

The Capitalist Commodification and Societal Policing of Black Voices in Hip-Hop

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Introduction

"Every time I speak I want the truth to come out. Every time I speak I want to shiver the world." Tupac Shakur's heartfelt statement perfectly captures the essence of hip-hop as an uncensored platform for Black voices. Hip-hop has become entangled in the forces of economic commodification and societal policing, despite its beginnings as a form of resistance and empowerment. In addition to changing the genuine message, these forces have systematically exploited and discriminated against Black artists. Hip-hop serves as a battlefield for cultural autonomy and systemic resistance, from the criminalization of Black males through their art to the hypersexualization of Black women.

Hip-hop emerged as a form of resistance against institutional racism and oppression in the 1970s, during the socioeconomic unrest in the Bronx. It began as a result of the need to provide voice to underrepresented groups and to provide platforms for Black Americans to share their experiences and goals. Since then, hip-hop has grown beyond its origins to become a worldwide sensation and a billion-dollar industry. However, this change has come at a price: its cultural value has become commodified, and its political core has been diluted.

In hip-hop, where Black identities are subjected to different standards and prejudices, the combined forces of capitalist commodification and societal policing are especially harmful. Hip-hop's cultural capital is abused by capitalist forces, who transform compelling stories into commodities focused on profit rather than a purpose. At the same time, Black artists are singled out by society policing, which uses legal, media, and cultural channels to transform their artistic expression into instruments of control and monitoring. Black men are routinely criminalized and their words and visuals utilized as proof of guilt, while Black women are objectified and

hypersexualized. These dynamics show that hip-hop is not only an art form but also an epicenter of intricate cultural and economic conflicts, where structural oppression and profit-driven motivations threaten individuality.

The hypersexualization and objectification of Black women and the criminalization of Black men through their work are the main topics of this essay's analysis of the capitalist commodification and social policing of Black voices in hip-hop. The essay makes the case that hip-hop continues to be a battlefield for cultural autonomy and systemic resistance by analyzing these dynamics. The historical and cultural background of hip-hop will be covered first in the analysis, along with its development from a rebellious voice to a significant industry. The impact of capitalist exploitation on Black women will then be examined, and then the criminalization of Black men will be examined from the perspective of their songs and public opinion. The essay will conclude by going over how these issues overlap and offering ways to support Black musicians while upholding the basic principles of hip-hop.

Section 1: The Historical and Cultural Context of Hip-Hop

Deeply ingrained in a neighborhood struggling with racial injustice and structural neglect, hip-hop first emerged in the Bronx in the 1970s. Significant social and economic challenges occurred during this time, as metropolitan areas were devastated by poverty and insufficient investment. The Bronx, which was troubled by unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, and a lack of housing, developed into a hub for artistic expression that questioned social inequities. Hip-hop, a diverse cultural movement that includes rap music, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti art, was born out of these adverse conditions. Pioneers like Grandmaster Flash, Afrika

Bambaataa, and DJ Kool Herc established a new musical genre that gave Black and Latino youth a platform to express their experiences and fight against social exclusion (MDLBEAST, 2023).

Hip-hop began as a grassroots movement that provided a forum for locals to gather, exchange stories, and show support for one another. These early musicians gave their audiences a sense of pride and fortitude by writing songs that resonated with their realities. Rap, a key element of hip-hop, sprang to fame thanks to its spoken-word format, which gave musicians a platform to share the raw realities of their life while drawing attention to problems like systematic racism, poverty, and police brutality. Hip-hop's strength was its capacity to elevate the voices of those who had been marginalized for a long time.

Hip-hop evolved into a social and political movement in addition to being a musical style. As it developed, Black Americans and other marginalized groups used it as a tool for communal empowerment, resistance, and storytelling. The art form gave artists a genuine platform to consider societal problems and suggest group remedies. Songs that were both entertaining and a commentary on the injustices the community experienced were written during this time. Grandmaster Flash's "The Message" (1982), for example, addressed poverty, crime, and the struggle for existence while highlighting the harsh realities of urban life. Its powerful storyline illustrated hip-hop's capacity to elicit reflection and motivate action (NPR, 2007).

Hip-hop was a unifying force in addition to having artistic and political impact. Block parties, led by DJs like Herc, provided a platform for Black and Latino teenagers to celebrate their shared experiences and develop a sense of identity. The foundation for a new form of cultural expression that not only questioned the current quo but also gave those who had been shut out of mainstream society a sense of belonging was established by these early meetings.

