

Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionistin’ Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?

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Abstract

Since the emergence of hip-hop in the early 1980s, African American women’s sexuality and its correlation to their search for self-identity and self-control have been at the forefront of the genre’s discourse. Using a multidisciplinary theoretical framework (objectification theory, scripting theory, and Black feminist epistemologies), this article explores the fashion aesthetic, imagery, and celebrity culture of two major African American female hip-hop megastars, Nicki Minaj and Missy Elliott, to examine how the sexual politics of hip-hop culture has helped to define their sexuality, agency, and subjectivity. By examining the style and professional choices that fashioned their careers in hip-hop media, we explore the extent to which they have refuted, or submitted, to the distorted view of African American female sexuality, and thus contributed to their objectification or empowerment.

Keywords

hip-hop, African American, female, sexuality, fashion

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Introduction: Hip-Hop, Black Sexuality, and Fashion

Over the past few decades, numerous studies have been conducted (Collins, 2009; Emerson, 2002; Hall, 1997; Hooks, 2000, 1992; Joseph, 2009; Morgan, 2000; Phillips & Stephens, 2003; Sharpley-Whiting, 2007) exploring the cultural and historical trends effecting African American women's sexuality and its correlation to their search for self-identity and self-control. The music industry, particularly the hip-hop genre, is an important site for examining the sexualization of women in popular culture, especially African American women (Opplinger, 2008). Hip-hop's impact not only extends beyond music as a global social movement but also drives cultural and fashion trends and is purported to be "one of the major ways females express their sexuality and their class" (Opplinger, 2008, p. 8). Its dissemination of the oversexualized images of African American women across multimedia platforms has helped to shape the way they view themselves and their sexuality.

Missy Elliott and Nicki Minaj, two power players in the hip-hop genre, but very different in their rhyming style and visual aesthetic, are excellent examples of what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated genre, and how personal style and its different interpretations affect how one is perceived by society at large. In the wake of Nicki Minaj simultaneously gracing the November 2011 cover of *W* magazine (a renowned fashion magazine published by Conde Nast Publications) and *Cosmopolitan* magazine (international glamor magazine), while launching a new fashion collection line for H & M's Versache collection, she has positioned herself as an arbiter of fashion. Her trendsetting sensibilities are matched by Missy Elliott, who in 2002 became the first woman to be signed to ADIDAS urban sportswear to create her own line of clothing, shoes, and accessories that were specifically tailored to her taste. This article looks at the fashion aesthetic, imagery, and celebrity culture of these two major African American female hip-hop megastars to examine how the sexual politics of hip-hop culture has helped to define their sexuality, agency, and subjectivity. By examining the fashion style and professional choices that propelled their careers in hip-hop media, we explore the extent to which they have refuted, submitted to, or resisted the distorted view of African American female sexuality.

Theoretical Framework

This article borrows from diverse theoretical frameworks that include objectification theory, scripting theory, and Black feminist epistemology. These are important paradigms for understanding the hegemonic forces of

hip-hop culture by challenging the dominant ideologies and calling into question “taken for granted” knowledge and standards. Utilizing the theoretical tenets of Black feminist thought allowed for expanded critiques of African American female behavior that reflects the interests of Black women, who have developed a distinctive standpoint, by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge (e.g., everyday behavior, conversation, music, film). Collins (1991) contends that,

Within African American communities, Black women fashioned an independent standpoint about the meaning of Black womanhood. These self-definitions enabled Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups (p. 11).

I employ objectification theory as a lens through which we can understand the consequences of being female in a hip-hop culture that consistently sexually objectifies the female body. From a feminist perspective, objectification theory refers to a woman’s body being treated as a scrutinizable object by being separated from her persona (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). In essence, when objectification occurs, the female body is seen as a decorative object that is used as part of the scene for the advertised products or services. Given the fact that women are often viewed as objects of desire for men, objectification can be fueled by gender stereotypes focusing on their sexuality or sexual attractiveness. Moreover, Aubrey (2006) asserts that women are frequently objectified as sex or beauty objects in the media, which can lead to physical self-objectification. Jung and Lee’s (2009) findings from a study examining advertisements in fashion magazines argue that, “the portrayal of women as mere decorative objects in advertising, which reproduces the stereotypical gender roles related to physical appearance, may influence women’s experience and feelings about their bodies” (p. 278). I use this paradigm to explore the strategies with which two megastar female rappers (i.e., Missy Elliott and Nicki Minaj) negotiate this terrain in a world where sexualized images of African American females in the hip-hop fashion culture have become iconic.

