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## Rap Music Literacy: A Case Study of Millennial Audience Reception to Rap Lyrics Depicting Independent Women

Mia Moody-Ramirez, *Baylor University*

Lakia M. Scott, *Baylor University*

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### Abstract

Using a feminist lens and a constructivist approach as the theoretical framework, we used rap lyrics and videos to help college students explore mass media's representation of the "independent" Black woman and the concept of "independence" in general. Students must be able to formulate their own concept of independence to counteract the messages and stereotypes they receive in popular culture through advertisements, film, print and music. The authors found that independence is situationally defined and it is a complex concept that is differentiated in consideration of age, race, and gender. Participants noted that rap music has the potential to influence their definitions and perceptions of rap music. More educational opportunities are needed where students can utilize constructivist pedagogies in order to become more critically aware of the influence of the media and systems of social stratification.

Keywords: *rap music, independence, critical race theory, hip-hop, gender*

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Educators who seek methods to discuss representations of race, gender, class and culture in their classrooms may turn to pop culture. Rap music, a form of rhythmic poetry that entertains and conveys information and videos, provides an avenue to explore such topics in the classroom (e.g., Chung, 2007; Rando, O'Connor, Steuerwalt, & Bloom, 2014). Using the theoretical underpinnings of Black Feminist and Critical Race Theory (CRT), this case study utilizes rap lyrics and videos to help U.S. college students explore mass media's representation of the "independent" Black woman and the concept of "independence" in general. *Independence* is defined as "freedom from outside control or support: the state of being independent ("Independence", n.d)." However, individuals have vastly different ideas about the concept of independence. Kratzer (2008, p. 1) offers this definition of independence in her ethnography:

Individuals in their thirties are supposed to be in a secure job and married with children. At least, that is the social constructed ideal. A struggle exists with the dialectical tension of autonomy and connection especially when negotiating intimate relationships.

Conversely, in one of the original rap songs that focus on independence, Roxanne Shanté in 1989 spotlighted her vision of an *independent woman*. She explored relationships, dependence on men, and the importance of not doting on a man who isn't as reciprocal in showing affection or appreciation. She cautioned women against buying into fairytale dreams or the idea that a man was going to take care of them. Since then, in addition to music, postmodern feminists have rewritten many of the traditional fairytales that featured damsels in distress to illustrate women's ability to be independent, powerful, and intellectual (Waters & Burfoot, 2008; Yolen & Guevara, 2000; Zipes, 1987).

More recently, both male and female rap artists have shared different definitions of independence in popular songs in the United States. Moody (2013) found that while many songs by rap artists contained positive messages, lyrics and video content also focused on materialism, beauty and placed unrealistic expectations on women. Definitions of independence by male rappers are often equated to the ability to do everything alone, including child rearing and paying all of one's bills while maintaining a high standard of beauty. In their vision of independence, the ideal *independent woman* is someone who does not demand emotional and financial support while he offers very little in return.

Similarly, most female artists define independence by mentioning elements of financial stability and sexuality. They denote that they are in control of their bodies and sexuality. Many male rappers pit the *independent woman* against the *gold digger* or *rider* narrative when they preach independence in their lyrics. Bynoe (2010) noted that in the hip-hop world, women are rarely the leader. Instead, they are usually depicted as *riders*, or women who are sexually and visually appealing and amenable to their mate's infidelities. Conversely, a *gold digger* uses her physical attributes to manipulate men and to take their money. In their 2010 song, "Gold Digger," Ludacris and Bobby Valentino describe a gold digger as "dangerous and superfast" and whoever is around her "better watch out she'll take ya cash."

Female rappers challenge the common portrayal of women as gold diggers promoted by male rappers by holding them accountable for their lack of involvement in the relationship (Rose, 1994). This idea is illustrated in songs by U.S. female rappers such as Lauryn Hill's "Doo-Wop (That Thing)." In it, she discussed the importance of remaining true to one's self. She states:

Don't be a hardrock when you're really a gem  
Babygirl, respect is just a minimum  
Niggas f\*\*\*ed up and you still defending them  
Now Lauryn is only human.  
It's silly when girls sell their soul because it's in  
Look at where you be in hair weaves like Europeans  
Fake nails done by Koreans.

These variances in perceptions and definitions of *independence* underscore the importance of creating literacy programs to help define and put the concept of the *independent woman* in the proper context. Literacy research has focused rap music's influence on teenagers and young people's personality development, self-esteem, identity formation, lifestyle choices, etc. (Chung, 2007; Rando, et al., 2014). Literacy programs tend to be broadly based and address consumerism/materialism, misogyny, masculinity, popular culture, social change, and literacies in childhood (Fu, Lamme, & Fang, 2003; Kumar, 2012; Chung, 2007; Rando et al., 2014). For instance, Rando et al. (2014) presented a lesson plan for early childhood education that teaches concepts of emergent literacy and history through the creation of student raps about historical figures. Likewise, Chung (2007) explored issues of sexism in hip-hop music videos and proposes ways to engage high school students in deconstructing their popular visual culture.

However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the frequently used perception of independence and best practices for teaching the concept of independence (Moody, 2011). To fill this void, the purpose of this study is four-fold: (1) to assess college students' knowledge of independence in rap music; (2) to determine where students' acquired their knowledge of independence; (3) to investigate whether watching rap videos changed students' perceptions of independence; and (4) to offer suggestions for using this information to create future literacy programs for college students and young adults using a constructivist framework.

This study is important for many reasons. First, it offers insights for a larger conversation about how society views independence. As individuals strive to be self-sufficient and responsible at some point in life, they must be able to formulate their own concept of independence to counteract the messages and stereotypes they receive in popular culture through advertisements, film, print and music. Educators can use music to explore the concept of independence to help students reach this goal.

