

A Case Study On Selected Terms Used To Describe Women In Selected Malaysian Hip Hop Lyrics

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ABSTRACT

Music has always played a pivotal role in our life as it possesses the power to mold listener's perceptions and notions. When broken down into components, music itself plays a role in stereotyping women into certain characteristics and ideals. This study therefore looks at selected Malaysian hip hop lyrics and examines how the lyrics are used in depicting women in certain sexist terms.

Keyword: *Hip hop, Malaysian, lyrics, sexist terms.*

INTRODUCTION

In the era of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, music has always had an impact on the ways that people move about their everyday life be it in terms of dressing or conversations. In the past, and in other parts of the world today, there are definitely other reasons for music to evoke emotions. The classical Master Beethoven was for example, famous for infusing precise emotions among his listeners, and till today his music is still adored by many. His piano sonata *Les Adieux* was written depicting a short story about two lovers's experiencing their loneliness but are reunited at last.

According to Eaton (2003), Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, a famous German composer and pianist once commented that music is much more specific about what it expresses than by written words about those expressions. Though music has the innate power to express, and bring out powerful emotions, the issue of music's moral and power, and how that power affects listeners and societies at large, is one that garners little attention among researchers alike.

Eaton (2003) goes on to state that ancient cultures had strong beliefs on the power of music and it was pertinent for them to uphold and maintain this belief in their music as well. Thus the core meaning of any music can be interpreted from the viewpoint of either a formalist or an expressionist. Listeners have different purposes on why they select certain types of music to listen to, probably due to the beat, meaning or the artist involved. As a result of this, the style of music may differ from culture to culture. An experienced musician might express certain music in a different way as compared to a novice and this results in how same music contradict themselves.

One such genre of music that is always interpreted differently by musicians and listeners is hip hop. The media puts forward that hip hop should take the blame for the gang violence, drugs, devaluing certain women and male control. Hip hop provided a new form of music - a music based upon fast and catchy rhythms. This genre is a phenomenon that is popularly associated with rap. Rap genre is seen as an act of talking in a rhyme to the selected beat which may encompass other music genres.

Rose (1994), in her book *Black Noise*, states:

“Rap music is ... a hidden transcript. Among other things it uses cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities ... rap music is a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless” (pp. 100-101).

As such, hip hop is a complex culture of music, fashion, language, dance and lifestyle and with this form of entertainment gaining popularity quickly amongst listeners, its effects on gender gradually has begun to put pressure on the ways that individuals should live their life incorporating violence, anger and abuse.

The influence of hip hop also plays a role in gender stereotyping and in January 2005, according to Pemberton (2008:1), “*Essence* magazine launched a “Take Back the Music Campaign” that encouraged critical dialogue among diverse communities about the representation of women in popular media particularly in rap music and videos”. The main focus of the campaign was to examine the effect of images of man and women alike, to promote better representations of women and to encourage the public to participate in this move.

According to Pemberton (2008:2),

“in many ways, rap music, particularly ‘hardcore’ or ‘gangsta’ rap, is a reflection, manifestation, and sometimes exaggeration of the violent, sexist, misogynist, homophobic and racist culture of the world in general”.

According to Balraj (2004), studies conducted by Fernandes (1997) and Ivy and Backlund (2007) noted that language found in hip hop music is sexist in nature and stereotypes the genders. All through our lives, we are inspired by the surplus of things which lie before us; we pick up knowledge around us and incorporate them in our daily life. Bates (2005) notes that we interpret what we see according to these preconceptions about what is important.

The result of this application of names and symbols brings to surface the issues that face many young people, such as discrimination, peer relations, and self-worth. Ayannah (2000) asserts that for the young generations who do not have the notion of discrimination, hip hop which is gaining popularity among listeners now may influence the younger generation to conform gender in certain roles. Without appropriate guidance, individuals will be “vulnerable to being manipulated and exploited by core institutions like the mass media and popular culture” (Strinati, 1995:7)

There are also others who directly or indirectly support an environment that allows gender stereotyping to continue, for example advertisements in magazines which depict male and female in different ways, gender discrimination in the workplace, television advertisements, cartoons and pornography. Most heterosexual pornography for example, attempts to reduce female human beings to sexual objects.