As hip-hop spread beyond local communities and became a worldwide phenomenon, its course changed over the years. Hip-hop artists like Run-D.M.C., LL Cool J, Tupac Shakur, and The Notorious B.I.G. rose to fame throughout the 1980s and 1990s, helping to popularize the genre. A rise in commercial interest accompanied the greater visibility. Record labels and media businesses started to make large financial investments in hip-hop by the late 1990s, keen to capitalize on its expanding market (MDLBEAST, 2023).

Hip-hop's commercialization gave the culture a new dynamism. It led to the commodification of the art form even if it gave artists the chance to become financially successful and gain more notoriety. The raw, genuine storytelling that first distinguished hip-hop was sometimes overshadowed by marketable characters and catchy tunes by record labels and industry professionals. A result of this change was the rising repackaging of aspects of the culture that had previously served as a voice for the voiceless to appeal to a larger, frequently white audience. The industry's focus on making money started to eclipse the movement's social and political foundations.

Increased scrutiny and the combined forces of societal policing and capitalist commercialization accompanied hip-hop's entry into the mainstream. Now worth billions of dollars, the genre has turned into a battlefield for power struggles that take advantage of its cultural importance. Hip-hop artists experienced increasing difficulties as the industry tried to shape them into characters that would fit into lucrative molds, even as they achieved financial success. The focus switched to tales and images that reinforced preexisting stereotypes, such as the idea that Black women are hypersexualized objects and Black males are violent or too macho.

Thus, hip-hop's widespread popularity keeps creating an ongoing cycle in which musicians are criticized for their lyrics and real-world behavior while being rewarded for producing content that conforms to preconceptions. As a result, Black voices in hip-hop are now not just commodified but also policed by society and the industry. It is increasingly clear that hip-hop's cultural capital is being exploited and manipulated, and that the genre is being used more as a means of making money than as a platform for genuine artistic expression.

Hip-hop's development from its beginnings as a voice of empowerment for underrepresented groups to its present status as a profitable industry illustrates the ways in which societal policing and capitalist commodification have influenced it. These topics will be further examined in this article, with a focus on how the commodification of hip-hop has led to the criminalization of Black men's work and the hypersexualization of Black women. By breaking down these mechanisms, the article hopes to show that hip-hop continues to be a battlefield for systemic resistance and cultural autonomy despite its widespread popularity.

In order to analyze hip-hop's current state, it is essential to comprehend its historical and cultural background. Hip-hop has been impacted by commodification and policing since its inception as a means of resistance and continues to be a global cultural force. The genre's rise from underground to popular culture has resulted in both opportunities and abuses. Hip-hop has been permanently altered by these relationships, becoming a genre where Black voices are both praised and criticized, commodified and limited. This dichotomy lays the groundwork for a more thorough examination of the ways in which these pressures still affect Black artists' freedom of expression.

Section 2: The Capitalist Commodification of Black Women in Hip-Hop

The hip-hop industry's commodification of Black women is an example of the widespread way that capitalism structures take advantage of Black femininity for financial gain, frequently at the price of true representation. Black women in hip-hop live in a contradictory area where their contributions stimulate cultural creativity while also being reductively stereotyped and hypersexualized. This phenomena demonstrates how the industry profits on racialized and gendered bodies while upholding social norms that police and devalue Black women's identities. It has its roots in both historical marginalization and modern capitalist practices.

Because Black women's bodies were commodified for labor and reproduction during slavery, the portrayal of them as hypersexual and subservient has historical roots (Collins, 2000). Despite their evolution, these clichés are still widely used in hip-hop and other contemporary media and entertainment. The widespread hypersexualization of Black women is similar to the "hot Latina" image in popular culture, as Merskin (2007) points out, demonstrating how racialized femininity is consistently reduced to sexual attraction in various cultural contexts. This commodification is evident in hip-hop's lyrics and images, which frequently put financial gain ahead of complex narrative.

In order to promote Black women's artistic abilities to a wider audience, the music industry takes use of these preconceptions, frequently perpetuating negative stereotypes. The commercial framing of Megan Thee Stallion's work, for example, highlights how the business presents such empowerment for consumer consumption, even though her song "Thot Shit" rejects these narratives by embracing sexuality on her terms (Megan Thee Stallion, 2021). Hip-hop, according to Payne (2022), gives Black women a forum to challenge prevailing narratives, but it is also appropriated by capitalist systems, which weakens their opposition.

