

Rap and R&B Videos: What Are They Trying to Tell Us?

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Have you ever really thought about how women are portrayed in music videos? We've watched a lot of rap and R&B videos, and from our point of view, it seems like they're trying to tell us to dress scantily [wear hardly any clothes] and to be attracted to rich men with lots of jewelry. They encourage us to judge a man by how much "ice" [diamonds] he wears and how big and fancy his car is.

The videos by top male rappers like Cash Money Millionaires, Mystikal, and Sisqo always have women hardly wearing any clothes. They're always talking about sex and "booty" and they swear all the time. Top female rappers like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown also feature women dancing in the background with hardly any clothes on. Plus, take a look at these stats:

- Almost 33 percent of all videos feature females as "props," characters who appear around the main performer or in the background.
- 25 percent of female "props" are made to wear very revealing clothing that exposes parts of their breasts or butt.
- Over 25 percent of videos focus on specific female body parts like "props" breast, legs, stomach, or crotch.

Thankfully, there are other male rappers and R&B artists like Common and Tyrese. They don't always show off cars, money, or jewelry. They often rap about how much they love and are devoted to their girlfriends, who are actually fully clothed in their videos.

There are also some female R&B singers like Monica and Brandy. They appear to be very strong, independent women in their videos, who are not obsessed with men regardless of their "ice" or their cars. Unfortunately, this is not common.

Source: *Children Now: Boys to Men, Entertainment Media – Messages About Masculinity, September 1999.*

Street harassment yields emotional repercussions

by Amber Bryant

There are few things that anger me more than street harassment.

I spent the last few days of 2002 staying with a couple of friends in Brooklyn, N.Y. One night, my companions attended a concert in Manhattan, leaving me alone for a night to stuff my face in front of six consecutive episodes of *Sex and the City*. Being a responsible video renter and itching for an after-dusk walk, I decided to trek the four blocks to return the DVD (and rent the next season).

My journey to Blockbuster was uneventful; the streets were busy with residents walking their dogs, taking out the trash and conversing with neighbors. However, on the way back to my friend's apartment, I encountered a strapping young lad who thought he'd strike up a conversation, opening with, "Hey baby, can I get up in it?"

In the interest of safety, I bit my tongue and glared at him, trying to look as psychotic and dangerous as possible. It obviously didn't work, as he and his two friends proceeded to follow me all the way to my destination, expressing his interest in my rear end, all the while and scaring the daylights out of me. By the time I reached the living room couch, I was livid. That a 16-year-old kid could tip the balance of power in his favor because he's male was enough to ruin the rest of my evening.

At first I tried to blame it on my location. However, while New York may have a reputation for street harassment, I can recall at least two occasions when a truck full of men thought it appropriate to whistle and holler at me in the parking lot of the Murfreesboro Wal-Mart.

This kind of behavior is horribly degrading, and for that matter, illegal. Unfortunately, until it isn't socially taboo to deliver a small amount of voltage to a harasser, women don't have many options to protect themselves, leaving their mental health in the hands of the chauvinist males who make a sport of catcalling.

So, the next time you get the urge to "compliment" a lady by making her feel like a piece of meat, don't. It'll be a great exercise in learning to be a decent human being.

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Being Pimped Ain't Easy

by Moya Bailey

Last year, rapper Nelly was ejected from a mall for being in violation of the mall dress code. He was wearing a do-rag. The local National Action Network, a Black civil rights group, was all over it. Showing up at the mall the following day 150-strong, wearing bandanas and do-rags, they accused the mall of promoting a racist policy towards African-Americans. Reverend Al Sharpton, president of the organization, issued a travel advisory, warning Black people not to patronize the mall because of its discriminatory practices.

The Black community was ready to rally to Nelly's aid for being thrown out of a mall, but has remained eerily silent about the blatant misogyny in his lyrics.

Don't get me wrong, I'm a huge believer in free speech and know that Nelly has every legal right to call me and my Black sisters "bitches and ho's." I just don't understand why the leadership in the Black community thinks that it is okay.

Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin recently attended a fundraising event for a charity founded by locally based rap superstar Ludacris. This followed the controversy surrounding his being dropped from Pepsi as an endorser because of his sexually explicit lyrics. She said that his charity was separate from his music and since the two weren't connected she could support his foundation. It seems Black women are so undervalued in this society that not even we will fight for ourselves.

These are a few examples in a long list of instances where misogyny, patriarchy, and the degradation of Black women in rap music is ignored or overlooked by the bigwigs in the Black community. The Grammys have even come to embrace these negative aspects of hip-hop music, nominating for an award Nelly's "Hot in Herre" in which he instructs women to take off their clothes and asks "what good is all the fame if you ain't f-----g models?"

To be fair, these lyrics are surprisingly tame when compared to others or even the visual images accompanying such a song. As scantily clad women gyrate around fully clothed slightly swaying men, the message is clear: Women are simply sex objects to be ogled and had. Put most succinctly by rapidly rising 50 Cent: "I'm into having sex, ain't into making love."

R. Kelly, provider of such R & B gems as "Feelin' On Your Booty" and "The Greatest Sex," is reaping benefits from his high profile child pornography accusations. He continues to produce music and the profits continue to roll in. As a friend astutely pointed out, had the videotape revealed Kelly having consensual sex with an underage boy, the community would be in an uproar. But because it was a girl, she has been dismissed as another oversexed fan that knew what she was doing.

It's not fair. It's not fair that these male rappers continue to demonize and brutalize women in songs and videos and the female voices who try to challenge these characterizations are silenced. Poet and activist Sarah Jones, daughter of legendary poet/activist LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), released a single called "Your Revolution . . ." The song draws inspiration from "The

Revolution Will Not Be Televised" by Gil Scott Heron. She took sexist misogynistic lyrics from existing songs that get radio play and wove them into a declaration of how she will not be used and mistreated. When her song was banned by the FCC, no Black leaders came to her aid.

Hip-hop's irreverence towards women is now being used as a marketing ploy. In a recent Heineken ad, Rapper Jay-Z dismisses his female guest's request for a drink refill, opting instead to get himself a Heineken. There seems to be a complete lack of criticism of this new advertising trend from men and even women journalists.

As far as I can tell, the best way to combat these negative images of women in lyrics and videos is to hurt the industry in the pocket by not buying this music anymore. The music industry is being upheld right now by hip-hop, and a severe dip in sales might be the warning needed for artists and record companies to change their ways. I'm not saying you can't listen anymore. You can download artists that don't need to be supported and buy the records of those who do. It is important that you only use your buying power to support artists who do not present misogynistic views of Black women.

I know it's hard. I have been known to bump the Ignition remix on my computer. That's why providing alternative artists and songs is so important. We can write our own songs, create our own beats. Producing lyrics and images that counter this misogyny is a step we all can take.

I'm going to make my own CD. I'm going to call it "Being Pimped Ain't Easy." Look out for hot tracks like "I'm Not A Ho," "Why Can't I Be Fully Clothed?," "I Don't Want Your STDs," and "I Don't Want to Date a Playa Because..." I'm going to have a hot video too. I'm going to rock the ice (of the H2O variety), show off all my cars (at a Mercedes dealership), and have male dancers (oiled up and grinding on each other, barely clad). Maybe that's what it will take to get some support from the leadership in the Black community.

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Guys Feel the Pressure to Be “Real Men”

by Scott Doyle, 18

The need for guys to prove their “manhood” is a phenomenon that dates back to prehistoric times, when cavemen tried to be the strongest, the fastest, or the smartest. How did they do this? Taking risks, pushing around the little guy, forcing their way into positions of power ... the list goes on.

Examples of men acting like “real men” continue today, even though they take on a slightly different form. Many adolescent males try as hard as they can to outdo one another, sometimes without even thinking about it.