As this environment which allows for gender stereotyping gains more popularity, the influence of the society becomes more apparent. Humans, who are social creatures, determine their ideas about their surroundings through representations from the social media and as such when these representations are repeated in the media, the notion is picked upon and a perception about the gender is formed. These feelings and ideas of seeing women no longer as human beings but sex objects will then focus into conventional thinking. Representation of women in hip hop lyrics then creates an image in the listeners mind on how they should be looked at and portrayed.

Maggi Humm (1995) in her study, states not everyone in the West for example thinks that hip hop music has a positive impact on its listeners. Newspaper reports and online articles have commented and criticized that Western hip hoppers such as Jay-Z, Snoop Doggy Dog, Nelly, Little Kelly to name a few, incorporate pervasive language into their lyrics which has also found its way into the music scene in Malaysia.

LANGUAGE IN THE MEDIA

Language is always seen as one of the most complex symbol systems created by human. The different language we use reinforces our beliefs and values and that too of how we view gender. According to Bell (1991:1), “it is the few talking to the many”.

The media dominates the presentation of language in modern society and therefore a lot of research has been carried out on media language. Bell (1991) gives various reasons for this. Firstly, it is interesting to see how the media uses language. Secondly the media uses language that is often heard in the public and thirdly, language is an essential ingredient in media messages.

Language in the media has an adverse effect on the way the content is conveyed. It is seen as the most influential influence that exists in human life these days. The media is seen as influential in the way they communicate messages about men and women. According to (Bell, 1995:23) “media language has always attracted the attention of linguists, particularly applied linguists and sociolinguists. There are four practical and principled reasons for this interest. First, the media provides an easily accessible source of language data for research and teaching purposes. Second, the media are important linguistic institutions. Their output makes up a large proportion of the language that people hear and read every day”.

“Media usage replicates and outlines both the language use and attitudes in a speech community. For second language learners, the media functions as the primary-or even the sole-source of native-speaker styles. The ways in which the media uses language is seen as interesting linguistically in their own right as these include how different dialects and languages are used in many ways in the media to construct their own images and their relationships to an unseen, unknown audience. And finally the media are important social institutions” (Bell, 1995:23).

“Media is also seen as important presenters of culture, politics, and social life, shaping as well as reflecting how languages are formed and expressed differently. Media ‘discourse’ is important both for what it reveals about a society and for what it contribute to the character of society” (Bell, 1995:23).

SEXIST LANGUAGE

Language as discussed by Mills (2008:124) “is a product of products of negotiations over meaning in the past as well as in the present”. Language also plays a vital part in developing sexist language among its users. Sexism is also the belief that “sexism is the thief of honor and shaper of lies” (Longman, 1995).

Wood (2009:118) reaffirms this by stating that “one way that language erases women is through the use of male generic language”. Wood (2009) puts forward examples of generic language such as the usage of “businessman, postman, mankind” as reference to the both sexes. Swim, Mallet & Stagnor (2004) state that when one communicates in a sexist manner knowingly or unknowingly, it is possible that they hold some form of sexist attitude.

According to Mills (2008:1), sexism takes on a different meaning whereby “sexism is simply an individual’s mistake or slip cause by thoughtlessness or lack of awareness” of the issue itself and

“can be rectified by simply pointing out the error and suggesting alternative usages”. Mills further state that in “analysing sexism, we need to be aware that the language available to us is not a static system” as language is seen as “negotiations over meanings” which will remain in our vocabulary. As language users, meanings will definitely be interpreted and inflect language items in different ways which brings sexism into the language.

Mills (2008:125) explains sexism as “a stereotypical way of representing the relations between men and women, with as associated lexicon of words whereby some users see it as offensive and anachronistic and for others it is seen as a humorous representation of men and women”. As Ochs (1992:335-359) states: “Members of societies are agents of culture rather than merely bearers of a culture that has been handed down to them and encoded in grammatical form”. This allows users to create for themselves an active role in selecting their forms of expression.

