

Gender in Hip Hop: A Research Study

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Introduction

Hip hop has moved to the forefront of Western pop culture over the past twenty years. This underground movement has spread rapidly, and the culture as a whole has left few Americans without some exposure to its artists and their messages. Hip hop listeners, scholars, sociologists, authors, artists, educators, record companies, media, and critics all view the hip hop movement in their own way. Additionally, they all view gender within the hip hop subculture differently. So, what is academia saying about gender in hip hop today?

Literature Review

Hip hop is seen by some scholars as a positive force in our society. Hip hop not only reflects the urban reality, but seeks to stimulate thought, discussion, and in turn, foster social change (Gladney 1995). Hip hop is not a response, but rather is sparking a movement while simultaneously catering to the hopes, dreams, and daily woes of the urban communities (Alexander 1996). Critical discourse is the heart of the hip hop movement (Alexander 1996; Gladney 1995). However, this “critical discourse” can sometimes be seen as a negative because some hip hop artists choose sexist, offensive, and profane language to communicate in their songs (Shivers 2000; Dines 2003; Keyes 2000). These negative attributes of hip hop sometimes overshadow the potential for the movement to become a catalyst for positive change.

One of the artistic outlets for hip hop artists that scholars and hip hop critics have a substantial problem with is the music video. The music video is created by an artist

(with a slew of other individuals input, including record companies) to promote a specific image and feel for the artist's image, message, and their music. Emerson (2002) notes that females within hip hop create videos that promote female empowerment and agency, while other females in hip hop further perpetuate the controlling images of Black womanhood by using oppressive images in their videos. Emerson (2002) also emphasizes the contradictory tendencies of many female artists who embrace female empowerment, yet still rely on old stereotypes or sexualize themselves or their background dancers in order to appeal to a wider MTV and BET audience. These conflicting images leave the audience confused because while promoting female subjectivity, they are promoting female objectivity concurrently (Shelton 2000, Smith-Shomade 2003).

Some female hip hop artists do remain true to their feminist ideologies in their music and through their music videos as well. Queen Latifah, a popular female hip hop artist and actress, has linked sexism and racism in one of her videos, "Ladies First." Roberts (1994) uses the example of this video to show how the feminist message is particularly powerful shown in the context of the other sexist hip hop videos that frame it on MTV and BET. The video is radical already, but is extremely radical in this case because it is in direct opposition of the patriarchal industry of hip hop commercialism (Shelton 2000; Roberts 1994).

Males within hip hop represent a different type of dichotomy than females in hip hop. They are also caught in the grasps of crass commercialism, but yet many artists maintain this "hyper-masculine front" (Thug Immortal 1997). Iwamoto (2001) suggests that this "cool pose" is employed by numerous urban youth and has transcended

into men's action and behavior within hip hop. The cool pose is a way for younger men to express themselves through physical postures and style of walk, specific clothing, type and flow of speech, various dances, hand shaking, social roles and social scripts, and attitudes and behaviors that symbolically represent masculinity (Iwamoto 2001). The down side is that the objectification of women is an inherent part of the cool pose because it makes men feel dominant over women (Patterson, 1993). Also, violence and aggressive behavior are central tenets because some urban youths have embraced the "thug life" (Hutchinson 1999). The media and popular movies have done their part to glamorize this particular lifestyle (Smith-Shomade 2003).

Having been stigmatized by society, urban youths may cling to the masculine ideals portrayed in the media. Iwamoto claims that "young men of color often enter into hyper-masculine behaviors to combat the degrading effects of racism on their self-esteem" (2001 p.45). These negative behaviors often cloud the real intent of the artist. An example, Tupac Shakur's legacy "exemplified the condition of the young, black male in the 1990's" (Thug Immortal 1997). Tupac was able to do this, but there is still much controversy over whether his music was uplifting or negative. While some songs, such as "Dear Mamma" showed his love for women, some of his other songs were full of sexist and oppressive opinions of women. However, Tupac sold over 22 million records (Iwamoto, 2001).

Hip hop commercialism is a barrier for men and women within hip hop. In "Tavis Smiley (NPR Radio) Presents: State of the Black Family," (2004) Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author, discusses the problems that hip hop artists face in order to become commercially successful.

Unfortunately, the misogynistic and sexist rap sells leaving the informed and conscious rap to the underground audience, who appreciate them for not selling out (Alexander 1996).