They lift weights so they’ll look stronger than other guys. They flaunt clothes, Jordans, cars, and other material things to show off their money and sense of style. They pick on the weaker kids to show their dominance over them. They pretend to be the most sexually experienced guys in school.

Why is this behavior so common? Why is it that males, especially teen guys, try so hard to show off? Despite guys’ claims that they’re trying to impress the ladies (which, in itself, is an overly “masculine” response), many times they’re doing things just to impress other guys.

“I feel awkward when I’m in the locker room and guys are bragging about how many girls they’ve slept with. Since I’m still a virgin, I just lie and say I’ve slept with tons of girls, so I can fit in with them,” says James, 17, of New York City.

Behind the Image

Michael S. Kimmel, Ph.D., an author and sociologist, has done extensive research on men, masculinity, and gender roles in society. His latest book, *Manhood In America: A Cultural History*, looks at how the American ideal of “manliness” has changed throughout the years and what causes men to strive for such a confusing and seemingly pointless ideal.

“The reason men do all this stuff—risk taking, driving fast, trying to impress girls, etc.—is really for the approval of other men. Growing up, our fathers and brothers are the ones that put us down and call us ‘sissies.’ Guys learn how to be ‘men’ from other boys, so naturally, that’s the approval they’ll seek as they get older,” explains Kimmel.

Alex, 18, of Pennsylvania, agrees. He says that many guys feel pressure from other guys, who are sizing them up and judging them.

“A friend of mine picks on other guys. He tries to have an intimidating image, so other people around him watch what they say. But most people don’t respect him. He doesn’t realize that by changing his attitude, he might lose the respect of few, but gain a lot more respect with the rest of the world,” he says.

Breaking Free

So, how can guys develop a positive attitude about themselves, without having to impress other guys?

“Develop relationships with other guys that are real friendships as opposed to guys simply trying to impress each other. This will make it easier for guys to be open with one another, to admit their fears and help keep each other grounded rather than trying to outdo each other,” advises Kimmel.

And what about heterosexual guys, who think that girls only like the real “manly men”?

“In mostly all public opinion polls,” says Kimmel, “women say that they don’t care about those things. They’re looking for a guy who’s caring, sensitive, and thinks about his partner more than himself.”

Mary, 18, of Middletown, NJ, responds to the idea of the locker-room culture:

“If he’s bragging about being ‘the man,’ then I think he’s immature. It’s not something that impresses people. If I hear about him from someone else, I look at it as a heads-up, a warning, to stay away from him.”

Meg, 17, from Keansburg, NJ, agrees.

“I look for conversation skills in a guy, someone who’s also able to be comfortable around me. I look for honesty and little things like crying. It’s great to see a guy cry.”

Sometimes acting “manly” isn’t being a real man at all.

Scott Doyle, 18, is a staff writer for Sex, Etc. His writing can be found at www.sxetc.org.

Not for Public Consumption

Ashley Day, Tolerance.org

I picked up much more than a sandwich while on a lunch run with a male coworker last week. We parked downtown and walked one block to the sandwich shop, passing six silent men. When I went back to the car several minutes ahead of my coworker, those same six men seized the opportunity to hurl grunts, hisses, whistles and sexual comments at me. Nothing was said to my friend when he returned.

That's a critical difference. As a male, my coworker can do something as simple as buy lunch unmolested.

Blame it on summer

The media makes much of this dichotomy every year when the mercury begins to rise, claiming incidents of "catcalling" rise with it. Linking sexual harassment to summertime sends the wrong message, implying women are walking around half naked "asking for it."

Are my tank top, skirt and sandals the problem? Or is the problem, in fact, that so many men feel entitled to verbally reduce me to Sexual Opportunity No. 1, No. 2 or No. 12 when I go to work, pick up lunch, pay the water bill, live my life?

It doesn't matter what I'm wearing -- I've been harassed in everything from my Sunday church best to a winter coat, hat and glove combo that showed as much skin as a burqa.

