

BODY POSITIVITY: HYPERSEXUALIZATION OF BLACK FEMALE ARTISTS IN THE
HIP-HOP INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

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It is important to acknowledge and observe common themes that have continued to present themselves over time throughout the history of Black performance. A theme that is in need of recognition in order to move forward as a society is the hypersexualization of Black female artists in the hip-hop industry. The current generation of Black female hip-hop artists have continued to utilize the theme of hypersexuality in correlation with the “Body Positivity Movement”. Within this acknowledgement it is important to include the icons that are choosing to freely express their bodies, sexuality, and share this influence with society in a positive light. This framework will focus on icons such as Melissa Jefferson known as Lizzo, and Megan Pete known as Megan Thee Stallion.

Black female bodies have gone through a continuing pattern of being scrutinized by society throughout generations, specifically broken down into body parts rather than the whole body. This results in the dehumanization of black female bodies that are often treated like a souvenir or an animal. The 1996 play “Venus” written by American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, will be used in this framework to paint the clear picture of hypersexualization that is apparent in contemporary life. This thesis will also be utilizing theories and schools of thought such as Bell Hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectional feminist frameworks, Susan Bordo’s gender studies approach and Lev Vygotski’s sociocultural theory. These frameworks will be applied to contemporary pieces created by Megan Thee Stallion and Lizzo such as songs, interviews, TikToks, and health resources.

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis will explore the ideas around the female body in the entertainment industry and how they are positively represented in mainstream media. The goal is to highlight the icons that are choosing to use their platform for positivity in terms of body image. The trending phrase that defines body celebration in the media is “Body Positivity”. Since the female body in the entertainment industry is such an extensive range, with several routes to tackle, it will be in my interest to focus on the hip-hop industry to remain on topic. Applying this popular phrase to these popular culture artists displays the amount of influence social media and the entertainment industry can hold. The purpose of this thesis is to highlight the influence and draw a connection between the “Body Positivity Movement” and Black female hip-hop artists. I plan to primarily focus on specific artists such as Lizzo and Megan Thee Stallion.

As a child, my mother always told me to be myself and feel comfortable in my own skin. I think that had much to do with her being a white mother and having a mixed child who has orange hair, freckles, glasses, who has always been taller than her peers. My mother instilled in me the confidence to own who I am and uplift others the same way. As a result of this and growing up in a world that is surrounded by media, I became infatuated with positive social interactions. Specifically, social movements such as “The Body Positivity Movement”.

Body positivity is a social movement that focuses on the equal acceptance of all body types. One of the goals within this movement is to challenge the societal standard throughout all forms of media that represents and discusses the human body. There is much misconception surrounding the term “body positivity” and its influence. Scholars such as the Scientific Journal “Obesity” published an article expressing that, “the body-positive movement is contributing to being obese,” As a result of this, mainstream media has fed into the misconception and created

headlines such as the “normalization of ‘plus-size’ risks hidden danger of obesity,”¹ In conversation with the statements, the Office on Women’s Health supports the “Body Positivity Movement”. According to OWT, “they report that having a negative body image can put one at a higher risk for mental health conditions, including eating disorders,”² The “Body-Positivity Movement” is more than just body-image, specifically the focus of weight. This movement focuses on all aspects of the body. Icons that have become the forefront of “Body Positivity” celebrate their differences for a number of reasons. Such as sexuality, skin coloring, hair choices, and muscle sizes.

My reason for focusing on the Black female body in the hip-hop industry is because of how long the Black female body has lacked control over its image and autonomy. Within this current generation, as a society, we are witnessing a generational shift that is creating happiness and contentment. This is not only evident within a specific demographic, but within all women. I plan on utilizing my research and thesis as a route to contribute to the social change that is still needed within society. This research may also contribute to the gaps that are still needed to be filled within the shelves of academia.

I feel as though the use of multiple scholars would benefit my research. I believe it is necessary for this topic as well as for the intersectional feminist approach that I plan to utilize. I will accomplish this through the use of Susan Bordo, Bell Hooks, and Laura Mulvey. These scholars fall short when it comes to the recent advancements of the current popular culture

¹ Muttarak, Raya. “Normalization of Plus Size and the Danger of Unseen Overweight and Obesity in England.” *Obesity* 26, no. 7 (2018): 1125–29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.22204>.