Jackson’s (2006) discussion of scripting theory helped me to understand how meanings become scripts unique to African American women’s experience. Jackson contends,

The term inscription and scripting are used to mean figuratively that the body is socially understood and treated as a discursive text that is read by interactants. Moreover, there is a hyperawareness of the negative inscriptions associated [with the Black feminine body, such as jezebel/whore, angry and hypersexualized]. These scripts are exacerbated by media portrayals of Black females. (p. 2)

Jackson argues that scripting refers to “the assignment of bodies, as understood by the scripter (e.g., the media), to certain locations being followed by the script imposed on them” (p. 54). “By taking agency in defining the self,” Jackson (2006) argues,

Scripting, as a discursive act, is ideologically driven . . . and the Black body has become a text in which all behaviors are visual and discursive representations to be read as alien, unless those bodies are complicit in almost every sense with dominant cultural norms (p. 55). By taking agency in defining the self,” Jackson (2006) argues, “Blacks regulate how they are scripted . . . and is one strategy they use in popular media (i.e., music, film, magazines, television) in order to reinvent themselves” (p. 60). Such is the case with hip-hop stars Nicki Minaj and Missy Elliott, both of whom have charted their own course and essentially rejected that which is deemed appropriate for Black female behavior and the inscription of the Black body

Jackson’s (2006) positionality correlates with Harvey and Gill (2011), who argue that a new feminine subject has emerged. They assert that,

the modernization of femininity over the last decades in the wake of the “sexual revolution” . . . has given rise to a new and contradictory subject position: the sexual entrepreneur . . . [which] constitutes a hybrid of discourses of sexual freedom for women, intimately entangled with attempts to recuperate this to (male-dominated) consumer capitalism (p. 52).

The authors claim that there is evidence for the new sexual entrepreneur that is widespread. She can be seen in magazine sex advice, in (fashion) advertising, across social networking sites, and in music videos. I contend that Nicki Minaj has clearly taken agency in defining her personae and thus encapsulates the essence of the “sexual entrepreneur.”

In attempting to make sense of a Western postfeminist landscape, Harvey and Gill (2011) assert that a new binary opposition has emerged in the past decade among feminist scholars who share arguments that relate to “whether the proliferation of representations of women as desirable and sexually agentic represents a real and positive change in depictions of female sexuality, or by contrast, merely a repackaging of feminist ideas in a way that renders them depoliticized and presses them into the service of patriarchal consumer capitalism” (p. 54). Taken from this perspective, recent representations of women (e.g., Nicki Minaj) in fashion magazines and music videos, “may constitute a clear break with representations from the past in which women were passive and objectified, now showing them as active, desiring and taking charge sexually in a way that clearly reflects feminism’s aspiration for

female sexual self-determination” (Harvey & Gill, 2011, p. 54). Harvey and Gill (2011) borrow from Attwood (2006), who argues that a whole series of signifiers is linked to promote a new, liberated contemporary sexuality for women; sex is stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, self-expression, and a quest for individual fulfillment.

Black Female Sexuality

Beginning in the 17th century at Catholic confessional practices and continuing into 20th century psychoanalysis, the task of scrutinizing our sexual behavior came to be understood as a means for better understanding ourselves (Hutton, 1988). Sexuality is socially constructed through the sex or gender system on the personal level of individual consciousness and interpersonal relationships and the social structural level of social institutions (Foucault, 1980). This multilevel sex or gender system reflects the needs, asserts Collins (1991), “of a given historical moment such that social constructions of sexuality change in tandem with changing social conditions” (p. 165). Collins (1991) quotes Lorde (1984), who writes,

Sexuality is a component of the larger construct of the erotic as a source of power in women. Lorde’s notion is one of power as energy, as something people possess which must be annexed in order for larger systems of oppression to function. Sexuality becomes a domain of restriction and repression when this energy is tied to the larger system of race, class and gender oppression (p. 167).

