The Conceptualization of Gender and Race in Rap Music: Its Impact on the Political Engagement of Black Women

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This thesis explores the underexamined relationship between rap music and the political engagement of Black women, using theories of Black feminist thought: Intersectionality and hip-hop feminism. Rather than seeking a definitive or binary conclusion, the research examines the complexity of how rap influences cultural representation, resistance, and political engagement. Through in depth analysis, several key findings emerged: the burden of responsibility Black women often carry in political spaces; their role as activist and advocates; the empowering representation of rap as a tool for identity and resistance agency and ownership over the narrative of Black womanhood; rap as a reflection of lived experience; the commodification and oversexualization of Black women within the genre, media literacy, and the development of political consciousness. These findings reveal that Black women's political engagement when interacting with rap is filled with contradictions and complexities as a result of this cultural expression and representation. Therefore, rap music emerges as a powerful site for negotiating and navigating identity and articulating socio-political realities. This presents an underrepresented factor in the political engagement of Black women.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Rap music is more than just a cultural phenomenon, but a tool of self-expression and political resistance for marginalized communities whose place in society has been subjected to racial and gendered discrimination and or ostracized. This thesis explores the underexamined relationship between rap music and the political engagement of Black women, using theories of Black feminist thought: Intersectionality and hip-hop feminism. Rather than seeking a definitive or binary conclusion, the research examines the complexity of how rap influences cultural representation, resistance, and political engagement. Through in depth analysis, several key findings emerged: the burden of responsibility Black women often carry in political spaces; their role as activist and advocates; the empowering representation of rap as a tool for identity and resistance agency and ownership over the narrative of Black womanhood; rap as a reflection of lived experience; the commodification and oversexualization of Black women within the genre, media literacy, and the development of political consciousness. These findings reveal that Black women's political engagement when interacting with rap is filled with contradictions and complexities because of this cultural expression and representation. Therefore, rap music emerges as a powerful site for negotiating and navigating identity and articulating socio-political realities. This presents an underrepresented factor in the political engagement of Black women.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Centering Black Women in Political Discourse:

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between cultural representation in the form of Rap music and the political Engagement of Black women in the United States, particularly focused on the intersection of race and gender. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought, theories of Intersectionality and Hip-Hop feminism are used to examine how Black women navigate multiple forms of oppression through rap not merely as entertainment but as a political vessel for self-expression, resistance, and social and political activism. As one of the most marginalized groups in society and within this genre, Black women are often subject to misogynistic and racialized tropes, becoming doormats in their communities. This study seeks to understand how these tropes are both challenged and reinforced within rap and how these particular cultural forum influences self-identity and political engagement.

In a society that silenced and omitted the voices of marginalized Black women, bell hooks, Patricia Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, and others recognized that there was a space well deserved and necessary for Black women within the political sphere and advocated for the acknowledgment of their multiple systems of oppression. The “double jeopardy” of being both black and female in the US has been and continues to be suppressed, ignored, and stigmatized. As a result, gender in society was classed as categorized as secondary to their racial identity, vice versa, rather than an attribute of their lived experiences as Black women. These pioneers, activists, and academics of Black feminist thought consolidated their work to create a framework that addresses the multifaceted experiences that shape the many African American women in the US.

The Foundations of Black Feminist Thought:

Black feminist thought as a framework articulated by Collins (2000), consists of six distinguishing features: (1) a dialectical relationship between acting through oppression and activism; (2) a heterogenous standpoint, establishing the notion that common challenges do not denote experience of significance; (3) Black women's collective experience as a unique standpoint; (4) contributions of African American women as intellectuals; (5) Black feminist though as dynamic and changing; (5) and black feminist thought's relationship to other social justice projects (Collins, 2000).

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Collins (2000) reminds us that Black feminist thought is not a single entity, group, or school of thought. Instead, she invites us to recognize that:

"Dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African American women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, constitutes the politics of US Black feminist thought" (Collins, 2000, p.3)

This study is framed by two central theoretical approaches: Intersectionality, hip-hop feminism, and Black feminist methodology known as Sista Circle Methodology (SCM). This work provides the lens through which this study will explore the intersections of race and gender in rap music and its implications on the political engagement of Black women. Crenshaw (1991) coined the term 'Intersectionality' to explain how the voices of Black women in the United States were being silenced in courtrooms pertaining to issues that involved sex and race. From this, Black feminist thought facilitates an academic framework to understand the multiple interlocking systems of oppression that Black women face in their lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). It is crucial, then, to emphasize that Black women do

not experience their blackness independent of their femaleness. Rather, their identities are shaped through stereotypes, historically controlling images, social policies, and commodification that rely on society reproducing images of what it means to be a Black woman (Crenshaw, 1991).

Black Feminist Thought and Sexuality:

While these frameworks provide a powerful basis for critically analyzing oppression, another key aspect, often incorporated in feminist and political discourse, is sexuality. For Black women, sexuality has historically been weaponized and erased, used to degrade and control, while simultaneously denying them the autonomy to define their sexual narratives. The historical roots of the suppression and control of Black women's sexuality are founded in the institution of slavery, where controlling images of black women were constructed to justify their oppression. Black bodies have been exploited "from slavery to the present day", "clothed and unclothed…bought and sold" (hooks, 2016). This has been established through the utilization of stereotypes such as the mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire, which have served to categorize Black women. Therefore, casting them as either asexual caretakers, hypersexual temptresses, or angry hypermasculine figures, stripping them of the complexity, humanity, and sexual autonomy within a "highly effective system of social control" (Collins, 2000, p.5) designed to keep African American women in an assigned, subordinate place.

Within black intellectual communities, Collins (2000) observes that Black women's sexuality is either "ignored, or included in relation to African American men's issues" (p.124). Thus, Black feminist thought calls for sexuality to be understood not merely as a matter of personal identity but as something deeply embedded within structural power

relations (Collins, 2000). In this understanding of sexuality, analyzing how Black women's sexualities are manipulated within systems of "class, race, nation, and gender as a distinctive system of oppression" (Collins, 2000, p.128) exposes how their bodies become sites of regulation and resistance.

What Collins and other scholars highlight, and what this thesis underscores, is that the sexualized representations assigned to Black women's bodies do not appear within a vacuum nor an isolated event. Rather, they appear across seemingly separate systems of oppression. For example, the commodification of Black women's bodies in rap music that hooks (2016) mentioned in her critique of Beyonce's 'Lemonade' album turns women into items that can be sold and bought. Similar tropes of "good girls and "bad girls" function to discipline women's sexuality, serving to reinforce Western binaries of morality that uphold sexual hierarchy (Collins, 2000).

Scholars such as Lorde, Morgan, and Collins have emphasized that Black women's sexuality is often constructed through controlling images, such as the Jezebel, the mammy, or the sapphire, that serve to limit their agency and justify their oppression. Lorde's (1984) *"Sister Outsider*" spoke of the "erotic as power" (p.53), reclaiming sexuality not only as a source of pleasure but as a vital source of knowledge and political resistance. Morgan (1999), through Hip-Hop feminism, adds to this, arguing that Black women can occupy contradictory spaces, being sexually expressive and politically critical without compromising their feminism.

These tensions are especially relevant when analyzing rap music, where the hypersexual portrayal of Black women often coexists with messages of empowerment and resistance. Therefore, recognizing sexuality as an aspect of identity allows for a deeper analysis of how cultural representation in rap both reflects and shapes political subjectivity. Thus, Black feminist thought, when engaged through the lens of sexuality, opens up space for

understanding how Black women navigate the politics of respectability, bodily autonomy, and sexual expression. In the context of this thesis, sexuality becomes a critical site of resistance and reclamation, particularly within rap music, a space where Black women challenge, subvert, and reconstruct the dominant narrative about their bodies and agency. This framing allows us to explore how these portrayals, whether empowering or objectifying, affect Black women's political consciousness and their motivations to engage in activism, organizing, and border forms of resistance.

Historical Context: Political Marginalization of Black Women:

Historically, the marginalization of Black women has been entrenched in both gender and race-based exclusion to marginalize not only their civil liberties but also their academic voices. For instance, the 1920s marked a pivotal moment in US history, with the ratification of women's suffrage, transforming political mobilization for women into a legally binding right to vote. This landmark legislation significantly increased women's political participation and representation. Yet, despite this move, this enfranchisement of middle-class white women was not afforded to women of color until 45 years later, when suffrage was afforded to all African Americans with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The delayed access to full citizenship underscores the distinct and complex position that Black women occupy in society, which will be delved into in chapter two. Their experience is not only shaped by systemic barriers but influenced by persistent stereotypes, controlling images from history and media, and the commodification of Black womanhood in culture, which continues to reinforce narrow and damaging ideas of what it means to be a black woman. Thus, actively attempting to limit their opportunities. As a result, these stereotypes are significant in shaping

their lived experiences that cannot be captured through the lens of race and gender separately, but conjunctively can be explained (Collins, 2000).

Stereotypes such as the Mammy continue to plague past, present, and future generations of black women, aiding in the continuous marginalization in society. The 'Mammy' portrays black women as asexual caregivers for white children and household duties (Adam & Fuller, 2006). This representation serves to further marginalize black women, positioning them as subservient and devoid of individual agency, a stereotype that continues to affect their roles in both the private and public spheres. Therefore, Collins (2000) argues that this historical exclusion means that 'stereotypical images of Black women permeate popular culture' (p.5). This ties greatly into the role that rap plays as a form of cultural representation.

Cultural Representation in Rap:

Now, as rap music evolved into a dominant cultural force by the late 20th century, it became more than a cultural phenomenon, but an artistic form of expression and a platform for political and social resistance. At its core, rap was and can capture society's failings experienced by African Americans and amplify their silenced voices into a form of 'black noise' (Rose, 1994). Yet, rap has undoubtedly faced criticism for perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black women in relation to race and gender. It is this duality that raises important questions about the impact of cultural representation influence on the political engagement of Black women. While existing literature is prone to hyper-fixing the negatives that rap has on African American communities, it is important to study, understand, and acknowledge that with the rise of Third Wave Feminists and the hip-hop generation, this literature has failed to account for the duality of the genre. Previous research has largely

neglected the dual nature of rap's portrayal of Black women, simultaneously portraying notions of empowerment while also objectifying them. Hip-hop feminists such as Morgan (1999) and Rose (1994: 2008) account for this dual nature of rap in their work, arguing that just as rap served as a medium for Black male artists to express their social realities, it has also become a space that empowers Black women to challenge and critique their intersecting systems of oppression. Therefore, this study plays a role in addressing the gap by furthering the work of academics such as Morgan and Rose by applying their ideas to how rap as a form of cultural representation may either empower or hinder the political engagement of Black women, challenging intersecting systems of oppression.

This foundational tension is what makes an intersectional lens not only valuable but essential to this study. To understand how gender and race in rap music influence Black women's political engagement, this thesis draws on the dual framework of Intersectionality and Hip-Hop Feminism within the broader context of Black feminism thought.

Intersectionality provides a robust framework for analyzing how overlapping systems of oppression, particularly sexism and racism, shape the lived experiences of Black women. In parallel, Hip-hop feminism provides a critical lens through which rap is analyzed not only as a cultural form but as a space where Black women are both empowered and objectified. Together, these theories allow for a deeper exploration of how Black women interpret and respond to their representation in rap, often characterized through hypersexual, objectifying, and racial stereotyping frames, which inform their political engagement. This includes both traditional political engagement and non-civil forms of engagement, such as protest and community organizing. To further clarify, the term 'resistance' throughout this thesis will refer to transformational resistance. This concept aligns with the aims of third-wave feminists, who argue that it is insufficient to merely include themselves within these male-

dominated spaces. Instead, it calls for a complete challenge, redefining and reshaping existing norms. In the context of Black women in rap, this can be observed through the language and themes that assert control over their bodies and challenge traditional representations of Black womanhood. Black female artists reconstruct Black womanhood and sexual liberation in a way that is subversive and empowering, shifting dominant narratives.

Research Aim and Hypothesis:

This presents the overarching question that this research aims to answer. How does the conceptualization of gender in relation to race in Rap Music influence the political engagement of Black women in the United States? Political engagement in this thesis refers to civic and non-civil participation, such as running for office, participating in protests, and community organizing. From this question, I attempt to explore how Black women perceive and engage with rap music, how their experiences with rap music may influence their self-perceptions and sense of identity, and lastly, how their experiences and ideas about rap may impact their political engagement. This leads us to our four hypotheses. H1: Black women's political engagement is deeply shaped by their intersectional experiences of race and gender, leading them to navigate and challenge societal structure in different ways than mainstream. H2: Rap music with empowering or resistance themes positively influences Black women's self-perceptions, leading to a strong sense of racial and gender identity. H3: Black women's exposure to misogynistic and racially oppressive themes in rap music negatively impacts their self-perception, potentially fostering internalized stereotypes or reinforcing social marginalization. H4: The experiences and ideas Black women form through rap music may significantly influence their political engagement, motivating them to engage in political

activism actively (protesting or community organizing) or leading to alternative forms of engagement that are underexplored.

Overview of Thesis:

The second chapter of this thesis will examine the political engagement of Black women, paying homage to their use of non-civil tactics and their presence in today's political system, from representatives in government to social movements. This offers space to discuss other factors that affect Black women's political engagement, such as the resource model, the growing debate on the irrelevance of gender as a factor, and the role of political parties and structures. From this, the literature will focus on the socio-political context of rap, criticism by Hip-Hop feminists, and academics on misogyny in rap music (Morgan, 1999; Rose, 1994;2008; Wallace, 2004; Collins, 2004; Adam & Fuller, 2006). It develops into the context, attitudes, and impact of rap music on Black women, showcasing the duality of the genre through the acts of resistance by third-wave feminist artists such as Megan Thee Stallion and Nicki Minaj in their attempts to reconstruct Black womanhood and sexual liberation. While debates may take place as to the effectiveness of this, what we see within the current rap scene illustrates a shifting tide, one that challenges the very foundation of what Black womanhood, sexuality, and identity have represented and been understood as. This perfectly captures the essence of Black women's activism, not just in rap but in political and social justice as well: it is never enough to simply demand to be seen or heard, as that represents only the first step. The true purpose is arguably always to revolutionize the past to transform the future. The last section examines the impact rap has on the identity formation of Black women, illustrating that the stereotypes in rap build on the gender socialization of young women, thus fixing them into specific roles in society. Additionally, this allows space to discuss how the cultural representation of Black women and rappers in rap music, and their

purpose, political activism, and messages conveyed through it, may enhance young women's sense of empowerment, motivating their sense of political activism through this medium (Halliday & Brown, 2018).

Chapter Three introduces our data collection process of Sista Circles Methodology (SCM). Rooted in Black feminist thought, SCM is a qualitative form of research that aims to validate and center the experiences of Black women participants in a safe and empowering space. This methodology was created by and for the enrichment of Black women because of their "shared characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic backgrounds" (Poe et al., 2023, p.2) that shape their unique experiences in American society. What separates this form of method collection is not only its emphasis on catering to marginalized communities but also its non-traditional structure of research methods. The three core features include (1) Communication dynamics, (2) the Centrality of Empowerment, and (3) Researchers as participants. Understanding that at the core of this method is ensuring that the dynamic is reciprocal shifts the traditional forms of power dynamics in mainstream research methods and essentially creates a more collaborative and comforting environment that centers the experiences and uplift of Black women. Conversations generated in discussions are not structured but rather focused on centering a structure that allows Black women to be their authentic selves (Dunmeyers, 2024). Therefore, those involved are "actors with agencies" (Firchow & Gellman, 2021, p.526) rather than subjects for the sole purpose of scholarly research. In this way, SCM functions both as a theoretical foundation and as a practice of resistance. Johnson (2015) demonstrates this in her approach to the method as a form of mentorship and validation for teachers to discuss professional experiences in schools. Similarly, Dunmeyer et al (2023) employ the method to examine the effects of "white supremacist ideologies on the experiences of black girls and women in school" (P.1248). Poe

et al (2024) also draw on this methodology to explore “how Black women have conceived and operationalized beauty and femininity in relation to place” (p.1).

Therefore, this methodology has been used by Black academics as a way of delving into the wider implications of societally, racially, and gendered ideologies to “experience healing, citizenship, and celebration of self” (Dunmeyer et al, 2023, p.1248). This section offers contextual insights into the 14 Black women participants from Virginia Tech and their demographics, as well as the two Sista Circles: Group One, which included five participants, and Group Two, which included eight. This data was all collected using pre-interviews, Sista Circles, and post-interviews. Additionally, it also addresses the well as data integrity of the data. It acknowledges its limitations, including group dynamics, technological challenges, and the concept of ‘shared identity’ among members of the African diaspora.

