

‘Are Real Women Just Bad Porn?’: Women in Nigerian Hip-hop Culture

by

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Abstract

Hip-hop music has taken a very unique dimension in the Nigerian music scene. It has emerged as a means of expression among the youth on a wide range of issues. Since its emergence in Nigeria in the 90's, the music has gone through a lot of transformation. However, a worrisome trend in this development is the fragrant display of women as sex symbols. The degree of violence against women and misogynistic ideologies being expressed in the lyrics has been a subject of scholarly enquiry in recent times. This paper therefore takes a look at the use of women as mere tools and objects claimed and cascaded around by Hip-hop artistes in Nigeria as a means of enhancing their celebrity status and commercial viability. It will also examine its implication on Nigerian society.

Keywords: Hip-hop culture, misogyny, popular music, feminism, sexuality, rap.

Introduction

David Wolper, in an interview about his production of the Los Angeles Olympic ceremonies stated: “we are going to have lots of music, because music is the United States’ gift to the world” (24). This statement shows the overwhelming influence of American music on music of other world cultures. The last two decades have witnessed tremendous growth in the Hip-hop music culture in Nigeria. Numerous studies have equally demonstrated the significant rise and development of the genre among the youth. (Omoniyi, 2008; Omojola, 2006; Ssewakiryanga, 1999). Because of its enormous appeal, it has also been used as a medium for expressing a variety of ideas, feelings, and emotions. However, there has been a growing concern on the negative impact of the music on the perception of women in the society. In spite of the seeming financial success and popularity of the musicians, hip-hop culture is frequently condemned for its misogynistic exploitation of women.

This paper examines the misogynistic ideologies expressed in Nigeria's Hip-hop and rap and its implication on the larger society. It will also examine the effects Hip-hop lyrics and videos (which contains images of women in sexually subordinate roles) on the youths, stemming from its focus and promotion of sex, drugs, crime and misogyny.

Theoretical Concepts

The theory of inter-culturation and trans-culturation is used as the framework for this study. Interculturation is the formation of a new culture based on encounters from multiple cultures interacting together (Gault 15). This is significant today for social theorists working outside their cultural boundaries for interpreting the dynamics of cultural change globally. The term transculturation was coined in the 1940s by sociologist Fernando Ortiz to describe the process by which a conquered people choose and select what aspects of the dominant culture they will assume (Pratt 589). The development of popular music over the years is hinged on cultural changes which, according to Hall are the product of "negotiation, resistance and transformation" (23). This statement was also corroborated by Said who stated that "All cultures are involved in one another. None is single and pure. All are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic." (45). Rice identified two categories of musicians in world music- those who seek to strategically position themselves as locally authentic and those who seek to embody or reconnect with ethnic or national traditions and histories (151). He however stressed that there are those who seek to become transnational performers or, at best, seek to resist any sense of bounded or fixed identity (Rice 157). Of this group, in my opinion, is the position of Nigerian Hip-hop music.

Hip-hop culture evolved from the United States of America. However, the concept has found its way into developing countries as a result of acculturation which introduced new styles and communities of taste, negotiating cultural differences through the musical manipulation of symbolic associations (Waterman 47). Consequently, the changes reflect new contexts, technologies, opportunities and performing situations.

Origins of Hip-hop

There are several positions on the origin of Hip-hop. On the evolution of Hip-hop music, Kevin Powell states that "Hip-hop's roots are not Jamaican, nor Puerto Rican, nor African-American, but African (Powell 2010). This was further substantiated by Keyes who observed that "the distinctive vocal techniques employed in rapping can be traced from African bardic traditions to rural southern game songs and allied forms- all of which are chanted in a rhyme or poetic fashion" (40). However the conceptualization of the present day Hip-hop phenomenon originated in New York during the early 1970's as a form of African American street culture (Bennett 78).

Aware of the inner city tension that were being created as a consequence of urban renewal programs and economic recession, a street gang member, who called himself AfrikaBambaaka, formed Zulu Nation on an attempt to channel the anger of young people in the South Bronx away from fighting into music, dance and graffiti (Lipseitz 26). Hip-hop has since become better known as rap music, which has been most widely publicized and marketed all over the world. Rap is a narrative form of a vocal delivery often spoken in a rhythmic patois over a continuous backbeat, with the rhythms of the voices and the beat working together. The initial appeal of rap for young African Americans related to the possibilities for instant creativity and expression which it offered. Thus, by relying only upon the ability to ‘talk the rhythm’, the art of rapping became the perfect vehicle for pride, anger, and for asserting the self-worth of the community (Beadle 85).