² Office on Women's Health. “Body Image.” Body image. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2023. <https://www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/body-image-and-mental-health/body-image#:~:>

industry. This thesis will be focusing on such advancements, that include updated icons that accurately represent the current generations strive for “Body Positivity”. In addition to focusing on feminism, there will be a focus on race, which will be covered through intersectionality.

For my methodology, I will primarily be focusing on textual analysis. I opted for textual analysis because it will give me the opportunity to closely examine the work these artists are producing and have produced. This will include their songs, blogs, social media accounts, and websites they may have created. I will also be focusing on the frameworks that are surrounding the icons. This would include press release articles that are written about these artists, blogs, Youtube videos. The purpose of this is to highlight what society should be focusing on. Rather than overlooking and making fun of these celebrities, they should be celebrated.

While the claims in this essay are progressive and hopeful, not everyone agrees with my previous statements. A common opinion in regard to the hypersexualization of female rappers in the hip-hop industry is that the exposure to these images and icons in popular culture has a negative effect on society. Specifically, in regard to the Black female body. The on-going stereotypes that we’ve previously discussed in this essay, such as deviant, easy, over sexual are misinterpreted within the image of a Black female artist. Some scholars do not see the hypersexualization of Black female hip-hop artists as a reclamation of the Black body and stereotype.

A prestigious scholar that is a critic of this trend in artistry is the Bell Hooks. She mentions in her article, “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace ” that, “Bombarded with images representing black female bodies as

expendable, black women have either passively absorbed this thinking or vehemently resisted it,”³ Hooks is not wrong about Black women absorbing or resisting the “expendable” images. But, it’s how she phrases her thoughts, they come across as judgmental rather than accepting. Hooks continues to explain that “Popular culture proves countless examples of black female appropriation and exploitation of “negative stereotypes” to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits of it,”⁴ Hooks chooses to look at the situation through a glass half empty perspective rather than half full. Instead of agreeing with the lens this essay is analyzing, Black female bodies in popular culture are seen as a part of the manipulation rather than reclaiming it. Hooks states in her journal that, “Appropriating the wild woman pornographic myth of black female sexuality created by men in a white supremacist patriarchy, Turner exploits it for her own ends to achieve economic self-sufficiency,”⁵ In Bell Hooks’ essay she decides to critique the popular culture icon, Tina Turner, but this is how Hooks felt about all Black bodies in the entertainment industry.

Hooks chooses to describe the Black female entertainment body as an entity that is being manipulated by the white, hegemonic, misogynistic, power that exists and will continue to in the United States. Rather than being claimed as a victim in a broken system, the Black female body deserves to take control over what image is being portrayed of hers, or his. No one deserves to experience lack of control over their own image, especially as a result of stereotypes in a systemically racist society. In the introduction I will introduce the scholars and topics that I plan on utilizing in my chapters. Such as Susan Bordo, Laura Mulvey, and Bell Hooks. A potential reader of my work may not be familiar with these scholars or their framework.

³ Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

⁴ Ibid (Hooks)

⁵ Ibid (Hooks)

So, as a result of this, it will be beneficial for me to include an overview of the concepts being discussed in my thesis. I will also provide a brief background of the current conversation surrounding the Black female artists in the hip-hop industry and “The Body Positivity Movement. I will end the introduction with a lead into the first chapter. Overall, the basic understanding of the movement is very white and “not too fat”. That is until the recently popular Black female hip-hop artists began to be the face of “The Body Positivity Movement”. Introduction will discuss this connection.

In chapter one I will focus on the history of the Black female body, reclaiming the Black female body and “The Body Positivity Movement”. I will include an analysis and overview of Suzan Lori-Parks’ play titled, “Venus”. The purpose of this is to highlight an example of reclaiming the Black female body and share the comparisons Parks shares with the artists. Venus plays a key role in the overall concept of this thesis. The chapter’s goal is to create a foundation for the chapters to follow. The history of the Black body and “The Body Positivity Movement” will map out the journey the Black body has gone through as well as what the Black body has overcome.

