Global Hip Hop Studies
Volume 2 Number 2
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00043_1
Received 10 October 2021; Accepted 2 July 2022

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Link in bio: Exploring the emotional and relational labour of Black women rappers in sexual dance economies on OnlyFans

ABSTRACT

Through interviews and participant observation, this article examines the emotional and relational labour of emerging female rap musicians and video models who have significant social media followings and create sexually explicit content for the subscription platform OnlyFans. Findings indicate that respondents felt conflicted in potentially exacerbating stereotypes about women in hip hop music, but also as sexual performers they felt empowered by taking ownership of racial stereotypes, their safety during interactions with men and how their bodies were commodified for pay. Ultimately, this study introduces insights on the digital evolution of hip hop culture's relationship with sex work and reveals newfound ideological tensions faced by Black women rappers who are using sexual dance economies to adopt new direct-to-consumer business models on the internet (particularly on social media) to self-promote, sustain and develop their careers.

KEYWORDS

digital clout
OnlyFans
creator culture
Black digital feminism
social media
DIY hip-hop
ethnography
sex work

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In the social media age, creative labourers must learn how to brand and digitally present themselves to a public to forge both personal and professional relationships (Abidin 2017, 2018; Marwick 2013). This presentation of self is largely important for personal identity and social life generally, but it is also increasingly important to the occupational identity and marketing strategy of young adults that are seeking to acquire status needed to become a micro-celebrity (relational labour, personal branding, and linguistic practice) (Duffy 2017). Since 2015, social media entertainment has been a professional realm that has experienced exponential growth, resulting in new forms of occupations among young people (Cunningham and Craig 2019). Creators on social media platforms mobilize visibility labour with different modes of intimacy labour – commercial, interactive, reciprocal and disclosure – for followers to feel a sense of closeness (Abidin 2015), with undergirding 'underlying commercial interests' (Abidin and Thompson 2012: 472).

One prominent emerging content platform that has allowed its users for direct monetization of influencer work is OnlyFans. OnlyFans is a subscription-based social media platform and mobile application founded in 2016 that allows users to pay for an individual creator's (or account's) content (photos, videos and live streams) via a monthly membership. Now valued at over a billion dollars, the platform has come to prominence largely through providing a space for sex workers to distribute nude and sexually explicit content directly to paying subscribers (Ryan 2019).[1] OnlyFans creators generally not only manufacture their images and videos but also supervise their distribution and manage their audience reception. By mobilizing subscribers through their social media accounts (Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat), OnlyFans users are able to interact personally with their targeted public daily (Ryan 2019).

Creators on OnlyFans often use self-presentational practices to gain money from sexualized performances and interactions on the platform (Ryan 2019). Those nascent sex workers who have been most successful on the platform have been able to re-imagine their personal brands as visual artists, fitness experts, fashion designers and brand ambassadors, using their engagement with social media audiences to transcend occupation to gain sustainable income through their micro-celebrity (Lorenz 2020). Among these users, female rap artists and hip hop video models have emerged as a subgroup of users who have seen substantial success on the platform. Use of OnlyFans has given these women, for whom hip hop videos and club appearances are often central to shaping their visibility, the ability to make substantial money and amass digital clout (Evans 2020) to reach large audiences for their music.[2] Intimate photos and videos, cast in the digital register, have allowed these creators to brand themselves and discover sustainable career pathways that previously were unavailable to them. Even so, little to no research has examined the racial nature of this work from the perspective of the performers themselves (Miller-Young 2014).

Against this backdrop, the current study seeks to better understand how racial ideologies impact the emotional, relational and visibility labour of Black women rappers and hip hop video models creating and selling sexually explicit content on OnlyFans. Using ethnographic methods (participant observations and interviews), this study explores the experiences and meaning making of women who perform sex work as creators in digital spaces while entrenched in gaining status within hip hop artistic communities of practice.

1. OnlyFans announced in August 2021 that it would bar sexually explicit content from its site starting in October 2021. OnlyFans said its decision to remove explicit content from the platform was prompted by its 'banking partners and payout providers', the companies that allow users to pay for their subscriptions (Lorenz 2021).

2. Evans (2020) describes chasing digital clout as reputation and fame building practices on social media platforms that are rooted in hip hop culture and require the self-embodiment of racial stereotypes tied to life in urban Black communities.