Chapter Four presents the findings from the Pre-Interviews, Sista Circles, and Post-Interviews conducted during the data collection process. This chapter explores how SCM facilitated open and authentic conversations about black women's perceptions of rap music and its influence on their political engagement. Through the lens of SCM, participants' narratives were analyzed to understand how their intersectional identities, shaped by gender and race, informed their engagement with rap music as a cultural expression, a representation of Black culture, and a site of political resistance. The findings revealed a complex dynamic with rap music and political engagement, particularly about identity and empowerment. Which shifted the expectations presented on the more traditional forms of political engagement addressed at the beginning of the thesis. Participants expressed a ‘burden of responsibility’ in their political engagement, rooted in the historical and societal expectation that Black women need to be strong and empathetic towards the struggles of others, while simultaneously having their needs often overlooked and unsupported. In terms of the

intersection of gender and race in rap, participants articulated recognition of the negative portrayals of Black women in the genre, critiquing while also displaying a sense of indifference spurred on by a strong sense of racial and gendered self-identity. Discussions also highlighted and emphasized the celebration and beauty of black womanhood and its resistance and empowerment, especially expressed by black female artists, such as Docheii and Megan Thee Stallion, who bring to the frontline sexual liberation as well as the vulnerability of Black women. Additionally, the findings pointed to a degree of media literacy among certain women, whose interaction with rap was merely for entertainment and appreciating the beat and lyrics, without deeply or critically engaging with the content. This diversity in interpretation underscores a central argument in this thesis: Black women are not a monolithic group. Rather, their diverse expressions and interpretations reflect the multiplicity of how they navigate society. Furthermore, the most prominent form of political engagement that emerged from the discussions was the theme of political consciousness. In the context of this study, political consciousness often refers to the idea of being aware and forming an understanding of political issues and ideologies by individuals in society. This theme was especially evident during the post-interview data, where participants demonstrated an increased awareness of how rap intersects with political engagement and how artists use the genre to address issues related to Black womanhood and identity in means of empowerment and resistance. These findings were contextualized within the theory of hip-hop feminism and intersectionality, revealing how Black women navigate their political identities and activism through the complex and contradictory portrayal of Black womanhood in rap. This chapter also highlights the unique role that SCM played in providing a safe and empowering platform for marginalized voices to share and spread their knowledge in a space where their lived experiences were understood, relatable, and appreciated.

Lastly, Chapter Five concludes by reflecting on the central themes and findings of the research, particularly the dual nature of rap music as both a reflection of societal oppression and a tool for resistance. The chapter explores how black women navigated their complex relationship with rap, acknowledging its empowering potential while criticizing its perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. Through SCM, the women in the study provide valuable insights into how rap music shapes their political engagement, highlighting the importance of intersectionality and Black feminist thought in understanding their experiences. The findings emphasize the role of rap in fostering political consciousness and activism, as well as providing a compelling insight into the influence of cross-cultural experience and generational difference, and how it shapes how black women engage with rap. Finally, the conclusion underscores the importance of continued research into how rap music influences the political engagement of Black women, with a call for further exploration into the intersectionality of identity and the global influence of rap music.

Overall, this research is significant because it addresses the underexplored relationship between rap and the political engagement of Black women. It has the potential to reveal how the dual narratives of race and gender in music shape the socio-political landscape affecting Black women. More specifically, this research examines the ways that Black women navigate and resist the internalization of historical portrayals of black womanhood, often depicted in rap music. It also uncovers the complex factors that shape Black women's political behavior and activism beyond traditional forms of socio-economic theories of political participation. Exploring this topic, through an intersectional and hip-hop feminism lens which many scholars of rap and political engagement attempt such as Bonnette (2015) and Halliday & Brown (2018) is a greater appreciation of the role of intersectionality in

shaping the lived experiences and political realities of Black women and how cultural representation can provide a deeper understanding of this.

This thesis does not seek to provide a definitive or binary answer, rather it explores the nuanced and multifaceted ways rap music influences the political engagement of Black women, In doing so, it identifies several key themes that emerged from the data collection: the burden of responsibility Black women often carry in political spaces; their role as activist and advocates; the empowering representation of rap as a tool for identity and resistance agency and ownership over the narrative of Black womanhood; rap as a reflection of lived experience; the commodification and oversexualization of Black women within the genre and the development of political consciousness. Ultimately, this study argues that rap functions as both a site of cultural resistance and a possible space for identity formation, where Black women continuously negotiate their place. Political engagement, therefore, in this thesis is no longer fixed to institutional frameworks on traditional forms, but deeply intertwined with historical imagery, cultural representation, and personal/collective identity, highlighting how rap may serve as a medium in which Black women articulate, reaffirm, and challenge their place in society.

Chapter 2: Literature Review:

This chapter examines the historical and contemporary political engagement of Black women, specifically protesting and community organizing as a form of resistance in the United States. Reviewing scholarly articles and books, this chapter highlights the unique ways in which Black women have engaged politically and continue to be demonstrated. The chapter will then explore the role of rap in political engagement, the representation of Black women in rap, and how it influences identity formation. Ultimately, it will investigate how intersections of gender and race in rap music serve as an important mechanism for either enhancing or hindering their political involvement and activism.

Black Women's Political Engagement

Political engagement refers to myriad ways in which individuals participate in the political process, which can involve activism, voting, running for office, and engaging in political discussion. Scholars have heavily understood this as the universal understanding of the term. Before gaining the right to vote after the 1965 Civil Rights Act, Black women's participation was not seen at the voting booth like their white counterparts. Still, rather, their political engagement was rooted in the "political socialization, networks, and gendered and racial identity", according to Dowes (2020, p.698). Historically, Black women have been located at the center of social justice movements as spearheads, supporters, and activists for injustices, from the Black Power Movement, which was a response to demanding more immediate action against white supremacy in society. They were known as being at the "epicenter" of this movement, where some served in both rank and leadership roles, as well as establishing ideals of self-determination through community, local neighborhoods, and welfare rights organizations (Farmer, 2018). We also see their role in the Women's

Liberation Movement, where the topic of sexist oppression was the most pressing issue (hooks, 1981). Through the creation of organizations such as the Third World Women's Alliance, they attempted to address issues of intersectional representation, reproductive rights, and fostering images of black and brown women reaffirming their identities (Farmer, 2018).

The literature continues with these ideas of Black women's political engagement in society by reinforcing the role that Black women played as pillars of their community. This ranged from their status in the African American Church as community leaders, activists, and advocates for equal opportunity education and gender rights (Higginbotham, 1994) to the Black Women Club Movement, which established and consolidated religious, educational, and civic institutions within the community, which according to Spence (2011) was a crucial component of the women's suffrage movement. As well as the infamous Black sororities that we recognize and celebrate on college campuses today, Delta Sigma Theta, founded in 1913 on Howard Campus, "effectively established and combined sisterhood with community uplift" (Spence, 2011, p.102; Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., 2025). This illustrates the ways that Black women engaged politically, despite not being afforded the right to vote. These forms of community organizing, empowerment, and educational, political, and religious uplift were at the core of black engagement before 1965. Therefore, we see a multitude of important demonstrations of the political engagement that Black women exhibited in this pivotal time for advancing the civil liberties for their community and especially for African American men (Robnett & Barny, 2011; Davis, 1981). This is extremely telling as academics such as Spence (2011) highlight that the Civil Rights movement and Black Power Movement could not have been conducted "without the leadership of Black women" (p.102) despite their exclusion from the National Medical

Association (NMA) or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). hooks (1981) share this sentiment with the Women's Liberation Movement commenting that Black women place in the movement was stagnate because of the inconsistencies of the movement was tied down to its inability to recognize that race and gender were not separate issues, rather they were inseparable.

Despite the almost systematic marginalization of Black women within these movements by Black men and White women who saw Black women's issues as "sublimated to race" (Spence, 2011, p.102) it has never discouraged Black abolitionists and feminists like hooks, Sojourner Truth, and Davis from having their voices heard socially and academically. As well as their distinct experiences acknowledged within the unique dynamics they faced at the intersections of race and gender in the US. Rather, their persistence to move away from the margins has undoubtedly mobilized, shaped, and contributed to the foundation of historical and current movements on social equality and justice, especially for Black women. This encompasses the imperative act of using intersectionality in Black feminist thought to acknowledge and cement the contributions of African American women as intellectuals.

21st Century Black Women Engagement:

Today, despite the legal right to vote, we still see the continuation of protesting and community organizing by Black women, reinforcing that political engagement is more reflective through non-traditional forms of participation rather than running for office (Dowes, 2020). The Black Lives Matter Movement launched in 2012 following the tragic death of Trayvon Martin at the hands of a police officer. It originated as a hashtag by Black activist Alicia Garza. Empowered by the "devastating feeling of racially rooted hopelessness

in the American justice system" (Chase, 2018, p.1094), her media post catalyzed a focus on the police brutality of young black men. The same can be seen in the Me Too Movement, founded by Tanya Bruke to empower women of color facing sexual abuse and violence (Me Too, 2024). Therefore, these movements demonstrate how Black women's political engagement is often rooted in the fight for racial and gender justice outside of traditional institutional structures. Through these forms of activism, Black women challenge oppressive systems and mobilize for social change in ways that are embedded in their lived experiences and unique intersectional identities.

While non-traditional forms of engagement are central to Black women's political engagement, there is also an ongoing effort to increase political representation through formal institutions. The 2022 appointment of the first Black woman, Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, and the 2024 election with Vice President Kamala Harris as a presidential candidate force us to acknowledge the progress that Black women have made in terms of political representation. Statistics show that women comprise 5.4% of all voting members of Congress, 5.2% of state legislatures, and 8% of all mayors in the top 100 most popular cities (Census, 2024). This is against the population of Black women being 7.7% of the US population and 15.3% of women (Census, 2024). Based on these statistics, women are still numerically underrepresented in politics. Scholars point to the gendered structures of government, media, and societal norms that may contribute to the lack of representation of Black women in political spaces. The lack of representation not only hinders the self-empowerment of young Black women who see the diminished racial and gender representation of Black women in predominantly male and white spaces, but as discussed in the introduction of this essay, Black women cannot be separated from their race and gender. Bos et al.'s (2021) study on gendered socialization refers to the reinforcement of perceived

roles that men and women are societally united to hold, illustrates that as young girls grow up, they are more likely to associate a man with being suited for being in a political position of power rather than women, due to gendered conditioning. While this study's participants were not specifically young Black girls, it targets the gender element of their identity, in which we can assume that the impact of race, in conjunction with an intersectional lens, when Americans have never seen a female black president in their lifetime for them to represent as a possibility. Therefore, we see how the political engagement of Black women reflects how these two forms of oppression are inseparable from their lived experiences as Black women. Thus, the notion of 'breaking the glass ceiling' and 'double jeopardy' that is experienced by this group in society undergirds their attempts to challenge the "deeply rooted patriarchy, racialized and heteronormative beliefs" (Runderkamp et al 2022. p.566). For that reason, according to Brown (2014), intersectionality as a framework becomes imperative as an approach to highlight how "social and political forces manipulate the overlapping inequalities within marginalized groups" (p.8).

Alternative Barriers to Participation:

While this research focuses on supply-side influences on political engagement, such as gendered and racialized stereotypes in rap, it is important to consider the broader structural barriers to Black women's political participation. In doing so, it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the multitude of factors that may simultaneously enhance or impede their political engagement. The socio-economic Model (SEM) has been dominant in the literature about the political engagement of women of color, especially when it comes to traditional forms of political engagement. The model argues that resources such as "lack of money, free time and education" (Scholzman et al., 1994; Burns et al., 2001 in Holman, 2016, p. 14) play

a significant role in worsening conditions for women running for office than men (Taylor-Robinson & Geva, 2023). For instance, education is a key factor that encourages Black women to participate in politics (Brown, 2014). Therefore, as Black women attain higher levels of education compared to Black men, this trend underscores the crucial role education plays in fostering political participation and supports the broader argument of the SEM's relevance in this context (Brown, 2014). However, Holman's (2016) work argues against this model, suggesting that the resource model of political participation largely fails to explain the experiences of "members of intersectional groups" (p.15). This is because studies on this model are developed out of the 'experiences of white men' who often hold more systemic capital necessary to participate in politics (Holman, 2016, p. 15). Encompassed in this notion is that even though women and minorities have fewer resources compared to white women and men, this does not deter Black women from exceeding white women in performing their civil duties, such as voting and working for a political party (Brown 2014; Holman, 2016). Thus, it becomes more evident that the socioeconomic model fails to adequately capture the intersectionality of Black women's experiences, both in terms of its limited capacity and failure to account for scholarship to account for other perspectives. Additionally, this traditional model overlooks crucial barriers to Black women's political engagement.

On the other side, recent research by Teele et al (2018) suggests gender itself may not be the main barrier to women entering political office. Instead, they argue that the process political parties use to recruit and select candidates often disadvantages women, which discourages their participation. This was based on the notion of "outright hostility" within the culture of campaign recruitment (Teele et al., 2018). This is defined as having a long-established preference for individuals from a specific background, often male and white, while having an established bias for another based on a long-established partiality. Yet,

despite their emphasis on the culture around political parties and recruitment, there is still a gendered element due to the institutions of politics being male-dominated. Thus, it could be argued that Teele et al's (2018) work builds on the foundation and traditional concepts of gendered stereotypes that women experience, which is exacerbated for women of color who are trapped within this "double bind" due to the values often prescribed to the type of candidates they traditional associate with themselves: "White masculinity" (p.528). Teele et al. (2018) attempt to highlight a gradual shift in gender biases on factors affecting women running for office and rather place agency in the hands of political parties and their selection bias. What is important about this research, as implied by Sanbonmatsu (2006), is that supply-side and demand-side factors do not have to be understood or explained separately but could be seen as reinforcing or working simultaneously. Therefore, it creates the opportunity for further research, particularly in addressing gender disparities in political representation, that there is an integration of supply side and demand side as interdependent rather than separate. In doing this, it offers a more holistic framework for effective strategies for understanding women's political engagement and participation.

The History and Legacy of Rap in Political Engagement:

Rap hit the streets in the early 1970s, existing as what we know today as a tool of self-expression and resistance against oppression within the black community (Adam & Fuller, 2006). It served as an "assault on racism, black self-exploitation, and stored racial role" (Powell, 1991, p.246) and became utilized by young black and Hispanic boys in New York as a vessel for the voiceless (Rose, 1994). Miller (2012) argues that rap is not distinct from other aspects of culture, instead, it "internalizes (mirrors) and reproduces social domination while

creating spaces for subversion" (p.25). This dual nature of rap, reflecting social inequalities while simultaneously challenging the very system it critiques, highlights its complexity.

Literature that details the history and evolution of rap illustrates that before it was known as this vessel for resistance, it was rooted in a "musical style connected to partying" (Beighey & Unnithan, 2006, p.134). Pioneering artists such as DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash played key roles in shaping hip hop primarily through their groundbreaking work as DJs in the community Maultsby et al, 2021). Rose (1991) reinforces this sentiment, highlighting that it was "apolitical party music with limited social relevance" (p.276). However, Kitwana (2004), challenges this view of 'limited social relevance' in his work '*The Challenge of Rap Music from Cultural Movement to Political Power'* arguing that rap was initially established as a cultural movement that provided young urban African Americans, with an avenue of self-expression, reflecting their cultural identity through "fashion, style and language" (p.344) was encoded within the visuals and lyrics of rap music. Therefore, Kitwana emphasizes that rap was initially more about partying than finding a sense of cultural identity and self-expression. This provides the perspective that rap's inception was a gateway into the lives of the black community, drawing on what it meant to be young and black in the 80s (Kitwana, 2006).

Today, rap for scholars, academics, and artists is now one of the largest cultural, social, and political expressions for the Black community in the United States. Over time, due to commercialization, rap has gained more visibility and influence, and it began to take on political and social relevance, the realities, hardships, and the dichotomies and nuances within the black community (Rose, 2008). As the genre found its footing in society, Decker (1994) argues black rappers began to draw on 'black nationalist' ideas from the Black Power

Movements of the 1960s, the Nation of Islam, and Afrocentric nations to "rearticulate a history of racial oppression and struggle" (p.53) as a result cultivating a movement towards black empowerment and independence. Lusane (1993) similarly argues that Black nationalism was a dominant trope for black rappers, providing a way to "challenge and liberate political forces in the black community" (p.408). In a context of housing segregation, economic inequality, and police violence in the black communities in the 70s and 80s (Rose, 2008), rap became an important instrument in addressing issues of racial oppression. For example, NWA's famous song 'Fuck Tha Police' expressed collective frustration with police violence, a sentiment reinforced in the 21st century by rappers such as Kendrick Lamar whose song 'Alright' explicitly addresses the recurring incidents of police hostility and signaling resistance and resilience (Lamar, 2015). Rap also addresses issues of criminal justice discrimination, Mass incarceration, to criminalization in black communities have been a central theme in political rap, as argued by Kelly (1994, cited in Beighey and Unnithan, 2016). The War on Drugs was one key example that amplified the disproportionate number of arrests and convictions for drug offenses in the black community (Salcido, 2023). As a result, we saw how rap became a medium for frustrated and disgruntled black rappers to bring attention to these issues, criticize, and expose the "racist character of the nation's War on Drugs" (Lusane, 1993, p.410), especially the impact it has had on the black community. These illustrate just some of the roles that rap music has as a medium of political activism and engagement.

