

ABSTRACT

MCMANUS, LISA. Individualized Explanations for Structurally Based Problems: A Qualitative Analysis of Black Women Rap and Hip-Hop Artists' Albums. (Under the direction of Dr. Kim Ebert).

Rap is a particularly important medium to study because past research has found that listening to rap can influence individuals' perceptions of blacks in the United State. In this paper, I seek to examine how black women rap and hip hop artist explain social experiences, as this medium allows for a marginalized population to express publicly concerns and critiques of society (Rose 1994). Because rap has become an increasingly commercialized enterprise, I argue that corporations contribute to the kinds of messages that become broadly disseminated through rap songs, which in turn may be perceived as one tool in shaping prejudice. I conducted a qualitative analysis of a stratified random sample of 90 tracks from albums of black women rap and hip-hop artists that went platinum between the years 1992 and 2008. This analysis revealed that songs focused on the following topics: talent and success, sexual conquests, independence from men and men's financial dependence, distrust, intimate partner abuse, violence and nihilism. Findings reveal that artists frame success as meritocratic, intimate partner relationships as unnecessary or undesirable and street culture as dysfunctional. Framing of the topics in this way reaffirms notions of colorblind racism by presenting social problems as culturally- or individually-driven rather than structurally-based. Because of the presence of rap and hip-hop music in the mainstream media, these findings suggest that rap and hip-hop can help shape prejudice because they reify a dominant ideology which promotes individual explanations for structurally-based problems.

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Individualized Explanations for Structurally Based Problems: A Qualitative Analysis of
Black Women Rap and Hip-Hop Artists' Albums

by
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Introduction

Rap music is a genre that is credited with representing the hopes, aspirations and concerns of urban black youth (Kurbin 2005; Rose 1994). Rap music generates the perception of accurate representations of inner-city blacks even though songs that become popular in the media are chosen by corporate interests (Watkin 2000). Research demonstrates that listening to explicit rap songs can shape opinions about blacks (Johnson, Trawalter, and Dovidio 2000). Therefore, by studying rap songs from best-selling albums, we have access to a public medium that reaches a broad multi-racial audience that has the potential to create, shape and reinforce prejudice. This research reveals that women rap genre, which at one time was more likely to provide critiques of society and racial inequality (Martinez 1997), has presented social problems as individual- and culturally- based for some time now. My findings suggest that female rap artists present social experiences in a way that undermines the power of rap to act as an agent of change towards greater racial equality by reinforcing a dominant ideology of individualism.

This research sets out to identify how popularized artists frame social problems, which in turn can influence public opinion about the marginalized population of black women. In this paper, I conduct a content analysis of a stratified random sample of songs by black female rap and hip-hop artists, featured on albums that sold over one million copies from 1992 to 2008. This timeframe captures songs from eight years prior to and after which rap is said to have become increasingly commercialized (Watkin 2000). To begin, I present a

history of hip-hop and rap music and the commercialization of the industry. Next, I review relevant academic studies of rap songs that led to my research questions. Third, I explain the sampling and coding procedures used in analyses. Fourth, I present my findings that female artists frame topics related to intimate partner relationships, personal achievement, and problems of the inner-city using explanations that neglect the role of structure in shaping social experiences and life chances. Finally, I provide possible explanations for these findings and suggest avenues for future research.

The Importance of Studying Rap Music

Origins of Rap Music

The roots of the rap genre can be linked to a variety of locations and times. Elements of rap can be tied to long-standing forms of black musical expression including, but not limited to, spirituals, blues, gospel and R&B (Kitwana 1995). Rap in its most contemporary form is said to have emerged in the 1970s Bronx, as an expression of black culture that articulates the problems of urban life (Allen 1996; Rose 1994; Watkins 2001). Specifically, rap has been defined as, “a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music” (Rose 1994:2). Male rappers often address problems that arise from trying to understand the chaos of their surroundings, as well as discuss the struggles they face attempting to achieve a high status and gain respect from peers within their local

communities. Women rappers more often address issues of abuse, suspicion of their partners' love, drug use and the men's ability to provide financial security (Allen 1996; Rose 1994; Watkins 2001).

Women have a unique history within this genre because the image of rap was most closely associated with, and dominated by, black males (Haugen 2003; Keyes 1992). Although most people recognize female artists as emerging in the 1980s, Keyes (1992) traces the history of women in rap back to Millie Jackson – a blues singer who incorporated a rapping monologue in her song, “If Loving You Is Wrong, I Don't Want to Be Right” (1974). Female artists have to employ certain strategies to compete in the male-dominated field, which often means shaping their discourse and content to parallel those of male rappers (Haugen 2003; Keyes 1992). Rose (1994) found that female black artists present three main themes: heterosexual courtship, the importance of the female voice, and physical and sexual freedom. Topics discussed by female rap artists allow for a marginalized population to receive a public voice to express concerns and critiques of society (Rose 1994).

The Commercialization of Rap Music

As rap became a popular genre of music among a broader audience, larger music producers gained interest in signing rap artists. Many of the smaller labels were bought out by larger companies, which consolidated the number of companies producing rap music. This left substantial power in the hands of larger corporations for determining which music

was production-worthy (Watkins 2001). The medium of rap and the messages that are presented through rap songs are filtered through corporations and are said to have stronger commercial interest after the year 2000 (Allen 1996; Watkins 2001). Therefore, artists may be pressured to produce albums with messages that will yield the most economic capital, regardless of whether or not the message is a true expression of the artist's beliefs.