In the sections to come, I argue that these OnlyFans creators both benefit from and must contend with the racialized, gendered and sexualized terms of Black female representation in hip hop music cultures and the 'always on' demands of their digital audiences. Considering OnlyFans as an exemplar that has emerged as part of the emerging economy of digital labour, this study builds theoretical understanding of race and ethnicity within cultural production and aims to show how digital media redefine social spaces that support Black women in self-commodification.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The capacity of a woman to use her sexuality to control male desire is an important aspect of the sexual politics of male raps about women, female raps about men and the depiction of women in rap music videos (Rose 1994). Hip hop culture exemplifies how Black female bodies have been commodified in the business of music as well as in sexual commerce (Miller-Young 2014). The sexual objectification of women in music videos specifically is often attributed to the music industry's tendency to appeal to the male gaze, which refers to the act of depicting women in a way that mimics a heterosexual man's perspective (Frisby and Aubrey 2012).[3] There is much research on Black women's sexuality in hip hop culture, rap music videos and the impact this has on women's perceptions of other women or perceptions about performers of different races. Both Mako Fitts (2008) and Imani Perry (2004), for example, address the uneven production of rap music videos in which the gendered and sexual labour of women services male rappers and male-owned corporations that provide little agency and economic mobility for most female cultural workers.

Central to this work is the concept of a 'video vixen', a female figure in music videos who is deemed attractive by current mainstream beauty standards (Johnson 2014). In hip-hop culture, these standards value light brown/tanned skin, long hair, round hips and butts, small waists, and bigger full lips on women. The video vixen is generally a woman who is used in music videos with these desirable physical characteristics to appeal to a wide audience across multiple cultural standards of beauty (Jhally 2006). The fixation on the video vixen embodies some female empowerment, where the woman can own her sexuality, while also reflecting perhaps a lack of power, as male artists and executives are often the ones using women's bodies in their own music videos to profit from their sexuality. One might argue that the video vixen finds validation (and economic gain) for her beauty and sexuality but also oppression and judgement from those who objectify her, specifically in the hip hop genre.

The image of the video vixen involves a conflict between desirability and hyper-sexuality, having the potential to be perceived as immoral and judged for one's sexual portrayal. Within these portrayals, women of hip hop are often depicted through male-skewed market logics within the music industry. Balaji (2010) notes that twenty-first-century young Black women grow up learning these logics as natural and understand their own sexuality and desires as not tied to the desires of heterosexual men. However, this purported freedom also tends to compartmentalize Black women and bind them to existing stereotypes of sexuality and attainability by society at large (Balaji 2010: 7).

The concept of the 'booty video' references the rap video's overwhelming representation of women's posteriors gyrating, particularly those of Black, Latina and racially ambiguous women, thus highlighting in such videos a

3. The male gaze presents women as solely sexual or desirable objects for the male viewers' pleasure. When women see themselves depicted solely as objects, they learn to internalize outsiders' perspectives (Jacobs 2016).

culturally specific preference by men of colour for a curvy body type (Rubin et al. 2003: 50). The phenomenon manifests through a process that many scholars have labelled as the 'backwards gaze'. This gaze frames the backside as an erogenous zone of racial difference complementing the breast as a signifier of gender difference for Black women (Durham and Baez 2007). The backwards gaze is a pornographic one and highlights cultural and economic capital of Black women through hip hop music videos and strip club culture (Johnson 2021).

Campbell (2004) contends that expression of sexuality through the backwards gaze can be limiting and tends to reduce Black women to being perceived as deviant and sexually available. She also cautions feminist scholars about equating these dances with sexual freedom, considering freedom for one can be a form of containment for another.

Despite enduring negative stereotypes in hip hop of women as hypersexual, Black women are leveraging this to their advantage in the modern era, wielding transformational social power in online spaces (Gaunt 2018; Halliday 2020; Jennings 2020) as well as reclaiming corporal ownership of their bodies in the sexual marketplace (Khong 2020). For example, Khong (2020: 4) notes how rappers like the City Girls and Cardi B create songs that provide feminist re-imagining of power and privilege by depicting their sexuality as a weapon for 'scamming' men out of their money and credit cards. Placing this concept in realm of social media, journalist Taylor Lorenz (2020) has reported extensively about how women traversing sex work, social media content creation and the rap music industry now use platforms like OnlyFans, Patreon and Fancentro to digitally produce a sense of ownership not often found in the physical space of the hip hop strip club. This follows a wider trend of Black digital content creators that specifically target Black audiences and maintain audiences from in-person Black social sites that typically operate largely outside of the white gaze (Florini 2015).

In theoretically approaching gender roles projected in hip hop culture, Sharpley-Whiting (2007) wrote a detailed account about how women in hip hop music have always used lyrics and imagery that depict and celebrate illicit eroticism. For newer female rap artists, the scammer archetype has brought recognition to the value of women's voices in the corporate tier of the rap music industry, though many would argue that the lyrics and imagery of the artists still rely on racist stereotypical tropes of sexual availability among Black women. To that end, Miller-Young (2014) proposed the 'Ho Theory', an analysis of labour tactics and identity formations for Black illicit erotic performances. Ho Theory shows that the link between hip hop and pornography can be traced to a long history of Black women's bodies being associated with criminality and degradation. Miller-Young writes that Black women have been seen as 'a figure of moral corruption, social deviance, and economic drain, especially in the field of hip hop-influenced sexual media' (2014: 146).