The idea of "ratchet-respectability," a framework where Black women negotiate social norms of decorum while embracing self-expression, is a particularly clear example of the conflict between empowerment and commodification (Payne & Halliday, 2023). This dichotomy is best illustrated by artists such as Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. Cardi B's use of "ratchet, diasporic feminism" to question patriarchal norms and claim agency is highlighted by Jaime (2022), despite the fact that her image is frequently commodified to reinforce the very prejudices she aims to dispel.

Hip-hop's wider social policing of Black women is reflected in this paradox. According to Abdelaziz (2017), the business imposes respectability politics that marginalize Black women who don't fit the mold and reward them for conforming to acceptable ideals of femininity. This duality serves as the foundation for the capitalist commodification of Black women, generating a profitable loop in which deviant identities are both embraced and constrained by marketable parameters.

By emphasizing visual appeal over lyrical content, hip-hop marketing tactics contribute to the commodification of Black women. Black women's bodies are commodified as "currency" in a hyper-visual economy that puts profit ahead of authenticity, according to a critique from The UCSD Guardian (2021). In addition to reinforcing stereotypes, this commodification downplays the many contributions made by Black women to the genre.

Perro (2022) examines "Hot Girl Rhetoric," showing how artists like Megan Thee Stallion maintain their vulnerability to the industry's predatory gaze while reclaiming agency through their branding. This reclaiming is an example of a strategic negotiation in which artists engage with a system that commodifies their work while asserting their autonomy. Additionally,

Payne and West (2022) highlight how Black college women at largely white universities deal with comparable situations, rebuilding their identities through hip-hop as a lens in environments that frequently tokenize their existence.

Hip-hop continues to be a potent medium for Black women to assert agency and confront structural injustices, even in the face of widespread commodification. Collins (2000) emphasizes how crucial Black feminist theory is to overturning these systems and promoting environments in which Black women can be honestly represented without being reduced to stereotypes that can be sold. Payne's (2022) analysis of Black girlhood demonstrates how hip-hop functions as a space for identity reconstruction, enabling Black women to recover narratives that celebrate their complexity and fight against social policing.

In her exploration of feminist issues in hip-hop, *Lazy Women* (n.d.) highlights how musicians such as Nicki Minaj and Megan Thee Stallion use their craft to challenge conventional gender norms. These women use their prominence to confront the exploitative practices of the industry and use their platforms to promote feminist principles. Their success highlights the possibility of empowerment, but it also highlights the boundaries of personal agency in a profit-driven system.

The hip-hop industry's capitalist structure, which puts profit ahead of advancement, continues to commodify Black women. According to Payne and Halliday (2023), this system marginalizes more radical displays of identity while rewarding performative representations of empowerment that conform to consumer expectations. Black voices are socially policed by this dynamic, which limits their capacity to confront structural injustices.

The industry sets artists against one another by establishing a false dichotomy between respectability and ratchetness, which commodifies both, as demonstrated by Payne's (2020) analysis of the "Cardi B-Beyoncé Complex." This dichotomy illustrates how capitalism takes advantage of these dynamics to maintain its profitability by reflecting larger societal expectations that regulate the behavior of Black women.

Hip-hop's commercial exploitation of Black women highlights the need for structural reform that puts authenticity ahead of profit. The experiences of artists like Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion highlight the limitations of individual resistance inside an exploitative system, even though they manage these dynamics with agency. Hip-hop can advance toward a more inclusive and equitable future by adopting Black feminist ideas and elevating voices that question the status quo.

According to Collins (2000), breaking down these systems calls for a group effort to appreciate Black women's contributions above and beyond their marketability. Hip-hop should be a place of emancipation, not monetization, where Black women can claim their identities as they see fit. Black women's voices will continue to be at the forefront of the genre's development as a result of this change, which will honor its origins as a forum for empowerment and resistance.

Section 3: The Societal Policing of Black Men in Hip-Hop

In the context of hip-hop, where Black male musicians frequently have their songs used against them in court, the relationship between the judicial system and artistic expression is especially delicate. Cases like Bobby Shmurda and Young Thug serve as prime examples of this tendency, which has significantly increased in the last few decades. After an extensive court

struggle in which his lyrics were crucial evidence in a racketeering prosecution, Young Thug (Jeffery Lamar Williams) was freed in 2023. In a strategy sharply criticized by civil rights activists as a violation of First Amendment rights and a racially misreading of artistic expression, prosecutors claimed that his music and social media posts supported criminal conspiracies (Lang, 2024).