While rap has long served as a powerful tool for addressing racial oppression, according to Lusane (1993), rap has become a forum for debating the nature of gender relations among the black youth and community. While emphasis has been placed on rap's ability to highlight and draw on issues of police brutality, the war on drugs, and criminal

justice discrimination, there has been less outright focus on the issues of the intersection of gender and race within the community. In an interview with Angela Davis, rapper Ice Cube claimed that conversations with Black women have to wait for black men to be uplifted first (Cube & Davis, 1992). Such rhetoric is not unfamiliar in the rap context and the black community and highlights a longstanding marginalization of Black women in rap, where the category of gender has always been deemed separate and secondary to black male rappers (Collins, 2004). However, this does not fail to acknowledge the growing spaces and artists who have challenged existing dominant ideas of gender in rap, from Queen Latifah to ISIS, to highlight the importance of black womanhood, empowerment, and identity in a male-dominant industry and wider society (Decker, 1994).

Rap has allowed decades of black rage from institutional, systemic, and societal issues to be challenged in their music as a means of countering authority and raising awareness of the present and growing inequality in their neighborhoods and lives (Rose, 1994). Artists like Public Energy, who marked a significant break in rap music, Queen Latifah, Kendrick, and NWA ultimately used this medium as a form of social activism; this activism raised the capacity for political consciousness of the community, but also for other artists, such as Tupac (Rose, 1991). This political consciousness led to the subgenre of rap music called political rap, an essential component of this thesis. According to Kuwahara (1992, as cited in Beighey & Unnithan, 2006), “political rap is oppositional as it questions hegemonic forces and resists domination by producing alternative knowledge while presenting a uniquely Afro-American view of society” (p.135). According to Beighey & Unnithan's (2012) study, they identified key themes that are present within political rap lyrics: redefining black family, criminal justice discrimination, and lost economic opportunities are commonly sampled in political rap lyrics. These can be shown through artists like Public Enemy and NWA.

Therefore, there is a large emphasis on this concept as representing or engaging with institutions that oppress African Americans. Bonnette's (2015) work '*Beyond the Music: Black Feminism and Rap Music'* argues strongly that "those exposed to political rap have a more positive relationship with black feminism" (p.77). This is because, while some rap music is misogynistic, political rap specifically entertains pro-feminist sentiment and therefore embraces different perspectives about women that stray from classical male rapper 'bitches and ho' narrative.

While political rap has become a staple in the genre, literature often attempts to separate the notion of political rap and entertainment rap, especially when considering the impact it may have on our political attitudes. Decker (1994) offers an expansive definition, describing political rappers as "involved in the production of cultural politics, its creation, circulation, and interpretation, which is tied to the struggles of working-class blacks and the urban poor" (p.101). In contrast, entertainment rap includes a popular subgenre 'gangsta rap', which has been heavily critiqued protested, and challenged in the culture of rap, for its "vulgar, profane, misogynistic, racist, antisemitic, and juvenile" (Lusane, 1992, p.410; Kitwana, 2004; Oware, 2018). Kitwana (2004) argues that the emergence of 'gangsta rap' has caused concerns for the notion of "black cultural integrity" (p.344), which is how the images of young black rappers affect the wider community. Discussion of X-rated languages, such as the n-word, and tropes of 'bitches, and ho's' expanded and criminalized young black men, whilst depleting the visibility of young black intellectuals (Kitwana, 2004). However, artists like Ludacris argue that these expressions are not meant with negative connotations it's just the language of rap and that to understand the language and culture of hip hop one has to live within it (Miller, 2012) This ongoing debate speaks to a generational divide between the hip-hop generation and the civil rights generation, with some black elites concerned about the

negative effects it may have on attitudes and politics (Spence, 2011). Rose (1991) offers an important counterpoint to this binary distinction between political rap and entertainment rap. Rose (1991) argues that even if the content of rappers does not explicitly convey a "politically resistive meaning," it does not exclude them from the "complex web of institutional policing" they are subjected to (p.276). Therefore, it is not just about what is said but also about where it is performed and how others react to it. This struggle over the "context, meaning, and public space" (Rose, 1991, pp. 276-77) underscores the difficulty of neatly categorizing rap music into political and entertainment camps. However, Bonnette's work suggests that political rap and nonpolitical rap, also known as entertainment rap, should be studied separately to understand the differences in the treatment of women and the topics related to them. It can be said that both political and entertainment rap are entangled in the same political structure and should be considered as part of the same border discussion. This argument becomes extremely important when addressing lyrics made by third-wave feminist rappers, such as Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, or Nicki Minaj. While their lyrics may not seem automatically like political rap in the traditional sense, their messages of sexual liberation and empowerment are a response to the second-wave black feminist notion of respectability politics. These artists challenge the conventional 'respectable' expectations of Black womanhood, which Oware critiques as "reinforces white patriarchal and heteronormative ideas of poetry and property" (Oware, 2018, p.81). In doing so, these third-wave feminist rappers contribute to the ongoing conversations about Black women's agency and power in a genre historically dominated by male voices and patriarchal ideals. Oware (2018) further highlights how the evolution of raunchy and hypersexualized music by black female rappers in the 1990s has been for third-wave black feminist/ hip hop feminists unsupported and rejected by the respectability politics of the older generation – who in their attempt to establish "honor, self-respect, sexual purity, and morality" (p.81) have undermined

the needs of Black women to express their sexuality. Thus, we observe the generational and wider tensions within both the black community and academia regarding the evolving role of rap in shaping political and social discourse.

In conclusion, rap has historically served as a platform for socio-political expression, but it has also contributed to the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes about blackness and black womanhood. The rhetoric of misogyny, gangsta rap, and ho's is being perpetuated and reinforced almost carelessly by male rappers (Morgan, 1990; Rose, 1994). These depictions represent not just the formulated experiences of the black community but also border societal attitudes. However, blaming the genre alone oversimplifies the issue, and as Miller (2012) points out, focusing solely on blaming rap obscures a deeper analysis of gender and sexuality as these issues become entangled with racial representations. Therefore, this thesis argues for a more nuanced understanding of how women of the hip-hop generation are utilizing it as a "cultural site for resistance against racial and gender oppression" (Oware, 2018, p.82). This highlights the complexities within the genre and its intersections of race, gender, and political engagement. By examining these intersections, we gain a more holistic understanding of how rap can function as both a tool of activism and a space that continues to shape the politics of identity.

Black Women in Rap

Black women, just like any sector of society dominated by sexism and patriarchy, experience the brunt of these intersecting systems of oppression. This is reflected in rap music, where the two forms of oppression are prevalent in the lyrics and imagery. This draws us to the concept of hip-hop feminism. Coined by Morgan (1990) in '*When Chickenheads*

Come Home to Roost', it deliberately speaks to the intersection of race and gender when it pertains to Black women's enjoyment of hip hop, which decenters the victimization of Black women and instead generates an understanding and exploration who we are as Black women. However, what scholars such as Morgan (1990) and Rose (1998) identify as important concerning understanding the complexities and duality of rap on Black women is the acknowledgment that black identity and black womanhood should not be placed into one space (hyper-sexualization) or another (female sexual liberation), rather it should be at the intersection where these contrary voices meet (Morgan, 1990). Therefore, understanding that hip-hop feminism is decentering the blame on Black men and highlighting that for Black women to further their empowerment, "Sista's have to confront the ways we are complicit in our oppression" (Moran, 1990, p.78). This complicity comes from their permission and compliance in being "video ho's" (Morgan, 1990, p.61) as well as female black rappers objectifying their bodies, ultimately transcribing to the same misogynistic images that control them as a means of 'acceptance within this black- male-controlled universe' (Rose, 2008, p.129). This illustrates the active role that Black women can play in their oppression within rap. Oware (2018) goes as far as to argue that while women may own their sexuality and empowerment, their "collective oppression persists" (p.80). Therefore, Morgan's work on hip-hop feminism attempts for us as Black women to demand responsibility for our lives, through establishing the duality of rap, and simultaneously upholding the patriarchy while attempting to challenge it.

Black women's place in rap was originally marginalized and secondary, from DJs to rappers (Rose, 1994). Yet, continuously, their role in its formation is rarely acknowledged, according to Oware (2018). As a result, literature follows a common argument that as rap centers around the lived experiences of black male artists, the glorifying black male artist

come at the expense of demeaning and subjecting Black women to tropes of ‘bitches’ and ‘hoes’, hyper-sexualization and gold diggers (Reid-Brinkley, 2007; Collins, 2008’ Rose, 2008). Wallace (2004) argues that sexism in rap is a “necessary evil” (p.134) in facilitating the space for black youths to articulate their economic and social frustrations. Collins (2004) further argues that these harmful tropes serve to bolster Black men's “devalued sense of patriarchal privilege” (p.104), reinforcing their domination of Black women and should be condemned. This underscores the idea that one of Black women's primary roles in rap music is to uphold patriarchal values, even as their bodies and identities are sacrificed at the expense of the self-expression of black male rappers (Morgan, 1990; Rose, 2008). The fact that sexism existed in society before rap and after rap, the sexist and racialized language that rappers “carelessly” (Hoston, 2024, p.41), worsens the gender inequality in society between their communities. Therefore, we can see the continued pattern of Black women, the scapegoats within the black community, to uplift their black males without regard for their rights and empowerment. It also reinforces scholarly understanding in rap music that gender is a secondary identity when it pertains to Black women.

On the other hand, despite the literature's hyper-fixation on misogyny in rap music toward Black women. Scholars like Wallace (2004), Rose (1994; 2008), and Morgan (1990) narrate that Black women's role in rap is not just to be sexualized and devalued objects but to hold these sexist depictions accountable and challenge them. Therefore, they are pioneers and utilize their music as a form of empowerment. Figures like the founder of Sugar Hill Records and groups Finesse and Synquis were pivotal in bringing female rap voices to the masses (Oware, 2008). Female rappers from the 90s to the 21st century have expressed their opinions on matters such as sexism and racism by challenging their sexual exploitation towards sexual liberation to promote “Black female power” (Collins, 2004, p.133; Oware,

2018). Rap, as a result, became a space for feminism, whereby there was a gender approach to rap that centered on the experiences of Black women and the multifaceted nature of Black womanhood (Morgan, 1990). Halliday & Payne (2020) support this, arguing that black female artists are no longer staying silent on these derogatory images of women but are reclaiming their access to power and privilege. Rap music illustrates the complex identity of Black women, depicting on one side the Video Vixens who are deemed to be sexually exploited by the 'bitches and ho's' after the money of rappers to a new wave feminist rapper, challenging the patriarchy by re-envisioning their sexual liberation for themselves (Rose, 2008). Therefore, the chains of victimization and hyper-sexualization shift to resilience and empowerment of their agency (Morgan 1990; Rose, 1994). While Collins (2004) argues that it is extremely difficult to distinguish between the two, the latter appears more prominently in the work of current Black female artists. As a result, we can see how Black women's desire and freedom to control their narrative and express their sexuality free from the 'male gaze' (acting or dressing in a manner that appeases male attention), has become a significant aspect of the duality and nuances explore in rap literature, especially by third wave hip-hop feminist. Megan Thee Stallion is just one of many examples of rappers who aim to redefine Black womanhood through her understanding of the sexual script and narratives. Her lyrics and imagery are a representation of her owning her sexual liberation and sexuality as a means of empowerment for other women to follow suit and not be distracted by society's over-focus on women's bodies (Graham, 2022). While this form of resistance is important and should be emphasized more in the literature on rap, Rose (2008) argues that there is a tragedy in reclaiming the terms of 'bitches' and ho' used by black female rappers like Megan Thee Stallion and Nicki Minaj as it perpetuates a binary narrative that categorizes women into two camps of 'good one' and 'bad ones'. This dichotomy ultimately reinforces the rigidity of the patriarchal system that subjugates women and continues to serve the needs of men. These

nuances demonstrate a form of political activism that may be subconscious as Black women navigate the complex negotiations of sexuality and empowerment embodied and performed through acts of sexual liberation.

Impact on Identity Formation:

The relationship between gender, race, and rap music influences the political engagement of Black women. As a cultural force, rap not only reflects societal attitudes but may also actively shape them, creating a dynamic sphere where identity empowerment and political consciousness intersect. According to Stapelton (1998), rap's inherent reliance on self-expression, storytelling, resistance, and protest makes it an ideal platform for political engagement. It serves as a powerful medium where Black women can both express and recognize their experiences and challenge broader political issues related to gender and race. Rap thus provides a dual lens through which they engage with broader issues of gender and race. As Skeggs (1993, cited in Stapleton, 1998) notes, while rap combats racism and oppression, female artists specifically use it to battle sexism. Pough (2007), in her work, *'What It Do, Shorty? Women, Hip Hop, and a Feminist Agenda'* highlights how the commercialized portrayal of Black women in rap culture, through the 'ride or die chicks' and 'video Vixens' tropes, reinforces narrow stereotypical roles that limit the scope of black agency. These tropes reduce Black women to mere accessories. However, encapsulated within that narrative, Pough (2007) asserts that these images or notions have to be seen through a critical lens. Many women who take these positions are not passive objects of the male gaze but active participants who exercise their agency, utilizing a form of political consciousness. Thus, the decision to be video vixens or embrace such roles can be seen as a form of self-determination where women use their bodies and visibility in ways that they

control. This shifts the narrative from the "poor victimized woman" (Pough, 2001, p.68) that scholars often assign to Black women to one of empowerment, where they navigate societal norms and reclaim agency and empowerment. This serves as a platform of political consciousness where these women are actively engaging with the tensions between societal expectations, personal desires, and broader cultural movements.

Cultural representation of gender and race plays a crucial role in Black women's participation in the political sphere. A notable example is the 2024 election, where 92% of Black women were a driving force in both voting for and campaigning for Kamala Harris - not just because she was a black woman but because she embodied a combination of qualifications and leadership that may have resonated with their lived experiences (NBC News, 2024). This brings forth the discussion of how rap music influences identity formation, particularly in the way that Black women see themselves, which in turn shapes how they navigate through society and politics. Stereotypes discussed throughout have illustrated Black women as sexually exploited, socially inferior, and victims of the patriarchal system and racial system. According to the National Council of Negro Women, President Dorothy Height "This music is damaging because it is degrading to women to have it suggested in our popular music that women are to be abused" (cited in Lusane, 1993. P.413). Therefore, this argues that these portrayals may undermine the potential and self-empowerment of Black women, creating a complex landscape in which both discouragement and empowerment coexist.

Furthermore, the commercialization and commodification of rap music in the 21st century often exploit the cultural realities and perspectives of the black community for consumption by a predominantly white audience (Rose,1994). hooks (2016) offers a

compelling critique, arguing that what appears to be the empowerment and the reconstruction of Black Womanhood is the selling of Black bodies for profit. A clear example of this is Beyoncé's Lemonade album, which, while celebrated for empowering Black women, also poses questions. Although the intended message may be directed toward Black women, hooks (2016) claims that her real audience is “the world” and “that world of business and money making has no color” (p.1). Therefore, its intention, the album, Beyonce, and many other artists can be seen as trapped within an industry that exploits black bodies while presenting the limited perspective of their identity to a global audience. This is important as the mass production aids in Rose's (1994) work that Black women have as a result strongly internalized stereotypes projected by rap in the way they see themselves. As mentioned before, segregating themselves into two different good and bad versions of negative stereotypes acknowledges not only the dichotomy with social expectations and self-empowerment about race and gender but also presents a larger question on the extent Black women navigate these labels as part of their self-identity due to this internalization. The exposure of rap on young people can speak to the spatial and longitudinal effects it may have on their self-image. Yet, as time changes, the literature points to a growing sphere of female black rappers exemplifying the potential of music to empower and mobilize against the challenge of the patriarchy (Rose, 1994). Halliday & Brown's (2018) study highlights how Beyonce and Nicki Minaj’s ‘Feeling Myself’ serves as an anthem of ‘Black Girl Magic,’ offering a powerful and positive depiction of black womanhood. In this study, the college-age Black women illustrated that through this song, they found a sense of self-reflection where they could “express the joys of being a Black woman” (Halliday & Brown, 2018, p.233). This is because for them, the song by these specific artists resonated with having a “good time, self-love, and positive affirmations” (Halliday & Brown, 2018, p.233). This anthem not only champions self-empowerment but also provides a platform for political engagement.

Themes of “self-confidence, women’s empowerment, and political messaging” (p.234) galvanize Black women to embrace their distinct identities. In a society that often seeks to control the behavior and bodies of Black women, ‘Feeling Myself’ is one of many representations of race, gender, and sexuality that empower young Black women by promoting sexual autonomy, resistance, and self-determination.