That said, racial and gender essentialism in hip hop often defines Black women in the culture (normatively lumped together, they include video models, street prostitutes, private escorts, exotic dancers, phone-sex workers, skeezers, freaks, chicken-heads, golddiggers, scammers and others) as anti-intellectual and as existing outside of moral respectability (Miller-Young 2014: 147). More recent scholarship has sought to explore how many female rappers have an interest in re-appropriating lyrics about sexual expression as empowering. Citing Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda' as her primary example, Halliday (2017) argues that modern portrayals of the Black woman's body by current

female rappers are in fact empowering to Black women, as their songs encourage them to express their sexuality freely. Minaj is just one in a long line of many modern female rap artists (including Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Megan Thee Stallion, Cardi B, Rubi Rose and City Girls) that have displayed an ability to influence women's self-perception and help them see themselves as entrepreneurs and bosses, which can include proudly participating in forms of sex work (e.g. stripping and making sexual content for OnlyFans) as well.

Like the scammer, the 'bad bitch' and the 'hot girl' are terms used frequently to refer to Black women in rap lyrics and their relationship to their sexuality (Jennings 2020; LaVoulle and Ellison 2018). These titles, however, are used to describe a woman (or the ideology of a woman) who embraces her body while simultaneously using it to get gifts (financial and material) from high-value and/or rich men. This brand of hip hop gives Black women a new way to celebrate their sexuality and to declare autonomy over – and cultivate community around – their bodies.

This increased profitability of female rappers and strip club narratives in contemporary music has redefined Black women's sexual labour in other ways. In the digital era, social media platforms now allow for the power of the booty video to be harnessed by the video models, exotic dancers and rappers who have self-fashioned themselves as social media influencers and content producers who can commodify their bodies while gaining clout. Thus, Black women in hip hop culture have been given the power to capitalize on their narratives and appearance while subverting the historically male-driven music industry.

By combining platform capitalism with racial capitalism (e.g. McMillan-Cottom 2020), these Black women use OnlyFans to lean into the affective pull of existing fan communities who expect them to appear sexually available, and who already are heavily 'backwards gazing' with the women of Hip-Hip through social media posts and music videos (Durham 2017). Therefore, it is possible to comprehend their OnlyFans participation as 'hope labour' (Stuart 2020) and the assumed precursor to more mainstream relational labour, serving as a training process for managing an ongoing and eventually (hopefully) lucrative audience (Duguay 2020: 3). Ultimately, there is a need for more research that depicts how women connected to the hip hop music industry feel about being typecast sexually and/or racialized in digital spaces, how they navigate fame and how they seek ownership in self-definition as well as in monetizing their personal brands through this form of sex work.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Beyond its obviously gendered practices, OnlyFans has proven to be a particularly high-visibility marketplace for Black sexuality (Persaud et al. 2020). Its most well-known performers are often influencers who are already attention-getting, interest-drawing and profit-generating through DIY digital media tools and technologies (Brennan 2018). Though previous research has depicted the ways in which male DIY hip hop artists navigate visibility on social media (e.g. Stuart 2020), little to no scholarly work has explored how gendered stereotypes for female rappers shape their labour practices or how social media platforms might amplify or hinder those practices. Finally, scholarship has yet to examine the digital work of female rappers and video models on OnlyFans and other adult content platforms.

With these newfound synergies of sex work, social media creator culture and rap music in mind, in this article I explore two intertwined questions: how

do digital platforms like OnlyFans and their associated adult content social media subcultures shape relationships between Black women rappers and their audiences? How does race and gender mediate the experiences of these creators and the audiences with whom they are intimately entangled?

PROFILE OF THE SAMPLE, PROCEDURE AND ANALYSIS

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 also focus on labour 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. 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.

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. Finally, 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 Black female 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 (authencity);
- 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 female members of hip hop's community of practice 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. 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.

Soliciting clients vs. building friendships (authenticity)

Emotional labour is when workers are expected to regulate their emotions during interactions with customers, co-workers and superiors (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Hochschild 1979). This concept usefully addresses how, within an economic framework of producing the self as a 'brand' via social media, a labour model of controlled emotionality is invoked. In addition to time, social media engagement requires constant emotional labour and strict self-presentation from the creator of the content (Guarriello 2019). For my respondents, seeking to monetize OnlyFans seemed to raise challenges concerning how much emotional labour should be expended on potential subscribers. Video model, aspiring rapper and exotic dancer Davina* elaborated:

> It's much easier now to be in contact with audiences [on social media], but it's almost too much easier. You have to find a way to keep people's interest authentically and tease them just enough that they're interested in buying the rest of anything you're gonna show 'em. They already see Black girls [offering to] suck dick on their Twitter feeds! That may get them some followers but that won't make me any money if I actually do that or share it. Nor will it get me respect as an artist or on video sets. You really have to be careful with your content.