Sexism is defined in many varieties, specifically blatant, covert and subtle sexism (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1999). “Blatant sexism is defined as obviously unequal and unfair treatment of women, whereas covert sexism is defined as unequal and unfair treatment of women that is recognized but purposefully hidden from societies view” (Swim, Mallet & Stagnor, 2004:117). In comparison to the earlier mentioned varieties, “subtle sexism represents unequal and unfair treatment of women that is not recognized by many because it does not appear unusual. Subtle sexism is quite interesting for researchers from both theoretical and practical aspect as it is quite prevalent” (Swim, Mallet & Stagnor, 2004:117)

According to (Banaji & Hardin, 1996) sexist language is seen in the form of subtle sexism as it maintains stereotypes and different level of status between the genders. Hyde (1984) notes that this could be due to the fact that language is learned at a very young age and is also considered a linguistic habit (Lips, 1997). “People may use sexist language for a variety of reasons. People may do so because it is commonly used and deeply-rooted in current written and spoken forms and can be difficult to change. Apart from that, people lack knowledge about what institutes sexist language” (Parks & Roberston, 1998:445-461). Parks & Robertson (1998: 445-461) further state that “people who are relatively unaware of subtle sexism behaviors, either because they do not notice them or do not consider them to be sexist could be the ones who are most likely to engage in such behaviors”.

The debate over gender free language has indeed been rather swept aside, and has certainly been devalued as an attempt to impose ‘political correctness’; however, the issue is still seen by many as a persistent problem (Mills, 2008). For many people, debates about ‘politically correct’ language are simple discussions of an academician linguistic nature; for them the real issue takes place not around a particular word in a text but of equal pay and discrimination in the workplace (Mills, 2008).

Further, Mills (2008:9) believes that research on sexism is considered outdated and archaic as “the model of language which presupposes is itself outdated”. Mills (2008:9) notes that “a more adequate view of sexism would see sexism as a judgment made about a particular language usages, with certain facts and linguistic and social histories being used to justify that judgment”.

Cameron (2006:3) notes in her work on sexual politics that “we need to analyse the contending forces that are active around gender relations”. Cameron (1985) further argues that:

‘sexist language’ cannot be regarded as simply the ‘naming’ of one world from one, masculinist perspective; it is better conceptualized as a multifaceted phenomenon occurring in a number of quite complex systems of representation, all with their places in historical traditions’ (p.14)

While Cameron suggests that multifaceted sexism is difficult to analyse, Mills (2008:13) argues that this ‘should not make it impossible to isolate sexism as the analysis of the process of how certain items are associated with sexism, the history and judgment made can be traced back and analysed’. She further adds that at times sexism is not an easy task to categorise as “some women play with stereotypical belief” whereby some women shamelessly embrace sexist terms to describe themselves ironically or jokingly”. Mills (2008:13) relates an incident where a woman was seen driving a car which had a sticker in the rear window which said in pink ‘Dippy Tart’. Both ‘dippy’ and ‘tart’ are terms associated with women who lack intelligence and competence.

Sunderland (2004:194), on the other hand, argues that whilst “some individuals may be damaged by sexist discourse; others recognize it for what it is, resist it, laugh at it and/ or become empowered in the process”. The recent outcry on the statement made by Don Imus in 2007 regarding the women basketball team showed how language is permitted “by racism and sexism, and deeply racist and sexist language is no longer unusual; it is common. It feels the airways” (Herbert, 2007:23).

SEXISM IN HIP HOP

There is no doubt that hip hop’s objectification of women is well received amongst listeners and artist alike. Although hip hop music has been a topic of debate and there is a great deal of commentary on the topic, systematic content analyses are rare (Binder, 1993). Van Zoonen (1994) state that this is also the case where sexism is more obvious in other genres too. Binder (1993) conducted a study on heavy metal and rap songs from 1985-1990 and found that the former dealt heavily with anti-authority themes and that the genre’s allusions of sexual acts and male domination of women were fairly subtle, whereas rap songs were more sexually explicit and graphic. Collins (2000) considers hip hop music as a ‘controlling image’ used to subordinate and control women.

