Rape Culture in Music:  
Lyrics that Provide a Step-by-step Guide to Sexual Assault

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Abstract
The evolution of gender relations has brought women to the forefront of social functions. However, these roles have come with a price as women have often been labelled by society as nothing more than sexual objects for the taking regardless of their profession, especially in public forums. This research seeks to impose upon the reader the gravity of the sexualization and objectification of women through the analysis of contemporary music laden by rape. The author argues that the lyrics analysed are part of a larger issue, that of rape culture; and that their existence allows for the proliferation and validation of such a culture. Through a lyric-by-lyric analysis, this research finds that instances of sexual violence in music are dangerous due to their possible applicability, as the verses of these songs provide a step-by-step guide to rape.
Introduction

Misogyny is not a new development in our world. Society has become immune to the objectification, sexualization, and violence that surround women. Whether it is product advertisements or music videos, the issue of violence against women permeates our culture. Rooted in that premise are more serious issues such as the spread of and acclimatization to rape culture. In this culture, rape infiltrates many aspects of society and consequently allows for its continuity by reflecting acceptability to the act of rape. It is here where the unthinkable happens, as victims find themselves being blamed for their attacks, underrepresented in the legal sphere, and constantly reminded of their misery via mainstream media. The pervasive nature of such culture has lasting effects on the communities we inhabit. This research seeks to impress upon the readers the gravity of the situation through a lyric-by-lyric analysis of some of the most prominent songs which have perpetuated, and more importantly glamorized, glorified and validated a culture of rape.

The extolment and acceptance of rape lyrics is an extension of the acceptance of such an event in our societies, as music and media are usually a reflection of the community they arise from. “In a rape culture, people are surrounded with images, language, laws, and other everyday phenomena that validate and perpetuate, rape” (FORCE, n.d.). Music is one of the realms in which this validation takes form. The producers of this music not only feed from, but also feed into, the repetition and propagation of sexual assault. Rape music is not new in our society, yet it has permeated the industry to the point of becoming more than a happenstance in a single musical genre. Rape has transcended musical styles, languages and cultural barriers, to become an all-encompassing issue without regards to sociocultural delineations.

This research connects more than just one type of music or language, as it seeks to provide enough information for an educated inference into the enormity of the situation. Hopefully, by the end of this analysis, the reader will understand that it is not only the graphic accounts of rape given in some songs that we must be attentive to, but rather the more subtle and often concealed portrayal of such violence. It is the latter of these two that seeps inconspicuously into the realm of normalcy and becomes the backbone for the continuing acceptance of a culture that blames the victim rather than the perpetrator.

Analysis

Rape is a persistent malady in our nation as shown by the numbers found on the website for the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), which states that “there is an average of 237,868 victims (age 12 or older) of rape and sexual assault each year” in the United States (“How Often,” n.d., par.1). Songs that perpetuate the idea not only of rape, but of a right to rape, may very well play a part in the sustenance of such high number of victims. I begin this analysis with the overt examples of rape-related violence in music, to address the acceptance of aggression against women in popular culture. The artists in this section were chosen due to the heinousness of their lyrics, and their unabashed use of rape as a selling point for their music. Instances of rape in music cross cultural and language boundaries, and involve a demographic which spans from rap, to metal, to ska punk. Regardless of the type of
music, the message seems to be the same. It is a message that enables male entitlement over the female body and their ability to make their own choices.

The first example comes from one of the most controversial rappers of all time: Eminem. According to the artist’s IMBD profile, Eminem’s album, “Slim Shady EP,” went to triple platinum. His 2002 release of “Marshall Matters LP,” sold over one million copies during its first week alone. His career has been awarded with MTV Music Awards, Grammy Awards, and even an Academy Award for his “8 Mile” soundtrack (“Eminem Biography,” n.d.). This immense success speaks to his popularity and thus, his potential influence on society. Originally born under the name of Marshall Bruce Matters, this young artist from Detroit grew into one of the most violent lyricists in the music industry. He has, undoubtedly, the most graphic account of rape in this research, in his song “Stay Wide Awake.”