As Davina's quote exemplifies, social media platforms supported her in building fan communities and to speak directly to fans of her sexually explicit content but demanded a different set of skills in determining what not to share behind a paywall or not share at all. This extra work often included going on nude or lingerie photo shoots, 'getting clips' (making short sexual videos), posting clips to Instagram or YouTube and/or verbally engaging with fans and followers on live streams through social media. Even so, she felt that the slightly pornographic content she posted on her social media pages ran the risk of devaluing her status as an artist, largely due to her race and affiliation with sex work:

> Like people already don't take female rappers seriously. They definitely don't take dancers seriously. I get money from dancing but I don't really broadcast that I'm a dancer. OnlyFans is more or less just an extension of my Instagram and me being sexy or girly. I want to be like Cardi B or Megan Thee Stallion. They graduated from the [strip] club but they still have sexy in their brand. It's a fine line.

In this quote, Davina reiterates the tensions she faced in knowing that she could rely on digital sex work to get attention and make money but also feeling like she did not want to devalue her brand as an artist. In saying she wants to emulate Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, she pointed to them as role models who 'graduated' from working in the strip club and did not have to lose respectability for their artistic merits. She found herself navigating these tensions by highlighting her online sex work as being more aspirational and hopeful labour than that of her work in the physical club.

Another subject who expressed this tension of seeking artistic respectability while balancing multiple sexualized identities online was RockSoda*, a rapper and popular local exotic dancer in Chicago, who had over 140,000 followers on Instagram and another 40,000 followers on Twitter at the time of our interview. She often leveraged members of that following by becoming a brand ambassador for their businesses (e.g. restaurants, retail stores and fashion boutiques). In her posts about these different businesses, she would pose seductively in a bathing suit or post a video of herself twerking to music. When asked how she dealt with risks that accompanied this sort of work she stated:

> I have a child that I need to take care of so I really can't be all that picky when it comes to doing promo for others. I have done stuff for liquor stores, marijuana dispensaries, lingerie stores and all types of Black-owned businesses. Those places usually seek me out because my brand fits with theirs but sometimes it's exhausting to have to always be sexy. Also, I have to be careful with promo for rappers and musicians. Nine times out of ten they want to have sex with you and they think because they paid you one time for a promo, that they own you or something. It's what all Black dancers face in physical and digital spaces.

Rocksoda's comments were consistent with Davina's in that she clearly felt there were issues of safety which made her work risky and left her vulnerable. Despite being an influencer with a share of market capture in the attention economy, she felt her issues were different than that of her white counterparts. Though she willingly exploited her voluptuous body as an asset, she was also aware that it subjected her to derogatory treatment and demands for 'always on' hypersexual behaviour.

Many respondents also spoke of similarities in how the demand for emotional labour from both predominantly Black strip clubs and camming helped them become adept at using social media to maintain customers. For example, aspiring singer Roz spoke of how her usage of chat rooms as a camgirl benefitted her well as a creator on OnlyFans:

> I think, honestly, my ability to use Instagram and OnlyFans really came from being in a chat room to begin with. Having – just knowing how to carry on these conversations to make people feel important. To make

> all of these – all of these other connections where it's a lot of work to keep up with that many conversations at once, you know? And keep sense of all of them. And then I think just translating that into picking people out of the comments or the, you know, the messages, or just kind of paying attention to what other people are doing in terms of like, what they're saying to you, and all the things they wanna see, and playing into, hey, this is what my people wanna see right now. Working the circuit as Ebony performer makes you well prepared.

Atlanta rapper Destiny* also spoke about this during her interview:

> Well, the club to me was easier because you can make relationships with artists and deejays. It has the connection of touch. Now with OnlyFans, everything is visual and distant. I say your promotion and staying relevant is probably the hardest thing. Managing people's internet feelings can really burn you out and you're expected to always be ready to engage. That caricature that you created, the bad bitch they want to pay for, you have to be that for 24 hours a day if you want to keep customers.

As Roz and Destiny's quotes indicate the convergence of hip hop, porn and the internet illuminate the contours of rap music's symbiotic relationship with Black femininity, as it engages the myths and fascinations of Black sexual deviance through the illicit erotic economy, particularly focused on the sexual politics of the hip hop themed strip club (Johnson 2021; Miller-Young 2008). In this digital space, portraying 'caricatures' or 'carrying on connection' was considered by interviewees to be a detriment to their mental wellbeing – one not always worth it once weighing the costs and rewards. Destiny's comment about having to digitally be 'on 24/7' made it clear that she often felt obligated to provide a constant performance of the emotional labour typically expected in the strip club and, as a result, carefully guarded her authentic self from her audiences.