Byron Hurt (2006) noted that rappers rap about violence and misogyny as it is well accepted amongst listeners and music moguls. Rappers do not get payment or get their music on the radio if they speak righteously. A major reason why rappers use sexist language is because these songs sell millions of records (Rhym, 1997).

Liebow's (1967:140-144) "ethnography study on low income neighborhood describe how it is pertinent that men to be seen as 'exploiters of women' even if they are not capable of treating women in such a manner". Miller and White (2003), also state that the exploitation of women is still prominent in cities and continues to shape gender.

LANGUAGE AND HIP HOP

While hip hop is seen as a positive force by some researchers (Galdney,1995), as it showcases the urban lifestyle and fosters social integration, others state that this type of genre can also be seen as negative as it perpetuates profane, explicit and sexist language in the lyrics (Shivers, 2000; Dines, 2003; Keyes, 2000). This negative characteristic at times becomes more prominent and overshadows the potential of hip hop movement.

An example of this negative attributes overshadow is the controversy over hip hops artist Nelly's music video '*Tip Drill*', highlighted that there exist a gender problem in hip hop media. The portrayal of women in that music video was so degrading that Nelly was summoned to court by feminist and academicians in the field alike.

Males within hip hop represent a cool dichotomy as compared to the females in hip hop (Thug Immortal, 1997). Iwamoto (2001) further suggests that this cool dichotomy is pursued by the younger generation which then becomes a new culture. Patterson (1993) on the other hand state that the consequence of this cool objectification is that women are not part of it and thus allows men to feel powerful over women.

Iwamoto (2001:45) suggests that "young men of colour often enter into hyper-masculine behaviours to combat the degrading effects of racism on their self-esteem". Sue Knight, the infamous CEO of Death Row Records, candidly stated that 'Hip hop is a young man's game' (Hurt, 2006). Hip hop mass media promotes a hyper masculine persona cultivated in the street culture of urban environments (Kubrin, 2005).

As such, hip hop media is an extension of historical Black gender stereotypes. It is modified, expanded and updated version of Black hip hop community. Numerous scholars have linked the contemporary representations of men and women in hip hop mass media to historically based racial stereotypes of Black men as well the violent and hypersexual Brute and woman as the seductive Jezebel (Collins, 2005; George, 1998; Herman, 2008; Hurt, 2006; Kitwana, 2002).

Apart from discussing political and social issues in their lyrics, hip hop artist both male and female always rap about the opposite sexes and this has received much criticism from academicians in the field. Hip hop is seen as one of the few social outlets that perpetuates male and female gender stereotypes and differences. The men in the lyrics are often seen as rough, aggressive, macho, pimp, money makers while women are portrayed as emotional back stabbing tramps. Women are also seen as being very materialistic and two faced humans who change partners based on their wealth.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN HIP HOP LYRICS

A total of 35 lyrics were used to examine the role of language in presenting women.

This study looked at two literary terms in analyzing the language in hip hop for sexism:-

- a. Nouns
- b. Metaphors

This is not to state that the lyrics do not have other literary terms but since the corpus was large, the researcher focused on nouns, metaphors only. Table 1 puts forward the list of names and actions for women derived from the lyrics.

No	Category	Word	Frequency of Words	Percentage (%)
1	Disparagements	Baby	33	60
		Mami	14	25
		Ho (es)	5	9
		Gurlies	2	4
		Bitch (es)	1	2
	Total		55	100
2	Sexual Organ	Ass	11	58
		Booty	6	31
		Butt	2	11
	Total		19	100
3	Food	Honey	17	85
		Buttercup	2	10
		Honey	1	5
	Total		20	100
4	Attire	Thong	4	50
		Panties	2	25
		Bra	2	25
	Total		8	100
5	Process	Sex	5	56
		Thang	4	44
	Total		9	100
6	Activity	Fornicated	1	100
	Total		1	100

Table 1: Sexist Language

In the list of words above, there are six categories of sexist language. There are disparagements, sexual organ, food, attire, process and activity. The most frequent sexist word is honey (85%) followed by baby (60%). Name calling a woman a ‘girl, baby girl and baby’ seems to be repetitive in the lyrics.