The song begins with the author identifying a “young girl”, a minor, sitting in a park, seemingly vulnerable to his advances. He approaches the girl with the intention of causing physical and emotional harm. He befriends his intended victim, and then proceeds to exact such a violent attack that even I am uncomfortable describing it. From the start, the song is an assault on the humanity of any woman, as he does not hesitate to refer to the young girl in his song as a “whore.” The aggression escalates as the lyricist uses inanimate objects as aides in the violation of his victim.

Sit down beside her like a spider, hi there girl, you mighta
Heard of me before, see whore, you're the kind of girl that I'd assault
And rape then figure why not try not to make your pussy wider?
Fuck you with an umbrella, then open it up while the shit's inside ya
(“Eminem Lyrics,” n.d.)

Not only is the degradation of the girl accomplished by name-calling, it is also exuberated by the use of an umbrella to worsen the damage inflicted on her. The girl becomes nothing but an object to be “played” with at the discretion of her rapist. By the end of the song, the listener has been described a total of two rapes and one murder – all of females. In the second instance of rape, the singer insinuates that the woman is to blame for the attack because she is naked in her own house “but I [the singer] can see she wants me.” The woman is left without a choice due to the man’s perception of her desires.

Throughout the song, the author refers to himself as spider and a stalker who hides in the darkness and preys on his victims. In one of the instances, he even hides in the woman’s basement and waits until she gets into the shower before attacking. Afterward, the violence is freely issued upon his victims. Throughout the song, the author perceives himself as an artist producing the same level of work as Mozart, glamorizing his acts by comparing them with classic masterpieces.

Eminem’s “Stay Wide Awake” lyrics propagate the phenomenon of rape. The fact that his albums continue to sell millions validates the support for his music from the population. It is the buyers, after all, who make this “art” permissible. In supporting an album with a song in which women get violated, both physically and emotionally, the population is legitimizing the permissibility of rape in music. Rape, then, becomes
something to bob our heads to and pump our fists in the air for, instead of being
something we fight against.

The argument could be made in an attempted defense of artists like Eminem, stating
that their music is made to satisfy the phenomenon of rape fantasy; that in no way are
the lyrics inciting actual instances of rape. However, the difference should be clear.
Rape fantasy involves partners in consensual interactions. The women participating in
rape fantasy have willingly given their partners the power to re-enact an instance of
rape. The men, on their part, have been allowed to wield such power but only to the
extent to which the women feel comfortable – there are safe words, and the word “no”
retains its meaning. Rape fantasy caters to the "dark" side of many of us, but those
many are aware of their actions and are consenting to the event. The lyrics in these
songs reach an incredibly wider audience, as the numbers show, and the message
behind the verses is spread to children and adults alike, some of whom may not be
mature enough to deal with the severity of the content. Therefore, rape lyrics do not
have defined boundaries of influence. Rape fantasy is not rape because the women are
consenting, and their consent is not to rape, but to the illusion of it. Rape lyrics
promote rape, not consensual sex.

The instances of explicit rape in music are endless. However, this research seeks to go
beyond the unambiguous and into the realm of the concealed. There are songs that are
not as evident in their disdain for women, as they do not directly address the issue of
rape, but rather insinuate the act in between rhythmic beats.

I begin this section with a controversial song which, to my knowledge, is the only
song that has actually inspired repercussions against the singers. “U.O.E.N.O” by
Rocko, featuring Rick Ross, produced a backlash of such magnitude that the latter
artist found himself dropped from some of his endorsement contracts and apologizing
publicly via his official social network sites. The verse chosen has no direct mention
of rape in it, yet the insinuation of the act in between rhythmic beats.

Put Moly all in her champagne, she ain’t even know it
I took her home and enjoyed that, she aint’ even know it
(“Rocko Lyrics,” n.d.).