The origin of Hip-hop in Nigeria dates back to the late 80’s and early 90’s (Joseph 256). According to Abiodun Adebisi the emergence of an African American rapper on exile in Nigeria, Ibrahim Salim-Omari led to the release of the first Nigerian rap album titled “I am African” (248). This opened the floodgates for other artistes like “The Remedies” and the “Plantation Boyz” in the early nineties. The first generation of Hip-hop artistes at first copied their counterparts in the United States of America. However, the trends in the late 90’s till date showed a transformation with the evolution of “NaijaHip-hop”. Thus, Nigerian Hip-hop music is categorized into two main divisions – indigenous and foreign. The indigenous Hip-hop styles are those which derive their elements mainly from indigenous musical sources which include the native, traditional, neo-traditional and spiritual derivatives. The Hip-hop artistes also derive some source of materials from local African folk tradition drawn from village or ethnic boundaries with the folkloric phenomenon seeming to be a major trend in their lyrics.

Hip-hop and Gender

Feminism and gender studies have been a focus of scholarly work since the 20th century. While some see men and women as two often hostile groups locked in an unending and unequal struggle for power, others view them as complementary. The Hip-hop world tilts towards the second assumption. However, the complementary role being played by the two is being benefited by men where the women are portrayed as dangerous objects of desires (Wallach 222). This, according to Daniel Innim is purely a transfer of gendered meanings saturated by class differences and global popular culture influences (201). Even though we have a few Hip-hop female artistes in the industry, men are in the majority while women often feature as dance troupes performing in the background to the music. This has resulted in the misuse of the gender role of women in these musicales as sex symbols. The term “sex symbol” was first used in 1910 to describe beautiful stars in the film industry. Since then, the film industry has been playing a role in the further projection of sex symbolism through its dissemination of beautiful people all over the world (articleworld.com). However, sex symbolism is taken to an alarming dimension in the music industry where women are seen as a commercial venture, basically useful for commercial purposes.

This is because generally in Western culture and societies that follow the West, a woman's body is considered sexually provocative to man, and thus there is a growing concern over the near-naked female postures in some music videos. Writing on the negative effects of Hip-hop on the American youths, Ayanna observed that "all women, but mostly black women in particular are seen in popular hip-hop culture as sex objects" (Ayanna). She stressed further that almost every hip-hop video that is regularly run today shows many dancing women (usually surrounding one or two men) wearing not much more than bikinis, with the cameras focusing on their body parts. These images are shown to go along with a lot of the explicit lyrics that commonly contain name calling to suggest that women are not worth anything more than money. It is a common sight to see in these videos scantily clad young ladies prancing seductively around the singers in the videos. Subsequently, the imagery and lyrics of popular rap music and videos is normalizing the degradation of women. Thus, as a male-dominated culture, hip-hop has forced women to become victims of misogyny violence (Morgan 427). Misogyny has been defined as the hatred or disdain of women – a concept that reduces women to objects for men's ownership, use, or abuse (Adams and Fuller, 939). An African woman's identification with her gender has always been a product of her identity, and the social constructions of society, and as such, gender is socially constructed, and consequently, hip-hop has constructed the role of women in a negative way, and therefore encouraging them to play characters such as the "gold digger" (Ayanna).

Marketers and Promoters

Nigeria is the most populous Black nation in the world. With a population of over 150 million people, the country is unarguably the melting pot of the entertainment industry in Africa, especially with the emergence and the promotion of Hip-hop artistes within the last two decades. These decades have seen Hip-hop music and culture transform through a rediscovery and recycling of sounds. In Nigeria, the sporadic growth of Hip-hop music is due to the undaunted efforts of marketers and music promoters with the introduction of labels like Kennis music, Mo hits, Storm records, Question Mark etc. and added influence of television and radio stations and other agents of promotion. Hence, much air time is devoted to playing of Hip-hop music with Nigerian content in line with the regulation of the broadcasting board that stipulated that 70% of the music content in both the radio and television should be devoted to indigenous Nigerian music (Naija Hip-hop inclusive). This has led to the establishment of various musical shows with exclusive cable Nigerian Hip-hop content like Gbedu, Nigezie, Sound City, Music on Wheels, Hip-hop World, Music Africa, etc. in addition to other cable stations devoted to Hip-hop music in Africa such as Channel O, MTV Africa and Daarsat music. Accordingly, the aim of these establishments is purely commercial and their overriding interest is the sale of their music in a particular market, and thus they employ all means to achieve their goal like their Western counterparts. Hip-hop scholar Mark Anthony Neal therefore observes that:

“... They sow the field of misogyny for the patriarchy and provide the labor necessary to keep it in operation. They dictate the lyrics, the costumes, the scenery and of course, the girls! The reason for such media hype by the music promoters is seen in the slogan that ‘sex sells’.