The best-selling albums are not necessarily produced by the most talented artists. Rather, the decision for which artists are promoted and released into the mainstream media outlets is often decided by corporate interests. Gomery (2000) emphasizes that because conglomerates have the strongest selling power, corporations have control over what artists and songs become popular. These conglomerates have the financial means to pay for their artists' songs to be heavily represented on the radio, and placed in the right section of the sales floor, to help them gain popularity. Artists working with independent labels do not have the same means to get recognition (Gomery 2000). By commodifying the music, or making its ultimate goal the securing of profit, the social urgency and authenticity of the messages contained in rap are compromised in favor of record sales (Myer and Klerk 2007). In order to keep the appearance of authenticity from the streets rather than a corporate office, corporations employ tactics such as hiring street teams to investigate what is happening 'on the streets' (Negus 2004). An opposing strategy used by corporations to make rap more appealing to a racially diverse audience is to remove direct references to race within lyrical content while still addressing issues of racial oppression (Goodall 1994). Although these strategies use opposing mechanisms to make rap music more marketable, they suggest that

artists associated with corporate enterprises may be denied the opportunity to produce songs that resist the corporate model of what is predicted to be a marketable song.

An important factor to consider is the role corporation's play in determining what messages are disseminated to represent black urban culture. As rap originated as the voice of the street, listeners may interpret the lyrics as an accurate representation of urban poverty, while neglecting to consider the commercial influence. The power of public recognition through media outlets provides opportunities for elites – here, major record companies – to create and reinforce stereotypes of blacks through messages disseminated by rap and hip-hop music (Blumer 1958). By comparing the messages of songs produced by independent or corporate production companies, Lena (2006) found that since the corporate takeover of rap music there is now a higher concentration of songs referencing commercial success, rather than issues of an artist's local environment. These findings suggest that studying rap as a commercialized genre, rather than a grassroots expression, provides an opportunity to explore how elites can act as causal agents that shape and reshape culture through the media (Entman and Rojecki 1999).

The Impact of Listening to Rap Music

Music is used as a tool to communicate within a peer group by setting guidelines as to what ideas and perceptions are normative. A particular genre of music shared by a peer group reinforces and alters an individual's perception of the agreed upon ideals amongst their peers

(Riesman 1950). For black listeners, rap music can play a role in constructing their identity, contributing to a belief that certain behaviors and attitudes are normative. Music plays a role in how people conceptualize who they are as individuals, and who they are as members of a larger group (Roy and Dowd 2010). Sullivan (2003) found that black respondents were more likely than white respondents to report that their clothing style and discourse reflected rap artists.

Although rap music emerged as a way of expressing the life struggles for blacks in the inner-city, the music is consumed by an audience beyond the inner-city community (Rose 1994). Regardless of whether rap is an accurate representation of the ‘voice of the street,’ fans of rap music report believing that rap music is a way of understanding life in the ghetto, and the music can thus affect listeners’ opinions about blacks (Johnson, Trawalter, and Dovidio 2000; Sullivan 2003). In a survey of 51 students in a Midwestern city, most students agreed with the statement, “Rap was a true reflection of society.” In a controlled experiment in which college students were first exposed to a segment of violent rap and then asked to answer why a young man would act out in a violent manner, participants provided an explanation that it was due to his personal characteristics rather than the situational explanations. Interestingly, the results revealed that both black and white subjects’ judgments about blacks were affected (Johnson, Trawalter, and Dovidio 2000).

In an ethnographic study of hip-hop concerts with a predominantly white audience, the white participants used colorblind ideology to ignore racially-charged messages within the hip-hop music. White respondents removed the ‘blackness’ of the artist’s message,

replacing and reinterpreting the messages to be unifying messages of equality and freedom. Yet, in one instance when the black artists commented on their noticeable presence in a predominately white neighborhood, the white audience laughed along, demonstrating an awareness of racial differences, while still choosing to avoid speaking about race and its meaning to the music (Rodriquez 2006). This study offers a reminder that whites listening to the songs may use agency to reinterpret the meaning to be less threatening to their privileged position as the dominant group.

Scholarly Research Dedicated to Rap Music

Previous scholars have used rap in different contexts, and have credited rap with varying levels of authenticity in terms of real life experiences. Stephens and Wright (2000) suggest that select rap songs can be considered as “real” participant observations, and their songs can be analyzed as first-hand accounts of urban life for blacks. Rap has also been studied as social movement that contests the dominant ideology by examining the way in which black rap artists use their songs to critique publicly major societal institutions (Martinez 1997). Other researches argue that the importance of studying rap is to learn what messages it disseminates to the general public, not to analyze its authenticity. These studies use a random sample of platinum albums because these songs reach a broad audience (Kurbin 2005; Weitzer and Kurbin 2009).