Sander Gilman’s (1985) essay calls attention to the way the Black presence in North American society allowed Whites to sexualize their world by projecting onto Black bodies a narrative of sexualization disassociated from Whiteness. Gilman documents the development of this image, commenting that “by the eighteenth-century, the sexuality of the black, male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality” (p. 62).

Sarah Bartmann (Venus Hottentot) is known to be the original icon of Black female sexuality. Phillips and Stephens (2003) borrow from the Darwinist perspective when they argue that the African race is the lowest on the hierarchy of humans, as they used Venus as the example that shaped society’s view of African women’s sexuality. In 1810, an 18-year-old Bartmann was persuaded by a French ship’s doctor to leave Cape Town by convincing her that she would make a fortune of money by displaying herself to European crowds fascinated by the tales of exotic, animalistic bodies of African women. During her performances, she was displayed partially nude, with a skin colored loincloth as her only coverage (Gould, 1985).

James (2008) reminds us that many Black feminists (Collins, 2009; Hooks, 2000) have long noted that Black female sexuality is stereotypically represented as inherently “abnormal” and “excessive.” From Sarah Bartmann to Joesphine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge (Nicki Minaj), and Beyonce, any number of particular Black women have represented to or for White patriarchy, extreme, disproportionate sexuality. James borrows from Crenshaw (1995) and says that,

describing a sexual hierarchy in operation that holds certain female bodies in higher regard than others, blacks have long been portrayed as more sexual, more earthy, more gratification-oriented; these sexualized images of race intersect with norms of women’s sexuality, norms that are used to distinguish good women from bad, Madonnas from whores. Thus Black women are essentially prepackaged as bad women (see Crenshaw, 1995, pp. 368-369 in James, 2008).

Black feminist poet Audre Lorde (1984) asserts that,

in order to survive, those of us for whose oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers. This “watching” generates a dual consciousness in African-American women, one in which Black women become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection (p. 114).

Phillips and Stephens (2003) argue that,

the development of a sexual self is based on an understanding of the message and meanings an individual is given about sexual roles and behavior. To understand how meanings become scripts unique to African American women’s experiences, it is important to look at how their images have been framed within a racialized and sexualized socio-historical context (p. 3).

Beliefs and attitudes about African American women’s sexuality appear to be sanctioned by a culture that continues to embrace stereotypes about race and sexuality. As Black female sexuality has been represented in racist or sexist iconography as more free and liberate, Hooks (1994) argues,

Many black women singers [and performers], irrespective of the quality of their voices, have cultivated an image which suggest they are sexually available and licensed. Undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable, the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, and when it is sexually deviant (pp. 65-66).

In contrast, Lisa Lewis (1995) suggests that there are areas in the media that can be manipulated to the advantage of women. Lewis claims that “female musicians are actively participating in making the music videos work in their interest, to assert authority as producers of culture, and to air their views on female genderhood” (Sellen, 2002, p. 319). Thompson (2009) further argues that middle-class Black women, such as successful Black female hip-hop artists, openly address sexuality and rewrite their role in African American culture.

Black Female Sexuality: The Hip-Hop Controversy

Hip-hop is a cultural phenomenon that has immensely influenced society with its collection of cultural forms and practices dominating music, fashion, dance, art, and urban vernacular since its inception in the Bronx New York in the 1980s. Originally created as the voice and a vehicle for political, social, and self-expression for the underprivileged and disadvantaged minorities of the Black American urban ghettos, hip-hop’s fight against political and social norms of the time quickly grew from a marginal tool of cultural and political expression to a mainstream multimillion dollar global industry. According to Sharpley-Whiting (2007), in her writings on the role women play in hip-hop culture, “Due to technological innovations, consumer capitalism and media and entertainment mergers, hip-hop naturally expanded beyond its Djing, MCing, break dancing, and tagging origins. The hip-hop universe soon included fashion, fiction, movies, and magazines” (p. 6).