Mark Anthony Neal was insightful to point out that the industry thrives on sexism, and that asking artists to promote a feminist vision would be asking them to drop their contracts and start selling far fewer records (Neal). In a study done about Black male/female relationships of the hip-hop generation, many of the Black men in the hip-hop culture that were interviewed valued economic resources and used these resources as a way to manipulate and control women. And some women negotiated with their bodies for things that they wanted (Hutchinson 73). In order to gain access to these things, and to get the love and attention from men they wanted, some women felt that they must cater to the exploitative images (Ayanna).

To illustrate, reacting to promoter’s cravings for financial aggrandizement in the Nigerian Hip-hop scene, Pat Uwaje-King¹ observed that:

What the promoters want is instant financial gratification. The culture of finesse the musicians have nurtured over time is now taken over by self-centeredness and greed. They feel the pulse of the youths outside and dance to their tunes. The song as in vogue in America is based on violence, money, stripper and sex. Unfortunately, it has now come to us in Nigeria and we are sinking it in both hook, line and sinker. (Uwaje-King).

Generally, a good music video must exhibit good music coupled with artistic presentation in both performance and delivery. But the question we need to ask is, must it also be at the expense of our values and moral decency? The most unfortunate aspect of this discovery is the fact that much of the sexual exploitation in hip-hop culture is done with the consent and collaboration of women. In Nigeria, most of the women that show up for the music video shoots are young undergraduates who are paid stipends by these promoters to pose nude with the “super star”. Reacting to this worrisome trend, Omawunmi Omagbemi² stressed:

The success in the music business is all about money, power and sex. The priorities have been misplaced in our bid to please the wrong people, but it is wrong. What is obvious might not be real because what you see us do in the videos is cosmic (Omagbemi).

Correspondingly, the bottom line is that women are used to wet the sensual appetite of the viewers in order to sell their products. Commenting on this worrisome trend, Omagbemi observed:

It is purely a commercial thing. This act is degrading. Women who subject themselves to such are only interested in the money and fame. Their portrayal of women as indecent, immodest, and lacking in values is appalling (Omagbemi).

Usually, the main goal of culture is the inculcation of national consciousness, advancement of the appreciation of the arts and culture, and in Nigeria specifically, the enrichment of identity nationwide (Omojola 34). Only very few Nigerian musical videos have achieved this aim. Instead, what we see is an exact duplication of “porno-visuals” like their Western counterparts where women are portrayed as sex symbols. While we agree that music should provide avenues for free interactions and mingling across cultural boundaries, it is completely out of place for us to allow the values of other nations to be the yardstick for measuring our success. As Abudu noted, “If you want the global world to watch your films, you have to be able to retain what we call your African centre personality, which is your Nigerian personality” (43). Therefore, the question is - do our Hip-hop music videos have what it takes to represent the image of Nigeria anywhere in the world? Or is it just duplicating other people’s ideologies? Unfortunately, misogynistic lyrics have been allowed to flourish in Nigeria, not only through radio, television, CD, and other mediums, but it has also been promoted through live performances. And for clarification, it is important to note that much of what is considered to be misogynistic lyrics in Hip-hop usually has one or more of the following six themes: (a) derogatory statements about women in relation to sex; (b) statements involving violent actions toward women, particularly in relation to sex; (c) references of women causing “trouble” for men; (d) characterization of women as “users” of men; (e) references of women being beneath men; and (f) references of women as usable and discardable beings (Adams and Fuller 940).

NaijaHip-hop Lyrics

Historically music has been a medium for human social expression. This social expression can take many forms, from triumph and hope to utter frustration and despair. Regardless of the catalyst that creates it, music serves to stimulate the mind, stir the soul, and elicit emotions (Adams and Fuller 938). Hence in the same way, Hip-hop lyrics are used as a form of communication; however, many Nigerian Hip-hop lyrics are misogynistic in nature. This can be seen in three Hip-hop lyrics I have selected for analysis which provide examples of how misogynistic ideology manifests itself in Nigerian Hip-hop music. The lyrics have been chosen from three popular Hip-hop artistes in Nigeria: 2face Idibia, Eldee, and Sheyman.