Female rap artists are said to be in conversation with male rappers, who make up the majority of the rap community. In a study of a random sample of mainly male artists, researchers found the presence of themes pertaining to nihilism, violence, resistance, and misogyny (Kubrin 2005a; Kubrin 2005b; Martinez 1997). In response, female artists address issues that contest male authority, address domestic violence and discuss their own career achievements (Emerson 2002; Keyes 2002; Rose 1994; Troka 1998). Female rappers' discussion of promiscuity may be a tactic to reaffirm their femininity while performing in a genre of music that is perceived to be masculine (Haugen 2003; Rose 1994). By focusing on a comparison of male and female artists a broader analysis of female rap lyrics has been neglected. In order to understand the influence of female rap and hip-hop songs on public opinion, it is important to examine what topics artists' are discussing in their songs and how topics are framed. Past studies of female rap songs often rely on a selective rather than random sample and use deductive analysis to assess how often specific themes are discussed within rap songs. My research extends previous research by employing an inductive analysis of a stratified random sample of rap songs to investigate what themes emerge from the lyrics and how the themes are framed. I ask, what topics emerge from a qualitative analysis of a random sample of songs from female rap artists? And, how do female rap artists frame these topics?

Data and Methods

Sampling

I conducted a stratified random sample of tracks on albums that went platinum between 1992-2008 by black women rap and hip-hop artists. I modeled my sampling method after Kurbin (2005, 2005a) who conducted a random sample of rap songs that had gone platinum from 1992-2000. I used Kurbin as a model because she approached rap as a social medium that disseminates a message to the broad public rather than an accurate representation of the inner-city. By extending the timeframe to 2008 the sample is more current and still includes an equal distribution of songs that were said to be produced before and after rap had become increasingly commercialized in 2000 (Allen 1996; Watkins 2000). Interestingly, although the industry is said to have a closer association to corporate interest in 2000, during 1992-1998 all but two albums (both belonging to the group TLC) were either produced or distributed by one of the five conglomerate production companies; Seagram's Universal Music Group, The Warner Music Group, The Sony Music Group, The EMI Group PLC and The Bertelsmann Music Group. Kurbin's (2005, 2005a) dataset included solo artists and excluded interludes and collaborations. My dataset includes artists who work in groups, collaborations and interludes, which are small spoken segments which are sometimes placed in-between full songs. This provides a more inclusive sample of the genre which prevented

any potential bias that may result at only looking at solo artists or complete songs rather than tracks.

I created the dataset using publicly available data from the Recording Record Association of America (RRAA) which provides a list of all albums within this time frame that went “platinum,” meaning that the albums sold at least one million copies. Next, I identified every album that belonged to a black female rap or hip-hop artist who performed as either a solo artist or as a member of a group. To identify which albums were released by rap or hip-hop artists, I used my personal knowledge of the music industry in conjunction with general online searches to discover more information about how the artists had been previously classified.

I conducted a stratified random sample of songs from 1992-2008 to capture songs before and after the rap industry was considered heavily commercialized in 2000. Between 1992 and 2008, nine different female black rap artists released 23 platinum albums. This resulted in a population of 350 tracks, of which I sampled 90 or approximately 25 percent. The sample was divided into three time frames, 1992-1998, 1999-2001 and 2002-2008. I randomly sampled 30 songs from each time period. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the total platinum albums released by each artist during each time frame.

-Table 1 about here-

Coding

To begin coding I read the lyrics from the 90 songs in their entirety, highlighting and making note of the topics that emerged from the data relating to social experiences. I used individual tracks as my unit of analysis. Next, I reread the lyrics and my comments and developed an inclusive list of reoccurring topics. This resulted in a list of nine main topics that covered the artists' social experiences. These topics were identified either for the frequency throughout the sample or saliency of the topic within particular songs. For example, the discussion of intimate partner abuse was only present in four tracks of the sample, but an entire song was devoted to discussing this topic making the message very salient. I identified the following nine topics: talent, experienced success, sexual conquests, sexual independence, men's financial instability, intimate partner abuse, distrust, violence and nihilism. The artists framed these topics in three primary ways: *success as meritocratic*, *intimate partner relationships as unnecessary or undesirable* and *street culture as dysfunctional*. I also counted for frequency of topics within the sample. Tracks often referred to more than one topic, and any mention that signified a topic, even if the topic was not an overarching theme throughout the track was considered. A topic could only be counted once per track. Table 2 provides a more detailed explanation of my coding schema.

-Table 2 about here-

My findings provide a frequency of how often topics were discussed within the total sample. Further analysis of said topics provides an explanation of how these topics are framed to either critique or deny the presence of institutionalized inequality.

Findings

My findings reveal that female rap artists often discuss issues concerning intimate partner relationships, characteristics of life of the inner-city poor and their commercial success and popularity. My analysis of how artists frame the topics reveals that artists rely on a colorblind framework to explain their success, intimate partner relationships, and street life which allows for the perpetuation of colorblind racism. Colorblind racism is the practice of ignoring structural inequality and promoting a dominant ideology that individuals have equal opportunity to succeed (Bonilla-Silva 2009). Bonilla-Silva (2009) suggests that four discursive frames are engaged in order to rationalize racial inequality; these are termed *abstract liberalism*, *naturalization*, *cultural racism*, and *minimization of racism*. Abstract liberalism plays on the notion of ‘equal opportunity’ and the ability to succeed based on individual merit. *Naturalization* explains racial difference through natural occurrences and suggests that there are different preferences for different races. *Cultural racism* suggests that minorities are in subordinate positions because they have cultural deficiencies, or cultural preferences that are not aligned with white middle class standards of success. *Minimization of racism* occurs by ignoring that racism still exists, or suggesting that even if it is present that it

does not affect minorities life chances. Artists worked within a colorblind framework by representing interpersonal relationships as undesirable and unnecessary, street life as inherently dysfunctional and presenting success as a meritocratic achievement. Table three illustrates the frequency of the topics and frames.