Although considerably male dominated, women have played a large role in the development of the hip-hop music genre and culture, not only as female rap artists but also as participants in all aspects of the culture. Unfortunately, as hip-hop grew to be a more popular form of expression and part of the norm that it was once fighting against, the image of women seemed to take on a more gender inferior, sexually demeaning, and provocative role. Hip-hop continues to dominate today’s music charts with its creative and edgy lyrics, grace the covers of magazines with its unique stylized photography, and visually stimulate its audience with bold and often sexy imagery and concepts in music videos. It is these perverted social and cultural representations from the hip-hop culture that are shaping future generations of women, particularly African American women (Oppliger, 2008).

In addition to shaping African American females’ beliefs about gender roles, persistent exposure to stereotypical imagery in hip-hop media may also influence beliefs about themselves as women. If the exceedingly pervasive

media indicates that women are insignificant and inferior, female viewers may also come to feel this way about themselves. Lane (2011) asserts,

Typical, commercial depictions of Black women's bodies in rap music, offer a body with no agency. We see Black women whose rear ends are either the theme of the song or the star of the music video, but rarely do these women get to express anything outside of a sexuality that is already shaped by the desire of the male artist (p. 789).

The emphasis on the body and physical aspects of Black women for hip-hop artists and active participants, including dancers, models, and fans, are significant factors in hip-hop controversy because of its effect on African American women and their sexuality. Its influence on young girls is becoming increasingly important because hip-hop media "appears to influence adolescent sexual behavior" (Andsager & Roe, 2003, p. 38). According to VH1's *Hip-Hop Videos: Sexploitation* (2005),

The women in the videos claimed they are acting in the videos, it is not who they are. They argued that they liven up the videos and make them more fun. These women are motivated by the exposure, thinking it will lead to modeling and acting careers. There is intense competition for camera time; therefore many women are motivated to do whatever it takes to get attention . . . The order ranges from the most prestigious "video models" to the lowest "video hos," who exchange sex for an opportunity to be in videos (Oppliger, 2008, p. 119).

The same oversexualized image of hip-hop participants, such as video models, extends into the expectations for female hip-hop artists as well. Quoted in Andsager and Roe (2003), Gow (1996) contends that for female artists, physical appearance and sexuality tend to be emphasized more than musical abilities, as close-ups and revealing clothing are the required components of their roles. Scholars (see Keyes, 2000; Morgan, 2000) have argued that the current state of popular discourse surrounding Black women who rap places a very narrow strict divide between those women who are viewed as having a very sexualized image or not. However, Lane (2011) furthers these contentions when she writes:

These arguments typically do not engage the ideas that Black female rappers' bodies are always already sexualized. The degrees vary to which they are rewarded and punished by the cultural ideological state apparatus for engaging in the display of what some call hyper-sexuality (p. 789).

Today sexuality is a much more prominent feature, with magazines and videos continually pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable. Near nudity,

lesbian chic, and more-than-suggestive depictions of sexual activity abound. Thus, many artists attempt to compete for airplay, media attention, and record sales by exploiting their sexuality to greater degrees. (Andsager & Roe, 2003, p. 47) For female artists, the use of their sexuality as a power to control their own fate is rare (French, 1987).

Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott, rapper, producer, and actress, is a veteran in the hip-hop industry, dominating hip-hop since the 1990s, and is among the artists who demonstrate sexuality as power. Elliot exploded onto the hip-hop scene in 1997 to become a formidable figure within the rap industry (Sellen, 2002). With record sales of over seven million dollars in the United States, she is the only female rapper to have six albums certified platinum by the Record Industry Association of America (RIAA), including one double platinum, titled *Under Construction* (Elliott, 2010). Lewis (1995) argues,

Elliott, who underwent a shift in image when she lost a significant amount of weight, did not use her slimmer figure to move to a more sexualized image. Rather, she continues to rely on close-ups of her face interspersed with some choreography . . . [and suggests that] this type of female perspective portrays female fantasies of the overthrow of male domination and the forming of alliances among women (p. 504).

Her initiative and presentation of sexuality as power goes against the stereotypical image of Black women in hip-hop and was challenged with many discussions in the media regarding Missy’s sexual preference. In 2002, rumors of Elliott’s sexual orientation began circulating after working with Tweet in her single *Oops (Oh My)*, claiming that she liked girls, and Tweet was one of them. Elliott responded by saying, “When people see how strong I am, and there’s not a man around, it’s like, ‘What is she doin?’ But I don’t need a man to make me happy. I need to make myself happy first” (Elliott, 2010). Missy’s strength and her desire to empower women through her music and image stemmed from her mother’s fleeing from Missy’s physically abusive father. Elliott was quoted saying, “When we left, my mother realized how strong she was on her own, and it made me strong. It took her leaving to realize” (Elliott, 2010).