Through their names, appearances, and lyrics, these artists assert their identities and challenge social norms. In doing so, they resist dominant historical stereotypes and social expectations, creating space for a new narrative of empowerment. This not only encourages Black women to claim their right to occupy spaces traditionally closed off to them but also offers an empowering example for an entire generation of youth. This pushes the work of this research to see the complexities of rap music and its impact, strengthening the narrative that rap may inspire political activism and resistance. The desire to challenge the status quo is simultaneously being mobilized to achieve and promote social change.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology deployed in this study, which centers around exploring the lived experiences and identity formation of Black women through a cultural and political lens. The chapter begins by reinstating the hypothesis guiding the research, followed by a detailed discussion of the Sista Circle Methodology, a culturally relevant and community-centered qualitative approach grounded in black feminist thought. The chapter will then explain the process of participant recruitment and provide descriptions of the individuals involved in the study. The methods of data collection are outlined alongside considerations for ensuring data integrity throughout the research process. The analytical framework used to interpret the data is also detailed, with particular attention given to the context and cultural significance of Sista Circles. Finally, the chapter concludes by addressing the limitations of the study, acknowledging the factors that may affect the data, such as shared identity, group dynamics, and technology.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

As stated in the introduction of this thesis, I presented three main hypotheses. Firstly, Black women's political engagement is deeply shaped by their intersectional experiences, leading them to navigate and challenge societal structures differently. Secondly, I expect that rap music with ‘empowering’ or ‘resistance’ themes positively influences Black women's self-perception, leading to a strong sense of racial and gender identity. Thirdly, Black women’s exposure to misogynistic and racially oppressive themes in rap music negatively impacts their self-perception, potentially fostering internalized stereotypes and reinforcing social marginalization. Lastly, the experiences and ideas that Black women form through rap

music significantly impact their political engagement, motivating them to engage in political activism (running for office, protesting, or community organizing) or leading to an alternative form of engagement that is underexplored. These four hypotheses underpin the core purpose of this paper, which is to explore the duality of rap music on Black women and the nuances that it can result in. Through this methodology, I aim to engage with the lived experiences and understandings of Black women around me, to better answer the questions in this study.

Research Method: Sista Circle Methodology (SCM)

"Black women possess a unique standpoint on how Black women are perceived as a group."

– (Reavis et al. 2022, p.184)

This research is based on the literary work of those who came before me, who saw that cultural representation, such as rap, could mobilize individuals into political activism. It is for this reason that I have chosen to use the qualitative method in this thesis; to engage with the lived experiences and understanding of Black women around me to better answer the questions I attempt to generate through this study. How do Black women conceptualize gender and race in rap music, and particularly, how are these intersecting identities expressed in the genre? What impact does rap music have in shaping their political engagement, such as protesting and community organizing, among Black women? In what ways does rap music either empower or marginalize political activism? Does the language instate a form of resistance and empowerment, or is it just a form of expression with little to no political instigation or connotations?

It was imperative to maximize the marginalized voices of Black women in society and literature by utilizing an approach created to provide a safe place to discuss and share this perspective of race and gender in an intimate and empowering environment. This resulted in the desire to use Black feminist thought methodology, Sista Circle Methodology (SCM), which is defined as…

"A gathering of cis-gender women and/or girls who identify as Black and/ or a member of the African Diaspora to explore kinship, Sistahood, and healing through their interactions, shared experiences, and spirituality" (Dunmeyer et al., 2023, p.1249).

The term Sista Circles has only recently been recognized as a qualitative research method, which explains why my use of the term often intrigues people who do not know of it. However, this does not mean it did not exist before then. Johnson (2015) identifies that Sista Circles can be seen throughout the history of the livelihoods of Black women. Serving as a support group, they transformed into formal Black women's clubs to provide a safe space for Black women to validate the experiences of their community (McDonald, 2007; Johnson, 2015). Operating as a form of scholarly resistance against the lack of research taken into the experiences of minority groups and the voices of Black women, this method centers on their experiences as they navigate the intersections of race and gender (Dunmeyer, 2023; Poe et al., 2024). We see these three distinguishing features of Sista Circles that set it apart from more traditional qualitative political science methodologies: Communication dynamics, the centrality of empowerment, and the researcher as the participant (Johnson, 2015). Within Sista Circles, Communication dynamics center Black women's unique form of communication (Poe et al., 2024, p.2) by establishing a safe space to express mainstream American English and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). We see this explicitly through the spelling of 'Sista,' which pays homage to African ancestry and spirituality by replacing the 'er' with an 'a' acknowledging the personalization of the African American

language (Dunmeyer, 2023). In addition to this, what sets SCM apart from mainstream forms of methodology is its ability to ground and acknowledge the other forms of communication, especially nonverbal forms that Black women often display through facial expressions and hand gestures. Johnson (2015) acknowledges that these Circles "stimulate natural social interactions among Black women" (p.47); therefore, including these nonverbal cues that are found in everyday interactions serves as an integral means of not only researching but also proving a well-rounded understanding of how this community behaves. Therefore, factoring this into the choice of method allows for a raw and deeper understanding of how they may subconsciously feel about this topic without any words. Actions speak louder than words. The second feature is the centrality of Empowerment. This refers to the nature of Sista Circles. As mentioned previously, they are designed to share experiences and knowledge amongst each other in a way that allows for meaning to be found in those experiences and thus an increased sense of confidence in oneself (Lacy, 2018). Therefore, Sista Circle allows Black women to recognize their experience and knowledge as a form of power (Johnson, 2015). Lastly, the researcher as the participant is one of the most distinguishing features of this method. Traditional forms of data collection illustrate a clear power dynamic between the participant and the researcher. In this case, the researcher becomes a part of the conversation, sharing their knowledge and experience in the conversation, as a member rather than solely facilitating the discussion. The notion of the researcher as an extension and contributor of knowledge and experience is imperative and appropriate as it establishes a reciprocal relationship in this study that is fundamental to this methodology (Johnson, 2015).

Data Collection:

Though Sista Circles is the main form of data collection for this study, pre-interviews and post-interviews, as well as analytic memos, were important methods used to

enhance the information collected. These steps follow a common layout for the Sista Circles method collection (Johnson, 2015).

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. This is the intentional recruitment of participants to examine the research question (Bailey, 2018). Through purposive sampling, it ensures that those selected truly represent as closely as possible the population that is being studied (Bailey, 2018). Participants were selected from a pool of Black women (African Diaspora) college students at Virginia Tech who identified to be politically engaged, meaning they either actively participate in political activities, such as traditional and nontraditional forms: voting, protesting and community organizing informed or invested in political discourse, or have a strong sense of political awareness. Additionally, these women engage with rap to varying degrees, from fans, listeners, and scholars, for example. Due to the ages and degrees of college students being diverse as well, it allows for a broader range of perspectives on the topic, providing a more holistic understanding. Therefore, the overall criteria for selection were (1) identified as a Black woman, (2) engaged in rap music, and (3) A level of political engagement. To recruit this intentional sample, outreach was targeted at members of the Black Organizations on campus, such as the Black Organization Council (BOC), Black Student Alliance (BSA), Student African American Sisterhood (SAAS), and the African Student Association (ASA). As well as groups on campus that are involved with Hip Hop Studies, such as Digging in the Crates (VTDITC), as well as recruitment in the Political Science department and Sociology department at Virginia Tech. 15 participants signed up for this study; however, only 14 participated in the Pre-Interview, Sista Circle, and Post-Interview. For each circle, excluding myself as a participant,

there were between 2-8 people per group: Group One had five participants, and Group Two had eight participants.

Pre-Interview:

Before each Sista Circle, a scheduled pre-interview with each participant was conducted to establish a rapport. Each meeting was around 15-20 minutes long over Zoom and was audibly recorded to be a point of reference to ensure accurate transcription. This meeting gathered information from each participant, including their political orientation, such as Liberal, Moderate, and Conservative; racial identity; geographic and educational background; and family history of political engagement. These will allow a deeper understanding of other factors like economic privilege or disadvantage, ethnicity and regional identity, and a family environment of political engagement. They may also affect their perception of Black women's political engagement and representation in rap music. This pre-interview was intended to verify that each participant met the selection criteria (including their demographic data), preferred participation in one of the two circles, and provided a consent form in which they all verbally consented to partake in the study. The questions asked are presented in Appendix B.

Participants Descriptions:

The participants in this study ranged from 19-27. Specifically, three participants were between 19-20, nine were between 21-24, and two fell between 25-27. All but one participant reported they frequently engaged with rap music; however, the one who reported no, noted during the pre-interview that she had recently begun reconnecting with the genre. Regarding political engagement, nine participants identified themselves as politically engaged, four were uncertain, and two stated they were not politically engaged. Interestingly, one participant who initially said “no” to political engagement later cited voting as their primary form of

participation, which was explored further in their pre-interviews. This highlights the varied interpretations of what it means to be politically engaged. When asked about their 'political orientation in the pre-interviews, participants were initially uncertain about the question's meaning and tried to interpret it in terms of political party affiliation. However, this approach limited them to a specific party ideology rather than reflecting their broader political orientation. As a result, the distinction between the use of words liberal, moderate, or conservative was used to help explore their answer. Many of the women identified their politically oriented (liberal) views as being shaped by their experiences as women from marginalized communities, which they associated with supporting 'the people'. This was further influenced by their identity as first-generation children, with immigrant parents, which gave them a unique perspective on how society treats immigrants, shaping their more liberal leaning views. In this study, political engagement is defined broadly, allowing for a wide range of actions and perspectives to reflect how Black women are involved in political activities.

Participant One: Hadja

Hadja is a 20-year-old Cybersecurity undergraduate student at Virginia Tech who grew up in Senegal, France, and the United States. In the States, she lives in the suburbs of Maryland, where her neighborhood is predominantly black. For her, in this context, she is surrounded by "black people thriving in big houses, nice houses", and she loves to see that.

Hadja identifies as a liberal, claiming to be for "the people", especially women and immigrants. This viewpoint is embedded in her family's history of being immigrants and coming to the US, and everything her mother has done, which has made her "pro her," as she puts it. In terms of her political engagement, she made a point to motion that she is not an activist however, her engagement is often in the form of traditional forms such as voting,

making the point to emphasize that “I did vote for Kamala Harri herself” and “I’m not ashamed to say I voted for Kamala Harris.” While Hadja is a proud voter, she claims that political engagement does not run in the family: “They try to stay away from politics, they just vote for themselves”. Therefore, she is the most active politically in her family, especially being at Virginia Tech, throughout the majority of the year she stated that she is immersed with a lot of different people, and the relevance of social media means people are constantly reposting things, especially the black community at Tech, which has helped her become more exposed to social problems and issues.

When it comes to her relationship with rap music, she listens to rap music and trumps it down because she is a college student who is surrounded by it. However, her interaction with it is more situational or in social settings. For her, “it all sounds the same… the purpose of it is all the same…I’m not listening to the lyrics, I’m listening to the beat and melody just like normal people my age do.”

Participant Two Mamusukula

Mamusukula is a 19-year-old Multimedia Journalism major with a sociology Minor undergraduate student at Virginia Tech who grew up in a predominantly black city in Northern New Jersey, She was mostly surrounded by Africans, African Americans, and Hispanics. In this environment, she claims she was oblivious to other issues such as school shootings because people were mostly worried about “being at the wrong place at the wrong time or gang affiliated”. But when she moved to Roanoke for college, she was exposed more clearly to the fact that people are not going to like you or your color.

Mamusukula identifies as a liberal with a political orientation that aligns more closely with liberal values than conservative ones. As a first-time voter this year, she shared that she tries

to stay informed about major stories and mainstream topics that affect everyone through social media. Her exposure to these topics is further enhanced by her communication major, which has provided her with more opportunities for discussions in class and has motivated her to conduct additional research on subjects of interest. Furthermore, she actively spreads awareness whenever possible. A clear example of this engagement is that she is involved with issues such as “Palestine and Gaza”, where she highlighted that she did partake in protests, shared social media posts, and signed petitions. Thus, her engagement is highlighted through various forms, such as traditional forms, non-civil forms, and her growing sense of political consciousness. Raised within an African household, she states that while her parents are voters, they are not fully involved nor educated when it comes to politics “until it affects them”. Interestingly, when it came to the 2020 election, Kamala Harris, a woman going against Trump, was highlighted, and Mamusukula joked that “we're Liberian, Ellen Johnson was president.” Therefore, she claims to her and her sibling to “get them in check sometimes”.

Rap music is a genre she listens to a lot, and as a result, she understands the various sides to it. She identifies that sometimes rappers aren’t saying positive things, from the Kendrick vs Drake rap beef to artists like J Cole who speak about autistic people. Most of the time, she sees it as “demeaning us as Black women… black people in general…saying the N-word repeatedly… adding the B word.” In the cases of black female rappers, while they use the B word to illustrate, they are B, it is still the B word. However, she claims that some rappers put their stories into music, such as Megan Thee Stallion.

Participant Three Andrea

Andrea is a 22-year-old Management, Consulting, Analytic, and Entrepreneurship Undergraduate student at Virginia Tech who grew up in a diverse area in Alexandria,

Virginia, to the suburbs of Stafford, Virginia, in a predominantly white space. As a result, she has a well-rounded perspective of different cultures in society.

Andrea identifies as being very liberal, like Mamusukula; she believes that her beliefs or morals do not align with conservative ones. This is influenced by the fact that she claims that she doesn't believe voting conservative is in her best interest, especially as a Black woman. In terms of her political engagement, she partakes in various forms, from local, midterm, and general elections to political consciousness with news coverage and protest, because "people need our help elsewhere". While she claims her parents are "not activists", her family is very involved in politics, although more passive than herself. With her father working in the United Nations, politics is a frequent topic of conversation at home, often sparked by his encouragement to stay engaged and educated.

Andrea grew up listening to a lot of rap music, and as a result, has culminated in her love for the genre, with some of her first introductions being to Nicki Minaj and J Cole. She sees how artists such as Kendrick Lamar engage in political rap, where they speak on the oppressive nature of the black community in society. She states that "it is important to highlight that there is also good in rap."

Participant Four Amari

Amari is a 21-year-old Electrical Engineering major with a minor in Science, Technology, and Society undergraduate student at Virginia Tech who is the Vice President of the Student African American Sisterhood (SAAS), which focuses on providing a safe space for Black women on campus. As well as the president of Women in Electrical and Computer Engineering (WECE), created due to the gap of women in the male-centric department. Being from a military family, she grew up in both a rural area of South Carolina as well as suburban

areas of Georgia, which has exposed her to the notion that “not a lot of people are on my side”, facing a lot of racism.

Amari also identifies as liberal, influenced by her environment and being a black woman. She claims, “We don’t have much choice in terms of political stance… there’s a side that doesn’t like us at all.” In terms of her political engagement, she states that she is heavily engaged politically, such as in political discussions, social media engagement, and voting. This contrasts with her family, who, although they vote and sometimes engage in political discussion, identify that there is a generational difference between their means of political involvement.

Amari is an avid listener of rap music, with her favorites being Tyler the Creator and upcoming female rapper Doechii. While she states that she enjoys the lyricism of rap music, she worries and can identify a negative/ aggressive influence that it has on the younger generation and their interaction with the genre.

Participant Five Taylor:

Taylor is a 26-year-old Sociology PhD student at Virginia Tech who grew up in Indiana, within the inner city of a predominantly white state, as well as a red state. Her studies have cemented her commitment to political activism, focusing on the disparity between academic achievement rates of black students and white students as well as the ways that black middle-class families transmit their culture regarding literacy and how important literacy is within several generations.

Taylor identifies as left left-leaning black feminist scholar. She is actively involved in political activism influenced by her growing up as a black woman in America, which played a role in her initiation into a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., which allows her to connect with black mentors and Black women who are politically engaged. Taylor is

heavily involved with volunteering with voting registration and being a part of the Fair Election Council, which helps college students register to vote. Like the other participants, she also participates in social media advocacy, especially in terms of voter suppression. Taylor describes herself as an anomaly in her family when it comes to political engagement. While her family votes and her brother abstains, she states they are not the most informed voters.

Rap has been a key aspect of Taylor's life growing up, where listening to rap music continuously surrounded her. Her favorite artists now are Megan Thee Stallion and Glorilla because she "loves the duality of being a black woman, having my stuff together but also love rap music." As a result of her love for the genre, she identifies the shift in the industry, claiming "rap in the eighties and nineties was bad for women, artists like Megan, Latto, and Glorilla, are reclaiming their presence as strong Black women who not going to let men get over on them."

Participant Six Eunice:

Eunice is a 21-year-old Clinical Neuroscience major with a minor in Interdisciplinary Engineering, currently residing in Virginia Beach. Having lived in several areas nearby, she has been surrounded by a diverse community with a wide range of demographics from Hispanics, Africans, and South Asians.