-Table 3 about here-

Success as Meritocratic

I found that artists often frame their success as meritocratic, by referring to their skills and commercial success in reference to individual achievement. Previous researchers have discussed how female artists self-promote their skills and success in order to prove that they are equally talented to male artist and deserve equal recognition (Rose 1994). In the context of conversation between artists, this explanation for self-promotion seems logical. When considering that rap songs can play a role in shaping how the public views inner-city blacks (Johnson, Trawlater and Dividio 1999), it is also important to recognize that this message can be used to justify why certain people experience success while others do not. This plays into the idea of *abstract liberalism* by suggesting that the most talented individuals will succeed because they are the most worthy of economic rewards. It does not call into question the unfair social structure that unequally distributes the resources and connections that can lead to a higher economic success rate.

Talent: 'We the best at what we do'

Of the tracks analyzed, 23 referred to artists' skills as rappers or discussed their commercial success by boasting about record sales, fan approval and monetary payments from their works. Artists justify their success by emphasizing their talents. In the following stanzas, Foxy Brown's discussion of commercial success is linked to her talent.

Let alone the skills I possess
 And y'all gon' see by these mil's I possess
 Never settle for less, I'm in excess (Foxy Brown, "I'll Be")

Beyond individual talent, Brown does not reference external factors such as network connections and corporate sponsorship that have likely contributed to her success. By artists explaining their success as strictly talent-based, there is an implicit understanding that anyone can achieve commercial success in the rap industry if he or she is talented enough. The belief in a meritocratic system of success is one way in which whites remain color blind and ignore the privileges they are allotted. Although blacks are aware of structural racism, they are still exposed to the dominant ideology and can call upon *abstract liberal* ideas to make sense of achievement outcomes, even though they knowingly acknowledge that they are not afforded same advantages as whites (Bonilla-Silva 2009). Parkin (1979) argues that in a society that has unequal opportunity structure, allowing a few people to achieve upward mobility presents an illusion of equal opportunity.

Success: 'First the mansion then the yacht'

Success was also associated with hard work, overcoming difficulties and the need to keep trying. Salt N' Pepa write:

“Went from dancing on tabletops to making labels pop
For the love of the money so I could cock everything from icy rings to drop” (Salt N' Pepa, “Heaven and Hell”)

The song continues to explain that it was possible to overcome hardships by making the ‘right’ decisions.

“Do positive and positive will happen
Stay positive and positive was rapping
It was like my brain was clouded with unnecessary shit
But I chose to see through the negative and make hits uh (Salt N' Pepa, “Heaven and Hell”)

Here we see an example of how, through hard work and good decisions, the artist was able to overcome difficulties and still succeed. This song reiterates a message that benefits the elite, by suggesting that anyone can overcome their challenges to succeed and failure to do so is rooted in individual flaws (Parkin 1979). This is an example of the achievement ideology – the notion anyone can succeed through hard work. In his study of black youth living in a northeastern housing project, MacLeod's (2009) demonstrates that the acceptance of the achievement ideology is often not enough to overcome the ascribed status and situational disadvantage of being a black male growing up in the ghetto. The young black men worked harder academically than their white peers, but experienced fewer rewards in terms of job outcomes because of their lack of social connections and because they

experienced discrimination in the job market. Even though the black youth were ‘staying positive’ – which Salt N’ Pepa credit to their success – they may not experience economic mobility because they faced structural disadvantages.

In the one case where an artist mentioned discrimination in her song, it was overshadowed by a positive and confident attitude that could be used to overcome discrimination.

Read the book of my life
 And see I've overcome it
 Just because the length of your hair ain't long
 And they often criticize you for your skin tone
 Wanna hold your head high
 Cause you're a pretty woman (Mary J. Blige, “Work That”)

Here the artist acknowledges that there is racism in that people are criticized on the basis of the color of their skin. Yet, the artist interprets her commercial success to individual attributes, in this case a blessing from God.

Feelin' great because the light's on me
 Celebrating the things that everyone told me
 Would never happen but God has put his hands on me (Mary J. Blige, “Work That”)

In this example Mary J. Blige discusses her own success as exceptional. She presents her success as predestined and accredits God’s choice to allow her to succeed. Crediting God for her success suggests to listeners that perhaps they have not succeeded because they have not been chosen by God, rather than discussing how others’ success may be stunted because of discrimination. Using God to explain one’s success detracts from larger systemic issues of discrimination as to why certain groups are under privileged and deprived of opportunities to achieve social mobility. This explanation coincides with the *minimization of racism* and

abstract liberalism frameworks, suggesting that even if racism persists, it is minimal and can be overcome under celestial conditions. Although it is recognized that artists' confidence and positive attitude have contributed to their success, their emphasis on an individual's ability to overcome inequality suggest that that individuals must adapt to interpersonal and institutionalized racism in order to succeed, rather than look to ways to change the unequal social system. This explanation allows those in the dominant group to ignore discrimination and unequal conditions (see also Forman and Lewis 2006) and instead, expect members of the subordinate group to overcome challenges themselves.

Intimate Partner Relationships as Unnecessary or Undesirable

I found frequent framing of intimate partner relationships as dysfunctional and undesirable. Previous research discusses the use of heterosexual encounters and relationships as a strategy for artists to validate their femininity (Haugen 2003). I argue that the framing of relationships as dysfunctional can contribute to *cultural racism*. The dysfunctional behaviors are presented as stemming from a cultural or individualistic standpoint rather than framing relationship problems as stemming from structural constraints caused by limited financial resources that can cause hesitation towards engaging in a monogamous relationship.