In chapter two I will be focusing on the celebration of a specific Black female, her name is Melissa Jefferson. Also known as Lizzo. The purpose for focusing on Lizzo is because of how she lives her life unapologetically. Lizzo chooses to share this way of life with anyone who listens to her music, fan or not. Chapter two will be analyzing Lizzo’s framework and how she chooses to interact with her audience. The framework that will be analyzed will range from songs created by Lizzo, interviews, and social media content. One song that I have chosen for

analysis is “Rumors” featuring Cardi B. The choice to examine the song *Rumors* stems from the pushback that these two artists have received from the beginning of their careers. This analysis will not only be looking at specific songs, but one of her albums as a whole, “Cuz I Love You”. Through the scope of interviews with NPR, Vogue Magazine, and Vegan News we begin to hear not only more about Lizzo as an artist, but as a person as well. We also get a glimpse of how she is positioned in society and how she has chosen to let that be what sets her apart from other popular culture icons. As a Black, obese, gender-blind, woman Lizzo strives to push open barriers for not only herself, but her fans as well.

In chapter three I will be pivoting my focus on to another artist, known as Megan Thee Stallion. Much like the chapter focusing on Lizzo, this chapter will be analyzing Megan Thee Stallion’s framework and how she chooses to interact with her fan base, as well as those who are not in support of her. Thee Stallion’s framework discussed in this text will range from her mental health resources website, interviews from NPR, and direct quotes from songs.

Just recently Megan The Stallion published a mental health website titled, “Bad B*tches Have Bad Days Too”. The website contains resources such as therapists, free therapy, and crisis hotlines. She has utilized her influence for good and this is noticed within her music as well. The songs “Body” and “W.A.P” will be the focus of The Stallion’s chapter. Megan Thee Stallion provides influence more than just how one might feel about their outer appearance. She’s trying to establish a deeper connection and influence with anyone who listens to her, fan or not. Within this chapter, as well as Lizzo’s, there will be highlighted examples that reinforce the “Body Positivity Movement” as well as the reclaiming of the Black female body.

CHAPTER ONE. HISTORY OF RECLAIMING THE BLACK FEMALE BODY & CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

Picture yourself in a car riding down the street on a hot summer day in August 2020. As you are switching through the radio you come across a hard-hitting set of lyrics, “I said certified freak, seven days a week. Wet ass pussy, make that pull out game weak, woo!”⁶ After stumbling across Cardi B’s new hit single featuring Megan Thee Stallion, “WAP”, how do these lyrics make you feel? Well, how would you feel if these lyrics were coming from a male rapper rather than a female rapper like Cardi B herself? Or even a white female rapper? Does any of this make a difference to you? Well, the fact of the matter is many people are losing their minds over lyrics such as the ones previously stated.

These lyrics come from Black female artists when sexual content is usually a common denominator in male artists. Sexism in the rap industry is alive and well, but thanks to the increasing number of female rappers, women have been given an opportunity to embrace their body and sexuality through music. But why is it that the black female artists are the ones receiving backlash? The Black female body has lacked control of its own which dates back to days as early as the slave trade. Black female icons in popular culture have utilized the consistent narrative of being deemed as “hypersexual” and have chosen to be role models rather than a victim in a broken system. Black female artists have chosen to celebrate bodies and sexual agency rather than being shamed by it. The hypersexualization of female artists in the hip-hop Industry is contributing to the body positivity movement while it is still detrimental to the oversexualized Black female body stereotype. The body positivity movement is a social

⁶ Heran Mamo, “Here Are the Lyrics to Cardi B’s ‘Wap,’ Feat. Megan Thee Stallion,” *Billboard*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/music/lyrics/cardi-b-wap-lyrics-megan-thee-stallion-9456405/>.

movement that embodies the celebration these Black females are attempting to be a part of. Body positivity is a social movement that focuses on the equal acceptance of all body types. One of the goals within this movement is to challenge the societal standard throughout all forms of media that represents and discusses the human body. Within this chapter the history of the Black female body and musical frameworks will be in conversation with the 1996 play “Venus” written by Suzan Lori-Parks.

According to Bell Hooks’ essay “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace ” throughout history, “the black body is forced to serve as an icon for black sexuality in general – By the 18th century, the sexuality of black, male and female becomes an icon for deviant sexuality,”⁷ In correlation with the Black body as an icon for deviant sexuality, the presence of Black people in North America has resulted in whites sexualizing their environment through the hypersexualization of Black bodies. Whites began to actively project a narrative of hypersexuality onto Black bodies that is isolated from whiteness.