Secondly, there is a shortage of studies addressing literacy, rap music and independence, in particular. As aptly stated by Chung (2007), educators rarely discuss or examine important topics such as sexism, racism and materialism in hip-hop music videos in the classroom settings because there are not adequate studies on the topics. Thirdly, adolescents and young adults need a solid understanding of the various definitions and techniques affiliated with misogynistic lyrics as rap music continues to grow in popularity. Lastly, little research exists on how much students already know about the concept of independence and where they acquired their knowledge. The popularity of the use of the term independent woman in rap lyrics provides the perfect tool for such a study. The long-lasting societal perceptions of Black women as being overtly sensual, dim-witted, or villainous further adds to the importance of undertaking this analysis.

As scholars and educators, one of the researchers' goals is to break students from their dependence on instructors and to prepare them for lifelong learning and how to function as critical consumers of media. Both men and women must be educated about the power of lyrics and videos they hear and watch regularly. They should understand that mass media present unrealistic images to consumers to encourage consumerism.

### Theoretical Framework

This study combines Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Theory to explore students' perceptions of rap music that include themes of independence. Scholars who examine the intersections of race, gender and class are important as critical race theorists have concluded that social relations are fundamentally "raced" due to legal, social, and historical foundations among other forces (Bell, 1992; Ono, 2009; Squires, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991). In direct opposition to emerging discourses that assert America is a colorblind society, critical race studies often examine how messages portray underlying ideologies that reflect social relations of domination based on a pervasive yet unobtrusive racial hierarchy (Crenshaw, 1991).

CRT examines how racism is a common, everyday lived experience for people of color and recognizes that societal roles and norms are socially constructed based on relationships of power within a system that continually favors the majority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Stereotypes of Black women are particularly enduring. Particularly, research has illustrated that there are negative perceptions about African American females as independent beings through the "sapphire" and "jezebel" stereotypes (Dates & Barlow, 1993). The sapphire stereotype represents a Black woman that is headstrong, bossy, and dominating in a way that emasculates and demeans others – particularly men (Dates & Barlow, 1993).

The notion of not needing a man, being financially stable, demonstrating leadership ability, and being highly intelligent are considerable characteristics associated with being an independent woman. On the other hand, the *jezebel* stereotype has also negatively influenced perceptions of independence (Dates & Barlow, 1993). In this case, the African American woman is typified as hyper-sexualized, seductive, and sensually appealing to men (and women). This stereotype also encapsulates a negative perception about Black women as portrayed in the media as a fierce, sexy, driven woman. The myth of the *superhuman* Black woman, for instance, has been a staple in society and cultural narratives for centuries (Wallace, 1979). Various mass media outlets have depicted black women as being overly independent both out of choice or necessity (Moody, 2013).

In her landmark text, Wallace (1979) asserted that the myth of the Black superwoman essentially consists of stereotypes deeply rooted in slavery and the idea that although Black women are able to do more physical labor than the average woman, "they consistently sacrifice themselves for others, have no emotion, and are really just men" (p. 107). She adds that the matriarchal structure of the Black family led by a strong Black woman during slavery is often credited for the emasculation of the Black man, and subsequently the dysfunctional nature of the Black family. She writes:

Less of a woman in that the Black woman is depicted as less 'feminine' and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman. (p. 107)

## **Feminist Theory and the Intersectional Approach**

A feminist-informed method puts gender and gender-related concerns at the center of analysis and highlight notions of power in different ways. Feminism examines gender inequalities through social, political, historical, and contemporary contexts of life and society. Themes of sexual objectification, exploitation, oppression, and expression are explored in feminism. Ardener (1975) posits that women and men within patriarchal, capitalist societies tend to form two distinct circles of experience and interpretation, one overlapping the other (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). The masculine circle converges with the norms of society, providing a signature of masculinity that overrides the feminine circle. Therefore, women's voices and perspectives are not openly articulated. This dissimilarity between the portrayals of men and women suggests that it is important to consider gender differences in the interpretation of music.

While early feminist theorists emphasized the commonalities of women's oppressions, they tended to neglect profound differences between women in terms of class, age, sexuality, religion and race. Debates about the adequacy of gender as the central concern of feminist theory led to the useful concept of intersectionality, which emphasizes that women do not experience discrimination and other forms of human rights violations solely on the grounds of gender, but for many reasons, including age, ethnicity, class, and sexuality (Tyree, 2009; Ludvig, 2006).

An intersectional approach to analyzing the disempowerment of marginalized women attempts to capture the interaction between two or more forms of subordination such as race, ethnicity, and class. Studies have shown that while media and societal structures are unjust to both Black and White women, they marginalize Black women to a greater extent (Benedict, 1997; Collins, 2004; hooks, 1992; Squires, 2007; Wallace, 1979). The Black Feminist movement developed theory to adequately address the interconnection of race, gender and class and to take action to stop racism, sexism and classism.

Collins (1990) included in her definition of Black feminism the idea that black feminist theorists must provide a unique vision of self, community and society concerning the women and topics they study. Black feminists add that one could not conceive Black women's experience of various issues as separable from their experience of racism (hooks, 1992). For instance, women of color do not experience sexism in addition to racism, but sexism in the context of racism. hooks (1992) labeled this matrix a "politic of domination" and describes how it operates along interlocking axes of race, class and gender oppression. The politic of domination refers to the belief in superior and inferior, which are components of the interlocking systems (Collins, 1990). Black feminists contend that the liberation of Black women entails freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism and class oppression. To further frame our inquiry, we offer an examination of the history of rap music and the literature on gender, children and the concept of independence as it is taught in American public schools.

## **Review of Literature**

### **History of Rap Music**

The hip-hop culture has made its place as a staple in society's pop culture. Defined as "an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, break dancing and rap music" (Rose, 1994, p. 2), the term as the term *hip-hop* describes a culture, superficially characterized by performers with droopy pants, hats to the back, lace-less sneakers, hoods, and loud radios that emit base heavy rhythms (Krohn & Suazo, 1995). In other words, hip-hop encompasses the culture of which rap music is a major component (Dyson, 2004). Rap music stems from an activist spirit in impoverished areas in New York and Philadelphia where citizens felt ostracized and muted. Rap music became a mechanism for speaking out against social injustices, conditions of poverty, and even political unrest in the 1970s ("Rap", 2008).