The musicians employed the technique of code mixing with three languages namely standard English, Nigerian pidgin, and Yoruba. The first excerpt is taken from the lyrics of the most celebrated Hip-hop musician 2face Idibia titled “Enter the place”, which speak about women as objects to be used and abused:

...When you feeling down, we try to turn the tables all around
I see you, I gbadun you, girl, I want make you let me (Enter the place)
Make we see if you no carry belle too (and see if I will not get you pregnant)
Ma phone must be ringing cuz your body is calling
No need to dey knock on the door (No need to knock at the door)
Just enter, get it straight, and jump on the floor... (2 face Idibia).

The lyrics describe a woman who can be abused sexually. The invitation from 2face Idibia for women to “enter the place” and see “if I no go give you belle too (if I will not get you pregnant) is degrading. Telling women to “enter the place” and see if he wouldn’t get them pregnant portrays women as usable and discardable beings.

The next excerpt is entitled, “Hotter than Fire”, a single performed by Sheyman:

Am hotter than fire
Give me some water
Your “thing” make dey stagger (your body is driving me nuts)
I no fit retire (I will not give up)
I will give you some “kondo Olopa”
And you will give me some “rondo alata.” (Sheyman)

The artistes paint a picture that is suggestive of a man inviting a woman for a round of “hot sex”. The music videos also reveal women in bikini wears, dancing in such a manner as to suggest their complete sexual and emotion submission to their male counterparts. The use of *kondo* (the male sexual organ) and *rondo* (the female sexual organ) features prominently in the music. From subtractive researches done on meanings in Hip-hop lyrics, evidence have shown that listeners can read several meanings into a particular word or a sentence expressed by the artistes. This is in line with Meyer’s assertion that apart from the emotional attributes of popular music that it has cognitive elements (68). He submitted that:

a piece of music can provide a connotative complex of extra musical meanings that is not unlimited, yet not precisely denoted by the music. The first meaning is a construction supplied by individual listeners from their own memories of extra musical concepts (68).

An example is found in “hotter than fire” by Sheyman. The literal meaning of *Kondo* is a policeman’s baton while *rondo* means a round hole. Although the terms *kondo* and *rondo* are being used to describe a certain type of harmless objects their use and the images they create in the song are sexually derogatory to women.

The next excerpt by Eldee suggests the idea that women can be forcefully subjected to degrading acts. Written in both pidgin and Yoruba dialect, the lyric suggests that sex is an activity that one can force women to participate in:

...Today na today. You not go escape
I go put you for corner. Am ready for you
Today na today. You not go escape
Mo ti ready latitaa tan
But before then...
Bo sikorok’afu (elDEE)

Translation

There is no way you will escape from me today
I will put you in a tight corner
I am ready for you
There is no way you will escape from me today
I am ready to do it with you
But before then, move to a shady corner and let us have sex.

The posture of the singer in this song is that of a rapist, waiting to take advantage of an innocent young lady because of his uncontrolled sexual urge.

The Nigerian Hip-hop and rap genre have common characteristics: expressive vulgarity, sexual resonance, preposterous violence and good-times symbolism. The large amount of sexual content in Hip-hop movies and songs leaves more to be desired. It is totally “un-African” to discuss the subject of sex in the graphic manners being portrayed in the hip hop movies and songs. And just like their Western counterparts, Hip-hop singers are more likely to be sexist in that females are depicted as sex objects, yet in general, in African society, women are treated with respect and dignity, not as sex machines.

Although many commercial Hip-hop songs appear to glorify promiscuous sex, gang violence, and drug use, in contrast, lesser-known rap songs and artists present positive messages as well as insightful critiques of Nigerian society. Thus, I contend that Hip-hop lyrics should be used as avenues for combating social ills in our society, and therefore their themes and textual contents should be employed to combat crime and encourage good values among the youth.

Hip-hop and Youth Identity

It was been found that listening to Hip-hop music is a “number one non-school activity” among youth (Roberts et al. 56). And according to a Kaiser Family Foundation poll, rap/Hip-hop is the most popular genre of music for youth across all ethnic groups in America (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 18). And furthermore, in the study, 65% of junior and senior high school kids said they had listened to rap/hip-hop music the previous day, which is more than twice the portion that reported listening to any other single music genre. Just like in America, the Nigerian youth have appropriated the Hip-hop culture as an important means of expression and identity formation. Obviously as numerous studies have demonstrated, the lyrics of Hip-hop music has a tremendous impact on the habits of youth, as its lyrics often tell stories and describe the situations to which many youth feel they can relate.

