songs differ? 5) What are implications of study findings?

Findings and Discussion

Male and Female Rappers' Perceptions of Independence

The archetype of the "independent woman" is particularly emphasized today in the hip-hop genre in which male and female rappers discuss it frequently. The songs in this sample generally emphasize four themes: "material wealth equals independence," "beauty and independence are interconnected," "average men deserve perfect women," and "sexual prowess equals independence." The songs often include mixed messages. For example, Webbie's 2007 rendition of "Independent" speaks of his ideal mate as a college graduate who is financially stable, has a perfect credit score, and is a churchgoer and a schoolteacher. "*I-N-D-E-P-E-N-D-E-N-T Do You Know What That Mean/'Baby Phat Jus Relax Front Ya Own Flat Screen/Back Rubs Cook Clean And Don't Make Her Make Her Scene/"* (Webbie, 2007). Webbie's lyrics are far better than those that glorify drugs, violence and sexism. However, the song focuses on what an independent woman can do for him, but never mentions reciprocity or love. Hence, the song subordinates and elevates independent women simultaneously.

Similarly, Drake's song, "Fancy," includes a mixture of positive and negative messages that correlate independence with beauty: *You say you droppin' ten pounds preparing' for summer/And you don't do it for the man, men never notice/ You just do it for yourself you the fucking coldest.* Drake continues this theme of perfection throughout the single: *Nails done, hair done, everything did/Nails done, hair done, everything d.../ /In the bathroom flat irons and nail files/Spending' hours in salons on your hairstyle/In the mall steady racking' up the air miles* (Drake, 2010). While he compliments his ideal woman for staying in shape, the song's primary focus is her appearance and spending hours at the salon to gain physical perfection.

Conversely, female rappers in the sample tend to measure independence by sexual freedom, money and the ability to get men to care for them. For example, in "Independent Bitches," Rasheeda claims to pay for everything, on one hand (Redd, 2010). On the other hand,

she emphasizes the importance of men spending money on her. In other words, while espousing "independence," her lyrics make it clear that men must pay for a woman they desire. Redd (2010) discusses working hard and paying her own bills*;* however, the hook, tells a different story. She says, "*Independent bitches get up on the dance flo'/an if you dat chick make 'em spend a grand on ya*." This line demonstrates that although she is independent, she expects men to spend money on her, in this case, at least a grand.

Furthermore, it appears that female rappers are more sexually explicit than their male counterparts, often bragging about their skills in bed. For example, Rasheeda, exclaims she is the boss bitch and her "Dougie" is fresher than other women's. She continues with her "nookie," which is slang for intercourse, makes the fellas take a "*down south tour*," which refers to oral sex. Miss Kandi is also explicit and offers this description of her vagina "*They say it feel a little tighter get a little wetter/been told many times I'm the best ever/I asked your man and he said you betcha*" (Redd, 2010). Similarly, Nicki Minaj in her remix of "Miss Independence" with Ne-Yo focuses on oral intercourse. She states "*You know they call me down town Julie Brown/I get a lot head/I get a lot of fades and I get lot dread/"* (Minaj, 2010). She continues with "*I'm looking for a king with some good ding a ling.*" These lyrics are catchy and rhythmic, but they clearly focus mostly on a woman's sexual ability more than anything else and present a negative portrayal of women, particularly "independent" ones.

Materialism Equals Independence

It appears that while both male and female artists are obsessed with materialism, which supports findings by Krohn and Suazo (1995), their ideas on financial matters are different. Songs by male rappers praise women who do not depend on a man financially. For example, Drake *speaks of his independent woman as, "Independent with the demeanor of an R 'N' B singer* (Drake, 2010)*."* He lists fancy cars and a closet as full of brand new clothes and hand bags by designers such as Prada, Gucci and Chanel. Similarly, Webbie and Yo Gotti glorify expensive name brands owned by "independent women.