Rapidly spreading from coast to coast, founders of this music genre are noted for their influence in artistic expression about the social and economic conditions of ostracized groups ("Rap", 2008). Conscious rap, in particular, provides strong political messages flavored with a progressive and/or Black Nationalist perspective (Cheney, 2005; Newman, 2007). Lyrics often promote positive and uplifting messages about the black experience. For example, Tupac Amaru Shakur, often popularized and characterized as a gangster rapper

was also considered a poet within his community and others because of his ability to provide a narrative of the real-life challenges faced while living and growing up “in the hood.” Consider this excerpt from Shakur’s (1995) “Dear Mama”:

And even as a crack fiend, mama  
You always was a black queen, mama  
I finally understand  
for a woman it ain't easy tryin to raise a man.  
You always was committed  
A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it.  
There's no way I can pay you back  
But the plan is to show you that I understand  
You are appreciated.

In this song, Shakur continues to praise his mother despite negative conditions. He references her as a Black Queen because of her strength and ability to care and take care of the family. In another song, “Keep Ya Head Up,” Shakur (1993) provides an uplifting message to young women in recognition of the hardships they continually face. An excerpt of this song follows (Shakur, 1993):

And when he tells you you ain't nothin' don't believe him  
And if he can't learn to love you you should leave him  
Cause sista you don't need him.  
And I ain't tryin to gash up, I just call em how I see em.  
You know it makes me unhappy  
When brothas make babies, and leave a young mother to be a pappy.  
And since we all came from a woman  
Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman  
I wonder why we take from our women  
Why we rape our women, do we hate our women?

In this song, he calls to question the treatment of women in the Black community and the lyrics serve as a message of empowerment for marginalized populations. And, these messages are continually carried throughout media streams in present-day – this song has been consistently ranked a “greatest hit.” Shakur’s lyrics are merely one example of how rap music has the power to promote positive and uplifting messages about the Black experience. There are countless other artists that include, but are not limited to Naz, Common, Nappy Roots, MC Lyte, Lupe Fiasco, Daddy Kane, Kendrick Lamar, Eryka Badu, Eminem and Talib Kweli.

### **Gender and Rap Music**

Scholars have concluded that rap lyrics often celebrate themes of violence, misogyny and materialism (Iwamoto, 2003; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2007; Gan, Zillmann, & Mitrook, 1997; Kurbin, 2005; Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993; Weitzer & Kurbin, 2007). Researchers have found that contemporary rap music is more likely to place female characters in positions of objectification than males (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2007; Kurbin, 2005; Perry, 2003; Rudman & Lee, 2002). While male characters are significantly more likely to be associated with a variety of themes, female characters are more likely to be placed in positions of sexual exploitation and moral degradation. As a result, the rap music genre is often linked to black male identity, which may lead to increased themes of sexism and misogyny (Iwamoto, 2003; Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; Shaviro, 2005). Lyrics refer to women as “bitches” and “whores” and boast about male dominance in relationships and sexual prowess.

The empowerment movement has been dichotomous in nature. Lil' Kim, Trina, Nicki Minaj and many others have been recognized for their explicitly sexual and seductively enticing musical styles and performances. Emerson (2002) concluded Black women performers often exacerbate the exploitation of Black women's body and perpetuate stereotypes of Black womanhood. On the other hand, pioneering female rap artists such as Queen Latifah, Sister Souljah, MC Lyte, Eryka Badu, Missy Elliott and Lauren Hill, depict themselves as independent, strong and self-reliant women. They define independence by condemning the disrespectful treatment of women in society by addressing societal issues like harassment and domestic violence. Sister Souljah, for instance, through her lyrics and autobiography, provides an example of the role music can play in the feminist movement. Her rap lyrics discuss Black women's oppression and offer an important perspective on contemporary urban culture (Williams 1987, p. 150). Similarly, Latifah's (1994) song, "U.N.I.T.Y." stands up for women and demands that they be treated with respect:

Instinct leads me to another flow  
Every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a hoe  
Trying to make a sister feel low  
You know all of that gots to go.  
Now everybody knows there's exceptions to this rule  
Now don't be getting mad, when we playing, it's cool  
But don't you be calling out my name  
I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame.

In this way, independence indicates having a voice and speaking out against female injustices. Perhaps, the varying definitions of independence are appropriate to address the state of issues that women face and must subsequently conquer.

### **Rap Music and Children**

The history of rap music is rich, and the genre has withstood the test of time. Today, scholars are concerned with its potential to influence the self-esteem of children, teens and young adults. Young adults must be educated about the power of lyrics and the videos they hear and watch regularly. Music is constantly producing and reproducing ideologies of social existence (Livingstone, 1998). Rap lyrics are of concern because popular culture is an important source of ideas that can shape people's perceptions of themselves and other people; and the content of popular music may have a great influence on adolescents as they employ it for self-identity formation (Andrews, 2006; Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Collins, 2004; North, Hargreaves, & O'Neill, 2000).

Exposure to rap music may affect attitudes, perceptions and self-esteem. Kistler & Lee (2010) investigated short-term effects of exposure to hip-hop music videos with varying degrees of sexual imagery on viewers' acceptance of the objectification of women and sexual permissiveness, and rape myth acceptance. Study findings indicated that male participants who were exposed to hip-hop music videos of highly sexual content expressed greater objectification of women, sexual permissiveness, stereotypical gender attitudes, and acceptance of rape.