Similarly, the lyrics of Bobby Shmurda's popular song "Hot N***a," which the prosecution claimed represented actual criminal action, were a major factor in his 2014 conviction. The lyrics were used to support the prosecution against Shmurda, even though he claimed that the song only represented larger stories in his community (Dowd, 2019). In addition to ignoring the creative aspect of the music, the propensity to criminalize hip-hop lyrics indicates a racially double standard. Fried (2020) discovered that even when other genres with comparably violent images are given artistic leniency, rap lyrics are frequently viewed as autobiographical and dangerous. This discrepancy highlights the structural prejudices present in these court cases.

It is impossible to separate the use of hip-hop as evidence in criminal trials from more general systemic problems, such as the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on Black communities. According to academics like Dennis and Nielson (2019), these practices are closely linked to the prison-industrial complex, which makes money by locking up Black people. The well-known prosecution of Young Thug and his colleagues under Georgia's Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act exemplifies this relationship. RICO laws have progressively targeted artists despite being promoted as a means of combating organized crime, so fusing criminal conspiracy and cultural expression in the public consciousness (Lang, 2024).

Furthermore, these cases are made more concerning by the historical background of mass incarceration. Hip-hop and criminal justice's disproportionate targeting of Black men feeds negative stereotypes and feeds the cycles of surveillance, incarceration, and poverty. Rap lyrics are evaluated more harshly than equivalent lyrics assigned to other genres, according to a 2016 study by Dunbar et al., demonstrating how deeply ingrained racial biases influence public and judicial opinions. Due to these prejudices and the prison-industrial complex's financial interests, Black males in hip-hop are disproportionately monitored, charged, and imprisoned.

Black men in hip-hop have long utilized their platform to oppose oppression and criticize social injustices in spite of these structural obstacles. Legendary artists like Kendrick Lamar and Tupac Shakur have turned the genre into an activist instrument, addressing problems like systematic racism, economic inequality, and police brutality. Tracks like "DNA." and "Alright" from Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize-winning album DAMN. serve as anthems of resilience against systemic oppression, demonstrating this resistance (Nielson & Dennis, 2019). Likewise, Tupac's "Changes" remains a powerful indictment of the structural injustices that Black communities must contend with.

This opposition has been strengthened by movements like #ProtectBlackArt, which call for the defense of artistic expression against judicial abuse. The campaign, which was started in reaction to Young Thug and other individuals being criminalized, draws attention to the wider ramifications of such instances for the right to free speech. Proponents highlight the genre's function in providing voice to underrepresented groups and contend that hip-hop lyrics ought to be accepted as a valid form of artistic expression rather than as evidence of criminal activity (Greenwald, 2023).

The need for structural change is highlighted by the continuous discussion about how Black guys in hip-hop are socially policed. A significant step forward is legislation such as the newly passed statute in California that forbids the use of rap lyrics as evidence in criminal trials. This statute establishes a standard for other states to follow by recognizing the particular vulnerabilities faced by Black artists in the legal system (Bellware, 2022). At the federal level, efforts such as the Rap Act, which was put up by U.S. lawmakers, seek to provide comparable safeguards across the country and promote a fair method of assessing artistic expression in court.

In the end, criminalizing hip-hop is a reflection of larger social forces that pathologize Black culture while neglecting the structural factors that influence it. Black men's freedom to create, critique, and resist without fear of punishment is asserted by campaigns such as #ProtectBlackArt, which counter these prejudices by elevating the voices of artists and communities.

Section 4: Intersections and the Broader Capitalist System

The complexity of identity come together in hip-hop, a cultural and artistic arena that frequently reflects the unique and overlapping struggles that Black men and women experience. As a result of the historical exploitation of Black femininity, hypersexualization and societal expectations often influence how Black women are portrayed in hip-hop. Black women are frequently reduced to objects of desire or symbols of resiliency weighed down by hardship in lyrics and images. On the other hand, Black men in hip-hop are frequently portrayed as hypermasculine, representing stories of violence or extravagant wealth as indicators of achievement.

The way that violence against women is portrayed in the genre clearly reflects the crossroads of these realities. Rather than reflecting the artists' personal convictions, lyrics that mainstream or romanticize such violence frequently reflect broader cultural sentiments. Nevertheless, they contribute to a culture that trivializes exploitation. These dynamics are made worse by media narratives, which ignore the structural causes of these problems while promoting negative preconceptions about Black communities. By turning suffering and resiliency into marketable goods, this dual exploitation advances the objectives of capitalism.