Like making hip hop music, staying relevant on OnlyFans meant not only creating a significant amount of content but also understanding how to provide a suitable experience for one's potential audience. However, the emotional labour required on social media was different to performances in a physical venue such as the club, in that when messaging and replying to subscribers directly there was a lack of intimacy, and it was much harder to gauge their followers' perceived interests even though they got more safe and secure transactions for their labour. When asked about this, Destiny explained:

> You can be their chocolate fantasy, the angry dominatrix or the freaky hoe. You must constantly be creative to keep their attention, or they'll unsubscribe after a month. Your performance is on a continuum versus bound to a live event. Even now [with many subscribers] and having some fame, I have a great deal of anxiety about pleasing my subscribers. It's like the rug can be pulled on you at any moment. Black women sex workers are probably the most disposable people on the internet.

Destiny comments hinted at her understanding of what her audience members want from her. She essentially states here that there were essentialist expectations (angry, freaky, sassy, ghetto, etc.) of how audiences perceive Black women and she felt difficulty performing those traits while

building connection in the online setting. Furthermore, she felt a great deal of anxiety about retaining her subscribers and still felt that gatekeepers working for the platforms could 'pull the rug' out from under her at any moment.

Collaboration with other creators

Beyond creating content in which they were sole performers, participants also co-created video content with performers of other races and nationalities to cross-promote each other's OnlyFans pages to a wider audience. Bricks explained the advantages of working in tandem with other performers to create and promote content:

> I had been doing my private Snapchat since like 2015, and it all kind of tied in with [being in] SuicideGirls. A lot of the girls had one and we helped each other attract customers. We all had different looks so that expanded our audiences. I was clearly the Black girl in the group, and it seemed to grow my following as a performer. I've taken that same approach to my OnlyFans content.

Outside of collaborating with other performers, authentic person-to-person recommendations were reported as the cheapest way for respondents to attract new followers and subscribers. For that reason, many respondents retweeted and replied to their fans, leveraging a performative aspect of having a networked audience to convey their status, while also appearing relatable. Ruby elaborated about how she was often surprised how many supportive followers and subscribers she encountered in the physical world:

> I would say, there – the one thing you learn about people, especially in like the cam industry or OnlyFans is that we all wanted to have this idea that there was just some perv paying. And there's not – there's normal, regular, everyday people. This is just what they wanna do to escape stress. And my very first meet and greets, I was kind of surprised at, like you know, wow. These are all just my normal everyday people that I would serve if I was still working at Buffalo Wild Wings. The love they give you can be what keeps you going.

Video model and aspiring singer Lacey echoed the same sentiments of how fan encounters generally served a socially supportive purpose that was reciprocal:

> I had one time, I was at Gelson's, and the dude that was behind the bread counter was like a big fan of mine and told me that he loved my content [chuckling]. And I took a photo with him, and it was really cute. Super unassuming, like nerdy little Hispanic dude. It was really wholesome. Those things can get you through the day sometimes.

On the flip side, building, keeping and maintaining these relationships with fans was described by many participants as exhausting. Rapper Gucci explained the undesirable process of going through her direct messages (DMs) as her following has grown since starting her OnlyFans account:

> For some reason, they think I should be more accessible and respond to every DM. If there's one thing I hate doing, it's answering DMs. I just can't stand it.

Even though there was not always a certain level of respect and social support gained during in-person encounters in strip clubs, interviewees spoke about how the anonymity of online interactions often emboldened fans to send unsolicited sexual photos, make hateful racist remarks and offer atypical denigrating indecent proposals. Becca explained:

> You get a lot of unwanted Snapchats. But it's the risk you take. And that's why I think, like OnlyFans now, it's like OnlyFans took Instagram, Snapchat, cam sites for people who don't wanna cam and turn it all into one, because you can do all of these things. I don't get the same level of disrespectful requests that I used to get on Snapchat.

Bricks also agreed that tenuousness of the work could lead someone to be overwhelmed:

> You're so easily accessible on OnlyFans. Yeah. I got a little burnt out honestly. During COVID and the Black Lives Matter riots, I needed to take a big step back and find myself again. Because I realized that I was – my sexuality and my Blackness was purely – it felt purely for other people at that point. It wasn't mine anymore. And I needed to find my noni again. I had to get – figure out what she wanted.

Quotes like these revealed that the use of social media platforms created many racial tensions despite race also being increasingly central to their brands as sex workers. Social media were not only a source of information and peer support for participants but also a place where business itself was conducted. Overall, this required that these women expended a great amount of emotional labour to draw in and maintain their subscribers. This also meant that they exhibited a strong penchant for understanding how their Blackness played a role in their performance and communication with others.