Another study conducted by Volgman (2013) revealed that rap music significantly influenced young women's perceptions by making them think about their own appearance. In particular, one participant noted that rap lyrics "make me feel like I should try to be sexier or smaller" (p. 61). And finally, Robillard (2012) conducted a study to examine the influence of music videos on African American adolescent girls' sexual activity. Survey data from approximately 500 girls revealed that rap video exposure encouraged and increased their sexual behaviors and significantly influenced their attitudes about gender roles and male-female relationships. These studies help to illustrate the devastating effects of sexualized and misogynistic rap music lyrics on younger generations of listeners, and more specifically, its influence on perceptions of the Black female identity.

## **Independence in Schools and Curricula**

In order to understand how the concept of independence is defined and understood at the collegiate level, it is important to first review existing studies about how it is taught in PK-12 schooling environments. There have been ample studies from the field of psychology to examine how parents give independence to their children across cultural and class groups. For example, Bulcroft, Carmody and Bulcroft (1996) provide a concise review of literature to discuss the patterns of parental independence giving to adolescents and following conduct a study to examine parental giving across contexts of race, age, and gender. More recently, literature on independence focuses on helping students that have special developmental needs or disabilities. For example, Toelken and Miltenberger (2012) evaluated the effects of teacher prompting in order to increase independent resources from students that were diagnosed with autism. In another study, researchers investigated whether routinized homework helped to promote independence among special education students with academic and behavioral learning needs (Hampshire, Butera, & Hourcade, 2014). While the aforementioned are beneficial in exploring the concept of independence, the findings are not directly applicable in guiding assertions about how young learners (without physical or mental impairments) acquire their understanding of independence.

However, there was a limited amount of literature that was considered when developing the scope and context of this study. Payne and Edwards (2010) discussed how service learning has the potential to increase educational engagement and processes of independence amongst adolescents. They note: “Service learning provides opportunities for middle grades students to reinforce their learning, begin the process of independence in a prosocial manner, and develop the competencies and civic skills necessary as they move into adulthood” (Payne & Edwards, 2010, p. 27). One of the avenues in which to incorporate service-learning opportunities is through social justice curricula because it is deeply embedded with critically analyzing local and global issues and injustices. In another study, Edwards (2010) asserts that teaching students how to be financial literate increases their abilities and assertiveness to become independent. He shares how through initiative-taking and mild adult guidance, students can develop enterprising skills and gain greater financial awareness. He elaborates: “the need is for students not only to be given the space and encouraged to have their own initiatives but also then to show the profile of what they are doing in financial terms” (p. 30).

Findings from the literature reveal that independence is not directly taught in schools and curricula. Instead, the concept of independence seems to be developed through routines and leveling of teacher support, specifically for students who have advanced learning needs. Addition research reveals that the concept of independence is developed through service learning activities, social justice oriented curricula, and financial literacy – all of which could be developed through having a critical and analytical lens.

Perhaps the limited number of studies on independence in curriculums could be related to the character education movement. Character education, loosely defined, involves teaching in a manner that encourages students to be good, moral, civic, mannered, and socially compliant. While there are a plethora of suggestions for character education curriculum that may explicitly or implicitly address the concept of independence, there are very limited studies (if any) that examine the curriculum’s influence on students’ perceptions about becoming independent and understanding how the media also helps to shape it. At the collegiate level, understanding the concept of independence becomes even more convoluted because it is assumed that independence has been taught or already learned. Based on this review of the literature, the following research questions guided the study:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How did participants personally define independence at the beginning of the study?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What were the participants’ perceptions of feminism and rap music?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: How did participants personally define independence at the end of the study?

After a presentation and discussion of the findings, implications of the study provide best practices to help foster conversations on independence using rap music in literacy programs for young adults.

## Research Methodology

This study was designed to represent a qualitative case study method through the lens of Critical Race and Black Feminist theory. A case study is considered an investigation of a single unit, group, or entity in search of relationship meaning between given context with aims to describe, explore, and explain real-life situations. Using a case study approach, the researchers captured the perspectives of college students on the meaning of an independent woman as portrayed through rap music and juxtaposed to their own ideals about independence. According to Yin (2009), this type of research is a systematic way to organize and present data based on in-depth analysis and interpretation. In most instances, case study data is collected in naturalistic settings to provide the researcher with a real-world context for the participant/subject studied.

The primary investigator (PI), who was not the teacher of record for the course in which the study was conducted, visited the class four times throughout the semester. During these visits, the PI conducted four focus group sessions. For each class visit, approximately sixty (60) minutes were used to review content and provide an opportunity for discussion. The PI assigned participants pseudonyms throughout the process and informed them that their comments would not influence their grades. The first visit allowed students to discuss their definitions of independence, where they acquired their knowledge, and their initial views of the "independent woman." During the second and third visits, the students watched videos and discussed their impressions. The final visit allowed students to discuss how their definitions and impressions of independence had changed over the course of the previous sessions.

Audio recorded data and handwritten memos from each of the focus group sessions were transcribed, and the two investigators looked for themes as they related to the three research questions. In conjunction with this research project, the students maintained a journal in which they discussed their impressions of the videos and class discussions. Excerpts from these journals were used to enlighten the researchers' findings in the discussion section of this paper. However, the data findings represent participant statements collected during the four focus group sessions. Students were aware that participation in the study would not have an impact on their grades.

## Sample

Researchers recruited participants through an African American Politics class course taught at a private university in the South. The elective course generally attracts a diverse range of students who are majoring in political science at the university. Following IRB protocol, students taking the course were given the option to participate in the project during regularly scheduled class time. Those who would choose not to participate would be provided supplemental readings, however, all students elected to be a part of the study.