What does this mean for women and men involved in hip hop? They both play crucial roles in either perpetuating or changing gender stereotypes within the subculture (Dines 2003). Hutchinson reveals that it is American society that supports inequality by making it ok for men to look at women and by expecting women to accept that role as a visual stimulator for men (1999). Hutchinson also notes that the validation that these men crave are women's bodies, as objects, something to crystallize their masculinity (1999).

The scholars agree that change needs to be implemented fast because hip hop is growing and reaching widespread audiences, especially, world youth culture (Jenkins 1999). There is so much to be celebrated within this art form. Hopefully, the negative messages will sink amongst the intellectual and positive hip hop that has crossed over from the underground to become commercially successful.

Research Question

What is the difference between hip hop artists who sell and those who struggle? Do listeners hold women to the same standards as men in hip hop (in relation to beat, lyrical message, artist's image, etc.) or do they expect something different?

Methodology

This research was based on survey research conducted primarily at "The Sidelines" sports bar in Arcata, California. The Sidelines has hip hop DJ's that play on Friday and Saturday night, the evenings that I handed out the survey. The study draws its data from a conveniently selected sample of patrons that specified that they had an interest in, and listened to hip hop music. I asked patrons if they were interested in participating in my senior project and explained the focus on gender within the hip hop subculture. Almost everyone was happy to take part and help me out with this project. I thought people would be intimidated by the length of the survey, but most participants agreed that the length was necessary in order to fairly present the information needed.

When the individual agreed to participate, I handed them the questionnaire and a pen. I offered a free kamikaze shot to people who completed the survey (or a soda or water if they were a designated driver). I put the questionnaire in a manila envelope with the rest of the other questionnaires so that they were anonymous. I adopted this method of survey collection to allow for the greatest degree of anonymity to respondents and greatest convenience of data collection for myself. I could tell sometimes who was

who just by what some individuals wrote as comments, but that did not interfere with the study.

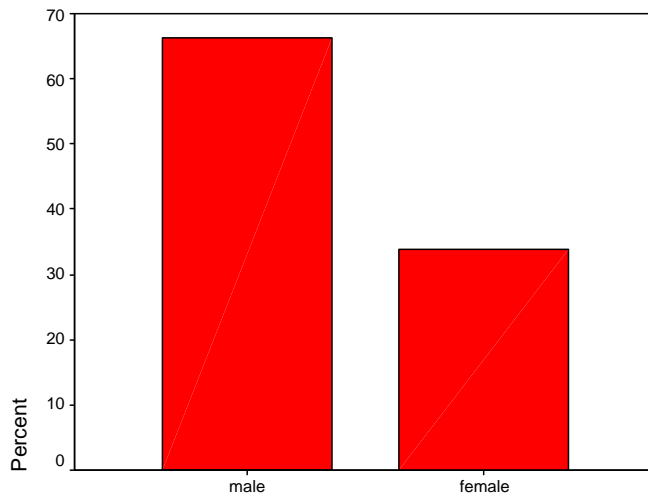
I received over fifty surveys at the bar. Then, I had to employ the snowball sampling strategy in order to work towards my goal of one-hundred surveys. I enlisted a couple friends that were highly involved in hip hop. One friend was a DJ and promoter and the other owns a hip hop record store. Both completed the surveys and handed them out to friends at their homes, hip hop shows, and the record store. This allowed for more depth because these were respondents who were more involved. Because of their help, I received a total of seventy-seven, much better than the mere fifty I received from the convenience sample.

The questionnaire (appendix A) asked questions regarding their interest in hip hop and their perceptions of women and men in hip hop. Questions were first directed at determining the demographics of the participants. Next, questions were aimed at to determine the level of knowledge and involvement within the hip hop subculture. Then, questions were asked specifically about women in the hip hop industry and the impact they have on cultural values, particularly those of women in today's society. Lastly, the same questions were asked about men in the hip hop world and the impact that they have as well.

Demographics

Fifty-one of the respondents were men (66.2%) and twenty-six of the respondents were women (33.8%). This was not what I had hoped for, but I did the best I could. There were almost two times as many surveys of men than women (see chart 1 below). I asked several other girls, but they did not seem to have an interest.