Following in the footsteps of Missy, the 28-year-old rapper and actress, Nicki Minaj, hit the hip-hop scene in a big way in 2010 with the release of her *Pink Friday* album. Signed to the all male hip-hop label Young Money Entertainment, Minaj made her mark in hip-hop by winning Best Hip-Hop Female at the annual Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards after her album release. In stark contrast to Missy Elliott, Minaj is specifically known for her scantily clad clothing. The public sexually explicit humiliation and

fascination of Minaj's Black body reveals a close resemblance to that of Venus Hottentot. The 2011 hip-hop chart topper has been publicly acknowledged more for her large buttocks than her rap talent. Consistently showing off her buttocks in boy-short underwear and skin tight leggings, it was a media circus as her buttocks was blasted on magazine covers and across the Internet as media journalists and fans alike revealed their infatuous desire to know whether Minaj's derriere was real. This is not too far-flung from the eyewitness accounts that reported people poking at the buttocks of Hottentot Venus to see whether it was real (Fausto-Sterling, 1995).

But to Minaj, this pervasive media coverage on her sexual physical assets only equated to good press coverage and was quoted in an interview on MTV2's "Full Throttle" with host Funk Flex (2011) saying that she does not mind if people are talking about her butt. "It's conversational, that's what people are going to do. As long as they talking about Nicki Minaj, I'm good" (Minaj, 2011).

On one hand, there is the hypersexual image of Black women; on the other hand, there is the stigma associated with the Black woman who boldly tries to assert control over her own life, sexuality, and how she is treated in society. Collins (2005) writes, "Representations of Black women as bitches abound in contemporary popular culture, and presenting Black women as bitched is designed to [further] de-feminize and demonize them" (p. 123).

Historicizin' the Black Female Fashion Narrative

Fashion has long held particular implications for African American women (Rooks, 2004). And still by today's standards, clothing choices and accessories function in a variety of ways, from establishing the wearer's status (e.g., designer labels) to attracting attention from others (e.g., skank chic; Opliger, 2008). Rooks (2004) asserts that "fashion choices reinforce cultural associations about African American women and sex" (p. 64).

At the end of the 19th century, Rooks (2004) argues,

Although fashion was discussed as a marker of class status for all women, this was particularly true for African Americans. It's function according to the editor and writers in Ringwood's (Afro-American) journal (of fashion), was a part of a larger project aimed at refuting charges of African American moral inferiority and distancing African American women from cultural associations with rape and sexual availability (p. 52).

By the second decade of the 20th century (fashion) would become a symbol of the intention to fully define and explore a new, more modern future.

The 20th century would suggest that fashion, adornment, and public display (of fashion) were most significant as the markers of a northern, urban, modern understanding of who African American women were (Rooks, 2004). The urban fashion landscape for these women appropriated the new hip-hop culture, creating a contemporary narrative that included “hoods, high heels, and couture.” Hip-hop fashion is a distinctive style of dress originated by African American youth who dominated the scene of all the major urban American cities and Toronto, complimenting the expressions and attitudes of hip-hop culture in general. Hip-hop fashion has changed significantly, and today, it is a prominent part of a globalized popular fashion aesthetic.

During the 1980s, hip-hop icons wore brightly colored name-brand sportswear, including tracksuits, bomber jackets, and sneakers (usually Pro-Keds, Puma, Converse’s Chuck Taylor All-stars, and Adidas Superstars often with “phat” or oversized shoelaces). Heavy gold jewelry would become an enduring element of hip-hop fashion, as it was suggestive of prestige and wealth (Keyes, 2002). Blousy pants were popular among dance-oriented rappers like MC Hammer. Fezzes, kufis decorated with the kemetik ankh, kente hats, Africa chains, dreadlocks, and Black Nationalist colors of red, black, and green became popular as well, promoted by artists such as Queen Latifah, KRS-One, Public Enemy, and X-Clan (Hip Hop Fashion, 2009).