The sample consisted of nineteen (19) upperclassmen. There were six men and 13 women; 10 were African American, 7 were White, and 2 were Latina. While almost all of the students had heard of the representations of independence in various genres of music, only one fourth ( $n = 6$ ) of the students had heard of all of the songs in the sample (two Black females, three Black males and one White male) (see Table 1). About half ( $n = 8$ ) of the students had heard of some of the songs (three Black females, one Black male, two White males and two White female students). The remaining fourth ( $n = 5$ ) of participants had not heard any of the songs in the sample (three White females, one Latina, and one White male). Race and gender played a role in the students' familiarity with the songs in the sample, for instance, Black males were more likely to be familiar with all of the songs in the sample, followed by Black females and White males. White females were the least likely to be familiar with the songs in the sample. Table 2 provides the racial and gender demographics for study participants.



**Table 1**  
**Student Familiarity with Songs in Sample (n = 19)**

Had heard of all songs in the sample	6 Participants	2 black females 3 black males 1 white male
Had heard of some songs in the sample	8 Participants	3 black females 1 black male 2 white males 2 white female
Had not heard of any of the songs in the sample	5 Participants	3 white females 1 Latina 1 white male

**Table 2**  
**Race and Gender of Study Participants**

	Black/African American	White/Anglo	Latino/Latina
Male	3	3	0
Female	5	6	2
Total	8	9	2

N=19

This study used two steps procedurally. In the first phase, at the beginning of the semester, participants discussed their perceptions of independence and where they acquired their knowledge. During this process, they watched four videos (see Table 3). It is important to note that videos were selected using the Google search engine and the keywords: “independence” and “rap music.” In the second phase, researchers encouraged students to build on what they already knew about independence.

The primary investigator (PI) (who was not the teacher of record for the course in which the study was conducted) visited the class four times throughout the semester. During these visits, the PI conducted four focus group sessions. For each class visit, approximately sixty (60) minutes were used to review content and provide opportunity for discussion. Visits were scheduled routinely (every week) for four weeks; this allowed time for students to reflect on the topics shared in class and write in their journals. Writings from the non-graded journal were collected and given to the PI to be used as a data source.

The first visit allowed students to discuss their definition of independence and their initial views of the "independent woman." During the second and third visit, the students watched videos and discussed their impressions of the videos. The final visit allowed students to discuss how their definitions and impressions of independence changed over the course of the semester.

Audio recorded data and handwritten memos from each of the focus group sessions were transcribed, and the two investigators looked for themes throughout these transcriptions as they related to the three research questions. Throughout the semester, the students kept a journal in which they discussed their impressions of the videos. Excerpts from these journals were used to enlighten the researchers' findings in the discussion section of this paper. However, the data findings represent the quotes collected during the four focus group sessions. It is also important to note that students were aware that they were picked to participate in a study on the topic. Participants were assigned pseudonyms throughout the process and were told that their comments would not have an impact on their grades; the PI was not the teacher of record for the course.

**Table 3**  
**Rap Music Videos on Independence**

“Independent” by Lil’ Webbie, 2007  
“5 Star Chick” or “5 Star Bitch” Yo Gotti, 2009  
“Independent Bitches” Candi Redd Ft. Rasheeda & Kandi, 2010  
“Independent” by Roxanne Shanté, 1990

Two videos by female artists and two by male artists were selected in order to offer different perspectives for the students. After watching the videos, participants discussed video messages in class and reflected on how both male and female rappers characterized independence differently. As part of any constructivist-based model, instructors helped students to clarify and connect their prior knowledge to different social constructs. Students took ownership of the learning process by later suggesting other videos that also illustrated independence to the class. To document the learning process, they described their thoughts in journal entries. The researchers used information gleaned from study results to offer suggestions for future literacy programs that would focus on rap music and independence.

## Results

### How Students Define Independence

The first research question asked how participants personally defined independence at the beginning of the study. At the beginning of the study, many participants stated that they associated independence to finances, freedom, experience and decision-making abilities.

A few participants included in their definition the idea that independence is based on relationships with other people, particularly a “significant other.” For instance, they stated a true sign of independence is being self-confident and okay with not being in an exclusive relationship with a partner. They stated that being bound to friends or having a “significant other” could limit their freedom and ability to be independent. For instance, one student said individuals must be able to be comfortable with him or herself: “to me, it means not necessarily depending on anyone in anyway. You can still want to have that connection with someone but being independent is being comfortable with being alone.” Mirroring this sentiment, another student stated that “being independent means being okay with being by yourself without friends and significant others.”

Taking this perspective to the extreme, one student stated independence to him meant not being legally bound by anything morally, socially, physically, and economically. He said: “You have the freedom to do what you want, what you wish. Freedom to speak your mind and to hold your own ideals.” One female student added that independence involves “making your own choices and being able to know you need to be somewhere at a certain time.”

### Parental Influence

Their definitions were almost always connected to lessons taught by their parents—with a large percentage of the participants stating their parents played a major role in their formative years. Answers were similar across gender and race lines. One student stated: “I’ve always been taught that when you are financially independent, you are independent. My parents tried to give us more financial freedom each time we reached a specific age.” In this way, participants connect the notion of being independent to being accountable with minimal influence from others. Other students said they learned their concept of independence from their parents who usually encouraged them to take on different levels of independence at different states in life.

However, some students had parents who gave them more freedom than others. One student stated her parents always encouraged her to be independent and to make decisions based on what she wants. She said:

“They don’t want me to be hyper influenced by other people – including them. For me, independence is not based on what my parents or anyone else wants. It’s about being able to make my own responsible choices and decisions that will have a positive effect on my life.”

However, there is a caveat to the participants’ interpretation of independence. As illustrated in their answers, participants did not feel prepared to become independent because they recognized that having a college degree did not guarantee financial stability or independent status and factors such as limited real-world experiences and overly supportive parental structures limited their likelihood to independence after college. Participants shared that while they feel independent on some levels because of being well prepared, they would still have to rely on their parents because of the current conditions in employment and labor markets. In this sense, participants proclaim that pursuing higher education has not allowed them to gain work experiences, and as a result, they are financially dependent on their parents. Two participants admitted to relying on their parents heavily, and as a result, they had to take active approaches in gaining more independence.