A “Moly” is a synthetic drug that has made its way into the pockets and tongues of
thousands of drug users in the United States. It is part of the fastest growing drug
problem in America, the synthetic drug market, and it has been found in nearly every
state (Griffin, Black & DiCarlo, 2013). It is a popular way to alter the mind of willing
users and of unsuspecting victims alike.

The lyrics to this song objectify the female victim, who has been drugged by the
lyricist, as something to be enjoyed without consent; after all, the perpetrator takes her
home and enjoys that. The use of “that” in the verse not only illustrates the
objectification and dehumanization of his victim, but also the contempt for “it”. The
victim becomes a thing that does not even deserve to be named. However, there is
more to this song than meets the eye, as rape is not only being committed but also
glamorized. The artist did not put the drug into a Coca-Cola, or a beer, or boxed wine;
he is dropping the drug into champagne. Champagne, by custom, is a high-quality and
high-priced drink that is mostly drank during special occasions. It is a drink which, in
popular culture, has usually implied a high-class environment. Rape is, therefore, occurring not in the streets of the ghetto or the back alleyways of our cities, but in a world filled with money. The message is that rape occurs everywhere because it is all-encompassing; no one can escape it, regardless of the means at our disposal for protection.

Rick Ross was dropped from his Reebok® endorsement deal and was motivated to write an apology to his audience. In his apology, Ross stated: “To the young men who listen to my music, please know that using a substance to rob a woman of her right to make a choice is not only a crime, it’s wrong and I do not encourage it” (Cubarrubia, 2013, par.4). This apology begs the question of why the song was written in the first place. The lyrics to a song are not done overnight, they are listened to by the artists and their producers before they are released. Rick Ross was very much aware of the message he was spreading and his apology is an insincere consequence of the repercussions he was made to “suffer.”

These subliminal messages of rape have crossed genre lines and found themselves embedded in top-chart pop songs, the latest of these being the catchy, yet eerily sexist, song titled “Blurred Lines” by Robin Thicke, featuring Pharrell and T.I. This song played repeatedly for most of 2013. According to the Mobile Marketing Magazine’s website, “Blurred Lines” became the song most searched for via the mobile application, Shazazzam, with approximately 17.8 million tags worldwide (Spencer, 2013). According to the New Musical Express’s website, this single became the highest grossing single of 2013, with 1.44 million copies sold (“Robin Thicke’s,” 2013). These numbers serve to illustrate the impact of these lyrics, as the song was not downloaded by a few individuals, but by millions. The ability for music to be downloaded via the internet, recognized via phone applications, and distributed by the click of a button, makes the content of the songs a matter of importance.

The lyrics to “Blurred Lines” have been criticized by different outlets of social media for their message of rape. It is so subtle, in fact, that many may not even recognize the content even though they have heard the song repeatedly.

I hate these blurred lines
I know you want it (x3)
But you're a good girl
The way you grab me
Must wanna get nasty
(Robin Thicke Lyrics, n.d.)

The most prominent message found in the song is that of the existence of blurred lines of consent and a sense of male entitlement. It is obvious for the singer that because a woman has approached him, she must want it; therefore, he has a right to claim her. The singer knows that the woman would otherwise not engage in any sexual activities with him, because she is “a good girl.” The implications for both men and women in this song are alarming, because women are perceived as having initiated the sequence of events by approaching the singer in a way he found provocative. Men, on the other hand, are being instructed to take any movement from the women they deem provocative as a sign of approval and consent. This outlook feeds into the already existing paradigm of victim-blaming prevalent in our society. Examples of this mind-
set can be found across the nation and at all levels of society. News reports in December, 2013 revealed that a high school student in Texas had been kicked out of her school for reporting rape and accused of lewd behavior; consequently, she was sent to a school for children with behavioral issues along with her rapist, whom she was forced to see every day (Pesta, 2013). This blatant disregard for the victims of sexual abuse is so ingrained in our society that some music artists have thought it appropriate to continue its proliferation.