Self-disclosure vs. performing the stereotype (trust)

In the physical world, friends are expected to engage in self-disclosure with one another, an expectation that raises dialectical conflicts between being open and honest and protecting the self and the other (e.g. Rawlins 1983). For many respondents, posting pictures and casually writing about their daily lives on OnlyFans came easily and felt normal, though it was more taboo to disclose too much personal information on the platform. This created tension because disclosing information to their fans was perceived as essential to give off feelings of true connection with their audiences. Even so, this mobilization required a complex knowledge of when to 'play the game' and how to strategically reveal their actual selves. For instance, rapper Dee T explained how her disclosure of her everyday life and willingness to answer personal questions was a part of her brand and helped her to grow and maintain her OnlyFans subscribers:

> If you hit me up on OnlyFans, I'll hit you back. Even if it's just a 'hey luv, how you doing?' or I'll send you out pictures through the day. Just

> showing my appreciation. So my personality, is me being so giving, so open and really cool and regular. I try to be a regular person. I don't try to come off as a star or something. I act like I'm their homegirl.

As Dee T indicates here, she plays the role of 'the homegirl' with her customers and creates a level of intimacy that resembles her true emotions, but also done with the knowledge of her client's expectations from a friend or casual lover. Her choice of the words also indicates that she seeks to use a mode of communication that reproduces some of the logics of a scammer archetype. This reaffirmed the idea that her performative sexual identity was largely a function of her perception of her audience's wants and desires.

On the whole, the most well-known social media creators have been found to attract fan communities that want them to recognize their humanity and pursue more personal relationships with them (Marwick 2013). DJ and video model Tyger talked about how her display for her hidden interests outside of sex work garnered her more work in the music industry and deeper fan relationships with subscribers:

> Now people know me for muscle cars, and then they're gonna know me for tattoos, or they're gonna know me for travel, or something. I also talk about current events in Black popular culture. I do commentary of reality shows on TikTok. I don't stretch too far outside of what's natural. But (I think) it helps them to like me more as a real person and a DJ. Not just a girl with a big tiger tattoo on her leg.

Tyger's quote echoes that it is often difficult for women rappers to perform alternate versions of the racialized self when doing sex work but that it was necessary if one's music was not necessarily sexually graphic. Along the same lines, Bricks elaborated on the quandary of letting her OnlyFans subscribers know about her burgeoning rap music career and continuing to use her personal social media accounts to promote her sex work:

> So, I chose not to hide that part of my career on personal Instagram and Twitter when I started moving into music. And I know that's a huge risk, but I think relatability and transparency and being genuine is like really, really important now, especially, you know, in these times. So, I always have to have consistent content. But now, I don't really post too much about myself. It's always direct [to business], here's what I'm doing next. I don't really get up into my personal life with none of that shit, or selfies or – nah. Because now, I've gave you all so much of me in so many ways, I made myself so accessible, now, I'm takin' it away, so you desire it. You know what I mean?

Despite feeling the need to compartmentalize her visibility on social media as a sex worker from her aspiring singing career to appear more credible, Bricks also felt conflicted about not connecting those audiences:

> I realized that anyone that follows me is expecting some ass photos, and if they're not seeing them, they're gonna be like, what the fuck is this, and just unfollow… But I do like the idea of connection, and you know, using my art to connect with a wide, you know audience of people. That makes me happy, you know?

Destiny expressed a similar sentiment when speaking about her desire to be a YouTube personality and podcast host:

> I can't reveal too much about myself in that [OnlyFans] context. I would like to start my own business. I would like to, you know, eventually have a popular music podcast or a YouTube [channel], and I don't want it to be centered around being a dancer. As a woman of color, if you have to leave the pole or else you're always going to be reduced to people who only want you to shake ass.

To Destiny's point, a week after our interview she changed her Instagram biography to state that she was an actor and musician instead of a video model. She said it was so she could field more legitimate requests.

On the contrary, Lacey indicated that while she built a sizable following posting nude content online, her willingness to share more about her personal life, views on Blackness, sense of humour and political opinions garnered her the most favourable comments and intimate connections with her fans:

> It's easy for me to, you know, post a meme, and then something political about George Floyd, and then a nude, and then a selfie and then a joke. You know, like it just all kind of makes sense. I get a lot of compliments on just being real. So, I think that's, you know, something that I have to my advantage, just because I've been through a lot of shit, and I've been sharing about it.

Beyond struggling with issues of self-branding and decision-making on how to authentically promote their nude content to their audiences, respondents also spoke about how expressing their sexuality was helpful to maintaining their psychological wellbeing as Black women. For instance, Daphne explained how she dealt with family members who discouraged her from publicizing her porn work on social media for fears she would be judged as sexually immoral:

> It's my body, my life and my brand. So… what's going to make my soul smile, that's what matters to me. What makes me feel good. [Nothing is going to] make me feel bad, make me not feel good about sharing myself publicly. I feel like a Black goddess in my videos.