One student added that the transition towards independence began when her parents were not as easily accessible. She elaborated: “I have always been super dependent on my parents. Since they moved back to California, they are not so close. I’ve learned to be financially and emotionally independent. I am finding my own solutions.” Some participants also shared that they were not prepared because there is a process associated with becoming independent.

These examples illustrate that there is a need to understand the different connotations of independence in contemporary life and popular culture. Participants stated that their views of independence were based on information received from their parents. They did not mention any outside influences such as peers or music. In the early stage of the study, participants did not have any major differences of opinions about independence. Their perceptions of independence focused on getting a job and living on their own. While some of them mentioned the importance of involving a significant other in the equation, most of them did not.

### **Feminist Theory and Rap Music**

The second research question asked about the participants’ perceptions of feminism and rap music. Many of the students noted that because the videos play a major influence on popular culture, they have a chance to make an impact on the feminist movement. However, one student noted, that this influence may not be entirely positive as both male and female rap artists often rap about independence as it relates to materialism, sexuality, beauty and other factors. She said this may help women push to seek success, but they will define them based on the terms they hear in rap lyrics, which means they are still aiming to please men. She said: “They’re still following guidelines and stipulations set by men, which is not feminism.”

More than half of participants agreed that music icons had not really furthered the ideals and purposes of feminism, but instead channeled female expression through increased sexual identities. Many students asserted that for women, feminism is more keenly defined by sex than financial independence. They noted that one indication that feminist ideals are not encouraged in the music industry is artists usually take on alter egos when they want portray a different side of their personality—particularly one that is sexual in nature—in an effort to portray their own sexual dominant inhibitions. Highlighting artists such as Nicki Minaj and Rihanna, several of the female students affirmed that these women are not furthering the feminist movement, but instead making a case for the need to hide behind a mask when when making a bold statement—or behaving “unladylike.” This need to behave “ladylike,” on one hand, while “behaving badly,” is an effort, in part, to remain attractive to a man, they noted. A female stated that independence is associated with a woman’s ability to secure a relationship with a man while also asserting power of the relationship. Another female student added that in rap music, independence for women is limited. In this way, women are always disposable, replaceable and only in positions to serve men, which illustrates the “rider” stereotype discussed in the introduction.

### **Tenets of Intersectionality**

Demonstrating the importance of using the tenets of Intersectionality in studies, the subjects in our studies were often divided based on gender and race. Participants shared how independence is expressed

through sexuality in rap music. Some students expressed that this was liberating for women, while others thought rappers took it too far, and lyrics advocated sexually promiscuous lifestyles for men and women. A black female student offered this matter-of-fact assessment of the lyrics:

Female rappers have changed the perception of you have to be married to have sex. They say “I can have any man in this club.” I don’t need to be this single, pure person; I can be anything that I want to be.

In this way, she demonstrates how female rappers assert their power through sexual freedom. In reflecting on her own experiences, she shared: “I’m going to do whatever I want. I am a hoe and it is fine. Society says it is okay. I can even take on a girl partner if I want. Different rappers are bisexual.” This quote exemplifies the influence that rap music has on female’s perspectives on sexuality and sexual identities.

Another black female student stated that even talented women have to use sex to sell their music. Women in the hip-hop world are encouraged to dress and behave in a certain way that is appealing to men. For instance, “Lil Kim wanted to rap about how her feelings, but Biggie Smalls told her she needed to be sexy and rap about sexy stuff.” However, he added that sexual independence in rap music is not about the women being sexually independent for herself: “She is doing it for her man. Female rappers do not practice what they preach.”

### **Double Standards and Images of Beauty**

Participants also highlighted the double standards in the music industry. They mentioned women are expected to look physically appealing at all times; however, this is not a requirement for male artists. One male student stated: “Biggie Smalls was overweight. Tupac was muscular. They both had a lot of women. Women are defined by aesthetics, male rappers are defined by the women they have and their possessions such as cars.” These statements illuminate the idea that materialism is heavily depicted in rap music lyrics and the overall lifestyle associated with hip-hop.

Conversely, colorism—or discrimination based on skin color—and physical attractiveness are common in representations of women. Yo Gotti’s (2009) “Five-Star Bitch” (directed by Rik Cordero) contains images of beautiful women. The main character in the video has smooth, light-brown skin accented by long, wavy hair. Yo Gotti (2009) refers to her as a “yellow bone,” which is slang for a light-skinned African American female. One prominent subcategory of this theme was the idea that “if you aren’t pretty, you are nobody.” One student noted, “They changed Beyoncé’s skin color and made her lighter. Women must wear weave and makeup to be considered pretty.”

In agreement, another student stated that the lyrics highlight the importance of getting one’s hair done, nails done. In other words, the overall message of these lyrics, the participants agreed, is if one is independent, he or she must be well-groomed and pampered at all times. Designer clothing also define independence, one student elaborated: “One way I can tell you are independent is if your hair is done; you wear Versace, Prada and Gucci. You can’t come out looking relaxed. If you are relaxed in your attire, you are not independent.” The student added, “You can’t wear old shoes, nappy hair. Women need to look nice when they go out. The artists show they are independent by being edgy. On the red carpet, they dress differently.”

### **Black Male Perceptions**

To counteract the negative connotations of the rap industry, two African American male participants shared positive interpretations of the videos. They stated that many of the students who spoke negatively of the lyrics did not truly understand the nature of the music and the backgrounds of the artists. They offered counter readings by discussing positive messages found in conscious rap music that traditionally focuses on violence, discrimination, and other societal disorders such as the oppression of women and commercialism.

One African American male student who was particularly vocal about rap music shared that the hip-hop industry has its own standards and norms that should not be evaluated based on those set by mainstream society.