This is rooted in ideology that is deeper than what the surface is displaying. As European colonizers found themselves in the “New World” this assumption of “virgin land” and submissive nature was waiting to be conquered by them. The College of Wooster explains that “This romanticization was used to validate the conquest of the land itself, precluding the sexualization of the women made victim by these imperialist mindsets. The feminization and sexualization of the European imperialist narrative encouraged the sexual exploitation of Black women who were perceived as byproducts of manifest destiny,”⁸ As a result of this we now have an increasing amount of sexual exploitation in the modern world of America. This is a direct

⁷ Ibid (Hooks)

⁸ Holmes, Caren M. “The Colonial Roots of the Racial Fetishization of Black Women.” openworks.wooster.edu . The College of Wooster, 2016. <https://openworks.wooster.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=blackandgold>.

consequence of the “colonial imperialist” ideology maintained through history repeating itself as well as the hypersexualized stereotype that has been pushed upon the Black female body.⁹

According to Era Dutta and Nilesh Napade’s article “Hypersexuality – a cause of concern: A case report highlighting the need for psychodermatology liaison”, “The term “Hypersexuality” itself is vague and often misinterpreted by most. It may begin in a benign way, presenting as excessive masturbation while watching porn or just the want of sex. It typically develops into a constant need for some or other types of sexual activity, at times even proving to be risky,”¹⁰This narrative of being sexual and consistently acting upon sexual agency is a common theme that is being pushed upon the Black female body. Evidence of this statement stems from history and contemporary popular culture.

Before we discuss contemporary examples of hypersexuality and the black female body, Let's gain a deeper sense of the history black female bodies have encountered over time. The Black female body has a long history of being overlooked, scrutinized, and fetishized. Dating back to the mid-1500s and manifesting through slavery within the United States, narratives reflecting hypersexuality that were written upon black bodies included animalistic, promiscuous, and inhumane traits. The animalistic traits most likely reflected the sexual desires of Black men. Along with the promiscuous description which reflected the Black female body’s enthusiasm supposedly predicted sexual advances, for anyone. The College of Wooster explains that “Slave women were dehumanized not only as economic and reproductive property, but also as a disposable sexual commodity. The subhuman conceptions of Africans did not deter male slave

⁹ Ibid (Holmes)

¹⁰ Era Dutta and Nilesh M Naphade, “Hypersexuality - a Cause of Concern: A Case Report Highlighting the Need for Psychodermatology Liaison,” *Indian journal of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS* (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2017), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6085926>.

owners from pursuing sexual relations with their human property,”¹¹ As a result of this, a common practice that has to do with the hypersexualization of Black female bodies and a contribution to the “promiscuous” stereotype is the fact that slave masters back in the 1600s would rape their female slaves. The dynamics of power within United States slavery “encouraged” the act of sexual exploitation between Black women slaves and white men slave owners.¹² A major example of sexual exploitation aside from Black female slaves unwarranted relations with their slave owners: Wooster College states that, “Female slaves who were considered good breeders could be forced into sexual relations with male slaves who were similarly selected for reproductive efficiency in order to produce strong, hardworking offspring for the economic gain of their masters,”¹³ From the moment Black bodies stepped on American soil, this sense of agency has been lacking in terms of sexuality and freedom. This is as a result of early American settlers stripping the agency away, making Black existence disposable and commodifiable.

With the continuation of slavery and the following years of oppression, it is crucial this academic journal highlights the definition of a racial stereotype, as well as the three core stereotypes that became major in the conversation of Black female bodies. According to Creative Equity,” A racial stereotype is a depiction of an ethnicity or race based on tropes and cliches.