However, female rappers send mixed messages with their ideas of finances and "independence." Although they boast of buying things for themselves, their lyrics also encourage men to pay for companionship. For instance, in "Independent Bitches," Miss Kandi claims to have pioneered the independent chick movement. She describes herself as an "independent chick independently rich" and asserts that she does not depend on men; however, it appears that if men want to be with her, they must buy her gifts. "*He'll spend a million for a taste of me/dey say a independent chick cookie even taste better*."

In her single, "Single Again" (2008), Trina also equates independence with finances. She tells her unfaithful former fiancé, "*Don't Explain Shit To Me/I Got My Own Money/There's Nobody I Need/I Need My Own Space/I'm Single Again/"* (Trina, 2008). She describes her ex fiancé's financial problems, and states that although he has maxed out his credit cards, she is still doing well. Similarly, Trina states she has "*20 G's in the Prada bag/Got my own diamonds so I gave back the promise ring/hold up, wait a god damn minute/It ain't over till' I say we finished/till' I get my half"* (Trina, 2008). Nicki Minaj also fixates on material wealth in her 2010 rendition of "Miss Independent." She discusses closing million dollar deals and the

abundance of her assets such as horses and a pink Porsche with custom-made plates. She warns, *"You approach me/say boss because I paid the muthafuckin cost/I'm in the Porsche listening to Rick Ross/I am a muthafucking/that's why I love me/ Miss Independent"* (Minaj, 2010).

Worth noting is materialism and sex were not the focal point in Roxanne Shanté's 1989 single "Independent Woman." Shanté's goal was to strengthen women without using images of materialism, and unkind words. It was strong and uplifting. Not only did she admonish women not to depend on men, she also encouraged them not to let men take advantage of them: "*So wrapped up in fairytale dreams so naive that every male seems honest and loyal/ready to spoil Buying' him gifts as if the boy's loyal*" (Shanté, 1989).

Misogynic Messages

Another interesting finding is male and female rappers in this sample praise "independent" women, on one hand, while using misogynistic terms to describe them, on the other. For example, Yo Gotti calls his independent woman a "Five-Star Bitch" or "Chick." Although "chick" is less offensive than "bitch," it is still not a respectable moniker for a woman. Similarly, Webbie compliments his ideal woman for her financial success, on one hand; he calls her a "broad," on the other. According to the *Urban Dictionary*, a broad "is less respectable than lady but much more respectable than bitch." By referring to his ideal independent woman as a "broad," Webbie indicates that although his ideal woman is perfect in every way—educated, beautiful and domestic—she is still *just* a woman. Hence, emphasizing he is above her in social hierarchy.

Similarly, female rappers also use words such as "bitch" and "chick" for women and "nigga" for men. Female rappers' use of misogynistic words implies that women approve of them, which supports muted theory in which women's ideas are omitted and male perspectives are articulated (e.g. Orbe, 1995; Collins, 2000; Wood, 1999). The prevalence of derogatory words to describe women also supports findings by other scholars who conclude rap lyrics contain mysogonistic messages that present women in a negative light (e.g. Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2007).

Overall, male and female rappers in this sample unquestionably have a different viewpoint of "independence." They express the fear that many adults—both men and women have—the loss of independence in exchange for a relationship and family life. Female rappers do not present an ideal image of relationships. They often discuss sex as the main tool for obtaining independence and present a power struggle in which women try to gain the upper hand. Surprisingly, their portrayal of "independence" does not focus on women making a conscious decision to be independent to better their family life. Instead, independence is used as a means to buy material goods and to control men.

Similarly, male rappers in this sample do not mention settling down with the independent woman they desire. Instead, they point out she does not weigh them down, question their previous actions, or beg for money like other women, which makes her ideal. Both genders emphasize the importance of looking good, wearing nice clothing, and getting one's nails and hair done; perhaps placing too much emphasis on superficial beauty. Some of these same themes

are found in videos discussed in the next section. Consequently, while these songs contain positive ideas, they are overshadowed by negative messages that subordinate women based on gender. These ideas mirror hooks' (1992) argument that rap music serves to keep black women in their place.