The “hip-hop” era also saw the split between male and female hip-hop fashion, which had previously been more or less similar, where women in hip-hop emulated the male tough-guy fashions such as baggy pants, “Loc” sunglasses, tough looks, and heavy work boots. The female performers who completely turned the tide such as Lil, Kim and Foxy Brown popularized glamorous, high-fashion feminine hip-hop styles, such as Kimora Lee Simmons fashion line of Baby Phat, while Lauryn Hill and Eve popularized more conservative styles that still maintained a distinctly feminine and hip-hop feel (Hip Hop Fashion, 2009).

Along with the turning of the tide by select female hip-hop artists came the emergence of promoting sex appeal through fashion. Females could not get enough of high heels in all different forms. The 1990s decade centered on women’s sense of style revolving around that of men, in that they would adopt the use of oversized t-shirts and baggy pants.

Female rap group Salt-N-Pepa are considered among the front-runners in leading the transition of moving away from the male alignment and asserting feminism in creating a new sense of dress by wearing hot pants, cutoff denim shorts, and Lycra body suits (Vander-Hook, 2010). “On record, in videos, and in concert, they [Salt-N-Pepper] were a bold, raunchy, sexy group sometimes decked out in street garb that made them look like ordinary hip-hop sisters” (Bogle, 2007, p. 290).

Black women's relationships to their bodies occur within overlapping cultural contexts that offer contradictory messages about their value and function (Lovejoy, 2001). In a male-dominated society, it is no wonder that women used to work hard to align themselves with male images, including how they dressed. As women generally gained access to and exposure within the offerings of several sectors of society—for example, music, movies, and television—we saw more images of what constituted attractiveness emerge, with rappers Lil' Kim and Eve resorting to trends that incorporated scantily clad outfits with provocative tattoos.

When rapper Nicki Minaj hit the hip-hop scene in 2009, she exuded an image that was very similar to Lil' Kim's hypersexualized fashion sense. From sexy poses for hip-hop magazines and album covers, half-naked in lingerie with the attention of the camera focused on her crotch or butt, Nicki appeared to be following in the footsteps of her predecessor Lil' Kim. Now in the height of her career, Nicki's fashion has shifted from risqué and skanky to couture designs from today's most infamous top fashion designers. Although still flaunting sexuality and femininity, Nicki's edgy, form-fitting, colorful outfits are now considered high fashion and avante-garde. For example, Nicki wore a colorful surgical mask, a rainbow-colored wig, a mini-tutu made out of cubic designs, with an attached string of stuffed toys to the 2011 Video Music Awards (VMAs; Fekadu, 2011). Most recently, she was invited by prominent fashion maven, Anna Wintour, to perform at the 2011 Green Auction: A Bid to Save the Earth, where she appropriately donned a black leather zip-up bodysuit and a mile-high blond and green up do.

As Nicki's image becomes more globalized, her fashion aesthetic has transformed to the extent that her style is now compared with that of today's hottest, trendsetting pop stars. Instead of hip-hop, she has gone from colorful bikinis, supertight leggings, and transparent lace tops and dresses to taking on the stage persona of "Harajuku" Barbie, a globally recognized fashion and style icon for women everywhere. Nicki went from showing off her most talked about assets in a black lace bra and high-waisted underwear on a 2010 cover of the urban *King* magazine to gracing the November 2011 cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine wearing a tight black corset dress, black feather bracelet, and a short black bob wig, marking only the second time a Black woman has graced the cover of the magazine.

Unlike Nicki Minaj, Missy Elliott stayed true to her desexualized hip-hop style from the very beginning. Imagewise, Missy favored her bling and baggy street gear long after the fashion changed. Bogle (2007) contends,

Though she was by no means "hip-hop goody-two-shoes, she was perhaps one of hip-hop's most understated image makers," but endeavored to let her unique music style speak for itself rather than exploit her sexuality to get media and audience

attention. She was able to rise to stardom while avoiding controversy and rarely turning up in the tabloids, unlike Lil Kim [or Nicki] (p. 305).