Stereotypes are harmful because they reduce the complexity of real people and erase individuality, agency, and power. They can permeate our shared culture and feed into unconscious biases,”¹⁴ The three stereotypes are known as Sapphire, Jezebel, and Mammy. The Sapphire stereotype is represented as rude, loud, and stubborn. The Jezebel stereotype is

¹¹ Ibid (Holmes)

¹² Ibid (Holmes)

¹³ Ibid (Holmes)

¹⁴Diversity Arts. “Stereotyping.” Creative Equity Toolkit, 2023.
<https://creativeequitytoolkit.org/topic/organisational-culture/stereotyping/>.

described as the representation of a Black woman having the desire to be with a white man. According to Ferris State University, “It is true that the "tragic mulatto" and "Jezebel" share the reputation of being sexually seductive, and both are antithetical to the desexualized Mammy caricature; nevertheless, it is a mistake to assume that only, or even mainly, fair-complexioned black women were sexually objectified by the larger American society,”¹⁵ An example of the “Sapphire” stereotype in popular culture is the maid, Minnie Jackson. Who is played by Octavia Spencer, in the film “The Help”, which was released in 2011. Also, Mother Mary, played by Mo’Nique in the film “Precious”, released in 2009. An example of the “Mammy” stereotype is the “Pearl Milling Company” formerly known as Aunt Jemima. The company’s logo consisted of a plus-size Black woman, maid-like, wearing a headwrap.

An example of the “Jezebel” stereotype are a couple roles that Halle Berry has chosen to play, “Cat woman” released in 2004 and “Monster’s Ball” released in 2001. But as the years go by, the interaction between different intersectionalities become apparent and new stereotypes are created. Lisa Rosenthal and Marci Lobel from “Psychology of Women Quarterly” state that. “Another more recent archetype of Black women is that of the “welfare queen”, which is connected to images of Black women as “breeders” dating back to slavery. The welfare queen is an image of an uneducated, poor, single, Black woman who does not want to work but has many children in order to take advantage of public assistance,”¹⁶ The overall purpose of these stereotypes being manifest throughout the culture of the United States represents the fact that these stereotypes are an act of trying to be in control of how society views Black female bodies and how these women view themselves. Black female bodies that are popular culture icons have

¹⁵ Pilgrim, David. “The Jezebel Stereotype.” Ferris.edu. Ferris State University, 2023. <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/jezebel/index.htm>.

¹⁶ Lisa Rosenthal and Marci Lobel, “Stereotypes of Black American Women Related to Sexuality and Motherhood,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (September 2016): pp. 414-427, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684315627459>.

the ability to create different representations and break the hold these stereotypes have on Black women as a whole within society.

Venus by Suzan Lori-Parks

A key component of this text and a major example of Western civilization hypersexualizing the Black female body is the instance of Saartje Baartman. A Khoikhoi woman who was lowered away from her home and displayed in a freakshow in Europe. She soon after was known as “Hottentot Venus” and people from all over traveled to see her “buttocks”. She was nothing but a spectacle for these people to look at, her body was a tourist attraction. According to Bell Hooks, “Most often attention was not focused on the complete black female on display at a fancy ball in the “civilized” heart of European culture, Paris. She is there to entertain guests with the naked image of otherness. They are not to look at her human being. They are to notice only certain parts,”¹⁷ The fact that people are only noticing Baartman as parts rather than a whole person becomes even more evident after her death. Baartman’s body was dissected, and her remains were then paraded around to the world and on display throughout multiple events, people continued to pay to go see a corpse. Harvey Young’s “Embodying Black Experience” explains that “Cuvier created a plaster cast of her body, dissected her body—preserving her genitals and brain in a glass jar — and reassembled her skeleton. The physical remains of Baartman’s body were shipped to the Musée De L’Homme (Paris) and placed on display until the middle of the twentieth century,”¹⁸ She remained on display until the mid-1970s and sadly the reason she was removed was not because of the dehumanization Baartman went through before and after death, it was because the image of her

¹⁷ Ibid (hooks)

¹⁸ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

had “awakened sexual desire” of tourists and resulted in attempted sexual assaults. The cast was removed to keep peace not to honor Baartman. Young states that, “In February 2002, the cast, the skeleton, and jarred remains were returned to Baartman’s native South Africa. Six months later, they were buried,”¹⁹ In honor of Saartje Baartman and an effort to tell her story, contemporary frameworks such as a play titled “Venus” written by Suzan Lori-Parks was created and celebrated. The purpose of the play is to remember Baartman and bring attention to what really did happen to her. Baartman is a part of a corner of history that often has been overlooked, much like other Black body experiences.