These terms usually refer to women who are in relationship with the artist portrays women as someone immature and constantly in need of guidance. This mislabeling of women appears to be indicative of the association of women to children, or the idea that women are “childlike” in nature. Apart from that, women are also called in terms of sexual organs such as ass, booty and butt. These terms are usually used in sexual context.

It also reflects disrespect toward women that seems to be regarded as entirely acceptable since people are rarely admonished for their sexist language. Social conditioning like this makes evident that women have been made uncomfortable referring to themselves as adults, apart from children. For instance in Too Phat’s ‘On and On’ (L26), it states:

On and On (L26)

1. *Yall lay men make way*
2. *When made mens in black Vans pull up the valet*
3. *With more butts than ashtrays*
4. *Yes I love my **girls** and I love em nasty*
5. *You love my falsy ways*
6. *Exactly how im digging how ya butt cheek sways*
7. ***Girl** just walk this way and bring your best friend*
8. *We could do it three way, on and on*

In the above lyric, we can see how Too Phat describes woman as his ‘girls’, and how they are required to be ‘nasty’ and wild (Lines 4 and 7). The supposedly ‘girls’ described here are looked upon as sluts and dressed sexily to entice the male groups. Again ‘sex’ seems to be the main discussion in the lyric. In describing a girl, one would imagine someone who is of younger age and perhaps needs parental guidance but in this context, apparently ‘girls’ here are referred to as sexual objects. Therefore the question that comes to mind is that are these woman called ‘girls’ based on how they are viewed as sexual objects only or are all woman regarded as ‘girls’ in men’s eyes.

In Too Phat’s ‘Island Girl’ (L16) a woman is still represented as a ‘girl’ in terms of being a sexual object. The lyric goes like this:

Island Girl (L16)

1. *Cliff party is peakin in action, **girlies** seekin attention*
2. *United nations by the beach, freakin convention*
3. *Where the nipples are peepin and the **feelas** are peepin*
4. *Then the devil he creeps in, have a devilish weekend*
5. *Fire, sand and breeze, different brands of **girls***
6. *Strippin minds and bodies offa they **mans** and pearls*

In the above lyrics, we can see how the ‘girls’ are described as bimbos who dress sexily in their bikini’s to get the attention and attract the guys at the beach. The men on the other hand are rarely addressed as boys in the lyrics. This gender is usually described as ‘fellas’, ‘man’, ‘dudes’, all of which carry masculine connotations (Lines 3 and 6)

Other than calling a woman a ‘girl’, the connotation ‘baby’ is also used to widely used to describe woman. In the data above, it shows that 15.6% hip hop artist selected for this study used the word baby in their lyrics. The term ‘baby’ in accordance to the Oxford Dictionary means an infant or toddler. But in this context, the term baby is used to refer for woman characters in the lyrics. From this context, we can see that baby is used as an endearment for woman. For example, in the lyric ‘Wanna Battle’ (L27), the term baby here is used by a female artist to her female counterparts.

Wanna Battle (L27)

1. *Get ready for the attack cos look who's back*
2. *Mizz Nina comin through with her crew and Too Phat*
3. *Have you ever seen a **hot b-girl** emcee*
4. *I bust rhymes with mad style*
5. *Positions, **baby** freeze*
6. ***So please acknowledge the fact that fact that im the equal in this hip-hop sequel***
7. *Don't be judgin by my physicals, I swallow you and your crew like*

In L27, the female artist puts out a plea to her counterparts that she might be female but that does not stop her from performing the best or same level as her male counterparts (Line 6). In L27, it puts forward the notion that even woman addresses their female counterparts as ‘baby’ making it difficult to draw the line as to who is sexist in nature (Line 5). Are the male who are sexist or are female singers especially agreeing to be the sexual beings that man desire them to be?