He scolded classmates for criticizing the content found in the rap videos, stating they could not relate. He stated: “We need to keep rap music in context. Rappers have their own social reality. Their reality is different. They are shaping the world. They have lived the life they are speaking of in their videos.” In this way, it is evident that participants realize that rap music communicates a set of standards that are necessary to become independent, despite the costs of friends, family, or relationships. The researchers chose songs by both male and female rap artists as respondents might have identified differently with lyrics by persons of a different gender. The researchers speculated that identification may influence their critical response. For instance, male students might likely identify with lyrics and videos produced by male artists, while the same may be true for female students.

### **Perceptions of Independence**

The third research question asked how participants’ views changed over the course of the semester. Initially, participants stated their views of independence did not change over the semester. They did not believe they were influenced by the lyrics. However, worth noting is they believe the lyrics have a possibility of influencing younger listeners. Participants stated the lens younger people develop from listening to rap music ultimately colors their perceptions about being ready and independent for a traditional worldview of having an education, a sound family structure, and a few varied life experiences. These factors can also influence the relationships they choose to subscribe to—albeit love, career, spirituality, family, etc., all of this stems from their self-perceptions about how ready they are for the world.

To bolster this claim most comments centered on the same factors such as the video’s emphasis on materialism, misogyny and the objectification of women. Almost all of the participants agreed that materialism was a prominent theme in the videos. One student stated, “Independence in these videos is based on finances. Lil’ Webbie states: *You got your own house, your own car, two jobs, work hard*. This means she is financially stable.” One student agreed by mentioning that the lyrics highlight the idea that financial independence is strictly based on finances and not needing a man. Another student added that in all of the videos, there is an over emphasis on material independence and many rags to riches stories. He stated that this theme is common in other songs such as Drake’s “Started from the Bottom and Now We’re Here.”

The idea that women should be “superhuman” was also a common theme. For instance, Webbie’s (2007) rendition, “Independent”, speaks of his ideal mate as a college graduate who is financially stable, has a perfect credit score, and is a churchgoer and a schoolteacher. See the following for an excerpt of the lyrics (Webbie, 2007):

Independent do you know what that mean?  
Baby Phat just relaxed  
Front your own flat screen.  
Fat Folks Cook or clean that a maka maka seen.  
When you're calling her on her cellular  
She tells you she needs not a god damn thing.

Participants noted that there was a subtheme of men and women being alienating in order to pursue their goals and dreams. They noted there were not many examples of men and women forming healthy relationships in videos. One student noted this is problematic because as humans, “We are meant to build relationships and learn how to interact with others. I think a sense of self-worth is more important than a desire to be completely independent from another person.”

This viewpoint extended to relationships in general. One male student stated there is an emphasis on men being able to survive without friends. He added: “They must be capable of surviving without anyone else.” A female student elaborated further to note that:

Men want to appear as if they don’t need anything or anyone. They don’t need women. They just use women for sex, but they don’t need them. Men and women don’t need each other. Being thirsty is

showing someone you like them or care about them. Hip-hop is telling you not to show love to anyone. You are treating them with too much respect if you show them love.

One student summarized her feelings by mentioning that rap music is a reflection of the millennial generation and culture. She stated that many college students are not willing to commit to a long-term relationship that may lead to marriage. “If I get married, that changes my life and I don’t want that. Female rappers have decided they want more out of life than marriage. They also want a career.”

After reviewing these general themes in rap videos depicting independence, many students agreed that music *can* be used to change people’s views of the topic. For instance, a student noted rap music has the potential to have a positive influence on the feminist movement—not because rap music is virtuous and wise—but because it calls attention to the problems of society and particularly in the Black community. It has the potential to call attention to current social problems, which will encourage some people to focus on fixing them. Another student stated, “Lyrics, like poetry, can lead the listener to challenge their personal thoughts and views. Hearing someone else’s definition or perspective on independence helps to shape or reinforce the listener’s.”

### Discussion

This study examined college students’ perceptions of independence following the viewing of rap videos depicting images of rap lyrics. They discussed their definitions of the “independent woman,” reflected on cultural narratives of Black women and discussed their views on feminism and rap music. At the beginning of the study, participants mainly associated independence with issues that related to their parents, relationships and finances. They later noted how one’s race and gender might influence their view of rap music, which might determine if the genre of music has an impact on their lives. Black, male students were particularly vocal on this stance.

Based on participants’ beginning definitions of ‘independent,’ it is evident they situate and relate independence to their age group and level of parental involvement. By asserting that independence is a certain type of “freedom,” participants could be alluding to ideas, activities, and even perspectives that they might not have previously have or had. After viewing the videos, they noted that other people had many different perceptions of independence that linked the term to sexuality, beauty, gender and power.

The students’ new interpretation of independence has implications on their ideas of self-worth and value in mainstream society. They noted that many of the standards were different from the traditional idea of how one might go about gaining independence, which many of them described as graduating from high school and college, getting a job, leaving home and living “independently.” The students noted that songs place higher demands on women than on men, focusing on getting one’s hair and nails done, working out, wearing designer clothing, making love, etc. In order to be independent, women must be lighter, thinner, prettier, smarter and better educated.

Based on the information from these discussions, it appears these young adults were able to distinguish fact from fiction in rap lyrics; however, they still struggle with understanding social stratification in America. Specifically, the participants are in route to receiving a higher education degree, which will in some ways, elevate their status, but instead, they are jaded to believe that this attained goal *will not* and *has not* contributed to them becoming independent. Both male and female participants agreed rap music is a reflection of the trends in the feminist movement—particularly as it relates to sexuality. Most of the participants who expressed their views on definitions of independence were female. The characteristics they mentioned addressed choices, accountability, decision making, finances, and self-confidence—all of which could be contested topics in the struggle for women’s rights and equality.