Sezin Koehler (2013) recognized this issue and proceeded to compare the lyrics of “Blurred Lines” to the images provided by Project Unbreakable, a non-profit organization that works to help survivors of sexual assault cope with their trauma through art. In the images, victims of sexual assault stand with posters in hand, containing the words said to them by their rapists during the act. The words found on the poster are disconcertingly familiar: “You know you want it,” “Good girl.” The side by side comparison pierces through the audiences’ ignorance of the similarities between these two seemingly disconnected entities, and produces a simultaneous reaction of both awe and shame. For the audience, it would be hard to believe that the song they have been dancing to for over a year is loaded with the same words which have been told to countless victims by perpetrators of rape.

Koehler concludes that “ultimately, Robin Thicke’s rape anthem is about male desire and male dominance over a woman’s personal sexual agency…she’s relegated to the role of living sex doll whose existence is naught but for the pleasure of a man” (par.11) It is the role of women to be complacent to the wants and needs of their male counterparts, while at the same time being the subject of blame for their behavior. The women’s behavior is conversely observed and judged relative to the personality of the male character involved. This flexibility in perspective allows for a million possibilities in which everything, from a sensual dance to the grazing of a hand, can be perceived as a blatant invitation for sexual advances.

Another song within the realm of what is known as “pop” that satisfies the conditions to be included in this research is Jamie Foxx’s, featuring T-Pain, “Blame It (On the Alcohol).” The single was released on December, 2008 and managed to reach both Gold and Platinum levels by May, 2009 (RIAA, n.d.). At first, the song seems to be blaming alcohol for the endeavours of the party goers. However, a closer look reveals that what is being blamed on the alcohol is much more sinister.

She put her body on me  
And she keep staring me right in my eyes  
No telling what I'm gonna do  
Baby I would rather show you  
What you been missing in your life when I get inside  
(Jamie Foxx Lyrics, n.d.)

The song does not seem to be inciting or suggesting rape yet, but slowly it has begun to resemble Thicke’s assumption of entitlement as a consequence of the woman’s actions. She is now drunk, and because she has approached the singer in a way he finds provocative, he now does not know what he will do. He just wants to get “inside,” leaving us to question where exactly that is – inside her life, or inside her? The singer continues as he believes that with just a “couple more shots,” the woman
will “open up like a book” that he will then proceed to read. The song follows with “Shawty got drunk thought it all was a dream/So I made her say ‘Ah, ah, ah.’.” Therein lies the admission that the woman did not even know what was happening when the man took advantage of her. Her levels of intoxication were so high that she thought she was dreaming. Much like Rick Ross, Jamie Foxx took the woman home and enjoyed that while she thought she was asleep – she did not even know it. The pattern of intoxication and abuse seems irrepressible.

Besides having crossed the lines of musical genres, the issue of rape culture in music has also broken the barriers of language, allowing for the Anglo-speaking community to share the spotlight with the Spanish-speaking constituency. Bachata sensation, Romeo Santos, came into the business as a Spanish-speaking singer for the musical group Aventura, which “has sold over 4 million copies in the US” (Garsd, 2011). Their success as a group gave Santos a stable ground upon which to launch his solo career. His second solo album, Formula Volume 2, is the focus of this research, as it contains the song “Propuesta Indecente.” The lyrics below are in their original language with the translation provided adjacently by the author:

Si te invito una copa y me acerco a tu boca/Si te robo un besito, a ver, te enojas conmigo?/Que dirias si esta noche te seduzco en mi coche/Que se empanen los vidrios si la regla es que goces/Si te falto al respeto y luego culpo al alcohol/Si levanto tu falda, me darias el derecho/A medir tu sensatez, poner en juego tu cuerpo (Romeo Santos Lyrics, n.d.).

If I buy you a drink and get close to your body/If I steal a kiss, would you get mad at me? What would you say if tonight I seduce you in my car/Let the windows get foggy and the idea is that you enjoy it/If I disrespect you and then blame the alcohol/If I hike-up your skirt would you give me the right/To measure your sensitivity, put your body at play.

