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THESE GIRLS (STRIP) FOR THE CLOUT: EXPLORING ASPIRATIONAL, EMOTIONAL AND EROTIC LABOUR OF BLACK WOMEN OF HIP-HOP ON ONLYFANS

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Introduction and Background

Hip-Hop culture and adult entertainment have historically shared a symbiotic relationship, and both have commodified the idea of Black life in the urban areas (Miller-Young, 2014; Sharpley-Whiting, 2007). A primary social site where these two worlds meet is within strip club culture (Brooks, 2010). Within strip club culture, Black women routinely use their bodies to seek monetary and cultural capital within their social networks. Since customers are directly helping the dancers financially, they often need to be validated as important, familiar and/or masculine. Like the strip club, OnlyFans is a techno-social arena where women maneuver to gain desirable resources by exposing their bodies. They both require the “marketing of erotic capital” by offering sexually explicit performances to those willing to pay, with OnlyFans relying on a monthly subscriber fee for access to digital content and strip clubs often doing so through entry fees, food & drink, tips for stage performers and fees for private dances.

In both instances, Black women are required to use their racial identity in emotional labour to fulfill men’s fantasies and use relational labour to accomplish the illusion of intimacy, submissiveness, and attraction. To the contrary, offline, and online sex work differs in that OnlyFans relies more on visibility labour (gain likes, shares and followers through posting and replying in ways to promote a personal brand) on multiple social media platforms rather than physically approaching potential customers in a club setting. This digital expansion within the sexual economy gives women of Hip-Hop culture who aren’t dancers (i.e. rappers and video models), a newfound potential for self-empowerment, through the exposure of their bodies, its financial valuation and its commodification (Khong, 2020).

Purpose of Study, Methods, and Analysis

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Though the initial goal of the study was to understand how female rappers and video models use practices from sexual dance economies (e.g. strip clubs) to gain visibility on OnlyFans more generally, it was ultimately decided to focus on experiences of the Black women in that group who earned significant income through use of the platform. The criteria for inclusion were that subjects were cisgender Black women with at least 10,000 followers or more on Twitter and/or Instagram. Additionally, all participants self-identified as video models and/or Hip-Hop artists, with links to OnlyFans accounts in their Twitter and/or Instagram profile biographies. I completed twelve in-depth interviews. All interviewees were African American between the ages of 18 and 35 (with an average age of 24). I conducted the interviews in English. I used a semi-structured interview guide with questions regarding the history and evolution of their work as creators in music and adult entertainment, as well as matters regarding the operation, strategy, and distribution of their digital content.

During this study, I utilized practices grounded in ethnographic methods of transcribing and coding interviews. By open coding, writing memos, organizing, and categorizing my data (semi-structured interviews and follow-up conversations), I developed themes of (1) relational labour, (2) visibility labour and (3) emotional labour, which the experiences and quotes of participants illuminated. Ultimately, interviews touched on the role of social media as an economic resource in their artistic labour. I analysed all interviews in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, before using an inductive, grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014) to distil recurrent themes. Within NVivo, all uploaded data were encrypted and securely stored to protect participant privacy according to strict confidentiality.

Given the limitations of in-person ethnography during the current COVID-19 pandemic, I employed digital urban ethnography (e.g. Lane 2018) which privileges interpersonal communication with subjects via in-person as well as digital communication tools. This study was approved by my employer's Institutional Review Board and all participants gave informed consent to be a part of the study prior to their first interview. Though some subjects gave permission to use their real names, many interviewees asked me to pseudonymize their names and quotes. Those individuals are marked with an asterisk after their names.

The power of digital clout (techno-social cultural capital tied to platform metrics) has made the gatekeepers of music industry more respectful of the influence and money that Black women of the rap music industry can generate in the platform economy. Even so, recent research has also detailed that Black women still face racism, sexism and misogyny regardless of these evolutions (e.g. Jennings 2020). That said, there is a dearth of work that has detailed Black women's perspectives (rappers or otherwise) working as content creators on OnlyFans. Against this backdrop, the current study follows emotional and relational labour of exotic dancers and aspiring artists on OnlyFans. Considering OnlyFans' connection to strip club culture as an exemplar of a Hip-Hop social site that has been reimagined as part of creator culture and the platform economy, this study hopes to build exploratory understanding of how digital clout redefines the value of erotic capital for Black women of Hip-Hop culture.

Findings

Respondents reported that OnlyFans was a platform that allowed them significant control in monetizing their visibility. They could directly profit from their bodies as sites of fascination and desire while seeding other aspects of their personal brands and artistic lives. Additionally, respondents also used the myth of black female sexual deviance to their own financial interests. By taking tropes from both Hip-Hop music videos and hardcore pornography, respondents used OnlyFans to secure economic power and sexual autonomy in two industries that typically deny significant opportunity, mobility and fame to its Black women participants.

Despite such variances in content creators' particular motivations, three salient tensions were shared about engaging with audiences through OnlyFans:

- soliciting business vs. building friendships (authenticity)
- self-disclosure vs. playing the stereotype (trust)
- clout vs. artistic merit (integrity).

Like Senft's (2008) foundational work on 'camgirls', the tensions of trust, confession and compartmentalizing persisted for participants throughout both interviews and field observations. Although these three tensions differed, these themes overlapped and intersected in myriad ways. Yet, together, they provided a more nuanced understanding of the unique experiences of Black women on OnlyFans and the emotional labour strategies that help to sustain (and grow) their digital clout. Ultimately, respondents did feel the need to exacerbate stereotypes about black women, namely their alleged hyper-sexuality and physical availability. Even so, as sexual performers they also felt they confronted the prevailing stigma by taking ownership of both racial stereotypes and how they commodified their bodies for pay.

Conclusion

Though their short-term financial success is unquestioned, this study reveals questions about the sustainability of OnlyFans work for these women. Unlike YouTube, which allows creators to share advertising revenue from content they place on the platform, OnlyFans allows creators to "partner" with the platform and collect revenue from viewer subscriptions, monetary gifts (in the form of tips) and other material gifts. Even though OnlyFans presents itself as a platform that is open for all types of expression and communication with audiences, the stakes of visibility are seemingly limited as far as what content by Black creators is privileged over others. That said, I err on the side of caution in simply celebrating OnlyFans solely as a solution for empowerment for Black women. Future research is needed to assess how the styling and presentation of Black women's bodies in participatory culture is possibly being exploited for the cultural capital that they bring to the platform. How digital Black feminism plays a role in platform economics will play a critical role in examining racial capitalism in the ever-growing ecosystem of sex workers within social media entertainment.

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