### **Limitations**

As with any study, there were limitations associated with this study. Researchers used a convenience sample of college students registered in a course at a university; therefore, the results may not be generalized to the mainstream population. The size of the focus group was another limitation. Seven to ten participants is the optimal number that is suggested for collecting focus group data; however, the size of the focus group was predetermined as it was conducted in a pre-existing course. Future studies might have fewer participants, which will allow for richer, thicker discussions. Students might also feel more aptly to discuss key topics and content as a result of fewer peers. Differences by race and gender should also be deeply considered within the context of rap music literacy studies. Though not analyzed through this combined lens, both factors have dire influences on the ways in which participants viewed notions of independence. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that White female participants were less vocal on the ways in which rap music influenced their definitions of independence than any other racial and gender demographic.

Perhaps, these participants were facing interpersonal struggles when conceptualizing the term through their own experiences and education. On the other hand, Black male and female students were assertive in their thinking about rap music as an agent of liberation and freedom for Black women, despite negative connotations about women and independence. These participants may be viewing rap music for its historical and contemporary contributions in promoting Black messages from people of color in mainstream society.

Student expectations, peer interactions and the need to please the primary researcher may have also limited participants' expression in the context of the study. The PI is an African-American female who had no prior contact with study participants. Participation in the study was not mandatory and not connected to the students' final grades; therefore, some students took the focus groups more seriously than others. Some participants were more candid in their discussions than others. About half of the participants opted to remain silent throughout exercise—perhaps feeling that they had nothing to add to the discussion—perhaps because of their lack of familiarity with the songs—or just not really wanting to participate. As mentioned in earlier in the paper, racial identity intersected with genre familiarity. All students were encouraged to participate regardless of their familiarity with the videos in the sample. The PI showed the videos in class and provided the links to the videos to allow students to view them.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future studies might include a larger sample and skillfully weave constructivist tactics throughout the process. This was the second of three studies. The first study explored themes in rap music. This one introduced or reintroduced students to rap lyrics that contain messages about independence and to help students come up with their own definitions of independence. The researchers plan to develop more extensive programs for junior high school students, which will include formal tracking of their views before and after the intervention. Because of the nature of the lyrics, instructors will have to be carefully trained. A key component of constructivism is to give students ownership of the learning process and to serve as a guide on the side. In many instances, students will know more about rap lyrics, and will therefore be better able to lead discussions on various representations. In this study, students suggested other videos that discussed representations of independence and facilitated discussions on the topic when one student tried to dominate the conversation.

Also worth noting is not all participants responded to the use of rap lyrics to teach the concept of independence. Some subjects were silent, choosing not to participate in the discussion, while other students dominated the conversation. Race and gender as factors for how participants perceived independence and the influence of rap music on becoming independent should be deeply explored in future research. Facilitators must be comfortable with discussing the content of the videos. However, it is the opinion of the researchers that it does not matter if the instructor likes the rap genre; it is more important that he/she remains objective throughout the discussions to allow for critical conversations about mainstream media messages about independence. As aptly stated by Kumar (2012) teacher educators will need practice and support to successfully integrate popular texts

and culturally relevant strategies into their own instruction. The research also encourages additional research to investigate how these aims can best be achieved.

There are a number of pedagogical strategies that could be effective for teaching students from varied racial backgrounds about concepts of independence. Teachers could look to the tenets of multicultural education and/or diversity awareness practices that explore ways to encourage various perspectives in educational settings. Additionally, it would be practical for the teacher to also conduct research on the students' racial/ethnic backgrounds in order to provide multiple contexts for understanding what it means to be independent within one's own culture. The teacher could also invite students to bring in their preferred genres of music to explore themes of independence. Allowing students to dialogue and deconstruct what independence means in various cultural contexts will increase their level of understanding about becoming independent while also advance their levels of critical inquiry about mass media messages. Despite the limitations of this study, filled an important gap in literature as discussed in the introduction. It is encouraged that scholars build on this article to develop curriculum that will enable young adults to become their "own version of independent."

### **Instructional Practices for Using Rap Music to Explore "Independence"**

In addition to viewing rap videos that focus on independence and writing in a journal to reflect on their experiences, other instructional practices for teaching independence using rap music might also include a combination of the following exercises. Instructors may use the songs and videos from our study as a springboard to begin critical discussions on independence and on how one might achieve it. After watching rap videos, students may write their own rap lyrics that describe their vision of independence. Let them perform for them for their classmates. Students may role-play what it means to them to be "independent." Have them incorporate where they learned their definitions of independence. Students may be empowered to choose videos that include various representations of independence and present them to the class. They may even be encouraged to develop a worksheet and lead a discussion on the topic. It is also suggested that students be divided into groups based on gender, have them present skits featuring people in reverse gender roles. As this study has shown, a key area to explore in analyzing rap music concerns the different interpretations and opinions held by males and females. These exercises may help students explore messages of independence using rap music using a constructivist approach. It is important to begin the process with an assessment of students' prior knowledge of representations of independence in music and a discussion of where they acquired their knowledge of independence. One of the goals of constructivism is to help students become life-long learners and better critical thinkers. This article may be used to help participants explore perceptions of independence, Black Feminist Theory and independence in rap music as they hone their critical-thinking skills.

As an indication that the course was beneficial, this is an excerpt from one student's journal:

This class hasn't changed my views of independence so much as it has sparked a care and concern for my views of women's independence. Before the instructor asked us what we believed it means to be independent, I had never really put thought into the idea, I just assumed that I was independent and that was that. I had always believed myself to be relatively independent, but the conversation allowed me the chance to re-evaluate what that means and how people experience independence in different ways.

Rap artists offer real insight on the importance of independence. Roxanne Shanté was clearly a trailblazer when her song about independence was released three decades ago. Her vision was clear-cut and unwavering. Her definition of independence was clearly stated "women should not depend on a man." Since the 1980s, definitions of independence in rap music have taken on new meanings—often encompassing themes of materialism, colorism and sexism. It is up to scholars and educators to help students deconstruct media messaging regarding independence in order for them to form healthy identities on what it means to be independent.



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