Wearing what appeared to fit like an oversized thick rubber black trash bag, large gold hoop earrings, and dark-red sunglasses attached by a gold head piece in the music video of her 1997 worldwide chart-topping hit song *The Rain*, Missy Elliott has continued to challenge the stereotypical, sexualized image and fashion of women in hip-hop.

Considered more mainstream than Nicki, Missy landed a major endorsement in 2003, appearing in a highly touted GAP commercial with Madonna (Bogle, 2007), whose company catchphrase is “shop for the whole family” (p. 305). Flaunting her femininity even more, in 2004, Missy teamed up with MAC Cosmetics to promote their “Viva Glam” campaign where 100% of the sale goes to the MAC AIDS fund. Staying true to her hip-hop style, in 2002, Missy Elliott was contracted by ADIDAS, an urban sportswear brand, to create her own line, making Missy the face of an ADIDAS women’s lifestyle line of clothing, shoes, and accessories that were tailored to her taste under the moniker “Respect M.E.” emblemized by a crown (Lane, 2011), and making her the only woman and second person (after Run DMC) in hip-hop to have a clothing line under ADIDAS (Kingz, 2010).

Power Up? The Ladies of Hip-Hop: Nicki Minaj Versus Missy Elliot

As rap became more mainstream then ever, and “ironically” appropriating the misogynist, violence-tinged lyrics of their hip-hop colleagues, artists like Missy Elliott, Lil’ Kim (and Nicki Minaj), tried to appeal to fans with music similar to their male contemporaries. And yet, Carpentier (2010) asserts, “with the exception of Elliott, they often fell short of any empowerment that involved more than boasting they were hot enough to fuck men other women were shaking their money-makers to attract” (p. 12).

Lane (2011) provides a useful framework for understanding the reorganization of a public persona when she suggests that “Missy consistently questions and, thus, threatens the heteronormative, patriarchal systems that maintains men’s dominance in the rap industry and, as many female rappers must do, she addresses concerns about her femininity through particular stylistic and linguistic choices” (p. 778). She views Missy and other female rappers as, “not only seeking to escape the narrow confines of urban and suburban poverty that many of them come from, but also seeking to express pleasure, to advocate for exploration, and to do so with claims of agency” (Lane, 2011, p. 780). Lane comments on the many scholars (see Chang &

Herc, 2006; Morgan, 2000) who have written off stylistic choices Black women have made in hip hop, including TLC and Queen Latifah's choices to wear loose fitting clothes and men's sportswear, or Lil' Kim's sexually explicit rap lyrics, as various ways in which they were simply trying to be "one of the boys" (p. 778).

Black women have demonstrated a shrewd, complex understanding about how they wish to use their bodies. Too often Black women rappers are not credited with having a conscious understanding of their oppression (Collins, 2009 in Lane, 2011, p. 782). Lane (2011) takes issue with the term *hypersexuality* used by academics because, "[academics] suggest that Black women choosing to portray any type of sexuality, to show 'too much' skin, to dance 'too provocatively' in public is doing something wrong" (p. 790). She uses the contrast between Queen Latifah, who Lanes suggests,

Despite her participation in similar discourses (i.e., what a good black woman should be, based on the production of an image rooted in hetero-patriarchal notions) is elevated to the status of "super-moral," while Lil' Kim [or Nicki Minaj] is relegated to the status of "ho" because she talks and expresses sexuality (p. 790).

In a 2010 interview with *Vibe* magazine, Minaj discussed her sexual image stating,

When I grew up I saw females doing certain things, and I thought I had to do that exactly. The female rappers of my day spoke about sex a lot . . . and I thought that to have the success they got, I would have to represent the same thing. When in fact I didn't have to represent the same thing (Minaj & Friends Cover Vibe Magazine, 2010).

Nicki speaks to her sense of independence when she states, "I made a conscious decision to try to tone down the sexiness." She says, "I want people—especially young girls—to know that in life, nothing is going to be based on sex appeal. You've got to have something else to go with that" (Rachel, 2010, *Interview* magazine). "I've always had this female-empowerment thing in the back of my mind," she stated in *Details* magazine, "because I wanted my mother to be stronger, and she couldn't be. I thought, 'If I'm successful, I can change her life'" (Minaj, 2011). To reach that point, however, the young Minaj developed personas for herself that would allow her to be a "new person." An early incarnation was someone she called "Cookie," then arrived "Harajuku Barbie," before finally settling on Nicki Minaj.

