

Can hip hop empower women?



Silhouette Bushay

Hip hop is often described as misogynistic music.
But is it a cultural form that can also empower women?

Signposts



To answer the question raised in the title, Silhouette Bushay gives a brief introduction to the origins of hip hop culture, together with an explanation of its essential elements. She introduces readers to the ongoing debate about whether or not — and to what extent — hip hop culture is misogynistic. With the use of helpful examples, she shows how it is used by some women (and men) within hip hop culture to spread anti-sexist messages and, by women, to promote female empowerment. As well as being of general interest, this article is particularly useful for the topic of 'Culture and identity'.

Key concepts



hip hop, culture, empowerment, identity

The term 'culture' can be used in quite ambiguous ways. In this article, culture is used in relation to visible or tangible things such as dress code and mannerisms, as well as values and beliefs within a social group. Correspondingly, 'sub-culture' is part of a main culture, and hip hop culture is a sub-culture.

I want to examine hip hop culture in relation to women's empowerment in the UK. My argument is heavily informed by a critical educational research project called 'Hiphopology for transformation' (Bushay 2011) and the film documentary *Through the Lens of Hip Hop: UK Women* (2014).

Historical context of hip hop culture

In the South Bronx, New York City, USA, during the 1970s post-industrial era, social systems were ineffective and the local infrastructure was at an all-time

low. White communities fled the area (known as 'white flight') and ethnic minority groups remained, barely surviving (Rose 1994). The rise of drugs, crime and gangs in disenfranchised communities in disintegrating neighbourhoods meant local black people used the limited resources at their disposal in search of meaning for their lives (Chang 2005).

These circumstances resulted in the birth of a sub-culture known as hip hop. Hip hop culture was conceived using two turntables and a mixer to create a new version of the songs being played, using techniques known as looping and sampling. The culture evolved further when partygoers responded to the break-beats of this new sound through the development of new dances and raps. There are therefore sub-genres within rap/hip hop music. Rap/emcee is an element of hip hop culture. As in any other sub-culture there are attitudes and

behaviour patterns that are intrinsic to hip hop. These include expression, mannerisms and ways of doing things.

There are five traditional elements of hip hop:

- emceeing (rapping)
- deejaying (working the turntables)
- break dancing (b-boying/b-girling)
- graffiti painting (aerosol art)
- knowledge of self and your community

Critiquing the critics

Hip hop became a vehicle for articulating the experiences, hopes and dreams of a community that has historically been impoverished, as well as promoting 'peace, unity, love and having fun' (Fricke and Ahearn 2002). Hip hop has also been used to raise political consciousness and a sense of wellbeing in communities (Bushay 2011).

However, in mainstream media hip hop has often been demonised as a deviant culture and considered to be the source of the moral decline of contemporary society. In part, this is due to violent, hyper-sexualised, sexist, misogynistic, homophobic and other unpleasant content present in some of the music, dance and hip hop, particularly gangsta rap (Rose 1994).

Critics of this media presentation claim that hip hop has been made a scapegoat for wider social problems: that the narratives present in hip hop are merely reflections of inequality and division in society today. Interestingly, there is what could be perceived as an inspirational counter-narrative weaving through a lot of what is perceived to be negative hip hop imagery (Osumare 1999).

This correlates with common themes in hip hop stories, for example: working to relocate to more affluent residential areas (or moving out of the hood/estate); decreasing material deprivation (e.g. purchasing cars, jewellery and designer clothing); gaining an education for social mobility; and commercial enterprise. Surprising elements of hip hop for some are its strong fashion focus and innovative entrepreneurship (Osumare 1999). These narratives resonate with and appeal to societies all around the world.

What has identity got to do with it?

Hip hop culture has become a global phenomenon across geographic, social class and racial borders. Although it is still deemed to be a product of black US culture, social identities in late-modern life are fluid,



Old-school stars Monie Love and Queen Latifah, pictured backstage in 1989

and are deconstructed and reconstructed through the experience of local and global processes. Hip hop can be a central feature of identity formation, no matter what one's social background.

When she was interviewed for *Through the Lens of Hip Hop: UK Women* (2014), Sekai Mahoney, a PhD candidate from affluent Cambridge, noted that in the first instance, she was able to connect with hip hop due to the middle-class sentiments in the representation and lyrics of Kanye West and Common. In fact, Common comes from a middle-class background. Mahoney's experience indicates that although one's cultural identity will be influenced by one's family history, other factors are also at play. It is not uncommon for a 'hip hoppa' or a 'hip hop head' (synonymous for a person who is part of the hip hop community) to view hip hop as a key part of their identity.

Ethnicity is part of one's identity as it defines a shared culture which extends to symbolic representations such as

physical presentation, religion, rituals, art, food and clothing. 'Race' identity, by contrast, is inferred on the basis of exterior characteristics, such as skin hue, facial features and hair type — though so-called racial groups have many fewer biological differences than commonalities. Hip hop might be argued to be a symbolic form of resistance to racism, as can be heard when listening to artists such as Public Enemy, Lauren Hill and even more recently Kendrick Lamar.

Gender and hip hop

What about hip hop's alleged sexism?

Early imagery

Since the early days of hip hop, women have been contributors to its cultural production, working alongside and competing with

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other women and men. However, men have been the dominant force inside the hip hop industry since its inception and in much early hip hop imagery, women (particularly if they were a b-girl) did not subscribe to conventional gender norms and representations. They dressed in the sort of very practical clothing traditionally associated with masculinity, such as tracksuits and trainers (Rose 1994).