Chart 1: Respondents' Gender

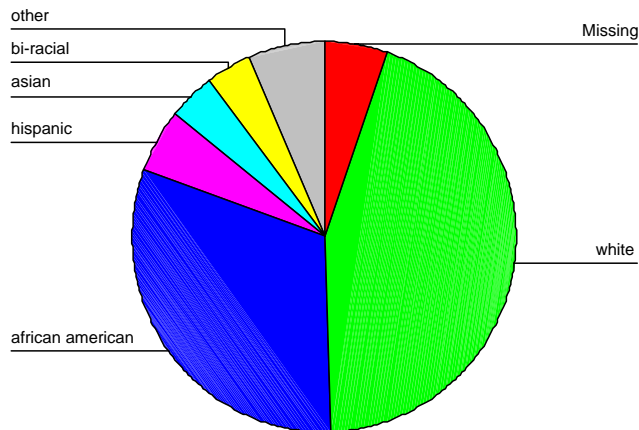


gender

I was slightly happier with the mix of ethnic identity of respondents.

Unfortunately, there is not much representation of different ethnic identities other than white and black. However, being in Humboldt County, I was happy to at least see that 31.2% of my respondents were black. The largest group was white (46.6%).

Chart 2: Ethnic Identity of Respondents



Furthermore, the respondents hailed from all major regions of the country (East Coast, Midwest, South, and West Coast), with an overwhelming majority being from the West Coast (77.3%). The living environments of participants were fairly equally

distributed. Although, upon looking at the data, it suggested that most of the respondents hailed from the suburbs (35.6 %), but urban was at 30.1%, plus I added a category of “ghetto/hood” when entering this into SPSS because it came up seven times in the “other” category (9.6%). I asked a respondent why they wrote that rather than just checking urban, but she said that urban made her think not only of the city, but money. If you smashed “urban/ghetto/hood” together, it is at 39.7%. People who grew up in rural areas showed up at 24.7%.

Most of the respondents were educated people in their twenties. The respondents’ ages ranged from eighteen to thirty-eight. Most respondents fell between the range of twenty-one and twenty-nine. 62.3% had at least some college, followed by 20.8% that had a four-year college degree or beyond.

Survey Findings

Finding statistically significant information was the most difficult part of the research process. I was able to find four statistically significant results, but I also included a few trends that were close. I must have cross-tabulated two-hundred different combinations, but this is what my research provided.

As Table 1 shows, men are more likely to be involved in hip hop, whether it be DJing, MCing, break dancing, graffiti art, beatboxing, production, or concert production/management. However, more men than women only listen. Women are more likely to listen and support than men. Feminist theory suggests this might be because women are often in supporting roles of men (Babbie 2001). The hip hop subculture mirrors our patriarchal society where men are still making most of the big decisions. Women have a hard time being taken seriously in a “predominantly white and patriarchal

culture industry on the one hand and a system of management controlled predominantly by African American males on the other” (Shelton 2000 p.107).

Table 1: Gender and Level of Involvement within Hip Hop

		Respondent's Gender	
		male	female
Level of Involvement	Listen Only	25.5%	15.4%
	Listen and Support	41.2%	73.1%
	Listen, support, involved	33.3%	11.5%
Total		51.0	26.0

P < .05 statistically significant

Approaching a statistical trend, respondents’ who listened to hip hop at least a few times a week were more likely to listen to conscious female hip hop (Table 2). This could be because they have been bombarded by sexist, commercial hip hop for so long and are now sick of the mainstream messages. I hope this becomes a trend in the future.

Table 2: Time Spent Listening to Hip Hop and Likelihood to Listen to Conscious Female Hip Hop

		How Often Respondent's Listen		
		a few times a month	a few times a week	everyday
Listen to Female Conscious Hip Hop	no	66.7%	23.1%	25.9%
	yes	33.3%	76.9%	74.1%
Total		3.0	13.0	58.0

p = .166 approaching a statistical trend

Women are more likely than men to recognize unity as a common message within female hip hop. This is a statistically significant statement (Table 3). Again, feminist theory can be applied here because much of the time it is not just unifying race, class, and culture, but unifying as women. Women in hip hop must “challenge male rappers’ predominance...and create spaces from which to deliver powerful messages from Black

female and Black feminist perspectives” (Keyes 2000 p.255). It makes sense that women were more likely to identify with unity because they can relate. However, it would be unfair to say that men did not see unity as a common message. As illustrated below, 44.9% of men did see unity as a common message, but this is compared with 73.1% of women.