Video Portrayals

The videos featured in this study differ greatly in how they depict their ideals of an "independent" woman. As with lyrics, videos by male and female rap songs contain mixed messages that are only partly positive. For example, Webbie's video "Independent Woman" (directed by Chris Comeaux) includes vignettes of female students in various settings such as classrooms, offices and hospitals. Throughout the video, they study current events and dream about their futures as doctors, business executives, and even the first African-American female president. They become sex objects as the camera zooms in on their short skirts and tight jeans, which reveal long legs, curvaceous figures. The video includes positive portrayals regarding intellect as these women are trying to further their education. However, they become objects of male desire based on camera angles. Conversely, their male counterparts are not portrayed as equals neither in dress nor intellect. Webbie is dressed very comfortably in oversized jeans, a jacket and tennis shoes. Instead of sitting in a classroom, he stands center stage by himself as the word "INDEPENDENT" scrolls in large gold-plated letters behind him.

Yo Gotti's "Five-Star Bitch" (directed by Rik Cordero) also contains fantasy imagery of average men and intelligent, beautiful women by mainstream standards. At the beginning of the video, the main character talks to his friends while standing in front of a house. As if in a vision, a sexy young woman walks by wearing tight jeans and a revealing T-shirt tied in a knot at the small of her back, revealing a tiny waist accented by an ample bottom, which is the focus of the first part of the video. Her long, wavy hair accents her smooth light-brown skin, which is appealing to Yo Gotti who calls her a "yellow bone." She appears ambitious as her day is spent studying, caring for her child and going to college. This fantasy-theme portrayal continues as he takes out a large stack of money that is stored in a plastic baggy in the kitchen cabinet and prepares to count it. An open cabinet door reveals several other plastic bags filled with crisp dollar bills. In another scene, he sits at the foot of the bed and describes a "Five-Star Bitch" while his oblivious love interest sleeps soundly next to him. Throughout the video, his occupation remains a mystery.

Similarly, Yo Gotti's video contains fantasy imagery of a surplus of mixed-heritage women reading books on the grassy lawns of a college campus. Although studious and intelligent, they wear thigh-length skirts, high-heels and breast-revealing tops instead of jeans and T-shirts like traditional co-eds. They have long flowing hair, long eyelashes, and flawless skin and are considered exotic and sexy by mainstream standards because of their mixed-heritage, illustrating colorism as discussed by Shaviro (2005). Worth noting is colorism is not as prevalent in videos by female artists, which feature women and men of all shades and colors. For example, in Candi Redd's "Independent Bitches" (2008) a fair-skinned female rapper wears cornrows perhaps to show allegiance to her black race. The others are various shades of brown.

Surprisingly, because of the inclusion of women of all skin tones, comments about Trina's 2008 video contained some negative feedback. A few viewers said they hate black people and dark skin. One person exclaimed, "Cause black people are dark while everything else is light and light looks good while black looks ugly as fuck." In response, a viewer suggested, "You need to get some help. Go see a shrink ASAP Because you have seriously lost your mind… You said that you are black but you don't like black people's skin color that means you don't like yourself…" Other viewers praised her for being inclusive.

While colorism is not prevalent in videos by female rappers in my sample, fantasy imagery was a dominant theme. They include fantasy portrayals of them living a lavish lifestyle pampered by members of the opposite sex. In "Independent Bitches," (directed by Mr. Boomtown) the first scene features Candi Redd cleaning up after her son who plays alone in their large mansion, then she hangs out with friends who are well manicured and dressed in designer fashions. Their lives look fun and picture perfect, as they dance the night away. Even the child in the video plays nicely in the living room without making a mess or putting up a fight when she leaves him at home.