The mid-80s shift

A shift occurred in the mid-1980s, when hip hop became more of an industry. More overtly sexual representations of women began to emerge (Morgan 1999). However, by the late 1980s moving into the 1990s, some US and UK female artists in the mainstream hip hop industry wrote lyrics that were empowering for women (and educational for both women and men).

Performers such as Queen Latifah and Monie Love dealt with themes around informed consent, healthy relationships with men and opposing domestic violence. Other empowering themes included positive body image and self-love — themes that were scarcely represented in dominant masculine narratives present in hip hop at that time.

Since then, male emcees such as Tupac Shakur, Mos Def and Talib Kweli have all contributed towards the ongoing dialogue between women and men in hip hop, by promoting anti-sexist attitudes towards women.

Present-day

Today, hyper-sexualised representations of women in hip hop images and lyrics might appear to have become hegemonic. Women interviewed for *Through the Lens of Hip Hop: UK Women* (2014) agreed that this representation of women in hip hop culture is problematic — women are being viewed as objects and performing for the male gaze. Further, female hip hop artist Pariz-1 (2014) stated that:

‘I’ve been approached by labels before and the very first thing that any of them say to me is that I have to change the way I look, my image, this tomboy thing I’ve got going on... they have approached me and said they will change what I talk about in my raps.’



Niki Minaj is known for her wigs and costumes and consciously plays with the portrayal of her sexuality on stage

Hip hop has been heavily criticised on the basis of its over-sexualisation of women. However, some feminists have detected double standards here. After all, men are not subjected to the same level of public scrutiny. Moreover, this kind of sexualised representation is a choice for some women and it can be empowering. For example, emcee Lady Lykes performs a song called ‘I Love My Butt’ but, for her, it celebrates and empowers ‘curvaceous’ women and younger girls who have been told by conventional and fashion media that they have the ‘wrong’ body type.

The underground hip hop scene can also still be an enriching space for women. Representations there are much more nuanced than in the mainstream, ranging from the most sexualised expressions to de-sexualised oversized clothing, all of which play with the dominant representations of hip hop for both men and women from earlier periods and through to today.

Hip hop and women’s empowerment

When speaking to Stylinquents (a group of young women from the hip hop community in the UK) on the issue of representation, they agreed that hip hop is still a male-dominated industry. There are few opportunities for women and girls who wish to pursue a career in b-girling or other forms of dance associated with hip hop. Now hip hop has become a multi-billion dollar industry, can it still act as an effective voice for empowering marginalised people, including women?

As part of the film-making process for *Through the Lens of Hip Hop: UK Women* (2014), we used semi-structured interview techniques to ask questions to a sample of women ranging from approximately 18 to 60 years old, from a range of ethnic

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backgrounds. Did they find hip hop empowering for themselves?

Women's empowerment here took many forms. For example, some women used hip hop for social action. Ladies First UK used an all-women live hip hop music event to raise funds for a national cancer charity. Some of the team members and artists are women who had members of their own family affected by breast cancer.

Philanthropic and charitable activities are actually quite common in the hip hop community, yet these are narratives about hip hop we seldom hear or see. With respect to self-empowerment, artists such as Pariz-1, Stylinquents and Ronster BGR have all stated that hip hop has assisted them with anger management and coping with stress. For them, hip hop culture is both therapeutic and empowering.

Conclusion

Hip hop was conceived in an era and in urban spaces of destitution and despair,

giving voice and hope to black communities. Yet common hip hop narratives centre on dominant black male identities, feeding into negative stereotypes about 'race' and gender that have existed for many centuries.

For some critics, hip hop and women's empowerment are simply not compatible. But there is a counter-narrative here that has been framed as meaningful and empowering for women. Some women are able to identify hip hop as both educative and therapeutic. We should therefore be wary of underestimating contributions to hip hop culture.

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Strip searches

There has been a great deal of research into the use of stop and search powers by the police in the UK, but very little research into the use of the specific power to strip search suspects. Strip searches involve the police requiring suspects to remove more than outer garments if there is reason to believe that they may be concealing something dangerous or incriminating.

Abuse of power?

Research by the BBC programme *5 Live Investigates* in 2016 revealed that this power was being used frequently, but that statistics on its use were not being recorded systematically and that there were a number of examples where the power was apparently being abused. After a Freedom of Information request, only 13 police forces were able to provide statistics. However in those police force areas a total of 113,000 strip searches had been carried out in the

previous 3 years, with more than 5,000 of these involving children who were 17 or younger.

The *5 Live* programme featured one 12-year-old girl from south Wales who was strip searched by the police without good justification. She was required to remove all her clothes although neither she nor her mother, who was arrested at the same time, were found to have committed any offence. Her complaint against the police force was upheld and she received compensation of some £17,000.

Racial discrimination?

No official figures are kept on how many strip searches lead to convictions or on the social characteristics of those who are subject to this type of search. However, a study of strip searches in a single police station from 1999–2000 (Newburn, Shiner and Hayman 2004) found that even

when other factors (e.g. the seriousness of offences) had been taken into account, strip searches were being used disproportionately against people of African-Caribbean origin. The possibility that this power is being used excessively and in a discriminatory way by some police forces suggests that it would be useful if further sociological research was carried out.

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