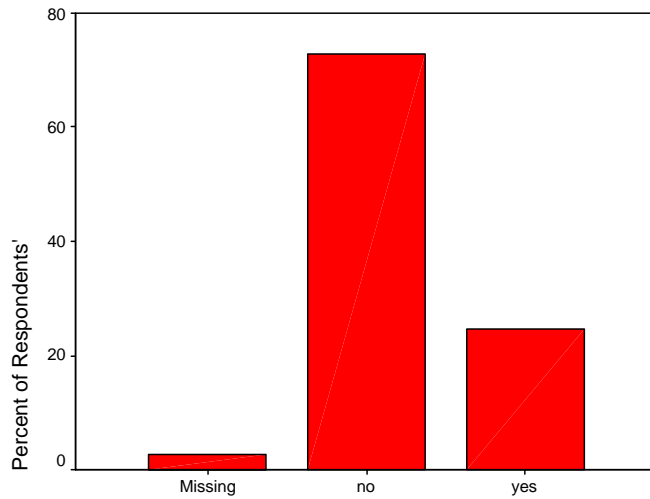
Table 3: Gender and Recognizing Unity as a Common Message within Female Hip Hop

		Gender	
		Male	Female
Unity is a Common Message within Female Hip Hop	no	55.1%	26.9%
	yes	44.9%	73.1%
Total		49.0	26.0

p < .05 statistically significant

These next few findings are not statistically significant, but by looking at Chart 3 and 4, one can make some assumptions. These assumptions can be backed up by an abundance of hip hop scholars. As noted in the literature review, violence is a prevalent theme in hip hop constructed by males. This can be attributed to the “cool pose” that Iwamoto writes about in his paper on Tupac Shakur (2001). Violence is a huge part of the gangster lifestyle that made Tupac so commercially prosperous. However, rapping about violence also represents everyday life in an urban setting. Hip hop tells a story, and violence is part of that, but men tend to focus on it more. It is not surprising to find out that Tupac’s life was cut short by an act of violence (Thug Immortal 1997).

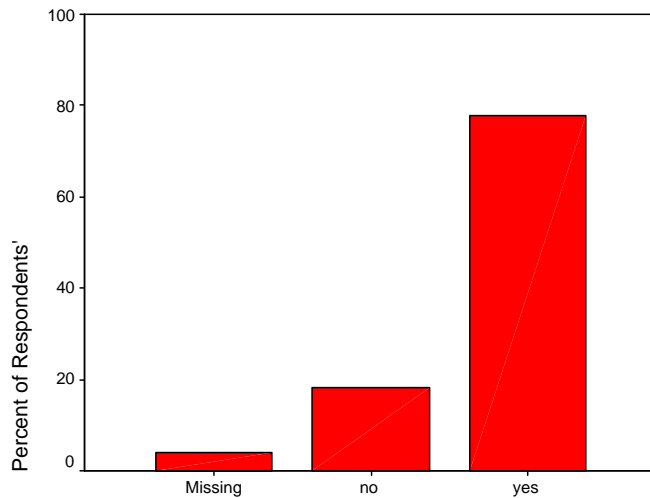
Chart 3: Violence as a Common Message within Female Hip Hop



Violence as a Common Message within Female Hip Hop

74.7% of respondents' said "no."

Chart 4: Violence as a Common Message within Male Hip Hop



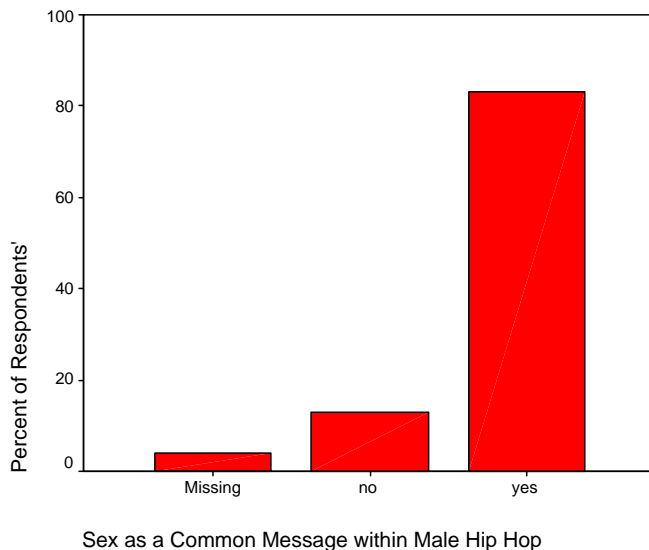
Violence as a Common Message within Male Hip Hop

81.1% of respondents' said "yes."