Suzan Lori-Parks is a playwright, screenwriter, musician, and novelist located in the United States. Lori-Parks was born on May 10th, 1963, in Fort Knox Kentucky and received her bachelor's degree from Mount Holyoke College and drama background from Drama Studio London. Parks and her work have become an outlet for history to be learned through the art of theater. Her frameworks are now currently being taught in schools across the country. Venus is a 1996 play written by Parks. The play is about the life of Sarah Baartman, a Khoekhoe woman, also stated previously.²⁰ To gain insight about why Parks chose to write about Saartjie Baartman. Parks states in an interview, “I’m obsessed with resurrecting, with bringing up the dead... and hearing their stories as they come to my head.”²¹ Parks’ obsession has turned into an act of doing what is right. Baartman died with little to no respect from the people surrounding her and then took decades to gain the minimal amount of respect to be buried back in her homeland, Africa. Parks’ play “Venus” is more than a symbol of reclaiming the Black female body. The play also

¹⁹ Ibid (Young)

²⁰ Mariana Brandman, “Suzan-Lori Park,” Suzan-Lori parks biography, 2023, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/suzan-lori-parks>.

²¹ Kornweibel, Karen Ruth. “A Complex Resurrection: Race, Spectacle, and Complicity in Suzan-Lori Parks’s Venus.” *South Atlantic Review* 74, no. 3 (2009): 64–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25681395>.

serves as an opportunity for Venus to have a voice since she was put in the position to not have one throughout her short life. Karen Ruth Kornweibel from East Tennessee State University explains that, This initial interest by Parks related to the issues of possession that Parks has often mentioned – could only have been confirmed when the playwright discovered what is known about Saartjie Baartman, the abuse she suffered during her short life, and the ways in which representations of Baartman as the “Hottentot Venus” were incorporated into late eighteenth-and early-nineteenth century European thought,”²² In regards to the phrase “European thought” this is a simple statement for the justification of colonialism. The idea of “Hottentot Venus” opened up for stereotypes we’ve previously discussed to be able to perpetuate. Specifically, the hypersexualization of the Black female body.

Parks opens up the play in South Africa where Baartman is lured away from her home. Then finds herself in a European Freak Show, as a result of the attention that she attracted from William Dunlop. According to Young and a rumor that has been recorded as history, “Dunlop convinced Baartmen that she could greatly profit by returning to England with him and exhibiting herself as an oddity in the English carnival circuit. With stars in her eyes,”²³ Throughout this play Baartmen continues to remain as the object that is gawked at, abused, and groped. But rather than celebrating this objectification, Suzan Lori-Parks encourages the audience and readers to take in consideration how the Black female body is being represented and what the Black body female body has gone through. Stated is a quote from the play “Venus”, “Behind that curtain just yesterday awaited: Wild Female Jungle Creature. Of singular anatomy. Physiqued in such a backward rounded way that she out shapes all others. Behind this curtain just yesterday alive awaits a female - creature and out of townner. Who’s all undressed awaiting

²² Ibid (Kornweibel)

²³ Ibid (Young)

you to take your peak. So, you've heard."²⁴ The purpose of the play is to remember Baartman and bring attention to what really did happen to her. Baartman is a part of a corner of history that often has been overlooked, much like other Black body experiences.

Park's play allows us to rescript and or reclaim history in a positive sense. Baartman deserves to be remembered as a person rather than her body parts and what has happened to her. Remembrance and the reclamation is done in front of white audiences paying to see a black female body appear on stage as an exhibit of otherness. The presentation of Baartman's historical tragedy encourages the audience to focus on an often-overlooked body part and to understand historically what the black female body has been through. Saarah Baartman states at the end of the play, "Love's corpse stands on show in museum. Please visit,"²⁵ Baartman in this play is not only referring to herself but also history. The audience is given the opportunity to be a part of this experience where history is paused and reflected on. Harvey Young in his book "Embodying the Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body" explains that Lori-Parks' play "gives voice Black experiences,"²⁶ History will always be a key component when in conversation about the Black body to truly acknowledge its long history of being scrutinized. Saarah Baartman in the play "Venus" serves as a symbol for Black feminism. Much like the long-endured scrutiny and hypersexualization of Baartman's body and existence, the Black female body in general has gone through this for centuries. The voice that Suzan Lori-Parks reclaims and gives to Baartman is the same concept that Black female hip-hop artists are utilizing in regard to the "Body Positivity Movement". As history tries to repeat itself contemporary actions are taken to avoid the

²⁴ Parks, Suzan-Lori. 1997. *Venus*. New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group.