Daphne's testimony reveals the complicated negotiations that are part of the everyday strategies of survival and mobility for Black women in the hip hop industry. She illuminates how one can both be critical of the misogyny in the music industry and still view making sexually explicit content on OnlyFans as a way to earn an honest living. This was an ideological tension that remained constant among participants.

Chasing OnlyFans clout vs. keeping artistic integrity (authenticity)

Black youth and young adults who are understood as deprived, disadvantaged or otherwise lacking, often take advantage of the subcultural capital they do have with savvy social media engagement that allows them to amass urban cultural influence or 'clout', a quality measured through the social media logics of likes, views, re-posts and followers (Burgess and Baym 2020). Since fame

and riches were my participants' goals, they were often hesitant to reshape their public reputation on their own terms and in their own words if fans seemed uninterested. Ultimately, this is because their clout allowed them to compete, collaborate and connect within the larger hip hop community of cultural producers and build a creative economy for their potential mainstream celebrity.

To counter both the male gaze and US society's white-dominated gaze in the media, Jacobs argues (2016) female rappers and video models specifically have learned to practise the 'oppositional gaze' when portraying hypererotic and sexually available stereotypes. That said, many respondents spoke of their stress in dealing with fans who made negative, racist and misogynistic remarks when communicating with them about their content. Queenie explained how customers responded when she started focusing her OnlyFans content towards her clothed appearances and performances at tattoo and car shows:

> Yeah. I've had a few people that are just like, wow, this isn't the stuff that I'm used to seeing from you ho! But I feel like people also have – they have to understand that I am growing and aging and moving along in this life, and it's not gonna all be the same thing. You can always unsubscribe but I have to evolve the way I want to.

Although Queenie did not always want sexual content to be at the forefront of her self-representations, her attentiveness to audiences' engagement with it mirrored that of other participants who noted quantifiable surges in attention when posting about sexuality and sexual identity. Even so, Queenie also expressed how offensive messages from her followers often discouraged her from wanting to continue to make herself available on social media or do extra promotion for her OnlyFans page:

> I don't know. This is the thing I've gone back and forth with. Especially, a couple years ago I was like, fuck it. I don't wanna do this anymore. I don't wanna do nude photoshoots; I don't wanna be on Instagram; I don't want to do any of this. Because I felt like it had caused a lot of problems in my life. People had expectations of me that I didn't necessarily like, agree with.

Bricks agreed with the amount of work it took to make sure that she protected her privacy from unwanted solicitations and stalkers:

> You know, it takes a lot of consistency, and it takes a lot of – it just takes a lot of work. And you're gonna have to deal with, you know, blocking people and protecting yourself, and curating that space, [so] that it's safe for you, because like, that's a very personal thing that you're putting out there. So, I like to – I don't know, I just like to set my own set of rules, and you know, I don't need people's money if they're gonna speak to me a certain way, or this send unsolicited dick pics, or whatever. So, it's a lot of like managing that space, so that it's healthy for you, still.

Similarly, Daphne spoke about how she regularly had to manage negative commentary on her Instagram page:

> How do you come to somebody's page, follow them, and then basically talk about them? What did you follow them for? That's weird to me. That's so weird. Just unfollow me. You weren't here before, why'd you come to talk shit? What's up? I don't even try to engage, I'll just be like – look, unfollow me.

Daphne also elaborated on how indecent proposals on her social media pages have increased significantly as her number of OnlyFans subscribers has grown:

> Before this, I was always fine and thick with a fade and everything and as a Black stripper we get hella messages with crazy requests all the time anyway. So it was like ok. But then this, I'm like, oh my god. They don't stop coming at you. It's overwhelming.

Though the amount of attention respondents gained was at times daunting to them, many of them also used their newfound attention as a platform to speak about the issues and causes that were personally important to them. For example, Bricks spoke about why the social unrest happening as result of the murders of George Floyd and Ahmad Arbery caused her to put a temporary halt to her OnlyFans content:

> When the George Floyd stuff was going on, I took a hiatus, a long hiatus posting, because a lot of my fans are White, and I just didn't feel – I was like y'all – I posted, I was like, y'all can give me money, but I'm not givin' y'all no pussy! For a minute. And then I came back. I came back to work. I made it a point to be like, I'm not performing for y'all right now. This is a privilege, and you have your privileges revoked for the moment, but you're still paying – and a lot of people did – they just sent me money, because they respected it, which is cool, because I – I felt the need to post that, because I wanted to get rid of anybody who didn't see that that was appropriate to do.