Sex is a common message in hip hop constructed both by males and females (see Chart 5 & 6). This is one aspect that almost all respondents agreed upon. Sex as a common message in male hip hop was slightly higher (86.5%) than sex as a common message in female hip hop (80%). Everyone seems to be preoccupied with sex because sex sells records. MTV and BET promote sexual images in videos and videos are a key way to get people to buy records (Dines 2003). This is what hip hop has turned into today. This is a double edged sword. On one hand, it is bad because it reduces hip hop down to purely sex and objectifies women, especially women of color (Emerson 2002). On the other hand, sex can be a liberating, depending on the context of which is it used.

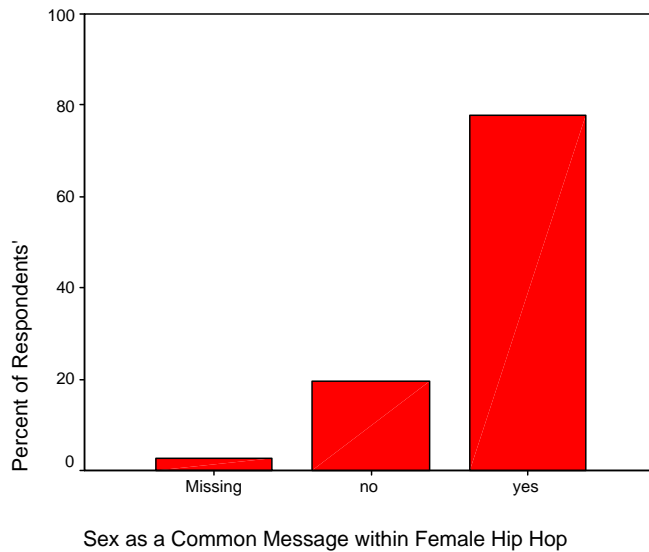
Some female hip hop performers are able to twist the dominant view of sex where women are the object. Their quest for sex becomes the subject and who they desire is the object (Emerson 2002). It is time that women take control of their desires, but these women will still be considered “hoes” by hip hop standards. However, these sex hungry hoes will be selling tons of records.

Chart 5: Sex as a Common Message within Male Hip Hop



86.5% of respondents' said "yes."

Chart 6: Sex as a Common Message within Female Hip Hop



80% of respondents said "yes."

A statistical trend emerged regarding gender and recognizing bragging as a common message within male hip hop. Women were more likely (91.3%) to notice bragging compared with 72.5% of men. Are men just not aware that they do it? I cross tabulated gender and bragging as a common message within female hip hop, but it was not even close to a statistical trend. This is gender role being reinforced through hip hop music. Also, men boast to get the attention of women. Then, after they get them, they will brag about that too. Hutchinson writes about this in her article titled, "The Hip Hop Generation: African American Male-Female Relationships in a Nightclub Setting." Hutchinson talks about young men having sexual conquests and talking about it with their male friends (1999). This boosts their ego and makes them feel dominant and superior.

Bragging does play into the cool pose of young urban men (Iwamoto 2001). Iwamoto is best at explaining this phenomena and how it relates to the portrayal of a tough, hard, and imposing figure of a man that urban men may want to exemplify (2001). Through bragging in rap, men are able to eloquently let us know what they have and what they want to obtain, be it money, women, possessions, etc. Maybe by doing this some rappers are able to numb their seemingly “low self-worth and lack of access to economic and social symbols of heterosexual masculine status and power” (Alexander 1996 p.36).

Table 4: Gender and Recognizing Bragging as a Common Message within Male Hip Hop

		Gender	
		Male	Female
Bragging is a Common Message within Male Hip Hop	no	27.5%	8.7%
	yes	72.5%	91.3%
Total		51.0	23.0

p = .07 statistical trend

Finally, there are two last statistically significant findings to report. Table 5 and 6 signify the relationship of radio exposure to the most listened to female and male hip hop genres. These tables vary only slightly. 50% of respondents who listened to the radio for hip hop exposure claimed that commercial and more pop oriented women hip hop artists were their favorite. 44.1% of respondents claimed the same for men in hip hop. In both cases, the conscious hip hop artists were the runner ups. Maybe this is because countless conscious artists are stepping up and getting more airplay on MTV, but not without the risk of losing “artistic integrity” (Gladney 1995 p.294).