More importantly, it shouldn't make a difference what I'm wearing. Like my coworker, I too want the freedom to leave my house, put gas in my car and grab a turkey on wheat without being sexualized or deemed on display for public consumption.

Word games

The term "catcalling," as many choose to label the act of a man verbally humiliating a woman in public, is more than a little problematic. We're talking about men blocking women's paths on the street, intentionally standing too close, using vulgar and offensive language, and making sexual references.

Call it what it is -- harassment.

And we shouldn't downplay the issue by presuming harassment is somehow "harmless." Whenever a strange man makes uninvited sexual comments or gestures to a woman, menace is an implicit threat. That's why, nine times out of 10, women tell me I should ignore it. Just be quiet, walk faster, dress inconspicuously, don't talk back, don't make eye contact and maybe he'll leave you alone. Maybe one day the advice will be to just stop leaving the house altogether.

Playing with power

Our military trains soldiers to depersonalize the enemy, and there was a time prisoners were

hooded before being hung in part to distance executioners from the person they were killing. Such work requires remove from the stark reality that you are harming human beings with faces and names and lives.

Street harassment is a similar depersonalization, one that allows men to treat women as objects -- instead of as sisters, mothers, daughters, friends.

We don't hang people anymore, but our society implicitly sanctions the depersonalization of street harassment despite the fact that it can escalate into violence, be it public assaults like the ones at Seattle Mardi Gras 2001, Central Park 2000 and Woodstock 1999 or the private assaults suffered in our homes and schools.

What happened in Central Park after the Puerto Rico Day Parade in 2000 and at Seattle's 2001 Mardi Gras celebration were not isolated events, but escalations of the public menacing of women that goes on all the time.

Take it like a woman

Meanwhile, women are told to get over it, take it as a compliment, ignore it -- all suggestions that assume street harassment is a passing moment that can be overlooked like an unpaid parking ticket. It isn't. It happens all day, every day. It's the cumulative force of it that drives us down.

Street harassment, like other forms of harassment and like rape, is about intimidation and power. The underlying message is, "woman, you have no business being in public on your own."

I know few women who have been harassed when accompanied by a man. But once they leave a man's company and attempt to go about their day alone, street harassment becomes their new companion. And it is this companion that tells us over and over: "You are little more than a piece of meat, a toy, an instrument of a stranger's pleasure."

While some women may resort to going out in groups or with men in tow, I happen to like my own company. I feel entitled to walk unmolested and unimpeded at high noon on a public street my tax dollars pay for. But I'm not.

Pump up the volume

Granted, all men don't define their masculinity or assert their supposed supremacy by dehumanizing women, or anyone else for that matter. I've watched men all over the country go about living without forcing sexual opinions and observations on every woman that walks past.

But those "good guys" have a responsibility here, too. Because silence equals acceptance, I urge men to actively challenge other men, including their friends, when they witness women being harassed on the street. Until that happens, I must continue to struggle against stereotyping every man as an "enemy" on par with those guys outside the sandwich shop.

Women need to speak up too, in whatever ways feel safest. New York's Street Harassment Project offers ideas about how to effectively confront harassers on your terms, be it talking back, putting up anti-harassment posters or confronting harassers with a group of your friends.

When we talk about street harassment we're talking about something as fundamental as equal participation in public life. Sure, street harassment isn't the reason women haven't claimed the White House, but think about how much more time and energy we'd have to focus on such lofty things if we weren't "dealing" with "Hey, mama, I've got some dick for you" or even "pssst ... baby, com'ere" throughout our lives.

Ashley Day is the producer of Tolerance.org.

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Street Harassment Calls for Action

Morse Avenue harassment calls for action

Along a section of Morse Avenue in East Rogers Park, young men hang out in clusters – near the liquor store, the currency exchange, the Laundromat, under the train station – and “catcall” to the young women, some as young as 10 years old, who walk down the street.

It would be harassing enough if they just said, “Hey baby, why don’t you smile?” But sometimes they touch. They pull hair. I saw one young man yank a girl’s clothing. Sometimes they even follow the girls, taunting them and calling them foul names.