Trina's video "I'm Single Again" (directed by Billy Woodcuff) features scenes in which she is sitting on a beautiful pool side while muscular men give her massages and fan her with a big leaf. The song chronicles her healing process, vacillating from happy to sad as she discusses the fun times they shared— in a perfect relationship that she likens to Beyonce and Jayzee's. She concludes that her ex-fiancé only wanted her for her body and what they shared was not love at all. In other words, she was just a sex object. "*You fell in love with my ass*," she exclaims. Perhaps as a slap in the face, she says she is now mingling with ball players.

Based on viewer feedback, it appears that the perception of independence is overlooked by most viewers of the videos in this study. Rather than focusing on independence, most comments center either on how much they love the song or how the artist ranks against other rappers. Few people discuss the irony of the lyrics, which promote independence, on one hand, dependence on men, on the other. One viewer of the "Independent Bitches" video on YouTube posted this comment, "These bitches are the farthest thing from independent I've ever heard of. Broke ass unemployed hookers bragging about teasing motherfuckers for money. Get a fucking job."

Similarly, very few viewers of Yo Gotti's video discuss the double standard in which imperfect men want a perfect woman. For example one person states, "I notice there are women with size 2 waists and flawlessly made up faces on these videos...however I don't see too many men giving as much effort to impress physically." In the case of Webbie's video for "Independent," a few viewers assert the song may be self-serving or about a man looking for an independent woman to take care of him. Other viewers state the members of his group are only appealing to "gold diggers" because they are "ugly." On the other hand, negative comments about Yo Gotti's video frequently focus on the artists' attire—particularly their baggy pants. One person commented that the artists are too old to dress like thugs. Another one stated if they knew the origins of the baggy pants trend—prison—they would abandon that style of dress.

Relationships in Rap Music Emphasizing Independence

While male rappers indicate they desire women who are domestic, female rappers do not mention domestic characteristics at all. Male rappers, many of whom deal with groupies on a daily basis, perhaps create the image of the self-sufficient woman in response to those who seek them out because of money. However, it appears that they place women in either one category or the other—gold-digger or independent. There is no happy medium. Also worth noting is male rappers in the sample set the bar higher for women than for men. For example, although Yo Gotti appears to demand an "independent" mate who is bright, perfect and beautiful; he alludes to the idea he is not. After listing his desires for a domestic woman, or "bitch," who will love him unconditionally, he adds, "*she knows how to treat a gangsta right"* (Yo Gotti, 2009). Similarly, in *Fancy* (2010) Drake appears to demand an "independent" mate who is bright, perfect and beautiful. However, he says she must have a little class and the confidence to "overlook his past ways," which alludes to the idea that he is less than ideal (Drake, 2010).

While giving "independent women" a pat on the back for their efforts, they do very little to encourage black men to foster healthy relationships. Honing in on the misalignment in what black men and women desire in a relationship, rap artist Slim Thug said both genders need to change their ways of thinking about couples, in a June 7, 2010 Vibe.com article (Girl, 2010). Black women want black men to be good providers, etc.; however, they do not want to reciprocate by playing a domestic role.

> Most single Black women feel like they don't want to settle for less. Their standards are too high right now. They have to understand that successful Black men are kind of extinct. We're important. It's hard to find us so Black women have to bow down and let it be known that they gotta start working hard; they gotta start cooking and being down for they man more. They can't just be running around with their head up in the air and passing all of us.

Slim Thug presents a compelling argument. Both men and women need to change their views about each other for the sake of a healthier black community. However, once, again, it appears that the ideal relationship is one in which the woman does everything such as paying the bills, cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children, while the male's role remains a mystery. According to Wilson (2009), the breakdown of poor black families and fewer marriages are the major causes of negative perceptions of black women. He adds that existing social issues in black neighborhoods such as poverty and economic mobility perpetuate this trend. This breakdown of the family, comes from both the distrust between the two sexes and the collected behaviors associated with the portrayal of a cool, gangster lifestyle. He adds that black men tend to harbor resentment against black women due to female suspicions about male behavior and intentions, which are the result of existing black male stereotypes of unreliability. At the same time, according to Kitwana (2003) many black men feel that black women simply seek men for financial support, leading to names such as "gold-digger."