Hip hop artists get caught in a bind between promoting a positive message, yet still making money. The conflict paradigm (Babbi 2001) most accurately illustrates the challenges within hip hop because in order to be commercially successful, you have to appeal to the masses and conform to record company's wishes. Unfortunately, appealing to the masses sometimes means losing hip hop's political, racial, and social consciousness in order to conform to stereotypes and shock value that sells.

It may also be critical to note that respondents that did not listen to the radio were split between conscious, underground, and old school in hip hop genres of men and women. That would make sense that they do not listen to the radio because they probably would not hear anything they liked if they did.

What is unsettling about this data is that a myriad of respondents are listening primarily to commercial/pop artists. Whether people like it or not, they are hearing the darker side of hip hop. It seems that listeners reflect the record company's decisions to favor hip hop that oppresses women rather than providing the audience with more socially conscious lyrics (Alexander 1996).

Table 5: Radio Exposure and Most Listened to Female Hip Hop Genre

		radio source	
		no	yes
Most Listened to Female Hip Hop Genre	commercial/pop	10.0%	50.0%
	gangsta/hardcore	10.0%	4.9%
	religious	.0%	1.7%
	old school	10.0%	6.7%
	conscious	20.0%	26.7%
	underground	30.0%	8.3%
	other	20.0%	1.7%
Total		10.0	60.0

p < .05 statistically significant

Table 6: Radio Exposure and Most Listened to Male Hip Hop Genre

		radio source	
		no	yes
Most Listened to Male Hip Hop Genre	commercial/pop	.0%	44.1%
	gangsta/hardcore	11.1%	16.9%
	religious	.0%	3.4%
	old school	22.2%	6.8%
	conscious	33.3%	22.0%
	underground	33.3%	5.1%
	other	.0%	1.7%
Total		9.0	59.0

p < .05 statistically significant

Study Limitations

I encountered various limitations throughout the course of my study. The limitations varied from having too many variables, respondents' skipping questions, having too many variables for one researcher to deal with (especially qualitative), and the setting of the bar to do a survey is also questionable.

If I had to do it again, I do not think I would change my survey. The questions I asked were applicable to the depth of my study. I only wish I would have had a partner. Especially, a partner that was interested in gender in hip hop as a social phenomenon. If that had been the case, I would have employed qualitative analysis in my study too.

Respondents' skipping questions or not responding correctly was a minor problem. However, on the whole, people did an impeccable job of completing the surveys. I was impressed.

The bar was not an ideal place for my study. It was loud and boisterous at times. However, it was a sure fire way to survey people that I know listen to hip hop. Plus, it

was convenient because I was working at the time and could offer free dollar kamikaze shots if they filled it out. I handed out surveys early in the evening and, as the evening progressed, only to designated drivers. Hey, they looked bored, they needed something to do!

Final Thoughts

Hip hop is an ever changing and inspiring art form. Hope remains in the more political and socially conscious artists that are crossing over to the mainstream from the underground. Hopefully, they will stay true to their values and resist the ever persistent oppression of women and the “bling bling” that is permeating the commercial hip hop of today.

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- "Tavis Smiley (NPR Radio) Presents: State of the Black Family." Live on C-SPAN February 28, 2004. Recorded at New Birth Baptist Church, Miami, Florida.
- "Thug Immortal." Motion picture: 1997. A Don't Back Down Production. Running

Time: 90 minutes.

Appendix A: Gender in Hip-Hop Survey

This questionnaire was developed as an assignment for the senior project course taught in the Department of Sociology. Your participation is voluntary. If you are under 18 years old, please do not complete the questionnaire. To protect your anonymity, please do not write your name anywhere on the survey or tell the student researcher your name. Also, please return your questionnaire to the envelope provided where it will be mixed with those of other participants before it is reviewed. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this survey, you may contact the instructor, Dr. Mary Virnoche, at 826-4569 or mv23@humboldt.edu.

General Information:

1. Please check sex: ___ M ___ F

Please write in your answers to the following two questions.

2. What is your age? _____

3. Race/Ethnicity? _____

Please check your answers to the following three questions.