Eunice identifies as liberal, influenced by her growing up African and being in non-accepting communities shaped the way. In terms of political engagement, Eunice describes herself as someone who votes and signs petitions but feels somewhat restricted in further involvement due to her prospects. While politics is often a topic of discussion within her family, it typically revolves around Nigerian politics. However, when it comes to US politics, there is a

noticeable increase in political activism, particularly around boycotting companies such as Sam's Club, as well as an understanding of the political climate.

Eunice is beginning to reconnect with her interest in rap music, though she had distanced herself previously because she felt it no longer addressed and communicated current issues and struggles as it once did. While she acknowledges that some rappers are aware of what is happening, she feels the dominant themes and rhetoric of sex, drugs, and money are appealing to their audience.

Participant Seven Kandi:

Kandi is a 27-year-old PhD Engineering student who grew up in the DMV, between DC and PG County, which is an affluent black area. She states that she was constantly surrounded by lawyers, doctors, and dentists who were black, thus privileged to live around people who do well for themselves.

Kandi identifies as more liberal on certain topics while taking a more moderate stance on others. She admits that she's not as politically engaged as she would like to be, participating mostly during elections through debates and voting. However, her involvement is more evident in community initiatives, such as donating and previously participating in protests like the Black Lives Matter in DC, but no longer on the front lines of activism. A history of families politically engages variously, with some displaying voting as their main form, while others focus on activism as "knowing our history and having informal conversations with people about things." She admits to being surrounded by imagery of her family being a part of the 1 Million Women march. She states there is a sense of exhaustion that her family expresses when it comes to politics, which limits their involvement and engagement.

Rap for Kandi is one of her top three genres of music that she engages in. Like Taylor, she grew up with it in her family, but she claims that being African American, her mother was

key in ensuring that she knew her history, from “artistry, plays, songs, music, instruments.” Thus, while rap music is not for everyone, she argues, she is an avid rap listener because of its rawness and lack of filter.

Participant Eight Aby:

Aby is 23 23-year-old Industrial and Systems Engineering student at Virginia Tech who grew up in a community-driven environment in Senegal and now lives in a city in Maryland with clear wealth disparities.

Aby identifies as liberal leaning, influenced by the way she is viewed in society, and does not agree with certain values of conservatism. She is politically engaged when it comes to presidential runs and elections, thus votes, but argues she still has room for more knowledge. She claims that her family is politically engaged back in Senegal, especially as they are involved in an organization established by the current President, and therefore, campaigning is a feature of their engagement, but not so much in the United States.

Aby is an avid listener of rap music, and it makes up a significant part of the music she enjoys. She is particularly drawn to songs with politically charged messages and lyrics. Her favorite artist includes Tupac, who often addressed politics, society, and racism, as well as Lil Baby, who spoke out during the George Floyd protests. She believes that only a small number of artists focus on these issues.

Participant Nine: Fehitnolu

Fehitntolu is a 21-year-old Industrial and Systems Engineering student at Virginia Tech who grew up in a Suburban, middle-class area.

Fehintolu claims that she prioritizes issues over political orientation, and as a result, she doesn’t align herself with a particular side. Instead, she can learn depending on specific

issues. In terms of political engagement, she is not a voter, however, she states that she keeps aware of things that are going on. When it comes to a history of political engagement in her family, she states that they do vote, but she wouldn't say they are super politically engaged, arguing that her father is more politically aware.

Fehintolu loves rap music, especially entertainment rap, choosing to listen to music that sounds good rather than its message, such as Future, Drake, and Young Thug. She acknowledges a liking for Kendrick Lamer but comments that "he's real rapping."

Participant Ten: Eden

Eden is 22 year 22-year-old Human Development major with a minor in Women's and Gender studies at Virginia Tech, who grew up in a diverse area of Northern Virginia. Eden states that she is a liberal liberal-leaning individual influenced by her upbringing in activism with her family. Eden claims she is an informational type of activist, therefore politically conscious through academia, but also action-based, like contacting representatives and participating in protests. She comes from a family of politically engaged parents; we are activists, especially in the US but also in Ethiopia.

Eden, like other participants, has been surrounded by rap music growing up, especially by her mother. Not only would she engage with it on a surface level, she claims, but her mother also told her about the meaning behind certain rap songs and the influence of certain artists. Therefore, she enjoys listening to artists who are pro-Black, as it is their truth and a creative outlet through, they are doing it.

Participant Eleven: Sydney

Sydney is a 22-year-old International Relations student minoring in Arabic at Virginia Tech, who grew up in the racially diverse area of Northern Virginia City. She is also a member of the Student African American Sisterhood (SAAS).

Sydney identifies as moderate, as she claims that there is not much difference between the two sides. Although she is more left-leaning than right-leaning. She is a proud voter, as well as a politically conscious activist with activism on social media. Her family is also politically involved through being volunteers at polls, which has played a role in ensuring and emphasizing the importance of partaking in a civil form of political participation.

Sydney is not an avid listener of rap music; however, she has been exposed to various forms of rap music, such as trap music, which is a local style of rap. Her interest lies in female rappers as well as subgenres of rap, such as poetic and boom rap. This, as a result, influences her due to the politically charged lyrics that highlight the struggles of black people, displayed instead of in mainstream rap.

Participant Twelve: Nadja

Nadja is a 23-year-old Computer Engineering student at Virginia Tech who grew up in a military family and traveled around the world. Her hometown is Mississippi. Living in both rural and urban areas is heightened by a racialized environment.

Nadja identifies as independent, with a liberal-leaning, influenced by a childhood spent moving frequently and being exposed to a variety of countries, cultures, and political systems and environments. When it comes to political engagement, she describes herself as an avid voter, not only in presidential elections but in primaries. She actively participates in boycotts and protests, proudly stating that she's unfair to be on the front lines. Her passion for politics is influenced by her family’s strong tradition of activism, particularly her parents and grandparents, who are outspoken and deeply involved. In contrast, another side of the family remains more passive in their political expression, often due to living in rural areas, where they must be more cautious about outward political displays.

Rap for Nadja is a genre, and while exposed to it slightly as a child, she found her love for it as she got older. Listening to rappers such as Tupac and Biggie, she was exposed and connected to their stance on black issues, wanting to further surround herself with uplifting black artists.

Participant Thirteen: Deqa

Deqa is a 21-year-old Finance Major at Virginia Tech who grew up in the suburbs of Northern Virginia, in a diverse area.

Deqa identifies as liberal, as this aligns closely with her values and morals. She shared that she is a first-time voter this year and has been actively involved in protest movements. Her political engagement is a reflection of her family's political engagement, which is deeply active when it pertains to Somali politics as well as US politics. Deqa enjoys rap music and listens to it regularly, often attending rap concerts. She vocalizes that her favorite artists include Drake and Gunna.

Participant Fourteen: Kayla

Kayla is a 23-year-old Public Health Master's Student at Virginia Tech who grew up in a suburban area in Richmond.

Kayla identifies as a liberal, shaped largely by her parents' strong left-leaning view, which led her to become a “little liberal” herself. Her passion for history also played a significant role in grounding her and helping her make sense of current events. This foundation has influenced the ways she engages politically by staying informed through debates with her friends, keeping up with the News, participating in protests, and using social media to spread awareness and knowledge. She mentions that her parents are still committed voters and make sure to submit their ballots, though they’ve become less active in other ways, such as following the News, which has become overwhelming, especially for her mother.

Like many other women in this study, Kayla is a passionate fan of rap music and has a deep appreciation for the genre. As she got older and developed her taste, she gravitated more towards rap, discovering artists like Nicki Minaj and Kendrick Lamar. She recognized the powerful messages embedded in Black rap music. Therefore, acknowledging its complex duality: from songs that may seem demeaning or purely entertaining on the surface to its often-overlooked role in empowering and appreciating Black women.

Table 1: Participant Description

Name	Age	Engaged in Rap	Political Orientation	Politically Engaged	Family's Political Engagement
Hadja	20	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Mamusukula	19	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Andrea	22	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Amari	21	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Taylor	26	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Eunice	21	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Kandi	27	Yes	Liberal/Moderate	Yes	Yes
Aby	23	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Fehitnolu	21	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
Eden	23	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Sydney	22	Yes	Moderate	Yes	Yes
Nadja	23	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Deqa	21	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes
Kayla	23	Yes	Liberal	Yes	Yes

N/A: Information not specified

Sista Circles:

Both Circles were held on separate days within the same week, with the first circle held on Thursday with five participants and the second on Friday with eight participants. All but one participant came to their sessions, with one unable to attend due to an academic commitment that overlapped. However, consent was provided to use the data from their pre-interview in this study, as it provided important background insight into different forms of rap and political engagement that were discussed in the Sista Circles. The number and size of the sessions were modified during the recruitment stage, changing from three circles to two with a larger group of participants due to student availability and a change in plans. To ensure that each participant could contribute meaningfully to the discussion, the format was adjusted to accommodate everyone. The same question was asked in each session. Given the challenges of coordinating in-person meetings at college, leveraging the growth of online platforms like Zoom presents an excellent opportunity to unite everyone. This can enhance accessibility and convenience, ensuring all participants can easily engage in discussions and collaborate regardless of location and time. Therefore, each Sista Circle was conducted on Zoom, lasting 60-90 minutes, also audio and visually recorded and later transcribed for analysis, which will minimize the risk of any human error that could come from solely writing the responses and discussions down. The discussions were guided by five open-ended questions about participants' relationship with rap music and their political activism. These questions can be found in Appendix C. During these conversations, participants were asked to provide artists that they listened to, but most importantly, how this particular artist or song made them feel. The purpose of this task was to stimulate deeper discussions into the diversity of their experiences, understandings, and perspectives, but also to see if there was a commonality amongst the groups.

Post Interviews:

After the Sista Circles, all participants were contacted by email to take part in the final stage of post-interviews, which were conducted the following week and lasted around 15 minutes. All but two participants provided post-interview, with academic commitments preventing a time to meet within the scheduled time. The same reflection questions were asked of each participant. These questions can be found in Appendix D. While this stage was expected to take longer, it gave them more time to discuss their reflection on their experience and any thoughts they had later on that may add more to what was originally said. However, despite its significantly shorter meeting compared to their pre-interviews, compelling and constructive points were made, for future recommendations, the impact of the study on them, and their thoughts and feelings during and after the Sista Circles, which was extremely insightful and beneficial. After all reflection questions were answered, time was taken at the end to give thanks and gratitude, expressing appreciation for their patience, consistent communication, respect, and contributions to the study.

Data Analysis:

Following the Sista Circles, transcripts from each session were carefully reviewed, and an analytic memo for each session was written to capture emerging ideas and insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These memos included detailed descriptions drawn from the transcript and served as a foundation for developing themes and codes. Coding is the 'process of aggregating text data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code' (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this thesis, thematic coding was central to the analysis. It is defined as the organization of observations from the data method, and this is the specific form of coding used to draw out the critical elements from the data (Saldana, 2013). Concepts such

as empowerment, demeaning, representation, and stereotype were used as foundational terms to construct the overarching themes. The themes that emerged were directly linked to the study's central research question and the hypothesis, allowing for a rich exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives.

I used inductive and deductive approaches, starting with insights that emerged from the data, and then linking these with existing theory and literature to develop overarching themes. While reviewing the transcript, I made more detailed commentary and simplification notes on key aspects of participants' responses, looking for patterns, commonalities, and contradictions in their discussions.

Table 2. Key Words and Concepts

Emerging Code	Thematic Category	Relation to CRQ
Uplift	Empowering representation in Rap	Reflects how Black women find affirmation through rap
Agency	Agency and Ownership in Narratives	Indicates self-determination in rap
Representation	Empowering representation in Rap	Positive portrayals increase self-identity
Stereotypes	Commodification +Oversexualization	Dominant narratives
Demeaning	Commodification + Oversexualization	Tensions between enjoyment and negative portrayals
Sexualization	Commodification + Oversexualization	Reinforces stereotypes, Hypervisibility, and Over policing
Burden	Burden of Responsibility	Historical depiction of BW activism
Activism	Activists and Advocates	Expectations of BW
Responsibility	Burden of Responsibility	Expectations of BW
Entertainment	Media Literacy	Nuances of Black women’s engagement with rap

The key words and concepts displayed in Table 2 were analyzed not only within their immediate context but also concerning broader thematic trends in literature and in relation to the central research question. Once the collection was attained, I used these terms and their

context to generate themes that aligned with the four hypotheses created for this study. This thematic analysis helped to identify overarching patterns and insights that responded to the research question and directly linked back to the initial hypotheses.

Data Integrity:

Ensuring the integrity and validity of the data throughout the analytical process was a key priority in this study. Several initiatives were taken to uphold the reliability and accuracy of data collection and interpretation, ensuring that the findings were both credible and accurate.

Contextual Accuracy:

As with using any form of technology, it is expected that there may be some inconsistencies with transcripts. Therefore, when revising these sessions, and any uncertainties that arose in interpreting participants' responses, I revisited the original recordings to ensure the simplification notes made in the transcriptions were verifying the context in which statements were made. This step was essential to ensure that no statements were misconstrued or failed to represent the truth in the participants' message. By paying close attention to the context in which conversations took place, I minimized the risk of mispresenting the data.

Transparency In Interpretation

Transparency in interpretation refers to the conscious effort to remain transparent about how themes were generated and how interpretations were made. Any assumptions of biases that could have influenced were carefully considered, ensuring the findings were not shaped by personal perspective but were instead rooted in the data itself. By doing this, it

upheld the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, providing a strong foundation for the analysis and ensuring that the results were accurate and meaningful to the study.

Limitations of the Study:

While Sista Circles are rooted in collaboration and community-based methodology, they can be largely affected by group dynamics, and this is an important factor to acknowledge. Firstly, participants were from all areas of the African Diaspora, not a specific group within the diaspora, as a result, notions of 'shared identity' may have been affected by the differences in identity of the participants, ranging from age, personal experience, and even geography. Thus, different identities within the group were able to offer diverse perspectives, which created more informative and nuanced discussions, such as between Andrea, who is ethnically Ghanaian, and Eunice, who came from a Nigerian background. Their perspective aided in providing cross-cultural experiences. However, it was noted that despite the positivity of different backgrounds, experiences still could feel underrepresented or misunderstood.

Secondly, group dynamics can be affected by power imbalances, which may result in certain voices dominating the conversation. This had the potential to hinder the inclusive and collaborative atmosphere that Sista Circles strives to foster in the group, potentially affecting the conditions for empowerment that they are meant to cultivate. While such dynamics are a natural occurrence in human subjects' interactions, they did not overpower or invalidate the contributions of others involved. This was stated in post-interviews by participants who still believed they were in a safe space to convey their lived experiences and thoughts. Dominance in conversation was more evident in Group 2, where participants such as Kayla, Taylor, and

Eden frequently led the discussion with insightful reflections. Taylor noted that while she felt she dominated conversations at points, it was a result of her teaching background, an insightful reflection. In instances where the voices of others had not been heard, opportunities and redirection of conversation ensured that all Black women's ideas and feelings were validated. These interventions contributed to a more balanced and engaging discussion, often leading to shared laughter and conversational tangents that deepened narratives. It is also worth noting that Group 2's larger size likely contributed to the disparity in speaking opportunities compared to Group 1, where all five participants had an equal space for contributions.

Third, the use of technology played a significant role in enabling and limiting the Sista Circles. While virtual platforms like Zoom provided efficiency and accessibility for gathering participants, and busy college students in their final months, it also introduced several challenges. During Group 2's sessions, technological disruptions such as internet connectivity issues, audio difficulties, and microphone malfunctions occasionally interrupted the flow of conversations, especially when interesting points were being made by individuals. These distributions also affected the visual dynamics of the session; because the discussions were recorded, the absence or inconsistency of the participant's visibility limited the ability to capture nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, which were vital to interpreting the various forms of communication that Black women subconsciously partake in. Nevertheless, participants adapted to these difficulties by utilizing the chat feature on Zoom to contribute when speaking was not possible, which often facilitated further discourse on what could have been a single contribution. Therefore, virtual Sista Circles were the most practical option for the environment, as confirmed by participants in their post-interviews. It is important to

acknowledge that the inability to convene physically may have at times hindered the depth and richness of Black women's collective discourse at times.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussions

This chapter presents the findings from the two Sista Circles conducted, assessing the validity of the hypothesis introduced at the outset of this thesis. Firstly, beginning with the setting of each Sista Circle, to provide an understanding of the atmosphere and environment in which these conversations took place. While each participant offered meaningful contributions, the examples detailed in this section were selected for their specific relevance and resonance with some of the most prominent themes and key takeaways that emerged during the Sista Circles.