Independence: 'I can depend on myself'

The idea of not needing, wanting or depending on a man is a common theme presented by artists. This was expressed both through the explicit language, such as “I can depend on myself/ I don’t need anybody else” (TLC, “Depend on Myself”) or through presenting ‘relationships’ with men as purely sexual. Like male rappers who reduce women to strictly sexual objects (see Weitzer and Kurbin 2009), female artists also engage in this language by reducing men to sexual objects. An example of a song that is explicit about men being equated with actual sexual objects is Missy Elliot’s, “Toyz”:

Whatchu mean I don't need you no more?
Cause I don't!
I gotta bag full of toys and I don't need none of your boys (Missy Elliot, “Toyz”)

By suggesting that a man can be replaced with a sex toy, the male becomes purposeless, lacking the ability to satisfy women sexually. This song frames the act of sex, which is most associated with needing a partner, as an act of independence. In another song, the artist explicitly tells the ex-partner that she is fine no longer being with him.

“I can do bad by myself
Yo I done it before and I can do it again
Sho don’t need you to be my man” (TLC, “Bad by Myself”)

In a study of “gangsta” rappers, Haugen’s (2003) argued that female artists may use explicit discussion of heterosexual encounters to reaffirm their sexual preference, since they are operating within the male-dominated arena of rap. These findings extend this notion and

suggest that female rappers may feel compelled to prove their heterosexuality by discussing sexual encounters with men, while still asserting that they do not need a man.

The discussion of independence is further illustrated in the following three sections. These sections reveal how artists frame men as untrustworthy, financially deficient, and perpetrators of domestic violence. I demonstrate that while addressing pertinent issues of urban blacks, the artists contribute to cultural racism by neglecting to connect these social problems to economic and racial oppression associated with living in poverty and residential segregation, and experiencing persistent discrimination.

Financial obligation: 'No romance without finance'

Women often discussed their financial independence from men. Not only did they express not needing men because they had their own financial resources, but they also discussed men's financial dependence on women.

The following quote provides an especially salient example of a woman having financial independence and the man relying on the woman for financial security:

Nigga wanna lay up on my couch, watchin' cable
 Hands all in his pants, feet all on my table
 Niggas I don't know, rollin' 'dro
 Optimo', blow you got to go nigga, out the door
 Tryin' to throw some hints
 It's the first of the month, time to pay some rent
 You could send them niggas home and hit the streets
 Cuz you been layin' up chillin' in this bitch for weeks (Foxy Brown, "Job").

Foxy Brown provides a vivid description of a young black man being too lazy to work. It appears that his values and rationale are not ambitious and he is actively choosing to remain unemployed. This suggests that the man does not work as a result of laziness. Wilson (1987, 1996) discusses some of the cultural adaptations that emerge in absence of conventional avenues of success. He emphasizes the importance of not interpreting cultural adaptations as synonymous with cultural explanations, but to recognize that there is an intersectionality between culture, social-psychological and structural explanations to explain behaviors of those oppressed in the inner city ghetto (Wilson 1991-1992).

By presenting the man 'laying on the couch' it appears that he is choosing not to work, and negates the structural constraints that can lead to weak labor force attachment such as difficulty in finding work. Foxy Brown makes no reference in this song to the discrimination black men experience in the job market or lack of jobs in the inner-city. In reality, the individuals to whom she refers experience discrimination based on race, class and space. Employers typically assume that, since a black man is from an inner-city ghetto, he will be involved in criminal behavior, lack a hard work ethic, and have weak soft skills (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Wilson 1996). An audit study supports this survey research by finding that white men with a felony criminal record are more likely to be called back for a job interview than black men without a criminal record (Pager and Quillian 2005). This song also speaks to another reality of the inner-city in which black women are more likely to obtain employment than black men (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991). Foxy Brown represents this as a trait of black men being lazy and unwilling to work, rather than

discussing that black women are preferred by employers because they are perceived as the primary breadwinners of a single family home and therefore assumed to work hard because of a direct 'need' for a job (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991).

The conclusion of this song further supports the idea that this man could be working if he so chooses to:

You could start from the bottom
 Take it to the top
 Start it from the Hoopty, end it in the Drop
 Wanna know the secret how you stay on me?
 You gotta get on, stay on your J.O.B., c'mon" (Foxy Brown, "Job")

This sends a similar message that emerged in the analysis of how artists explain and justify their success. The assertion that one can 'start from the bottom/ take it to the top' supports the achievement ideology. The presentation of man as able but unwilling to work, further explains why artists would promote being independent from men. This song uses both *abstract liberalism* and *cultural racism*. Rather than pointing to how black men are discriminated in the job market, Brown's rap reinforces the notion that black men do not 'work hard' enough to succeed because they belong to a culture that accepts 'laziness.'

Abuse: 'He says there's no me without him'

Although emotional and physical abuse made up a small part of the sample (four tracks), the findings are important to report because of the clarity of the message as well as the importance it can play in supporting the broader message of independence from men.