4. Highest level of education completed:

___ below high school

___ graduate of 4 year college

___ high school graduate/GED

___ graduate of master program

___ tech/vocational school

___ doctorate or beyond

___ some college

5. In what part of the United States have you spent most of your life?

___ west coast

___ midwest

___ east coast

___ out of U.S.

___ south

___ other, please specify: _____

6. Which of the environments below best describes the town/city where you spent the most time?

___ rural

___ urban

___ suburban

___ other, please specify: _____

Involvement/Exposure

Please check your answers to the following five questions.

7. How often do you listen to hip-hop?

- never a few times a week
 a few times a year everyday
 a few times a month

8. What are your sources of exposure to hip-hop music/culture? Please check ALL that apply.

- Television School
 Radio Friends
 Posters/ads Internet
 Magazines/print media Live shows
 In store Other, please specify: _____

9. How involved do you consider yourself in hip-hop?

- I listen to it.
 I listen to it and support hip-hop artists (i.e. tell friends, go to shows, buy CD's)
 I contribute through (please check ALL that apply): DJing MCing
 Breaking Graffiti
 Beatboxing Production
 Concert Promotion/Mgmt.
 Other, please specify: _____

Women in Hip-Hop

10. What styles of hip-hop female artists do you listen to? Please check ALL that apply.

- Commercial/Pop (i.e. Missy Elliot, Foxy Brown, Eve)
 Gangsta/Hardcore (i.e. YoYo, Gansta Boo, Lil' Mo)
 Religious (i.e. New Breed, Zane)
 Old School (i.e. The Real Roxanne, Salt-N-Pepa, Monie Love)
 Conscious (i.e. Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, Heather B)
 Underground (i.e. Jean Grae, Bahamadia, Kuttin Kandy)
 Other _____

11. From the female categories above, which style do you listen to the most?

Please write in your answer: _____

12. Please rate the influences on your listening choices of female artists. 0=no influence, 1=a little influence, 2=considerable influence, 3=extemely influential.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Beat | <input type="checkbox"/> Music video |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lyrics/message | <input type="checkbox"/> Radio airplay |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Artists appearance/image | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertising |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friend's suggestion | <input type="checkbox"/> Live show |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sex appeal of artist | <input type="checkbox"/> Music chart ratings |

13. In general, what messages do you find most common among female hip-hop artists? Please check ALL that apply.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unity | <input type="checkbox"/> Competition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spirituality | <input type="checkbox"/> Sex |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Women's Issues | <input type="checkbox"/> Drugs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social/political agenda | <input type="checkbox"/> Violence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bragging | <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify: _____ |

14. Of the items you checked above, do you feel any of them have a negative impact on society? Please check: Yes No
Why? _____

15. Of the items you checked above, do you feel any of them have a positive impact on society? Please check: Yes No Why? _____

Men in Hip-Hop

16. What styles of hip-hop male artists do you listen to? Please check ALL that apply.

- Commercial/Pop (i.e. Eminem, 50 Cent, Jay-Z)
- Gangsta/Hardcore (i.e. Too Short, DJ Quik)
- Religious (i.e. DC Talk)
- Old School (i.e. Grandmaster Flash, Slick Rick)
- Conscious (i.e. Common, Jurassic 5)
- Underground (i.e. Kool Keith, Souls of Mischief)
- Other _____

17. From the male categories above, which style do you listen to the most?
Please write in your answer: _____

18. Please rate the influences on your listening choices of male artists. 0=no influence, 1=a little influence, 2=considerable influence, 3=extemely influential.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Beat | <input type="checkbox"/> Music Video |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lyrics/message | <input type="checkbox"/> Radio Airplay |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Artists appearance/image | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertising |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friend's suggestion | <input type="checkbox"/> Live show |

Sex appeal of artist

Music chart ratings

19. In general, what messages do you find most common among male hip-hop artists?

Please check ALL that apply.

Unity

Competition

Spirituality

Sex

Women's Issues

Drugs

Social/political agenda

Violence

Bragging

Other, please specify: _____

20. Of the items you checked above, do you feel any of them have a negative impact on society? Please check: Yes No

Why? _____

21. Of the items you checked above, do you feel any of them have a positive impact on society? Please check: Yes No Why? _____

Please write any additional comments/questions below.

Thank you for completing this survey!