For some girls, learning how to navigate parts of Morse Avenue, where unemployed young men hang out, has become a rite of passage, part of a sad initiation into adulthood. On their way to and from school, they’ve learned to take zigzag routes around the guys, crossing the street in the middle of a block before crossing back over. Or they jog past the loiterers or walk in groups. Some girls admit carrying pocket knives or pepper spray.

Last year, area youths were invited to a community forum. Most organizers expected students to talk about drugs and gangs and violence. And they did. But overwhelmingly, the girls spoke about how threatened they felt while walking along Morse Avenue.

So Mariame Kaba, with Friends of Battered Women and Their Children, one of the sponsors of the community forum, asked the girls what they thought could be done. Initially, most said what amounted to: “Nothing. Men will be men. Boys will be boys.”

“Only two girls said they believed differently,” Kaba said. “I met with those two girls and they said they wanted to find out whether other girls in the community felt the same way.”

Last summer, six more girls joined those two, and the young women, age 16 to 18, dubbed themselves the Rogers Park Young Women’s Action Team. They surveyed more than 160 girls and rounded up 34 others to participate in focus groups.

Survey results found that girls repeatedly had been called derogatory names. There had been requests for sex. The more severe forms of street harassment included guys touching girls’ thighs, faces, buttocks, or breasts. Girls as young as 10 had been harassed. Boys as young as 10 had been the harassers. Girls said they felt afraid to walk past the boys and men. Many said they felt powerless.

The action team took pictures of the gangways, alleys and businesses that they determined were hot spots for catcalling. They put together a report and presented it last winter to the

community, the police and elected officials, including their alderman and Cook County and state politicians.

They requested better police patrols along Morse and better lighting in the area because some of the young women have to travel the streets at night.

The action team also created a workshop, which will begin in May, on how and when to confront the guys, since some are particularly aggressive and the girls worry about retribution.

One of the reasons I was moved by these young women, who are mostly African-American and Caribbean, was because when I heard about them, I had just read about a national study that said black girls from households earning below \$25,000 a year don't get much respect. A sad consequence of the hip-hop culture has been to define black women and their sexuality in some pretty vile terms.

I mentioned the study to action team member Joyce Taylor as we took a short walk along Morse. I told her I was impressed that the young women are refusing to accept negative labels or harassment.

"It's not normal," said Joyce, 16. "You can't control what [the men] say all the time. But you can control how you feel about yourself. And you can say, 'You don't have the right to touch me, and I will call the police'"

The girls hope that adults hear them, because they don't want the catcalling to escalate into rape. This is a battle they shouldn't have to fight alone. They need better lighting. They need more police patrols.

Most of all, the guys need to be educated – as folks have been in the workplace and in schools – to understand that this behavior is disgusting. No woman should have to endure being demeaned and humiliated as she walks down the street.

That's a message that must resonate to corners far beyond Morse Avenue.

"Morse Avenue harassment calls for action," Chicago Tribune, Metro Section, front page, Wednesday, March 31, 2004.

The Street Harassment Project

Statement of Purpose

The Street Harassment Project is a New York City based activist group that works against the omnipresent harassment on the street and in other public places of women by men. We feel that street harassment in its varying forms is an expression of male supremacy and sexism and a form of terrorization of women, with the ultimate effect of threatening any public activity. We believe that all women are subjected to street harassment; and that some groups of women, including young women, women of color, and women perceived as lesbians are subjected to forms of street harassment which reflect those prejudices as well. And we reject the idea that this situation is inevitable and unchangeable, and that this behavior represents innate male nature.

PREAMBLE

BECAUSE women are terrorized daily in public spaces, our personal space violated by men who block our paths, stand too close, use a too intimate and insulting language toward us...

BECAUSE this behavior is implicitly menacing and threatening and often becomes overtly threatening when a woman expresses her anger at these affronts...

BECAUSE the line between verbal harassment and physical menacing is often crossed...