Domestic abuse is a reality for many women, and even more so for black women, who are 35 percent more likely to experience domestic abuse than white women (Rennison and Welchans 2000). An explicit example of domestic abuse is found in a song in which Eve questions how a friend remains with a partner who is both emotionally and physically harmful towards her. In this song, Eve suspects that her friend is unable to leave her abuser because she is blinded by love. Troka (2002) and Weitzer and Kurbin (2009) interpret this song as directly challenging male mistreatment of women based on its conclusion, in which Eve kills the man who abused her friend. However, the song also provides an individualistic explanation both for why men abuse – she refers to him as a “snake motherfucker” – and for why women do not leave – she describes her as blinded by love.

By examining the lyrical content of this song we can see how the abuse and decision to stay with the abuser is discussed.

She was in love and I'd ask her how? I mean why?
 What kind of love from a nigga would black your eye?
 What kind of love from a nigga every night make you cry?
 What kind of love from a nigga make you wish he would die? (Eve, “Love is Blind”)

I don't even know you and I want you dead
 Don't know the facts but I saw the blood pour from her head
 See I laid down beside her in the hospital bed
 And about two hours later, doctors said she was dead (Eve, “Love is Blind”)

The song concludes with Eve killing the abuser at her friend’s funeral.

Eve’s explanation of why her friend does not leave the abuser is that “Love is blind.” Although this song touches on many realities for black women experiencing abuse, it does not touch on the structural constraints that may prevent a woman from leaving her abuser.

When lacking the economic resources to leave, a place to go, or faith in the police, many women decide to stay (Anderson et. al 2003). Eve neglects to address how these structural constraints interact with cultural adaptations to influence a black male's abusive behavior and a black woman's inability to escape her abuser. Black men are oppressed by larger societal structures, which prohibit them in some cases from expressing their masculinity in the socially normative way of being the primary bread winner (Hampton, Oliver, and Magrian 2003). Oppressed experiences can lead to frustration, resulting in attempts to express masculinity and to prove dominance in the relationship through physical and emotional abuse (Hampton, Oliver, and Magrian 2003). Consistent with non-structural perspectives, songs frame emotional and physical abuse as products of individual rather than structural attributes.

Distrust: 'So I creep, yeah'

Women rap artists also framed intimate partner relationships as unfaithful and adulterous. Interesting, in addition to artists portraying men as unfaithful, they also admitted to being the 'other woman' or cheating in retaliation for their partner's infidelity.

Does she like to have sex high off the X?
Try it with me and tell me who's the best (Lil' Kim, "She Don't Love You")

But the sex don't feel the same, no no no
You don't hold me or kiss me like, you used to
I can tell your feelins changed
It must be some other bitch thats takin up, your time
If it is then let me know, oooohh (Missy Elliot, "Is This Our Last Time")

These songs depict both men and women as willing to participate in a relationship that is complicated by infidelity, presenting themselves and potential partners as untrustworthy. This portrays infidelity as rooted in individual choices without addressing the structural constraints that interact with cultural adaptations, making relationship instability and sexual promiscuity more normative. A deprivation from middle-class aspirations may influence a young woman's desire to engage in sex, even running the risk of pregnancy because it proves that she has succeeded in being seen as sexually desirable (Anderson 1999; Wilson 1996). In a study conducted on inner-city black adolescents in Baltimore, researchers found that men were more likely to partake in having multiple sexual partners to help boost their social status. In absence of conventional means of success due to limited access to jobs, having multiple sexual partners was a way of obtaining respect (Andrinopoulos, Kerrigan and Ellen 2007).

In absence of a discussion of structural causes which are linked to a deprivation of financial resources and an abundance of experiences with racial discrimination, the songs make it seem as if black women chose to be independent from men because men have a cultural deficiency that causes them to cheat on, abuse and financially exploit women. By discussing intimate partner issues that are linked to black urban poverty, conglomerates benefit by appearing to reaffirm the authenticity of the lyrical content, while simultaneously reinforcing colorblind racism by only discussing the adaptation to structural inequality, rather than the unequal social structure itself.

Street Culture as Dysfunctional

My findings suggest that the presentation of street problems contributes to cultural racism, by discussing the problems in absence of structural causes. Blacks are depicted as having a dysfunctional culture that is void of “mainstream” moral values. Anderson (1999) found that those who are deprived of “mainstream” aspirations developed a ‘Code of the Street’ in which violence and nihilism were normative and in some cases celebrated. This code was part of an oppositional culture in which inner city youths actively opposed things that were associated with mainstream culture. By ignoring why inner-city blacks may turn to violence and nihilism, which stems from the inability to achieve success in “mainstream” society, it appears that they possess cultural deficiencies. I found that 22 of the 90 songs framed violence and nihilism as part of a dysfunctional street cultural.

Violence: ‘Got guns, so what, I ain’t scurred’

Explicit discussions of violent behavior; a willingness to be violent or reference to weapons were present in 21 tracks. Female rappers may be compelled to discuss violence in their rap in order to assert themselves into conversations with male rappers (Rose 1994). The following examples represent a depiction of violence as an inherited trait that is learned from one’s elders.

.. My Aunt Dot
left a glock and some blood on my sheets

Told me clean the shit up, then she hit the streets
 Even though I'm her niece, she copped me a piece (Lil' Kim, "Aunt Dot")

Here, violence is depicted as a multi-generational cultural trait rather than an isolated condition of poverty. Violence is a reality of the inner-city ghetto and is associated with an increase in joblessness. Less access to formal means of upward mobility may encourage some individuals to look for work in the illegal drug market which leads to increased violence (Wilson 1996). Those living in the ghetto often carry weapons as a display that illustrates they can defend themselves from harm and are worthy of others' respect (Anderson 1999). But by representing violence as a cultural trait, artists disseminate the message that those living in the ghetto are inherently prone to violence.