Sista Circle Group 1: Context

As previously stated, all Sista Circles were conducted Via Zoom. This group contained five participants (six, including myself): Andrea (22), Amari (21), Nadja (23), Kandi (27), and Mamusukula (19). The group consisted of a diverse range of participants of different ages, ethnic groups, and locations. Upon arriving at the Zoom rooms, each participant was greeted and asked how their day was to lighten the environment before being informed that once everyone had arrived, introductions to each other would be made. While some of the participants had already met others from being a part of the same student organization or at college events, some people were meeting for the first time. Thus, it was essential to make everyone feel as welcome and comfortable as possible. After introductions were made, asking for names, ages, and degrees, I briefly re-explained my choice of using Sista Circle as my methodology for this study.

“Safe space to uplift Black women and their lived experiences” (Osei-Bonsu, 2025)

In this particular session, there were several moments, particularly when discussing how Black women engage in politics and the unique "burden" they carry compared to others. These collective moments of recognition were expressed through "hms" or "clock it" hand gestures (involving the repeated putting together of the thumb and index finger) and nods of agreement that remained consistent, even during moments of disagreement or new perspective was introduced. This highlighted the importance of creating spaces where Black women can engage in candid and often personal conversations, especially in moments where certain language was used, and collective gasps and laughs were shared. Having experienced spaces where all Black women congregate, as many Black women have, I anticipated these revelation-like movements, especially when addressing issues so deeply connected to race and gender. It was affirming and almost a relief to see how a group of women, some of whom had never met before, felt comfortable enough to share personal experiences, both good and bad, in a space created specifically for them. Therefore, this session highlighted the importance of not only the intention of this methodology but also its utilization in truly understanding and acknowledging the perspectives and contributions that Black women bring to these conversations.

Sista Circle Group 2: Context

The participants in the second Sista Circle were Taylor (27), Fehintoulu (22), and Kayla (23). Deqa (21), Aby (23), Hadja (19), Eden (23), and Eunice (21). This session featured a larger group of the two, with eight participants, all from diverse ethnic backgrounds and various age groups. The dynamics of this group differed significantly from the last session. Despite everyone being in a Zoom meeting, participants were in different environments; some joined in with their cars, others from home, and some from work. One Black woman was even getting her hair done simultaneously, which sparked laughter due to

the relatability of her situation. A participant later remarked it was “a part of the black experience”. While the session felt more chaotic, due to various settings, it highlighted the multiplicity of identities Black women navigate, particularly as college students, and the way multitasking is an integral part of their everyday lives. The same process of introduction was conducted to familiarize everyone with each other, with many being aware of one another. I provided another brief explanation of what Sista Circles were and my reason for choosing them before delving into discussions.

“A form of Black feminist thought, which centers the lived experiences of Black women in a safe and empowering space” (Osei-Bonsu, 2025)

This session displayed similar levels of heightened emotions as expected from the previous group, especially when it came to Black women's “responsibility” to advocate for others, with many agreeing and reaffirming each other's lived experiences and perspectives. This theme transcended both Circles.

Hypothesis One:

This hypothesis proposes that Black women's political engagement is deeply influenced by their lived realities at the intersection of race and gender. Their engagement often manifests in both formal spaces, such as voting, and occurs through formal and informal spaces of resistance and advocacy. Through the Sista Circles presented two dominant themes emerged to support this hypothesis: (1) the Burden of Responsibility and (2) Advocates and Activists.

The Burden of Responsibility:

This theme was consistent across both Sista Circles. Many participants described a deep emotional and psychological labor attached to being a Black woman in general, and

when involved in political activities. Several of the women expressed feeling they carried a large burden to be responsible for, empathetic, and to advocate not only for themselves but for other people's issues, often without reciprocation.

In Group 1, Andrea makes a compelling statement:

“For Black women, we don't have a choice not to participate in politics because it affects us so deeply”.

Whereas Kayla in Group 2 shared the sentiment, stating:

“We do have a big responsibility. In general, we are very empathetic to other people’s situations, because we have a lot of things going against us, so we’ll stand up for so many different groups of people.”

In the same breath, she labeled it as the “Superwoman Scheme”, where we, as Black women, take on so much because we feel like we need to be strong, was her perspective. This is a popular discourse in the literature about Black women being “strong”. This provided room for a general conscience amongst the other women in the group. Taylor expressed:

“At this point, as a Black woman, I’m just tired…after that last election, I put a lot into that, and like Kayla said, no one is trying to look out for us.”

Her words captured the exhaustion and emotional toll of constantly showing up politically, only to feel unsupported in return.

Eden reinforced this narrative:

“There’s always a black woman leading or being very involved… it also kind of feels like Black women are always supposed to have the answer; we're supposed to have the knowledge to spread. But not everyone wants to put in an equal amount of work.”

The notion that Black women are alone in the fight for social change is echoed strongly in these circles, but what follows closely behind is the idea that there is no one there for us. This perceived obligation to ‘lead the fight ' was palpable in space; even those who didn't speak up nodded silently in agreement.

Mamusukula, in Group 1, summarizes it bluntly:

“Alot of Black women are on the front lines, and at the end of the day, Black women are the most unprotected people in the United States. So, you do so much, you don't get much back.”

Rather than solely naming it as a burden, some women point to the lack of recognition for all that Black women contribute, particularly in supporting communities that may not uplift them in return.

Andrea links this feeling to the historical depiction of the ‘Mammy’ figure, noting:

“People look to Black women for comfort or how to feel about certain situations.”

She later described the need to take a break after the 2024 election.

“Post the election last year, I just took a break from campus for a day…I just needed to get my mind situated if I can go back to campus because it felt very eerie in the air.”

The ‘mammy’ figure that Andrea speaks of is a distinct stereotype of an asexual black American woman who takes care of white children as well as household duties (Adam & Fuller, 2006). As a result, she relates her experience of Black women’s political engagement with the wider societal depiction of what is expected of Black women. This depiction weighs heavily on a lot of Black women, especially following the election, where it took a lot out of them.

Kandi, in the same group as Andrea, offered a different angle, raising the issue of emotional labor and boundaries:

“Do I have the mental and emotional capacity in my life to advocate for certain groups?”

In this, she spoke about the pressure of always being expected to speak up, and that was the burden forced upon her, especially when she is constantly in places where people don't look like her, jokingly referencing her being an engineer, which is a white male-dominated space. This promoted a series of head nods of reliability amongst the engineering women, such as Mari and Nadja, which added a nice element of lightheartedness to a heavy topic. Mari explores this point by arguing something I coined as ‘subconscious activism.’ This is the idea that simply existing as a Black woman in white spaces means constantly advocating, even when unintentional.

She says:

“I think a lot of the time they try to bring up those conversations because they’re expecting you to say what they are scared to say.”

Black women cannot separate their identities, which is a key component of this thesis, which is reinforced by the societal constraints that society has thrust upon us. As a result, we are subconsciously performing political activism in our everyday lives, especially as Black women at the PWI. Mamusukula takes this notion further, providing her anecdote detailing being one of the only black girls in her liberal arts class while there are black athletes. She tells us:

“They're all going to stay quiet, and they’re not going to advocate for nobody at all.”

In this, she highlights the gender dynamics in the black community, reaffirming the gendered expectations placed on Black women within their communities.

Overall, this theme reflects the reality that Black women cannot escape the societal expectations to be the spearheads of movements, emotional intellectuals, and all-knowing,

even though these duties are not equally shared. This contrasting pressure to be there for everyone influences their political engagement and positions them as constant political figures inside and outside of their communities. This is a unique position that Black women face.

Activists and Advocates:

While the burden of responsibility that Black women experience is an all-encompassing aspect of our everyday lives, this section discusses the ways that Black women experience their political engagement. Group 2 delved significantly into the ways they see Black women participate in politics. A powerful and underrepresented space mentioned was academia.

Eden shared:

“Recently, I’ve met a lot of women around me who are contributing more to the feminist world through their research…One person I know is writing a book… that's the biggest way I'm seeing some people around me contributing.”

Kayla added:

“I’ve been working with a PHD student doing research for Black women and Medicine, and how we're underappreciated in research and how it affects not only our mental health but our bodies.”

These points were surprising but refreshing to hear, as a lot of the time, when it pertains to political engagement, the most common mention is voting or protesting. Yet these reflections highlight how academic work becomes a form of political labor, challenging narratives, influencing policy, and persevering Black women's stories.

Taylor brought attention to cultural resistance:

"We have to be mothers and wives… not letting men trap you, let you be a baby mama…just taking back some of our agency."

This point was a widely shared sentiment across both Sista Circles: advocating for awareness of and resistance against mainstream cultural norms.

In Group 1, Andrea provided a story that captured the racial gatekeeping at PWI's

"I remember it was an open house, and so what were your stats like? How did you get here? Did you get any scholarships? I'm sitting here like I know what you're trying to get at right now, but I'm going to list off my states to you so you can know that I didn't get here because I'm Black. I had a 3.8 GPA unweighted in high school. I did all this stuff, I listed all my accolades, and they were like, Oh. Like I shouldn't have to prove to you why I'm in this college."

This story sparked audible reactions from others who identified with the experience of having to prove their worth in predominantly white academic spaces. As she told the story, it was evident that this experience was extremely meaningful to her due to the conviction with which she relayed it so openly to us.

Following this, in Group 2, another important form of advocacy was mentioned in response to my mention that we can find Black women in every institution actively advocating for something. In this particular institution, it was the church. Eunice immediately perked up to join the conversation and expanded on this, saying:

"I love the fact that you brought up the church because I see a lot of community leaders in the church taking more responsibility for helping people become more educated in regards to certain topics, and like helping them understand, like the gravity of not impacting them, but other communities around them."

This reminds the group of the historical role Black women have played in community building through religious spaces, a significant role in the uplift and empowerment of their communities, which was mentioned at the beginning of the thesis as a distinct form of activism that Black women participated in.

Finally, Kandi pointed out the generational forms of activism that she has witnessed around her. In response to how she sees Black women around her participate, she states:

"I feel like older Black women, I see them a lot at the polls in the DMV area. They volunteer a lot, they also call people, trying to get people to vote… I feel like the time they came from, voting was a really big thing. I think that when it comes to younger people, it depends on how they want to be a part of political activism."

Although the Sista Circles did not fully dive into the generational difference, this theme appeared more clearly in pre-interviews. Some participants, like Eden, came from activist families that inspired their engagement. Others shared that their families primarily voted but didn't actively protest or organize.

Therefore, through the themes of the burden of responsibility and advocacy, Sista Circles revealed that Black women's political engagement is rooted in their lived experiences, constantly negotiating visibility, labor, and voice. Whether through protest, research, resisting stereotypes, or educating others in the community, Black women are engaging politically in multi-faceted ways. Their activism is not always recognized, but it is always present, often woven into their daily lives, shared by the intersecting pressures of race and gender, coupled with societal expectations.

Hypothesis Two:

This hypothesis argues that rap music with themes of empowerment and resistance (in terms of challenging the status quo and dominant narratives) has a positive influence on Black women's self-perception, shaping their racial and gender identity perception. Rap music, especially those with political undertones, has been recognized by some scholars, such as Bonnette (2015), for its potential to shape black feminist attitudes. While Bonnette (2015) suggests that simply listening to rap music is not sufficient to directly correlate the two, by treating rap music as a cultural form in terms of how Black women are portrayed. It allows us to examine how political and nonpolitical influences affect Black women's notions of resistance and empowerment. Two main themes arise when addressing this hypothesis: (1) Empowering Representation in rap and (2) Agency and Ownership in Narratives.

Empowerment in Rap Music:

During the Sista Circles, both groups discussed how rap acts as a tool for empowerment and offers a space where Black women can find affirmation and challenge societal norms. This empowerment manifests in the way rap music highlights the strength, resilience, and beauty of Black women, serving as a counter-narrative to the often-negative mainstream portrayals. This was done by asking about specific rap artists they engage with.

A pivotal moment in the conversation came when Eden reflected on the positive portrayal of Black women in the 1980s and 1990s rap music, particularly in the way women were celebrated for their beauty and kindness was a pivotal time when Black women were being empowered. She stated:

"It was always talking about their beauty, their kindness, and just overall positive things."

This comment was echoed by others in the group, reinforcing the idea that historically, rap music played a crucial role in affirming Black women's worth at a time when mainstream society often excluded or marginalized them.

This theme of empowerment continued when the group discussed contemporary artists. For instance, Kandi and Mamusukula pointed towards J. Cole's song ‘Crooked Smile’ and note that despite his often-beautiful portrayal of Black women, there are still elements of occasional problematic language such as “don't save her, she don't wanna be unsaved.” (J. Cole, 2014). When it came to this point, it echoes a common trope that claims Black women as beyond redemption or unworthy of care. Therefore, participants recognized that artist undermine their messages of love and respect by including moments of blame and resentment towards Black women. This demonstrates the duality that Black women face as consumers of rap, in which they recognize aspects of rap that contain elements of empowerment by showcasing Black women's inner beauty and resilience. Whilst also confronting messages that reinforce tropes of deviancy and disposability. In this way, the women in the study are not only commenting on individual artists but also pointing to a broader cultural pattern, where Black women are inconsistently valued.

Representation and Sexual Liberation

Additionally, several Black women discussed the works of artists like Megan Thee Stallion, Doja Cat, and Docheii, all of whom challenge mainstream depictions of Black women and represent their lives and experiences in a multifaceted, empowering light. Taylor, a huge fan of Megan Thee Stallion, praised her for embodying “the dualness of being a black woman,” noting that her public persona bridges multiple aspects of identity, including sexual liberation and academic achievement. Taylor adds:

"She is doing it for the culture and then also representing, like going to college, and it's okay to also be sexually liberated…I'm also a tall woman, so I appreciate the representation."

This was a similar comment made by Mari in Group 1, interestingly enough. Eunice in Group 2 further elaborated on Taylor's point, highlighting that Megan's Thee Stallions' authenticity sets her apart from the traditional stereotypes of female rappers. She remarked:

"She's educated, and she's not the typical woman rapper you see. She stands up for herself, and she stands on business."

This discussion also developed into the concept of sexual liberation. As Taylor pointed out, there has been a significant shift in how Black women express their sexual agency in rap, particularly in the works of Megan Thee Stallion. She explained:

"I think there has been a shift in sexual liberation when I think about rappers like Lil Kim and Trina, like it was to benefit the male sexually, or to pleasure them. And with Meg Thee Stallion, it's to pleasure her and not focus on if the guy is enjoying it or not."

This distinction, where the focus shifts from male pleasure to female empowerment and sexual satisfaction, was a central part of how Megan Thee Stallion's music resonates with Black women in the Sista Circles. Her lyrics and persona portray her desire, contributing to a broader native of Black women owning their sexuality for their empowerment rather than to satisfy others.

The discussion also touched on how artists like Doja Cat have resisted mainstream expectations by refusing to conform to a specific image. Eden highlighted how Doja Cat's ability to play with her public persona, from defying public expectations to embracing controversy, empowers Black women by challenging societal norms around how they should present themselves. Eden explained:

“The public has been very negative towards her, but I just kind of find it empowering; she's not conforming to any sort of standard “She just told the public you know they want Black women to be some type of way and they want to be portrayed a certain type of way…watch what I’m going to do. I’m going to make it better.”

This sentiment was further supported by Kayla, who enthusiastically agreed with Eden's assessment, stressing the notion that Doja Cat’s refusal to fit into perceived notions of what Black women should be.

A key contributor to this conversation about empowerment, however, was Beyoncé, who was mentioned by individuals in group two for her significant role in both celebrating and uplifting black womanhood. Although Beyoncé is not strictly a rapper, her influence on rap and broader music culture is undeniable. Eden reflected on how Beyoncé’s music has shaped the narrative of Black women's empowerment, particularly how she balances personal empowerment with social and political messages. She stated:

“Representing how Black women friendships are…empowering herself and speaking about Black women issues… she goes back to her sexual liberation and then she goes on to talk about the mistreatment of Black women and Black families and then political issues.”

Beyonce’s work, especially in albums like Lemonade, serves as a strong narrative of self-empowerment, reclaiming Black Womanhood from societal constraints and confronting both personal and collective struggles. In her lyrics, Beyoncé consistently centers on Black women's experiences, struggles, and victories, contributing to a broader cultural and political discourse. Her influence in showing in Sista circles reflected how her music sparked conversations about resilience, self-worth, and resistance. hooks (2016) creates a compelling argument on the Lemonade album, arguing that while Beyonce intended to instigate these feelings and realities for and about Black women, her utilization of black bodies is all shaped

within the production and commodification of the industry. Thus, her work does not "truly overshadow or change conventional sexist construction of black female identity" (Hook, p.3). However, this participant spoke out about how she perceived those messages and depictions of Black womanhood, and how its shining light on the positivity and multiplicity of Black women should also be represented in spaces.