Overall, it appeared that creating sexually explicit content allowed more pathways for artists and models I spoke with to gain work opportunities, including in music and other media; nevertheless, the stereotypes of hip hop also sustained the racial inequities that respondents experienced in other realms of the adult industry. Hence their representation as bodies on a predominantly white platform still marginalized them from more normative white sexual economies online, and consequently, respondents exploited their racial difference as a border and generally steered clear of exposing too much of their personal selves to their audience.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The platform of OnlyFans has taken on increasing significance for women in the hip hop music industry. In this study, I pose questions as to what extent the digital labour politics of this emergent platform expand the tradition of fetishizing Black sexuality as a site of desire and disgust, expression and exploitation, subjectivity and objectification. As OnlyFans is an emerging platform that is still in flux, its meanings and characteristics still undetermined, I have depicted a trend of how hip hop and online sex work intersect and interact and what they might mean for hip hop's gender politics in this contemporary moment.

Previously illicit subcultures, communities and sexual practices of Black women have been brought into the public eye through pornography, and in the process, they have made their way into other modes of culture, including hip hop music (Miller-Young 2014: 9). The story of hip hop artists as early adopters and innovators of new technologies who make new frontiers accessible and desirable, and then are regulated, gentrified and criminalized out of them is as old as the story of the United States itself.

Enacting a particular kind of calibrated amateurism (Abidin 2017), the OnlyFans content creators I spoke with generally portrayed themselves as accessible, authentic, transparent and available to their subscribers in real life. In contrast to performers in traditional studio pornography, female rappers and video models must utilize a unique style of relational labour in order to maintain their distance but also feign intimacy to their regular customers. As my respondents described, part of the appeal of their job is that they get to perform a self-curated version of themselves, set their schedules and control the production, marketing and distribution of the content that they create.

To be sure, their level of economic freedom does not come without some tensions. I argue that their approach to monetizing pornographic content within social media subcultural contexts requires a communication style that demands self-disclosure, downplaying of artistic talents, emotional labour and a sacrifice of privacy with customers. Their promotional work on social media takes place on different sites yet is essential to their economic success on OnlyFans. Though some of the relationships formed with audience members were described by interviewees as fun, passionate and meaningful, without some form of monetization for the sexual transaction, there might never have been any lengthy interaction in the first place.

Previous research has identified hip hop as an important phenomenon for thinking about sexual culture and racial ideologies, particularly in the context of both economic opportunities for, and the sexualization of, women in popular culture. This study extends that research, in that alongside this notion of 'fans as customers', the performers that I interviewed described several ways that hip hop/racial stereotypes (i.e. sex positive, pleasure seeking, ghetto, voluptuous, promiscuous, video vixens) map onto their interactions with their audiences and even at times other performers. While digital microaggressions and racist encounters are unsettling, the *naiveté* and cultural voyeurism of their audiences were often precisely what drove their economic success on OnlyFans.

Despite these negative and stigmatic dimensions, performers in this study enjoyed performing their sexual selves, their non-musical hobbies and their everyday personalities for fans. These practices can be related to research on other forms of hip hop oriented performers who, as participants in the 'clout economy', strategically leverage stereotypes and sex appeal to gain influence, income and sustainable celebrity (Evans 2020; Sharpley-Whiting 2007; Stuart 2020).

Research on influencer work, relational labour online and/or social media entertainment has continually called upon the idea that democratization of digital tools and technologies will create new career pathways for individuals who exist at the margins of society. That said, the draw of self-made, flexible careers online remains an aspiration for those musicians attempting to turn their personal brands into a paycheque. Since female rappers and video models exist in a diverse platform ecosystem, often proliferating their content across different sites, this study carries unique implications for the examination of gendered work within the hip hop music industry and creator culture at large.

Even so, this study also marks a beginning of a critique of gendered capital and the clout economy. Though my respondents are making cultural critiques which capitulate anti-Black ideologies about sexuality, hip hop, strip club culture and illicit erotic behaviours, I believe there is something else to be said about their shared experiences. Their acknowledgement that their chosen sexual expressions were rooted in misogyny show that tensions present in their work on OnlyFans is the result of acting at times in concert with the processes of dehumanization towards Black women in rap music. Though in many ways creators on OnlyFans fall short of transcending stereotypes of Blackness, they appeared to push back on sexist issues of the clout economy in continually positioning themselves to financially benefit from such stereotypes. For future research, it will continue to be necessary to detail theory that considers OnlyFans as part of the emerging economy of hip hop's digital labour, particularly redefining social spaces that traditionally have supported the illicit eroticism of Black women rappers and video models.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Evans, Jabari (2021), 'Link in bio: Exploring the emotional and relational labour of Black women rappers in sexual dance economies on OnlyFans', *Global Hip Hop Studies*, 2:2, pp. 179–98, https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00043_1

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