²⁵ *Ibid* (Parks)

²⁶ *Ibid* (Young)

regression of the Black female voice and presence in Western civilization. The strive for Black female voices to be celebrated will continue to be a crucial part of society, a major reflection of this we see in the “Body Positivity Movement”. In the next chapter of this framework, we will elaborate on the deep-rooted history regarding the Black female body and this social movement.

History of Black Female Rappers

Recently, as a result of the rise in female hip-hop artists, more examples of positive social interactions regarding body positivity have become more common. Rather than the hip-hop industry continuing to highlight only what male rappers are focusing on, representation of female rappers has become more diverse and welcoming of all backgrounds. But who were the founding women of hip-hop? In the 1980s hip-hop was new and fresh. At the time the genre was only a few years old, people thought of hip-hop as just a phase. This thought process coming from society stems from the disco era, another Black led genre of music, that did not last long. It took until mid-to-late 80s for hip-hop to be taken seriously.

One of the first female hip-hop rappers that paved the way for female rappers today is Roxanne Shante. She was just fourteen years old when she stepped out into the hip-hop scene in 1984 by writing a song in response to the group U.T.F.O. titled “Roxanne’s Revenge.” According to Black Entertainment Television, “Roxanne’s Revenge” sold over 250,000 copies and established Lolita Shante Gooden as one of the first female rap recording artists to be recognized as a hip-hop celebrity,”²⁷ Up until recently, Roxanne Shante was overlooked as a key player in hip-hop history. A new Netflix biopic “Roxanne Roxanne” has recently been added to tell her story. Another pioneer of hip-hop is MC Lyte, also known as Lana Michele Moore. Her breakthrough single is titled “Paper Thin” which displayed her authoritative tone in 1988. The

²⁷ BET. “A History of the Female Rapper.” BET-photo gallery, 2023. <https://www.bet.com/photo-gallery/hh4950/a-history-of-the-female-rapper/xidsak>.

National Museum of African American History and Culture explains that, “Though MC Lyte and other women rappers of her generation wore streetwear that was almost unisex in fashion, the addition of large earrings, neatly pressed or crimped hair (often dyed a bold shade of auburn), and pastel colors to their sartorial repertoire marked a striving towards a specific expression of womanhood in hip-hop.”²⁸ Rather than catering to the male trends of hip-hop, staying away from accessories, natural hair, and less vibrant colors. The early generations Black women in hip-hop broke down barriers for new ideas to flood the hip-hop scene in the 1980s.

More founding women of hip-hop include, Salt-n-Pepa. This dynamic duo answered DOUG e. Fresh and Slick Rick’s “The Show” with the hard hitting “Show Stoppers” single. BET states that, “They have five Grammys and released five albums, one of which went five times platinum. They are the best-selling female rap act of all time,”²⁹ Instead of reverting back to the historical baggy pants, oversized jerseys and crewnecks, the emergence of Salt-n-Pepa and DJ Spinderella pushed for more. They performed in loud colors, sequined jackets, spandex, and teased blonde hair. According to The National Museum of African American History and Culture, “Their rhymes matched their style, with frank lyrics about sex and men and a playfulness about both topics that demanded everyone dismantle stereotypes about Black women,”³⁰ This is just the beginning of what is to come in the late 1980s into the early 2000s. As new faces of Black women stepped into the hip-hop industry, more agency was created. This reclaiming of Black female stereotypes, Black womanhood, and the agency that has lacked for so long. The reclaiming of Black female power became a consistent theme within the 1990s and has continued to trickle down into our current year, 2023.

²⁸National Museum of African American History and Culture. “Fashioning Power and Gender in Hip-Hop.” National Museum of African American History and Culture, May 6, 2022. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/women-hip-hop>.