Nicki, has in many respects, opened more doors for women's roles in hip-hop than some of her predecessors. To her, there is no difference in her background in acting and her career in rap music. "I look at rap as an opportunity

to act. My head is full of different characters—in each song I’m auditioning a character” (Weiner, 2010). She asserts that,

she has a lot of freedom to be crazy. I can rap in a London accent, make weird faces, wear spandex, wigs, and black lipstick. I can be more creative than the average male rapper. And I can show my boobs. Guys can’t do that (Weiner, 2010).

Continually flaunting her femininity and sexuality through her unique fashion sensibility, Nicki strutted around the stage during her performance at the 2011 VMA making sure to show the crowd that she did indeed have speakers on her buttocks (Martens, 2011). In addition to *W* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, she can also be seen on the cover of the Spring 2011 edition of *Vibe* magazine, *Cleo* magazine, a South African publication, as well as *King* magazine, where she dons the cover of the men’s publication dressed in a black lace bra and high-waisted undies.

Nicki’s effort to take control of her sexuality and demonstrate sexuality as power, though different from Elliot, led to debates in the media regarding her sexuality, just as it did with Elliot. In a *Complex* magazine interview, regarding sexuality, Nicki said,

When I rap, it’s just an extension of how I speak, and that’s how I talk. If you don’t like it, don’t listen. I’m also not going to explain something just because I said it in a rap. Take what you want from it (Kondo, 2010).

Conclusion: Empowerment or Self-Objectification?

This article examined the careers of prominent hip-hop artists Missy Elliott and Nicki Minaj to observe how they have, in some ways succumbed to, but also managed to challenge the stereotypical sexual image of Black women in hip-hop through their unique fashion aesthetic. I make the assertion that these African American women have redefined their own sexuality, taken agency, and written their own script. While in one sense, Nicki and Missy are objectified in a male-dominated culture, these two women are making a difference in the way Black women’s sexuality is viewed—Nicki as the sexual entrepreneur, and Missy as the contemporary woman who uses her sexuality as power to control her own fate and fashion as an independent standpoint. These artists use their fashion sensibility, lyrics, and image content in the media to either differentiate from, or subvert the male enforced sexual roles females are expected to play in hip-hop culture.

Making sense of our sexuality, Foucault holds, is perceived in the modern age to be a method for discovering the truth about who we are. The truth that we seek about ourselves is a truth we associate with the power of self-control.

Foucault contends that, “it is not knowledge of our sexuality that gives us power over ourselves (as Freud taught) but our will to establish power over our sexuality that incites our search for self-knowledge” (Hutton, 1988, p. 131).

Collins (2005) states it best when she said:

The issue of control becomes highly important within the universe of Black popular culture that is marketed by mass media. Some women are bitches who control their own sexuality—they “get their freak on” [a term Missy Elliot made popular initially invoking sexual promiscuity associated with blackness that migrated to the dance floor], a particular style of dance that signaled individuality, sexual abandon, craziness, wildness, and new uses of the body, which remains within their control and on their own terms. Whether she “fucks men” for pleasure, drugs, revenge, or money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass media (p. 121).

As a starting point for further discussion and debate, we might borrow from Attwood’s (2011) writing that focuses on the discussion of “agency,” or as Attwood calls it, “making do” to seek to locate new femininities in the context of debates about autonomy and power. Her work focuses on alternative pornography in the contemporary Western context where the rapid development of media and communication technologies offers women unprecedented access to various forms of cultural production. Gill and Scharff (2011) contend that, “she [Attwood] shows that these cultural and technological shifts also open up space for the presentation of new feminine sexualities that are not simply responses to male desires or forms of self-policing” (p. 14). Such is the case for Nicki Minaj and Missy Elliott.

Collins (2005) acknowledges that, “whether Black women rappers who use the term *bitch* are participating in their own subordination, or whether they are resisting these gender relations remains a subject of debate” (p. 130), but it further shows the effort of Black females or rappers reclaiming their image and sexuality through an individualized fashion aesthetic. The journey toward self-definition has political and cultural significance.

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