The content of the song is a direct assault on the female character, masked under the guise of an irresistible proposal. Santos tells the woman that he will disrespect her, whether she is okay with it or not, and will then blame the act on the consumption of alcohol. Further context might help to understand that this is an act of dominance. The second line of the song is “Te adelanto no me importa quien sea el” (In advance I’m letting you know I do not care who he is). The woman in this song has willingly chosen the company of another partner, and the singer refuses to accept this by imposing himself on her decision. He insists on dominating the situation, even if it means disregarding her freedom to choose her own partner, and he will turn to alcohol as his aide if he must. Lines such as the subsequent “Este martini calmara tu timidez” (This martini will calm your shyness), are testament to the reoccurrence of a pattern of intoxication and entitlement.

This move is surprisingly similar to Rick Ross’ and Jamie Foxx’s, as all three singers seem to believe that intoxicating women is a precondition for taking advantage of them. Whether it is via illicit drugs or through alcohol, these songs seem to give the audiences a step-by-step guide to commit sexual assault. Santos proceeds to ask if it would be okay with the woman if he hikes up her skirt. This behavior allows us to wonder whether or not he will stop if she declines, or if he will continue regardless of her levels of inebriation. There may not be a direct mention of rape in Santos’ ballad,
but there is irrefutable proof of a sense of entitlement from the part of the male character – an entitlement which may manifest as sexual assertion.

The last song chosen for this research is Sublime’s “Date Rape”, because it addresses sexual assault in a different way. The track is found in the album, 40oz to Freedom. According to the Recording Industry Association of America, the album has made the Multi-Platinum award category twice (RIAA, n.d.); a feature that is only accomplished by selling over two million copies. The song starts with a woman being drugged and raped at a party, and continues with the rapist being caught and prosecuted. If the song would have ended there, the band would not be a part of this research. In fact, it would have been a breath of fresh air to see the subject treated with the respect it deserves. However, the song continues by following the life of the convicted rapist after being imprisoned. During jail time, the man is raped by other convicts and, although heard by the guards, his sexual assault is not prevented or acknowledged by them. This instance of rape is provided as punishment for the assailant’s own actions; denoting an acceptance to sexual violence that should not be the norm.

The Hammurabi Code instituted the preconditions for a system in which violations of the law were punished by equal actions; an eye for an eye was the way of the law. The idea that a rapist should be allowed to be raped is as primitive as the act of rape itself. Promoting instances of rape as fair retribution feeds into the idea that the act of rape is a part of human nature, and that there is nothing we can do to stop it. Recently, an Indian woman was sentenced by her village court to undergo gang rape as punishment for having a boyfriend from another tribe (Smith, 2014). Although the official judicial system of India does not condone this behavior, the fact that it was an option to the village kangaroo court speaks to the ability for societies to see rape as an inescapable part of life, and more than that, as an adequate mode of punishment. This view of rape as punishment can be extended to explain the argument given in today’s society, stating that women deserve to be raped because of what they have chosen to wear – they asked for it; therefore, they must deal with the consequences.

The fact that the guards in the song turned away from a man being raped simply because they believed it to be the appropriate punishment, place the lyrics of the song on equal footing to the kangaroo courts in India who saw rape as viable and excusable retribution. This should not be the case in any society in the 21st century. The Hammurabi Code was overthrown by a rich history of advancements in law and order systems that advocate for the idea that “prevailing social patterns can only be transformed through a change in social relationships, structures, and ideologies” (Vogelman, 1990). Rape should not be a glorified subject in the lyrics of songs, nor should it be advocated as suitable admonition for rapists. Furthermore, as rape in prison is a deeply embedded issue in our society, it should not be trivialized in song, much less capitalized from.