Vulnerability

Beyond just the lyrics, participants noted the broader impact of these artists' actions and personas. For instance, Taylor emphasized the significance of vulnerability in Black womanhood, particularly in artists like Docheii. She noted:

"I love how she's also emotionally vulnerable, like with the anxiety song, we have to be strong all the time, and we can't, you know… I think that being vulnerable, mental health disorders are super underdiagnosed in Black women. It's just good to know that she has anxiety too; she's dealing with the same things we are."

This theme of empowerment through vulnerability highlights how rap music allows Black women the space to resist the pressure to always be 'strong', offering a space for emotional expressions and authenticity. Docheii across both groups, impacted the women by using her platform to represent Black womanhood in all its complexity, including both the challenges and the triumphs of navigating a world that often overlooks or misunderstands Black women.

In Group 1, discussions on Docheii also took place. Mari and Nadja also praised her for her versatility and the way she uses her body and voice to tell stories that reflect the diverse experiences of Black women. Mari noted:

"What I love about Docheii is that she's saying a lot of things I can relate to… I also think she has a really good balance. She might be talking about something more vulgar… I like pills, I like drugs, all that."

The rawness and authenticity resonated deeply with participants, with an extended commentary on this particular artist, illustrating how rap provides a platform for Black women to express not only their struggles but also a series of emotions. Nadja further praised Docheiis's ability to challenge the norms of the industry, which is often unfamiliar amongst other black female rappers, underscoring how her work empowers other Black women to embrace their voices and bodies in ways that are unapologetic and self-affirming. In this instance, we see one group of Black women who understand being sidelined by giving flowers to another one well deserving.

This theme explores the diverse ways that Black women empower themselves and their communities through music, allowing listeners to engage emotionally and intellectually. Black female rappers are raising awareness about important societal issues, from mental health to the treatment of Black women in the media, thus contributing to political discourse in unique and influential ways. These reflections highlight that Black women are not only consumers of rap music but also active interpreters of it, finding personal empowerment, cultural affirmation, and emotional resonance through the words and images of female rap artists. This aligns with H1, demonstrating how empowering messages in rap music contribute to a strong racial and gender identity. Whether through self-love, sexual autonomy, vulnerability, or sisterhood, the participants described and illustrated that a lot of the music they engage with reinforces their sense of self and community.

Agency and Ownership in Narratives.

Another key theme that emerged from this hypothesis during the Sista Circles was Black women's sense of agency and ownership over narratives that they are at the forefront of. When asked how the dominant portrayal of Black women in rap music affects their self-perception, participants commonly expressed they had a feeling of indifference because,

despite the negative portrayal, Black women navigated rap as a space for resisting mainstream culture and expectation by separating themselves from such tropes and embracing an empowered sense of identity.

For example, Kandi stated:

"Some of them are talking about their life experiences, so sometimes it depends on where they are from and what they've been through with the women they are engaged with. They've not engaged with a Ph.D. grad student at Virginia Tech."

This point was supported received collective agreements across the group, with Mari in support commenting:

"A lot of the time, I don't feel affected by the way they talk about Black women. Like, I know it's not me… and a lot of the times they're talking about like specific people… And I know for a fact a I share nothing with those women."

Therefore, these responses suggest that Black women are actively resisting the mainstream cultural narrative by rejecting generalization and asserting their individuality. This capacity to enjoy rap music while simultaneously rejecting negative representation could be seen as empowering in the sense that the act of distancing themselves allows them to assert control over how they are seen and how they see themselves. As well as aligning with markets of respectability and intellectual credibility, they demonstrate resistance to being fixed into a one-dimensional image of who black women are. Therefore, reinforces a positive sense of both racial and gendered identity. On the other hand, it also confirms the tension in literature between the separation of us vs them girls. This is evident through literature on the separation of Black women from the "good girls" and "bad girls". While the participants made it clear that this was not coming from a place of condemning or looking down on these women, they presented a broader and more nuanced understanding of to impact of rap music on self-

identity. These interactions uncovered how dense and complex identity formation can be for Black women engaging with a genre that is both culturally significant and challenging in its representations.

This perspective further supports key arguments made by Morgan (1999), who explored the tensions that Black women experience in engaging in rap music while understanding the problematic portrayal in hip hop. This group seems to have no difficulty in doing so, identifying clearly that there are different groups of Black women, and thus it does not represent the entirety of us. However, what makes the Sista Circles unique is how participants navigate this discussion with nuance. For instance, Mari further reflected that while some portrayals are indeed harmful, Black women do not deserve to be put down.

"A lot of the people who they tend to be referencing are kind of putting themselves in that position."

My reflection extended this point: acknowledging that while such portrayals can be damaging, they can also reflect agency, particularly when Black women choose to present themselves in sexual or provocative ways. Although this may have seemed leading, the participant opened up a topic of the agency of Black women in rap that can be seen through academic literature as the decentering of the victimization of Black women in rap. Thus, seeing a space to engage in this topic, I emphasized:

"Yes, this portrayal is harmful. But at the same time, we're taking away agency from Black women who want or like to present themselves this way."

This moment captured the complexity that hip-hop academics, have long discussed: that sexual expression in rap is not always about exploitation - it can also be about self-definition, and that in itself is a form of resistance, often not omitted and swept aside, to keep us within this victim complex that Pough (2001) argues we are shifting away from, where Black

women can navigate their reclaiming of agency and empowerment. This conversation highlighted that Black woman can engage with rap critically, challenge stereotypes, and assert their autonomy in how they are represented.

Hypothesis Three:

This section outlines the key themes that emerged from the Sista Circle discussions in response to a hypothesis: Black women's exposure to misogynistic and racially oppressive themes in rap music negatively impacts their self-perception, potentially fostering internalized stereotypes and reinforcing social marginalization. The conversations highlighted three major themes when addressing this hypothesis: (1) Rap as a reflection of lived experience, (2) The Commodification and Oversexualization of Black women, and (3) Media Literacy.

Rap as a Reflection of Lived Experience:

In Group 1, there was a shared sense of acceptance that rap music with misogynistic or degrading lyrics is not only a part of the rap industry but also a reflection of individual lived experiences. While this should not be used as an excuse for the language about Black women, it is important to recognize the lens through which many are speaking. Kandi stated:

"Some of them are talking about their lived experience. So sometimes, depending on where they're from and what they've been through with the women that they've engaged with… At the end of the day, I always remember that this is not my lived experience."

As a result of this, Kandi and others in the group expressed an understanding that certain images in rap are generated from a place of individual lived experiences. As a result, it tends to affect them in particular about the way that certain Black women are presented in the genre.

In agreement, Mari added:

“A lot of the time, I don't feel affected by the way they talk about Black women.

In Group 2, Eden shares this same sentiment about artists and vocalizing their lived experiences, stating,

“Keem is a good example. He does talk about, like you know, where he came from, what it's like to grow up in the hood, and what the losses that he had to experience.”

As a result, we have a consensus of openness and understanding when it pertains to language and imagery in rap because there is an understanding that it is based on a lived experience that cannot be taken away from them. This is unmistakably the foundation of rap music. This perspective also led to a recognition of how this portrayal can affect the way Black women are presented in the genre. It created space for a nuanced approach to the topic, as rap may depict Black women in the best way. There is an understanding that a lot of new artists have never experienced the experience that rappers in the 80s-'90s have.

Kandi commented:

“They're just rapping about something that they’re trying to have this image of. Okay, you're just talking down on us for no reason… it gets very vulgar. Sometimes you say all this, and you grew up with married parents in a good house, in the middle of the suburbs, and you are just degrading us for no reason.”

As a result, we see a level of accountability that Black women respond with toward male rappers who use Black women as a stepping stone to further themselves, whilst putting us down. This delves into hip-hop academics' exploration of how Black women are expected to stay silent on their disdain for the presentation of Black women in rap as a means of supporting Black men. However, in this case, Kandi demonstrates a clear refusal to allow this

to be the dominant narrative and creates space to question the authenticity and reason behind degrading Black women, which further reinforces our marginalized status in society as being one of the "most disrespected women in America is the Black women" (X, 1962).

The Commodification and Over-Sexualization of Black Women:

This theme addresses how rap music has historically and continues to oversexualize and commodify Black women's bodies, reflecting and reinforcing societal narratives that reduce Black women to objects of desire rather than full, complex individuals. Within the Sista Circle discussions, participants critically engaged with how these portrayals are not isolated to music alone but are deeply embedded in broader global perceptions of black femininity. The hypervisibility of Black women in rap, combined with the industry's profit-driven motives, often perpetuates a narrow and harmful depiction of Black womanhood centered on sexuality, desirability, and control.

Language and Normalization of Misogyny in Rap:

The women in Group 2 pointed to the language used in rap music particularly terms like "Bitches" and "hoes" which have been extensively discussed in literature addressing the genre 'gangsta rap' rhetoric. I brought this up in conversation to gauge their perspective on the use of such terms by both female and male artists and how the meaning might shift depending on the speaker. Some expressed discomfort with the terminology, regardless of who used it. For example, Eunice shared:

"Personally, I don't like using those terms in general. It is quite degrading…Even with my friends… It's not cute."

Eunice, discomfort with terms like Bitches revealed a personal boundary that speaks to a desire for respect and recognition beyond dominant cultural labeling.

Meanwhile, Kayla responds:

"I think its cool for everyone except Sexy Red because I think she does it a bit too much, but I feel like it's not the same as the N-Word, but it's kind of in the same mindset…when Meg The Stallion says 'Bitches cant have me' I don't really take it too personally, its like the generalized 'Bitches could never.. but when men say it, I'm like girl you cant hate from outside the club."

Kayla's comment lightened the mood, promoting smiles and agreement from others, particularly around the idea that certain artists may overuse the term. Her response shows how some Black women navigate these themes with humor and selective acceptance, highlighting how context shapes meaning. Eden followed up by adding:

"I feel like we can all say, as women, we've experienced a bad women friendship… so people talking about certain experiences, I don't care."

Eden's comments about female friendship challenges suggest that these lyrics sometimes reflect real-life dynamics, not just male fantasy or misogyny. This dialogue first highlights the complex and often contradictory ways Black women relate to and interpret misogynistic language in rap. While some reclaim and reinterpret it, others reject it entirely. It also highlights the importance of engaging directly with Black women when exploring such themes; too often, academics speak about Black women rather than with them. The use of Sista Circles intentionally counters this by creating safe and culturally familiar spaces where Black women speak freely, reflect critically, and share personal experiences that might be otherwise overlooked or omitted.

Double Standards and the Policing of Black Female Sexuality:

This theme was especially pronounced when participants compared the treatment of Black women in music to that of their non-black counterparts. In Group 1, Nadja referenced artists such as Sabrina Carpenter, whose sexualized image and language in music and media are rarely critiqued with the same intensity or moral judgment as black female artists. While Carpenter is often celebrated for embracing her sexuality, Black women engaging in similar expressions of sexuality are more likely to be labeled vulgar or inappropriate. She states:

"People calling it vulgar, like the vulgarity of Black women's rap music. But they don't mind Sabrina Carpenter… doing concerts and getting into different sex positions. And they're eating it up…Alot of her songs are about sex… playing into the sexy, blond bombshell…I just wanted to point out the hypocrisy of the media."

The hypocrisy reveals a longstanding double standard and underscores the policing surrounding Black bodies, where their freedom of expression is both policed and profited from.

Cultural Appropriation and Mimicry of Black Womanhood:

Furthering this conversation, in Group 2, the women discussed figures such as Bhad Bhabie and Alabama Baker, white rappers who adopt the language, style, and aesthetics associated with Black culture, particularly Black womanhood. This led to heated conversations, with emotions erupting from the topic. Many participants voiced frustration over how this artist capitalized on Blackness for fame and attention while reinforcing exaggerated, harmful racial and gender stereotypes. In response to Eden's question about these two rappers, Hadja replied:

"I'm sick of both of them."

Kayla responds to feeling disdain for white people who enter rap not to be rappers but rather to capitalize on blackness. She states:

“The wigs, the BBLs, the lip filler, the black scent is insane.”

The issue that arose for these women about this conversation was that, unlike Black women, these non-black artists are not subjected to the same social scrutiny, violence, or systemic consequences tied to the identities they mimic. Their presence in the genre is seen not only as a mockery but as a part of a larger trend in which Black culture is commodified and stripped of its original meaning and struggle.

Global Implications: Rap, Representation, and “sex sells” Mentality:

The conversation expanded to consider how this issue reflects broader global perceptions of Black women, particularly in the idea that“sex sells,” as stated by Nadja. As rap continues to dominate globally, it often becomes the primary presentation of black culture for international audiences. Several participants in Group 1 discussed the dangerous implications of this, especially when rap music is saturated with hypersexualized depictions of Black women. One participant shared a deeply personal account of being sexually harassed while abroad, attributing the incident in part to the global stereotype of Black women as promiscuous and sexually available in a predominantly white country. This image is largely constructed and reinforced through popular media, including rap. Nadja reinforces this, commenting:

“There are times when all they see about Black people is in the media, like in rap music.”

The discussion also surfaced the idea that Black women are not afforded the same luxury of innocence and protection that their white counterparts receive, according to Andrea. White femininity is often seen as something to be perceived or shielded. Black women are more likely to be perceived as inherently sexual or grown from a young age (find sources on that). Rap music arguably amplifies these disparities, but Andrea and I were quick to note that this

issue is not exclusive to the genre, but rather a microcosm of a much larger cultural and systemic reality. For instance, Andrea reflects:

“Yes, rap music plays a factor, but I think it's more. It’s embedded into our society, even like Black families.”

This led to a particularly powerful moment in the conversation when Mari asked a probing question about the characterization of rap and Black America through the lens of an outsider. This opened the floor to reflection on how participants, especially second-generation immigrants or those who grew up outside the US (me being Black British), had also internalized certain tropes about Black American culture. I commented:

“It shaped my understanding of what Black American culture was when I was younger. I saw the same images as in the streets, in the car, the fits. I kind of came to generalize what I assumed black culture was.”

These depictions not only shaped how outsiders view Black America but also how those within the diaspora navigate their own cultural identities.

Kandi captured this complexity when she stated:

“The problem that we face truthfully when it comes to being Black American is that Black culture is pop culture. That’s the bigger issue.”

This comment provided broader recognition of how African American cultural expression is often consumed and imitated without care or context, especially by non-black audiences. Even within the diasporic communities. Andrea first-generation Ghanaian American. Responds to Kandi's point in agreement

“I grew up in Ghana, and before I immigrated to America, I consumed a lot of American media and content…everybody wanted to be black American, say the N-word, all the

negative tropes of African American culture, they think it's so cool over there… you guys don't understand the shit that America feeds foreigners about what black people are like… thugs like gangbangers, all they do is smoke weed and live off social welfare"

These simplified images can reinforce damaging narratives while simultaneously influencing identity and expression.

Rap as both harmful and healing: A Complex Relationship:

Still, participants emphasize that rap is not a monolith. While it can reinforce stereotypes, as Andrea comments:

"I didn't like rap music portrayed Black women… very promiscuous, very ghetto, very loud and obnoxious."

It also offers a powerful affirmation of Black womanhood and community. Acknowledging the nuance in the genre, emphasizing that not all rap music perpetuates these harmful narratives. Kandi noted:

"I'm not overly consumed with that genre of music painting us negatively. There are songs that pain us so beautifully at the same time, like Wale and J.Cole."

This reflects a holistic understanding that rap music exists on a spectrum, capable of both reinforcing stereotypes and offering powerful affirmations of Black womanhood.

This particular conversation illustrates the importance of centering Black women's voices. These dialogues made space for vulnerability, critique, humor, and disagreement, reflecting the diversity of Black women's experiences. Sista Circles allowed participants not only the opportunity to process these portrayals but also to name their impact, question their roots, and imagine something more for themselves and their culture.

Overall, the insights shared strongly support the hypothesis. Participants revealed how consistent exposure to hypersexualized and commodified images of Black women affects the way they navigate through life. From internal discomfort with misogynistic language to real-life experiences of racialized sexual harassment aboard, these conversations highlighted how such themes can reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to broader patterns of societal marginalization. However, it is important to acknowledge the nuances in the women's responses, which reflect a complex relationship with the genre, where critique, resistance, and empowerment coexist. This reinforces the central aspect of this thesis, that rap is merely a reflection of the larger societal discourse of Black womanhood.

Media Literacy:

Media literacy was a significant theme across both Sista Circles, revealing how many participants engage with rap in ways that prioritize sound and rhythm over lyrical content. Rather than critically analyzing the messages within the music, especially those that may contain misogynistic or racially oppressive themes. Participants often expressed a kind of emotional distancing or selective attention. This pattern suggests a complex relationship with music, one where enjoyment of the beat or vibe coexists with an awareness of the potentially harmful content. For example, Hadja shared:

“My favorite artist is Gunna, but I feel like I can't put a solid opinion, like everybody else, just for the simple fact that I’m not really listening to his work, it's just catching stuff.”

She later responded during a discussion on the Kendrick vs Drake rap battle, she added:

“Kendrick is the better rapper because he’s a lyricist, but realistically, I don't really vibe to his rap. I don’t know, like, I'm not gonna sit in my room and play Kendrick.”