Even when the artists discuss violence as problematic, they still refer to violence in a way that it appears to be stemming from individual decisions and a culture that does not oblige "mainstream" values.

Children play, women produce
 Kids killing kids just for the juice
 Now Africa is looking for the truth
 But it's gonna take a while to enlighten the youth (Salt N' Pepa, "Heaven N' Hell")

Even though Salt N' Pepa suggest that the youth need to be 'enlightened,' which shows they do not condone the violence, they suggest kids are killing each other for sport. This drastically oversimplifies the causes of street violence. This idea is reinforced by Salt N' Pepa's explanations for fixing the problem of street violence.

The good news is God's news, with him you can't lose
 Hell is here on earth, the heaven you can choose
 There's a choice, you got one, son, know where I'm comin' from? (Salt N' Pepa, "Heaven N' Hell")

Here once again the artist uses language within the *cultural racism* and *abstract liberalism*. From Salt N' Pepa's discussion of street violence it appears that inner city youth can *choose* whether or not they want to participate in the 'culture' of street violence. It is implied that if kids follow the right path (i.e., God) they will be able to overcome the conditions of street violence.

Nihilism 'Live or die, laugh or cry'

The following example demonstrates both a feeling of isolation and hopelessness.

I just don't understand
 The ways of the world today
 Sometimes I feel like there's nothing
 To live for (TLC, "Sumthin' Wicked This Way Comes")

Without considering the broader social contexts in which individuals are made to feel despair, it may appear as if individuals are unwilling to help themselves. MacLeod (2009) found that a group of white young men living in the ghetto experienced high levels of fatalism as a means to protect their self-esteem from their projected life outcomes. Had they held stronger beliefs that they would experience upward mobility as a result of hard work, they would have had to question why their parents did not experience upward mobility. In this context we can see how fatalism is a condition of poverty rooted in the reality of inequality, rather than a cultural trait that is inherent in impoverished people.

By discussing violence and nihilism as individual choices rather than cultural adaptations the lyrics contribute to colorblind racism by using a *cultural racism* framework. In absence of structural explanations listeners are lead to believe that blacks in the inner-city are inherently prone to violence and negative outlook on life that prevents them from escaping poverty.

Discussion and Conclusion

An analysis of a random sample of tracks from platinum albums released by black women rap and hip-hop artists demonstrates that artists work within a colorblind framework by presenting success as meritocratic and relationships and street problems as individually and culturally-based rather than structurally shaped. Although at one time rap was more closely associated with themes of resistance which questioned the status quo and acknowledged and challenged persistent racial inequality and discrimination (Martinez 1997), my findings suggest that female rap artists have for some time now utilized the dominant ideology which provides support for colorblind racism.

This research extends previous studies by discussing the implications of female rap and hip-hop artists' tracks in shaping prejudice by reinforcing a colorblind ideology, rather than focusing on how their lyrical discourse may be shaped by the male dominated genre of rap. This research is representative of the population of platinum rap and hip-hop artists because it was conducted using a stratified random sample rather than a convenience sample. By conducting an inductive analysis of the lyrical content of songs, this research has

provided unique insight into how artists frame the topics that they often present in their songs.

There are a number of explanations for why black female artists do not contest the dominant ideology, but instead reinforce it by presenting inner-city blacks as culturally deficient while at the same time reinforcing the notion of individualism. One explanation is that female black rap artists may buy into colorblind racism even though they are minorities. Bonilla-Silva (2009) finds that although blacks recognize that the persistence of individual and institutional discrimination maintains racial inequality, they still make sense of reality within the dominant ideological frame. Mary J. Blige provides an example of this with her discussion of being judged based on the color of her skin. Yet, she minimizes how race and gender may shape life chances by explaining that she has succeeded because of God. It is also important to note that the writers of the lyrics sampled might not be female or black, and that the rappers might not agree with the lyrical content of the songs they rap. For the purpose of this study the artists' agreement with the lyrical content is not particularly relevant. Their association with the songs through their performance, regardless of their agreement with the lyrical content, is what becomes available to the mainstream media to be interpreted as authentic expressions of the artist's opinions.

Another explanation for the use of colorblind racism is that elites are in control of what messages are disseminated to the public (Gomery 2000; Watkins 2001). Since music has been commodified and sold as a product rather than produced as an art form (Negus 1999), these findings might suggest that owners of corporations continue to present ideas of

the dominant racial ideology so that white consumers are comfortable with the message. In his study of “magic negro” films, Hughey’s (2005) found that producers simultaneously presented blacks as powerful (as “magic negros”) and subordinate through their roles as supporting the goals of the primary white character, and that this portrayal allowed for the appearance of racial progression on screen while still not providing the black characters any real power. Like film producers, record producers benefit from presenting messages of colorblindness on two levels. First, they avoid offending their white consumers by not calling into question racial inequality and persistent discrimination, while still maintaining their black audience by avoiding overtly racist messages. Second, considering that producers often belong to the dominant racial and economic group, they benefit from a stratified society in which it is imperative to continue reaffirming the dominant ideology. White consumers, like the producers, hold stake in their dominant position in the racial hierarchy. This may attract them to purchasing these albums in order to reinforce their perception of individual and cultural explanations for structurally-based problems, ignore white privilege, and even allow them to celebrate their lack of racism resulting from their consumer choices of “non-white” music.