Implications and Solutions

These songs in this sample illustrate the dichotomy between men and women in which both have different expectations for relationships, which brings us to solutions for counteracting negative messages of "independence" in rap music. Parents must take back their roles as image-makers and be proactive in discussing such lyrics with children. At face value, the lyrics in this sample appear innocent. They promote independent women; however, a deeper analysis reveals conflicting messages

It is a positive move to teach women the importance of independence; however, rap music may not be the best place for such messages. Educators and parents must emphasize self-esteem and place the concept of "independence" in the proper context. Men and women should be ready, willing and able to be financially independent if the need arises; however, it is not always the ideal, particularly for single parents.

In addition, literacy programs must be created in which students learn that beauty, materialism and unrealistic domestic standards are not necessarily a part of being "independent." Each person should have his or her own standards of "independence" based on personal circumstances such as family life, cultural surroundings and available finances. In addition, it is important to put the concept of independence into proper context with regard to relationships: At some point, the attainment of independence may become secondary for people who desire a relationship and family.

In order for such ideals to change, women must make it clear that "independence" as described in the songs featured in this study is not ideal for all women. Such portrayals not only negatively influence the lives of women, but also men. They foster sexist and unrealistic expectations of women that are hard to uphold, and let men off the hook as fathers and husbands because women shoulder the brunt of the work. Ideally, listeners should be able to choose their own meaning of "independent" and not believe they must fit someone else's ideal. Analyses such as this one are a step in the right direction in fostering debate on an important topic.

Finally rappers must take responsibility and infuse positive messages in their lyrics that downplay materialism, sexism and colorism. Their depictions of "independent" women are idealistic and such women are extraordinary and scarce—but not always "independent." While not as glamorous, lyrics might also highlight men and women who work hard and balance families and careers.

Conclusions

As this essay reveals there are many definitions and connotations of "independent woman" in the lyrics and videos of rap artists. Some of the songs featured in this study are a step in the right direction in improving the perception of rap lyrics. However, positive messages are often overshadowed by an emphasis on materialism, sex, beauty and perfection. Both genders include mixed messages about the true meaning of independence.

The biggest surprise was both genders define "independence" very differently. For example, songs by male rappers are more likely to include messages in which women are paying their bills, getting an education and cultivating a good home life. Female rappers, on the other

hand, mostly equate independence with sex. They discuss their skills in bed—getting and giving good sex—and the importance of men paying to be with them.

Based on comments posted in response to the videos in this study, it appears very few viewers discuss perceptions of independence instead focusing on superficial items such as how the rappers in this sample perform, look and rank among other rappers. However, few viewers question mixed messages such as the idea that rappers are promoting messages of independence in order to get a woman to take care of them and males do not meet the same high standards as women. Similarly, few viewers question female rappers' ideals of "independence," which equate it with sexual prowess.

Future studies on this important topic might compare rap lyrics dealing with independence to other genres of music such as R&B and pop to determine if the same themes exist. Such a study might provide insight into cultural narratives that differ based on an artist's race, class and culture. Another study that might be of interest is how young women and men interpret the lyrics in such songs to assess if their viewpoints mirror study findings. This might provide insight into how adolescents personally identify themselves and the concept of independence.

This paper identified several themes and connotations of "independence" as they relate to women. Findings are important as perceptions and stereotypes often become the dominant viewpoint whether they are accurate or not. While censorship is undesirable, worth considering is creating literacy programs that encourage adolescents to identify and seek positive, accurate messages in all genres of music. It is hoped that this study provides a stepping-stone for future research, possibly leading to such programs.

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