Fundamentally, Black culture has been commodified by capitalism, which has criminalized the communities from which it comes while also removing its most marketable components. This conflict is best shown by the cultural phenomena known as hip-hop. By packaging and marketing hip-hop to general audiences, corporate corporations have made enormous profits by selecting sanitizing or exaggerating some aspects. These organizations frequently disregard the genre's origins as a medium for truth-telling and resistance in favor of profit above authenticity.

Racist and oppressive frameworks are maintained by the same institutions that benefit from hip-hop's commercialization. When Black artists' work defies social standards, they are often viewed as cultural disruptors, which causes their art to be policed in the courts and in the public eye. A cycle of artists being criminalized for their artistic abilities is perpetuated when lyrics that depict real experiences of systemic oppression are taken literally as confessions. This conflict exposes the hypocrisy of a capitalist society that marginalizes and polices the communities who gave rise to hip-hop while celebrating it as a worldwide phenomenon.

Regardless these obstacles, the hip-hop community's grassroots initiatives try to regain the cultural essence of the genre and oppose its commercialization. In order to challenge the power of large record companies and preserve creative autonomy, independent labels and artist-owned platforms have become essential instruments. Rap lyrics are a form of storytelling rather than proof of criminal activity, according to movements like the "Protect Black Art" campaign, which promotes the protection of artistic expression.

Hip-hop as a tool for community empowerment is becoming more and more popular, in addition to institutional initiatives. Without corporate intervention, local hip-hop festivals, cyphers, and seminars provide venues for artists to engage with their audiences in a genuine way. These programs preserve hip-hop's cultural value and encourage the next generation to see the genre as a source of pride and resistance rather than exploitation by creating spaces that honor its origins.

Solutions, Future Directions & Conclusion

Ethical representation and equity must be given top priority by industry stakeholders in order to combat the exploitation and commercialization of hip-hop. Brands, media organizations, and record labels need to critically assess their methods to make sure they support and empower Black artists rather than taking advantage of them. This entails addressing damaging stereotypes that are promoted in music and the media, increasing the voices of marginalized people, and diversifying leadership within these organizations.

The creation of equity-driven contracts that give artists more control over their earnings and intellectual property is one practical approach. Companies that collaborate with hip-hop musicians must also understand their obligation to support positive representation. Companies

can support storylines that celebrate Black identity without taking advantage of it by partnering with musicians who represent the cultural and political foundations of the genre.

The defense of hip-hop artists' liberties and rights depends heavily on legal advocacy. One major issue is the racially biased practice of using rap lyrics as criminal evidence, which stifles artistic expression. Legislative attempts to restrict the admissibility of lyrics in court are examples of advocacy tactics that are essential to maintaining art as a protected form of free speech.

More extensive systemic changes are also necessary. Comprehensive solutions that address the systemic injustices that drive mass incarceration and racial profiling are necessary. In addition to stepping up efforts to establish fair prospects for development and success, advocacy organizations and legislators must work together to chip away at the structures that criminalize Black communities.

Fighting exploitation in the industry requires giving Black artists the authority to manage their stories and intellectual property. Ownership gives artists the ability to control how their work is viewed and shared, which is a potent weapon for regaining autonomy. Platforms like Tidal and Chance the Rapper's independent career are two successful instances that show how artist-owned initiatives may change the balance of power in the music industry.

Emerging artists can be better prepared to succeed in the industry by receiving information and training on contract negotiation, intellectual property rights, and business management. This empowerment can be further supported via mentorship programs and partnerships with well-established artists, creating an environment where artists support and encourage one another.

Hip-hop reflects the larger struggles of Black communities under a capitalist system and is both a source of exploitation and resistance. Although the genre's commodification reveals the structural injustices that put profit ahead of people, its origins in community empowerment and storytelling underscore its promise as a vehicle for social change. Stakeholders may support hip-hop's cultural and political relevance and oppose the systems that want to take advantage of it by being aware of these dynamics.

Hip-hop's policing and monetization expose the interwoven nature of capitalism and systematic racism in America. Hip-hop is a microcosm of these problems, showing how Black creativity is both praised and disregarded. In order to resolve these paradoxes, industry practices must be changed, but so must the social values that support inequality.

Hip-hop's survival hinges on our combined efforts to protect its political and cultural foundations. Policymakers, industry participants, and audiences all have a responsibility to uphold the genre's integrity and oppose its commercialization. We can guarantee that hip-hop, which is based on the voices and experiences of the communities that produced it, continues to be a potent force for resistance and change by supporting moral behavior, pushing for legal safeguards, and empowering artists.

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