Although I have critiqued the use of the achievement ideology among female rappers, there is undoubtedly a two-sided argument as to whether there is a positive or negative outcome when using the achievement ideology to discuss outcomes. In absence of the achievement ideology, individuals making a cost/benefit analysis would choose to withhold effort in assuming that working hard would yield no positive return (MacLeod

2009). The contrary arguments suggest that by reinforcing the achievement ideology, those who face structural constraints that limit their access to conventional means of success, are provided with an individualistic explanation for why they have not succeeded (Parkin 1974). Although I see the value in presenting the achievement ideology as an inspirational aspect of rap music for urban youth, it is also important to consider how this message helps to promote colorblind racism to the boarder audience of rap music, by suggesting that those willing to work hard can succeed regardless of their race in absence of countervailing structural accounts (Bonilla-Silva 2009).

An important caveat to this research is that my analysis may not coincide with the artists' intended messages because of my limited knowledge of rap music and my outsider status in terms of my race and class. Being white and of a middle-class background may have also served as a strength in terms of my interpretation closely aligning with that of a white middle-class consumer of rap. This population arguably stands to be influenced by the colorblind messages they hear in rap songs. Also, although my findings critique the overall absence of structural causes within the lyrical content of rap songs, I am aware that artists work within the confines of making their songs lyrically pleasing and commercially appealing.

Because images presented in the media can help to reinforce prejudice (Blumer 1958; Entman and Rojecki 1999), my findings which reveal that platinum rap artists reinforce notions of colorblind racism is cause for concern. Future comparative research should examine the themes present in rap songs that receive the most commercial success, which

might allow for a richer understanding of what songs become increasingly desirable to consumers of rap. Also, future research could compare genres to assess whether the framing of success as meteoritic is unique to rap music, or remains consistent across various musical genres. Overall this research provides an important application of how blacks are represented in the mainstream media. Research on rap music should continue to look at what topics are being discussed in rap lyrics, and more importantly how these topics are being framed. Rap is a valuable source of data that should be continued to be studied by researchers from both an insider and outsider prospective.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A-Tables

Table 1: Total Population of Platinum Albums by Black Female Rap/Hip-hop Artists

Artists	1992-1998	1999-2001	2002-2008	Total
Lil' Kim	2	1	1	4
Mary J. Blige	2	1	3	6
Foxy Brown	1	1	0	2
TLC	2	1	1	4
Salt N' Pepa	1	0	0	1
Da Brat	1	1	0	1
Eve	0	1	0	1
Missy Elliott	0	1	1	2
Lauryn Hill	0	0	1	1
Total Tracks	124	113	113	350
Total Albums	9	7	7	23

Table 2: Coding Schema

Frame	Topic	Description	Example
Success As Meritocratic	Boasting of talents	Self-promoting talents as trap-artists. Using discourse referring to oneself being the best or most talented	“I’m the best, yes, I am, Yes (Salt N’ Pepa, “Break of Dawn)”
	Boasting of Experienced Success	Bragging about commercial and financial success, reference number or record sales	“Yo Na Na so ill, fist week out/ Shipped a half a mil, (Foxy Brown,Intro...Chicken Coop”)
Intimate Partner Relationships As Unnecessary or Undesirable	Sexual Conquests	Condoning numerous sexual partners or purely sexual encounters	Suck him to sleep, I took the keys to the jeep/ Tell him "I'll be back," go fuck with some other cats (Lil Kim, “Not Tonight)
	Independence	Not depending on a man, or not needing a man for emotional, financial, or sexual fulfillment	“My bitches/ That don't need/ A nigger for shit” (Da Brat, “All My Bitches”)
	Financial Obligations	Men needing to have financial security or an income in order to ‘get with’ or ‘be with’ a woman	You got to have a J.O.B./ If you wanna be with me(Foxy Brown, “Job”)
	Intimate Partner abuse	Both emotional and physical abuse of a woman	My outsides look cool, my insides are blue/ Every time I think I'm through it's because of you (TLC, “Unpretty”)
	Distrust	Distrust of men, acts of infidelity by either the artist or their partner	“You cheated me now I'm cheatin' back” (TLC, “Bad by Myself”)
Street Culture As Dysfunctional	Violence	Reference to the use of violence, guns, or a willingness to act violently	Cause if I gotta drop kick a ho, I'll kill her fa'sure (Da Brat, “Runnin Outta Time”)
	Nihilism	A lack of hope for the future, a willingness to die, feeling a sense of despair or apathy towards life	Sometimes I feel like there's nothing/ To live for(TLC, “Sumthin’ Wicked This Way Comes”)

Table 3: Topic and Frame Frequency

<i>Frame 1</i>	<i>Success as Meritocratic</i>				
	n=23				
Topics	Talent		Success		
	n=11		n=16		
<i>Frame 2</i>	<i>Intimate Partner Relationships as Unnecessary or Undesirable</i>				
	n=40				
Topics	Sexual Conquests	Independence	Financial Obligation	Intimate Partner abuse	Distrust
	n=18	n=10	n=5	n=4	n=17
<i>Frame 3</i>	<i>Street Culture As Dysfunctional</i>				
	n=24				
Topics	Violence		Nihilism		
	n=21		n=21		