BECAUSE on June 11, 2000, hundreds of men assaulted, stripped and fondled over 56 women in the public space of Central Park and the rage of women in the city exploded...

The Street Harassment Project was (re)initiated on June 15, 2000 and has been meeting weekly ever since.

BELIEFS

1. That street harassment, rape and assault are connected issues; that all stem from attitudes of dehumanization of women that are part of a bigger social picture: the system of male supremacy and sexism under which we still live.

2. We are feminists and see this struggle as an aspect of the larger struggle for women to be equal and have full human rights in every area of life.

3. Street harassment is a form of terrorization of women in which men attempt to impose dominance and women are supposed to react with subordination. The reinforcement of male supremacy is its effect as well as its motivation. It is patriarchy flexing its muscles.

4. Street harassment is primarily about power and control; we do not bring it on ourselves by what we wear or do. It is enough to be female and out in public to be harassed.

5. That the streets are public space that men have for too long claimed as their "turf," so that when women venture onto them we are defined by men as being there for THEIR amusement and titillation. We challenge their assumption of ownership of public space; these are our streets too!

6. We reject "boys will be boys" and other rationalizations for men's behavior. We do not believe that street harassment represents men's inherent "nature," but is part of a socially constructed "masculinity," one that is part of a male culture that has been passed on through generations. It is a learned behavior that CAN be unlearned.

7. While all women are harassed, we are cognizant of the special forms that harassment of some women may take, for instance, women of color, very young women, perceived lesbians and women deemed "unattractive," to name a few. We wish to explore these differences.

8. We realize that some women do not consider to be harassment what we consider to be harassment. While we recognize every woman's right to define for herself what she considers "harassment," we are cognizant of the fact that all women are continually being intimidated into "playing along to get along," as well as being constantly pressured to prove--even to ourselves--that we are "attractive." We do not forget that this is a game in which men set the terms and women are punished if we do not comply.

9. We recognize that there are many forms of harassment going on in public spaces. These may be based on race, class, immigrant status, sexual orientation, gender expression, homelessness, police targeting--or have other "causes." There are relationships and overlaps between these harassments/abuses and what women experience because we are women--we support all struggles on these issues. We have, however, in THIS group, chosen to focus on the harassment of women by men:

a) because there is no other group solely devoted to this important work and

b) because we believe we must fight as FEMINISTS against street harassment--and in the context of a larger struggle against male supremacy and sexism.

OUR INTENTIONS

To fight street harassment of women by men in all of its forms with our ultimate goal of having a society where women can go wherever we want, when we want, dress the way we choose and be able to express ourselves, including sexually, in freedom and in safety. We will work toward this goal by:

Creating an atmosphere in which street harassment is completely socially unacceptable,

Educating/raising awareness about what street harassment actually is, the toll it takes and how it shores up the system of male supremacy,

Creating a forum which can be a clearinghouse for our stories and in which we can share our experiences, support each other, strategize, inspire each other and build our courage through

the knowledge that we are not alone,

Developing concrete ideas and strategies, particularly group strategies, for handling harassment on the street,

Providing an outlet for our rage, a way to help us stay sane by engaging in creative confrontation that allows us to feel OUR power,

Engaging in actions that will make the harassment of women a NOT PLEASANT and NOT REWARDING experience for the harasser,

Putting street harassment back on the map as an important feminist issue--one we don't have to give up on--and by so doing making a contribution to the development of a strong and growing grassroots feminism,

Challenging the men who CLAIM to support us to ACTIVELY confront other men on their harassing behavior,

Encouraging women everywhere to support each other on the street by creating a culture of solidarity among women,

Experimenting and passing on the results of our experiments to other women and groups of women so that we can be a "seed project," one that women in other locations might want to model themselves after so that street harassment projects might start up in many cities and countries,

To accomplish our intentions through actions, graphics, street theatre, outreach, the internet, imaginative propaganda, patrols and any other method we can think up and pull off.