
Masculinities And Representation: An Analysis Of Hip Hop Fashion In Contemporary Media

Themes and Issues:

Tricia Rose (2008) outlines the important impacts of 'invisible white consumption' in commercial hip hop in the 21st century, such as the consumption of harmful stereotypes that are perceived to be actual representations of black people. Rose argues that hip hop allows racial unity and its more about the culture, using music to bring people together creating 'cross-racial exchange' but the racial stereotypes within commercial hip hop consumed by young white fans is due to a 'lack of knowledge of the history of black culture or racial oppression'. This leads to many white youth imitating black culture (music and fashion) without understanding the culture and racism that black people experience in society, especially the use of imagery in the media (television, fashion magazines, newspapers) creates a false depiction of black people that people are easily convinced by. Since the mid 1990s, 'racial fantasies' such as crime and violence (gangsters, thugs, hustlers) have been impelled into the minds of white consumers of commercial hip hop.

Rose discusses that 'this distorted form of cultural exchange is framed/masked by a post-civil rights rhetoric of colour-blindness' (Rose,2008,p.229), the idea that white hip hop consumers believe that its no longer about race, its for everyone; a new form of multi-cultural exchange. White consumers also deny these driven stereotypical images of black people and the appropriation of black style and music within the mainstream commercial hip hop. The colour-blind approach to consumption of hip hop's black style means that they only associate themselves with the 'coolness' of black culture and 'avoid confrontation with their own racial privilege'(Rose,2008,p.230).

I think that the discussion of hip hop is so important because the culture of hip hop has been impactful to the mass media such as the television and magazines but also has influenced the contemporary fashion industry. Hip hop challenges race, class and the value of black culture in society. Another reason why this discussion is important is that the perceptions we have about hip-hop-how did it start, why is it so significant to black culture, how is it impactful to society-has been used against the black urban community. The idea that black people and their culture are accountable for ghetto conditions they live in and their working-class status. Many people are misinformed about hip hop due to the mass media glamourising the black gangster rapper lifestyle but fail to bring to light the imperative context of post-civil rights era ghetto segregation for hip-hop's development. Why has the black gangster pimp been a depiction of black men in the mass media? Why did hip hop style base on drug dealing and crime become hip hop's economic and cultural representation?

In my dissertation I will explore the relationships between hip hop culture in relation to fashion and the mass media, answering the following questions:

- How does the mass media allow hip hop fashion to be culturally appropriated?
- How has the consumption of hip-hop style impacted the fashion industry?
- How is hip hop presented through the mass media? and how has this affect the black

Methods and Sources:

As I will be looking at the mass media and hip-hop style I feel that it is necessary for me to use image analysis as one of my main research methods in order to see how the clothes are worn in the subculture and how it is being presented in the mass media ie.fashion magazines and television. In terms of primary resources I intend to use an image photographed by Jenny Baptiste called Brixton Boyz(2001) and a photograph taken by Normski called Silver Bullet Posse-The Loyds Building,London. I will first describe these images in detail, then I will depict and state its social and cultural issues that the images raises then devise questions from these issues.

In terms of theoretical research, I have sourced three key academic texts that will help me contextualise my discussion. The first of these is Tricia Rose's chapter 'Hip Hop hurts black people' in the book *The hip hop wars: What we talk about When We talk About Hip hop-and Why It Matters* (2008), in this she discusses the negative impacts hip hop has on the black youth. Rose states that hip hop is 'self-destructive' as it emphasises the use of drugs and promotes violence, 'hip hop's lyrical references to violence, drug activity, verbal and sexual abuse of black women, as well as homophobia in hip hop cannot be denied, defended, or explained away as only a reflection of actual lived experience'(Rose,2008,pg.77). Rose states that these references are the cause of destruction in black communities. On the other hand, she also challenges this by stating "“black” images and styles cannot be products regardless, of the degree to which corporate power define, shapes and promotes them’,this fabrication allows us to think that commercialised hip hop derived from poor black youth but actually it is the ‘corporate power’ and ‘white desire’ who imprint these harmful ideas and images in commercial hip hop through magazines, tv and radio to generate sales. These images of hip hop are constantly being promoted and consumed by the mainstream white audience, therefore making these images highly profitable, as a result, the idea that black men a thugs becomes normalised in the media.

The second text is Michael P.Jeffries chapter 'Understanding the “cool pose”' in the book *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (2011), where he discusses the relationship between blackness and coolness in relation to mainstream American culture and how the 'cool theory' of black masculinity highlights the lack of opportunity and 'the pain of unrealised masculine aspiration among black men'. Jeffries states that 'black coolness' is 'validation of inherent racial otherness'.Black men have adopted and used the 'cool pose' as a way of surviving in a pressured society. In relation to hip hop P.Jeffries discusses the 'badman' narratives which is a posture-performance used by black men as a mask against negative social rules. The 'cool pose' reflects the disadvantaging social structures that society has created to restrict black men. Coolness is derived from black people experiencing racism and is a strategy for survival in society. In hip hop black men are in constant struggle with black masculinity and how they should act.

The third text is Patricia A.Cunningham and Linda Welters chapter 'Flava In Ya Gear: Transgressive politics and the influence of hip hop con contemporary fashion' in the book *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, where she states 'hip hop fashion is relentless and carries with it a code of dressing'. Black youth are defined by their clothing; experimenting and

appropriating from preceding black fashion trends. The ice-diamond jewellery known as 'bling-bling' is a 'black commodity fetishism' that 'erased the ambiguous gender taboo by which jewellery signified femininity or homosexuality', a culture that displays their wealth. The white fashion systems uses culturally-based fashion trends in America to make 'style primitive, exotic, or ghetto, in effect, 'to plunder "exotic" techniques and codes from "other" looks', the fashion mainstream is constantly influenced by hip hop fashion and can be accessible to everyone. For example, designer jeans such as Calvin Klein during the 1990s was popular amongst the hip hop youth creating a "sporty formal" denim suitable for more bourgeois lifestyles' therefore creating a cross between high and low culture of dress(A.Cunningham ,p.229).

Visual Material:

In the image Brixton Boys (2001)(Figure 1), two men face each other on opposite sides, one young black man is wearing a black vest top and black trousers, the other man is wearing black sunglasses and is topless, his pants slightly sag below the waist revealing his black underwear with a Calvin Klein waistband. Both men present a hip hop aesthetic that is hyper-masculine and hard-core demeanour. The young black man on the left also shows off his tattoos and branded underwear in a stylistic approach associated with hip hop. The sagging of the pants is a controversial hip hop style

Figure 1: Brixton Boyz (2001), photographed by Jennie Baptiste. during the 1990s as it violated the conventional rules of dress that was seen in the mainstream media. Its a form of rebellion by exposing the underwear that is meant to be private to the public eye, therefore disrupting the social norms. Are they trying to be seen as sexual objects to the female gaze? Are they over sexualising the black male body or are they challenging black masculinity through hip hop dress?

Personal statement:

I chose this topic because I have always been inspired by black culture and fashion when it comes to my own design practise. I have done numerous projects on Hip Hop and I enjoy researching photographers who photographed the hip hop scene during the 1990s. I always wanted to grasp a deeper understanding about hip hop culture and why the black American youth dress in a particular way. I am constantly trying to challenge masculinity through my fashion designs.