Her comments reflect a subtle tension between acknowledging lyrical skill and choosing not to engage deeply with those lyrics. This selective listening may serve as a way to enjoy the music while avoiding internal conflict with the content. There was an almost hesitancy to admit to not connecting with the themes of the music, possibly because the majority of the conversation had been with other women expressing the degrading nature of rap. However, after pointing out that it was completely okay if this wasn't the case for them, as their perspective was just as impactful and important to the study and understanding as critically analyzing the content and imagery of rap music. Similarly, Fehintolu, who expressed a similar sentiment to Hadja, commented:

"I just listen to the beats, I just like how their voice sounds, I don't really listen to the lyrics that deeply."

These comments point to broader themes of engagement without critical reflection, a type of consumption that may feel harmless but could still reinforce stereotypes or influence self-perception over time. However, in this instance, with these two women, it is merely a form of entertainment. Kayla makes an interesting comment that highlights the internal conflict some women face:

"I love the future so bad. He was one of my favorite artists. I was listening to one of his songs very recently, and I was like, this low-key is just crazy, and then I continued vibing."

She further reflected on specific lyrics from Future 'Even though I hate you, you're still part of my collection even though you don't claim me' and admitted:

"I was like damn. that is crazy, but I just have to scratch my head."

Kayla's insight captured a crucial moment of recognition followed by immediate emotional detachment, which she describes as being desensitized to the language. This reveals a

possible deeper impact of repeated exposure and how, over time, harmful lyrics may begin to feel more normal or unsurprising even when their meaning is acknowledged.

Lastly, Kandi, in Group 1, reflected on how her music choices change based on her emotional state. She states:

"Do I want to feel prissy and pretty? Do I want to get real? Whatever it depends."

Her comment displays a kind of situational listening that reflects a fluid, mood-based relationship with music. While participants did not always report feeling directly harmed by misogynistic or racially loaded lyrics, their engagement with these themes, whether passive or active, may still contribute to a broader pattern of internalized messaging and social marginalization, aligning with the hypothesis of this study.

Hypothesis Four:

Lastly, this section discusses the findings of both Sista Circles as well the Post Interviews concerning this particular hypothesis: The experiences and ideas that Black women form through rap music significantly impact their political engagement, motivating them to engage in political activism (protesting, or community organizing) or leading to an alternative form of engagement that is underexplored. The main theme: (1) Political consciousness.

Political Consciousness:

This section explores the theme of increased political consciousness that rose for participants during discussions of how they felt rap impacted their political engagement. Rooted in the hypothesis, although this discussion was one of our shortest ones, it revealed that more than any form of political engagement, Black women experience a heightened

sense of awareness and critique of systemic issues through their engagement with rap. For some of these women, political engagement in rap was not necessarily seen through direct action; rather, rap was an entry point for developing a deeper understanding of their positionality, social injustices, and the broader political landscape.

In Group 1, Mari shared her experience at a Tyler The Creator concert, where he has a song called ‘I killed you’ which centers on the politics of black hair. She recounted overhearing a white audience member say they didn't care for the song or understand it. This observation highlighted how non-black audiences often cannot relate to the assimilation pressures Black women face.

She states:

“There was this girl going through the set list, and she was like, oh, I love all these songs, all these songs are so good. And she was like, yeah, I mean I guess I killed you, was okay, I guess it's fine… It's a great song to me because I relate… She does not even know what the songs are about.”

This moment underscored the deeper political messaging in rap, particularly around the regulation and hypocrisy surrounding Black women’s bodies. Her liking of that particular song is a reflection connected with a personal experience connected to a broader systemic critique, a key marker of political consciousness.

Group 2 participants also discussed how mainstream performances could become a catalyst for political dialogue. Kendrick Lamar’s performance at the Super Bowl was brought up as a pivotal and current example by Kayla. She noted:

“It takes a lot to stand up in an area of people that don't look like you and say the message he said. It takes a lot of bravery, and it makes people think about what is going on, not just from their perspective, but from a different one.”

By saying this, Kayla highlighted that his performance created a gateway for conversations about racial issues and provided the means for people to delve into those themes. This became amplified by platforms such as TikTok, which help facilitate such discussion and learning from it. The ease of access and the communal nature of social media were seen as powerful tools to spread awareness. Therefore, for Kayla, what an artist like Lamar does is,

"A really good way of activism, makes people want to stand up and speak out… the

Bravery rubbed off on people and encouraged people to speak up."

Several participants reinforced Kayla's idea, referencing artists like Nina Simon and Lauryn Hill. Eden mentions them both because they are two artists who heavily talk about Black women's issues. Her comments:

"The only difference between them… Nina Simone says it more in a harsher way, like white people can't stand, and I just feel like that's why she's not as recognized compared to Lauryn Hill."

This feeds perfectly into the discussion that at one point "rap began because it was political messaging at first, with notes of 'Fuck the Police'" stated Kayla. Therefore, this reflection signals a collective awareness of rap's political roots and a recognition of its impact in calling to action in a way that other genres have not achieved.

A compelling moment came from a post-interview, which revealed how political consciousness is not always immediate but can be instigated through reflection and conversation. Hadja, a week later, shared:

"Well, I feel like they said something about… I don't remember who said it, but they were talking about how a lot of people were through their rap, telling stories about what was going on. That kind of opened my eyes a little bit because, like I said, I only listen to rap for the

beat, like I'm not listening to what story they are telling. So that also kind of opened my eyes a little bit. How they tied the two together with rap and people telling their stories."

This moment of realization highlights the transformative potential of rap when listeners engage beyond the surface. It also demonstrates how collective spaces like Sista circles provided opportunities for participants to re-evaluate their relationship with music and its messages. Hadja's shift from passive consumption to a possible political engagement. For some, political rap echoed what they already knew and lived. As Mari reflected:

"Political rap is just the Black experience… and I didn't need to be told that".

Her comment highlights a different, yet equally valid, perspective that an active listener reflects the development of political awareness and engagement.

However, not all participants felt that rap actively contributed to their political engagement, as the political messaging in rap does not necessarily serve as a revelation but rather as a confirmation of their existing awareness. For individuals like Mari, music may not always spark new political insight, but it affirms and validates the realities they already navigate daily. This was reinforced by collective nodding and a sense of agreement amongst some in the group.

Ultimately, the Sista Circles revealed that rap music remains a powerful force in cultivating political consciousness among Black women. Whether through lyrics that directly speak about their experiences or performances that open the door to dialogue, participants consistently described rap as a tool for recognizing injustice, building solidarity, and affirming their identity, even if, for some, it simply mirrors what they already know.

Chapter 5: Conclusion:

“Hip-hop culture to be similar to other aspects of culture- it internalizes (mirrors) and reproduces social domination.” - (Miller, 2012, p.25).

This quote by Miller underscores the double-edged nature of rap music; it reflects the very systems of power and inequality that shape society while providing space to critique and challenge them. In the context of Black women, this duality is especially pronounced. While rap music can perpetuate harmful norms, it also serves as a medium for Black women to resist, reinterpret, and challenge those very structures. Many of the responses in the Sista Circles suggest that women tune out the negative representation within the genre. This coping strategy reveals both strength and potential concern. On the one hand, it shows an agency, an ability to separate harmful messages from their own identities and lived experiences. On the other hand, it may signal that a broader sense of being desensitized to negative portrayals can make these representations seem normal or acceptable, potentially reinforcing the very systems they aim to resist. Thus, while tuning out may offer short-term protection, it raises important questions about the long-term impact and cultural normalization of misogynistic narratives. This tension between representation and resistance is central to the purpose and findings of this research.

This thesis set out to explore how Black women navigate this tension, how they listen to, interpret, and respond to the messages in rap music, and how those experiences shape their political engagement. Through an exploration of how Black women resist and reshape the historical and contemporary portrayals of black womanhood often depicted in rap music, this study sheds light on the complex factors influencing and shaping their political behavior and activism. The relationship between rap music and the political engagement of Black women

remains deeply underexplored, yet an increasingly relevant area of study, especially in light of the growing cultural prominence of rap.

At the heart of this discussion are critical frameworks such as intersectionality and hip-hop feminism. These theories provide a lens through which we can understand Black women's simultaneous love for rap while acknowledging its shortcomings, particularly in terms of how it often fails to uplift or perpetuate limiting stereotypes. Through these frameworks, Black women critique rap's messaging, especially its depiction of dominant tropes related to Black womanhood, identity, and sexuality.

In the Sista Circles, participants discussed the burden of responsibility they felt due to the historical portrayal of Black women as 'superwomen' and the 'mammies.' This portrayal often positions Black women as caretakers for others while neglecting their needs and desires, or even experiencing a lack of reciprocation, even within their community. However, many participants found empowerment in the more nuanced depictions of Black womanhood presented by newer waves of black feminist rappers, who reflect the complexities of Black women's identities, such as Docheii and Megan Thee Stallion. In contrast, some participants critiqued the oversexualization and commodification of Black women in rap, which is often filled with hypocrisy and policing of Black women whilst stripping them of their innocence in society. Additionally, some participants who initially engaged in rap solely for the beat came to appreciate its deeper meaning, particularly the political and personal storytelling embedded in the music. This highlights how rap, while a mirror of societal oppression, also functions as a tool for political awareness, empowerment, and resistance.

Impact of Sista Circles:

Through a plethora of conversations, laughs, and revelations, Sista Circle's methodology, as well as pre- and post-interviews, underscored for participants that rap music acted as more than just background noise for them; it became a source of education, a cultural archive, and at times, a political spark. The methodology itself, for all who participated, created a safe space where Black women could center their voices and experiences. This provided invaluable information highlighting the role of rap in shaping political engagement. Where academics who utilized traditional forms of methodology on marginalized communities had fallen short in that their work was solely talking ‘about’ Black women. Sista Circle creates a space where Black women are at the center, having their voices and experiences finally heard, in an environment that is safe and empowering. The researcher's role as a participant also contributed to the creation of a comfortable and open environment. By sharing my own experiences and thoughts, I encouraged others to feel more at ease in doing the same, recognizing this was not a question-and-answer, but rather an informal, friendly discussion. This helped reinforce the reciprocal nature of methodology.

Looking Ahead: Further Research:

This thesis has demonstrated that rap plays a multifaceted and dynamic role in shaping Black women's identities and political engagement, with political consciousness emerging as the most prominent form of engagement discussed. The Sista Circles provided rich insights into the lived experiences of empowerment and resistance, but they also revealed complexities that warrant further investigation. The connection between rap on Black women’s political engagement remains an evolving study, one that intersects with boundary issues, such as generational differences and cross-cultural experiences.

Generational differences:

Throughout the data collection process, generational differences emerged as a recurring theme in both perspectives on rap music and approaches to political engagement. Many participants often spoke about the differing forms of political engagement they had with themselves and older family members, particularly parents. While their parents were politically active in traditional ways, especially voting, they frequently relied on the younger generation to inform them about current events and emerging political issues. This exchange created a reciprocal flow of political awareness across generations.

The women in this study, particularly in attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs), expressed that they were more engaged in activism on the front lines, whether through such activities as protesting or community organizing. Their experiences in this college environment, where they regularly interacted and engaged with diverse groups, exposed them to a wider range of political perspectives and issues, many of which extended beyond their personal experiences and peers to the broader student body. This intersection of generational identity and educational environment appears to significantly shape how political engagement is formed, expressed, and acted upon. This suggests the need for further research into how educational institutions influence the political consciousness among young Black women.

Cross-Cultural Experience:

The cross-cultural experiences of the Black women in this study were a compelling takeaway from the study. It arguably played a pivotal role in shaping their understanding of Black culture and identity. Many participants reflected on how their perceptions of black womanhood had been shaped by the representation of Black women in rap music, which was often the most dominant form of cultural representation of the Black community globally.

These depictions, often complex and multifaceted, played a significant role in how they understood their place within both the Black community and society at large.

Future research could expand on these insights by examining how the global reach of rap influence's identity formation. This study has laid the groundwork for such exploration by including women from the African diaspora. However, there is a need to further explore the intersectionality of identity in relation to rap music. Specifically, incorporating perspectives from Black women within the LGBTQ + community would provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of how rap serves as a vehicle for political empowerment. This expanded focus would deepen our understanding of how Black women, in all their diverse identities, engage with rap music as a tool for shaping political consciousness and exerting social power in the context of the US.

In sum, this study became more than just an exploration into rap and political engagement, but it now stands as a love letter to myself, black womanhood, and all the contradictions that live within it. By centering this study on women who looked like me, we were able to explore all the tensions that came with our love for the genre, and its exploration of ourselves, vocalizing the strength, power, resilience, and political presence of Black women, past, present, and future. It argues that rap music functions as a complex and nuanced form in the political engagement of black women, one that transcends traditional forms originally stated at the beginning of this thesis and instead is deeply rooted in cultural representation, identity formation, and resistance. Rather than seeking a definitive or binary answer, this thesis highlighted the complex and multifaceted ways Black women interact with rap music to navigate and reshape politics in their lives. Together with the findings of this study, it reinforces a central argument. Rap music is not just a cultural product but a political medium in which Black women navigate dualities, reclaim their sense of self-identity, and resist dominant narratives of black womanhood. In sum, this study showed that Black women

are not simply passive consumers of culture or passive in their means of political engagement. They are activists, advocates, critics, and interpreters. Their engagement with rap music often challenges the dominant narrative, not to prove anything to anyone else but to cement their own identities within a world that has created a perception of them. Thus, this project helps reveal an often-overlooked form of political expression, one that deserves greater attention and recognition in academia.

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Appendices:

Appendix A:Consent forms

Title of research study: IRB#25-100: The Conceptualization of Gender and Race in Rap Music: Its Impact on the Political Engagement of Black Women

Key Information: The following is a summary of this study to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this study.

We invite you to take part in a research study because you are a Virginia Tech student who identifies as being from the Black diaspora and a woman who engages in Rap music as well as political engagement to an extent.

Detailed Information: The following is more detailed information about this study in addition to the information listed above.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at audrey19@vt.edu, 540-5585730

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if:

- You have questions about your rights as a research subject
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team
- You cannot reach the research team
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research.

How many people will be studied?

We plan to include about 15 people in this research study.

We plan to include about three to five people on Zoom per three sessions, out of 15 people in the entire study nationally.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

We plan to include about three to five people on Zoom per three sessions, out of 15 people in the entire study nationally.

- There will be three sessions of Sista Circles, you only need to sign up for one.
- The Zoom meeting will be 1-2 hours, during which we discuss the content of rap music: lyrics and imagery, your political engagement, and your self-empowerment.
- You will be interacting with 2-5 other participants
- It will be completed by February at the latest
- Sessions will be recorded on Zoom, including audio and video
- For those who participate, the only procedure is giving consent for the research to analyze your discussions and mannerisms for research purposes

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

If you are a student, the decision to leave the research at any time, for any reason, and it will not be held against you, nor will it affect on your grades or relationship with Virginia Tech.

If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator so that the investigator can remove you from your place in the study. Please email audrey19@vt.edu, with your name and which session you were partaking in for effective removal.

If data has already been collected at the point of withdrawal, you will be asked to explain the extent of your withdrawal and if this information can be collected and used within the project without any private information.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

We will make every effort to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and medical records, only to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB, Human Research Protection Program, and other authorized representatives of Virginia Tech.

The results of this research study will be presented as part of a thesis/dissertation.

Can I be removed from the research without my OK?

We will tell you about any new information that might affect your health, welfare, or choice to stay in the research.

We will offer to share your test results with you. You may accept or decline these results.

APPENDIX B: Pre-Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your political orientation?
2. Can you tell me about your educational background?
3. How would you describe the community or area you grew up in?
4. Can you tell me about your level of political engagement?
5. Does political engagement run in your family?
6. How would you describe your relationship with rap music?

APPENDIX C: Sista Circle Questions

1. In what ways do you see yourself and Black women participating in politics and activism?
2. How do you feel rap music portray Black women in terms of race and gender? Is representation empowering or harmful?
3. What messages about Black women are often conveyed through rap?

- Follow-up: How do these messages impact your perception of yourself and influence your view on politics?

4. Has a particular song or artist inspired you to take on political action? So how?

- Follow-up: How do you see black female artists influencing race and gender narratives and contributing to political discord?

5. How do you believe rap as a cultural form influences Black women's participation in political change and activism?

APPENDIX D: Post-Interview Questions

1. How did you feel during the Sista Circles? Does anything in particular stand out?
2. Did the circles provide a safe space where you felt comfortable sharing thoughts and experiences?
3. Did anything you heard challenge you to expand your view on rap and political engagement?
4. How do you feel the discussion helped you understand the connection between Rap music and the Political Engagement of Black women?
5. Was there anything you would have liked to discuss more or explore further?
6. Is there anything you could have changed about Sista Circles?