In another lyric by Poetic Ammo, ‘Pass the Honey’ (L1), the word is ‘baby’ is used as a term of endearment again.

Pass the Honey (L1)

1. *I see you swang swang wiggle wiggle shakin' that thang*
2. *Be my **bomb girl** and we'll start another big bang*
3. *Bouncin' like flubber skin tight like rubber*
4. *You just want to touch her hold her down and straight love her*
5. ***When baby you sop breathless I be like***
6. ***Winnie the Pooh with my hand in your sweetnes***

Rather than just call the woman a ‘baby’, she is more seen here as a sexual object in the midst of having sexual feelings for the artist (Line 5-6). The word ‘baby’ seems to be used frequently when the lyric setting is in a pub, or bedroom. The word seems synonymous with women who behave in accordance to what is seemed appropriate to men and are well liked by men in terms of physical beauty. The beauty of the brains of these women does not seem to impress men as they seem to be put off by women who can actually think for themselves.

In the lyric ‘Phat’s Girl Groove’ (L28), the woman here is described as someone who is fat but is not bothered of what is being gossiped about her in the pub regarding her size. She is seen as having fun but indirectly is being criticized for being the ‘fat’ person that she is (Line 4-5). Women are generally required to be a ‘36-24-36’ in figure measurements, as seen by these hips hop artists and if there are woman that do not fit the description then they are portrayed as below:

Phat’s Girl Groove (L28)

1. *Feel the beat, feel the rhythm*
2. *Dance floor filled with criticism*
3. *Narcissism, phatgirlsm*
4. ***Her booty phatter than your mother back in the day***
5. ***She belly dancin' but the belly get in the way***
6. *40 on the waistline don't waste time*
7. *Her leg taps and you think its the baseline*
8. *Don't bother anybody*
9. *Dance better than any hottie*
10. *This for the phat and cool girls*
11. *Groove it **baby**, forget the cruel world*

The woman is compared to other better looking women who are described as hottie (Line 9) whereas she is only called a girl (Line 10). Here there is an apparent difference in how better looking women are looked upon as someone ‘hot’ as compared to plus sized women.

METAPHORS

The study also found the lyrics to be straightforward and the metaphors discuss only women in the lyrics. Metaphors are used in the lyrics to talk about women’s physical attributes and attitude. A sample of the usage of metaphors discussing physical attributes and attitude is presented in Table 2.

No	Category	Sample Lyric	Lyric No
1.	Physical Attributes	a. <i>miss ikea does have a nice rack, my bad</i>	L.30
		b. <i>these girls got curves Like they're bullets and Angelina Jolie shot 'em</i>	L 30
		c. <i>she's no regular hoe,</i>	L 22
		d. <i>Her body is whoa though, let me rephrase, She's __hot and said she likes my Bittersweet face</i>	L18
2.	Attitudes	a. <i>You had to be greedy and play me out like a little devil Let the Underground know the kind of witch you really</i>	L2
		b. <i>Gangster in her blood pops from barrio</i>	L31
		c. <i>Mami I cant deny, the sight of your thighs is like Venom in vials thats rushing inside</i>	L 25

Table 2: Metaphors

In the list of metaphors above, metaphors are mostly used to describe women and their behavior. The women are usually compared to Hollywood actress if they are physically seen as enticing such as the comparison to Angelina Jolie when they behave badly; women are compared to being a witch or devil. As with nouns, metaphors also focus mainly on the physical attributes of a woman.

CONCLUSION

Media perpetuates women as an object rather than see them as humans. The way a woman behaves and her relationship with a guy is always scrutinized by men and the media in general. Women it seems are requested to shape their identity based on media's perceptions and not form their own identity.

Though numerous study has been conducted based on women and their representation by the media, much has been done to change the perception media and men have on women.

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