Relevance

The lyrics in this research have direct applicability, consequently making their implementation plausible. The songs do much more than promote rape as a type of entertainment; they provide the guidelines to seemingly successful ways of performing sexual assault. First, the men must ensure that the women are vulnerable
enough for the action – whether by stalking them when they are alone or by providing intoxicants that will alter their condition. Second, the men must interpret women’s behavior as acquiescence to their sexual advancements by focusing on the way women may grab them. Third, men are to righteously enjoy women without their consent while at the same time forgetting that they are women at all by naming them such names as “that” and “it”. And lastly, men are to sing about it so that they may validate and glamorize their actions with considerable public acceptance and multi-million dollar sales. Through it all, men should not forget their entitlement to choose for women, instead of allowing them to choose for themselves; forgetting that women becoming intoxicated by willingly drinking alcohol, does not, under any circumstance, give men the right to abuse their power.

Lloyd Vogelman (1990), in his article titled “The Sexual Face of Violence: Rapists on Rape,” concludes that “rape emerges from a culture that involves the domination and objectification of women” and that “as an act of sexual violence, rape reflects the masculine role as dominant and controlling.” These ideas of objectification and male domination are already found in society at large, but they have become almost permanent by their proliferation through violent lyrics. As seen in the verses provided, overt violence is no longer the seminal problem. The fact that rape culture has been so ingrained into the music business that lyrics no longer need to state explicit instances of rape, but rather simply imply it as subtext, should be an alarming observation to all. Violence is masked by tunes that are appealing to the public, consequently managing to influence as many people as possible. We are all complicit if we do not recognize the situation and battle against it.

Conclusions

The prevalence of sexual assault in music complements a holistic culture of sexual violence. The fact that audiences have not rejected the phenomenon and continue to support even the most overt instances of rape makes them accomplices to the sentencing of women as deserving of such treatment. Much like the Indian kangaroo court, supporters of this music are allowing the defilement of women, and in fact validating it, by refusing to oppose lyrics that contain such a call to action. Thousands of people listen to these songs on a daily basis, as proven by a success which can be easily measured in the number of sales for each record. Women have become so accustomed to the existence of rape in their environment that they do not even attempt to recognize it when it is playing on their radios. Instead, some women have resigned themselves to live constantly under the fear of possible assault and the repercussions of reporting it.

Sexual assault can be suffered in varying degrees, but regardless of the severity of the attack, the scars are equally damaging to those who suffer them. The current culture of rape in society does not aid the resolution of this problem, and “in contemporary popular culture, representations of rape and sexual violence seem rampant, recurring in rap lyrics, visual arts, and cinematic texts” (Smith, 2004, p.150). By providing a guide to rape, music becomes a dangerous weapon.

Artists such as Eminem, Romeo Santos, Jamie Foxx, and Robin Thicke may all argue against this interpretation of their work; yet the lyrics speak for themselves, and the fact that they refused to change their verses before releasing their songs, proves their
apathy towards the subject. Whether their lyrics impact a million people or just one, the messages delivered by their music are a hindrance to society as a whole. Stopping this phenomenon should be an essential task for our society, and it is the audience who must end the cycle. It is within this type of culture that rape victims are blamed for their assaults, women are shamed for their choices of clothing, and perpetrators are forgiven their violence.

In her protest song, “Fight Back,” Holly Near recognized the severity of rape culture in our society and aptly summarized the issue in a few verses: “By day I live in terror/ by night I live in fright/ for as long as I can remember/ a lady don’t go out alone at night” (“Holly Near,” n.d). The occurrence of rape in our culture is intertwined to much more than just the inability of the perpetrators to restrain their urges. It is also intricately bound to the worldview of a society that allows for the crime of rape to go unpunished, and for victims to be humiliated into silence. Pop culture, especially music, plays an increasingly important role in the sustainability of rape culture. The messages within the lyrics in this research are those of irrefutable violence and more than that, are a weaponizable guide to sexual assault. The objectification and sexualization currently victimizing women in our society cannot be deterred if these songs continue to exist. The onus of responsibility must be borne by those of us who recognize its happening and actively engage in its cessation.

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