In a 2008 dissertation on the influence of rap music on the Nigerian youth, it was shown that more than 62% of the 250 youth interviewed, they considered lyrical content more important to them than the beats (Awala 38). Furthermore, 75% of them were of the view that no Hip-hop video is complete without the use of female dancers with sensuous moves. Examples of such videos are ‘enter the place’ by 2 faces Idibia, ‘Maga don pay’ by Kelly Handsome and ‘Yahoozee’ by Olu Maintain which feature women in despicable manner juxtaposing a lyrical content of the videos that reveal the use of derogatory language against women.

I argue that the effect of these musical videos on the youth in Nigeria is no different from the studies of Johnson, Jackson and Gatto (27-41) on the American adolescence wherein they found that exposure to violent rap videos has been related to higher acceptance of violence, including violence against women by African American adolescent males. And in another study examining rap videos’ impact on health behaviors of African American female adolescents, a sample of 522 African American girls, ages 14 to 18, was followed over a 1-year period, and the results suggested that higher levels of exposure to rap videos were related to: a higher likelihood of contracting sexually transmitted infections, drug and alcohol use, having multiple sexual partners, getting arrested, and the hitting teachers than was the case with lower levels of exposure to rap videos. Unfortunately, this trend is quickly becoming a reality in Nigeria.

Often, Nigerian youth see hip-hop musicians as role models, and as a result the cultural expressions can be seen in their mode of dressings, language, mannerism, etc. Thus, they have appropriated aspects of African American culture, and even when the themes of the songs are ethnically based in Nigeria, the Nigerian singer or performer decides to put on clothes rooted in Western ideals as Western dress and fashion generally serves as a tool of identification with hip-hop culture and music. The fashion craze promoted in the videos has thus caused some problems; some schools have had to place a ban on indecent dressing by female students. And ironically, many of those used in the music videos are students from the nation's tertiary institutions. Thus, the mixed/ambiguous and often negative messages in the songs have become a source of worry to the government and education agencies, in addition to the lyrics that make references to broader issues like gender, ethnicity, and class in Nigerian society.

Conclusion

Much of the mainstream Hip-hop music in Nigeria has been reduced to a never-ending obsession with women and sex, and thus I content that the push for creating sensual and sexually driven music videos can result in a greater level of low self-esteem and image formation among girls and women. It is therefore imperative that we move beyond the beats that characterize Hip-hop music and seriously consider the negative effects it has on people. The regulatory bodies like the Nigerian Video censors board and the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation must scrutinize the songs that are played. A situation where music videos treat women merely as sex freaks is dehumanizing and can create an environment where sexual assault and violence against women will thrive (the media should be used as a tool for social change, not destruction).

There should be a re-orientation in the culture and in the ideology of the entertainment industry so dehumanizing lyrics is not tolerated. Furthermore, scholars and activists should mount a campaign against musical videos that portray women in despicable manners; they should continue to critically analyze the Hip-hop phenomena.

Education is the first step in changing gender relations in the hip-hop community (Ayanna). First people need to know the human rights of women are being violated verbally in the sexist lyrics, and that in the physical interactions at hip-hop events, and in the general way, the hip-hop community must reform, we are essentially demanding hip-hop's primary consumer base, youth, to consume music that is anti-sexist, and anti-misogynistic (Neal).

The growing concern of the dehumanization of women in the musical videos has led to the institution of several organizations that have determined to put an end to the worrisome trend. An example, is the National Organization for Women foundation (NOW) who in recent times have traveled around the United States of America, facilitating campus dialogues and community forums to rave reviews in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Florida on the portrayal of women in music videos (*Now Foundation Times*). Like the NOW foundation, we should be proactive in raising awareness about the sexism, violence, and other -isms that too often pervade this medium.

Furthermore, it is pertinent to evaluate the cultural messages transmitted in some of today's music and its implication to youth who are the direct beneficiaries of these commodities. Parents should be urged to engage in open communication about rap music and videos and monitor the images their children consume. Female Hip-hop artistes who work within the Hip-hop industry should use their position to correct the ills of the industry, not add to it with their own misogynist role. Women in the entertainment industry should take charge of their lives and resist any form of temptation from music promoters. And last, they should cherish their sense of self dignity and self-worth rather than throw away their sense of dignity, while the Hip-hop musicians and promoters 'smile' in their way to the bank.

Notes

1. A member of the midnight crew band, a popular music band in Nigeria.
2. A popular musician in Nigeria and winner of the next rated Hip-hop award
3. These are renowned Nigerian Hip-hop artistes

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