²⁹ Ibid (BET)

³⁰Ibid (National Museum of African American History and Culture)

Though Queen Latifah, Da Brat, and MC Lyte continued with the aspects of masculine streetwear, the concept of agent Black femininity remained a focus. The National Museum of African American History and Culture expresses that, "The Afrocentric trend also remained, with Queen Latifah using this imagery as a nod to her positioning herself as queen, while also connecting to the shared heritage of men in hip-hop."³¹ In the 1990s we're still in conversation with the men of hip-hop, the line has not been pushed yet. A hip-hop/R&B group that did push the line and create controversy surrounding their sound is TLC. This was as a result of their lyricism and clothing style. The NMAAHC states that, "Taking a cue from Salt-N-Pepa's frank discussion of sex and sexuality in singles like 'Whatta Man' and 'Let's Talk about Sex,' TLC burst onto the scene with midriff-baring tops and baggy pants. Their candid lyrics were open about their pleasure and relationship, and Lisa "Left Eye" Lopes wore a condom in the frame of her glasses to promote safe sex,"³² The iconic girl group utilized the platform they cultivated as empowering Black female hip-hop artists.

The purpose behind the song "Let's Talk about Sex" hit single and wearing condoms as accessories was to open up a dialogue about the topic of sex, safety, and sexuality. TLC stated in an interview in a 2017 interview with Teen Vogue that, "we wanted to empower young girls to have their own stash of condoms and not to leave it up to the guys. Some parents thought we were telling their kids to have sex. But we were making a fashion statement to make it easier to talk about sex,"³³ The group felt it was the right thing to do. The main reason for this is because they recognized the influence they have on society as hip-hop icons and role models. In combination with that, during the early 1990s many people were being diagnosed with HIV.

³¹ Ibid (National Museum of African American History and Culture)

³² Ibid (National Museum of African American History and Culture)

³³ Jacques, Rajni Lucienne. "Iconic R&B Girl Group TLC Explains Why They Wore Condoms as Accessories." Teen Vogue. Teen Vogue, May 22, 2017. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/tlc-explains-why-they-wore-condoms-as-accessories>.

Rather than being just a group that creates songs, TLC utilized a taboo topic in society and created a setting to talk about it in.

The 90s continued to push boundaries, the masculine aesthetic was no longer trendy. The application of femininity became apparent including bikinis, high heels, thin eyebrows, colorful wigs, and dark lipstick. This point in hip-hop history is where the lyricism of artists such as Lil Kim and Foxy Brown began to increase the margins of what is acceptable as a Black woman in hip-hop. NMAAHC expresses that, “As much controversy as Lil Kim and Foxy created, their style made fashion designers flock to help them blend their highly sexual style with luxury pieces. These collaborations showed that women in hip-hop could be sexy, stylish, and fierce on the microphone,”³⁴ The 90s became an era that pushed the envelope open for the generation to follow in terms of femininity and sexual agency that is not accompanied by a masculine aesthetic and or presence.

Although the idea of women being a part of the hip-hop scene in the early 2000s became normalized, they still lacked being taken seriously by society and the industry itself. This is a result of the direct and or explicit lyrics as well as the clothing choices that attribute sexual essence. Even though the 2000s consist of much backlash, by this time hip-hop became a major part of mainstream popular culture. Through this development of hip-hop into mainstream culture, the idea that this genre is accessible to everyone. This sadly, became a negative aspect. Black Perspectives expresses that, “Less palatable, of course, is the way that racial and sexual inequalities place value systems that promote white mediocrity over black talent or that elevates those women whose bodies most conform to normative white supremacist and capitalist

³⁴ Ibid (National Museum of African American History and Culture)

heteronormative beauty standards,”³⁵ Hip-hop artists such as Missy Elliot started in the industry as a dark complected, thick, Black woman. Elliot chose to focus on what she brings to the table rather than focusing on what she is lacking in a society that is already against you based on white supremacist and heteronormative beauty standards. She has continued to flourish within her career, with the control of her image and producing cutting-edge music videos.

Leading us to bridge the gap between the early 2000s and the generation of Black female hip-hop artists this framework is focusing on in the mid-2000s is the artist known as Nicki Minaj. Minaj has a flow that's undeniable and uses both rap in singing in her artistry. NPR states that, “Hip-hop often differentiates – and more accurately, disqualifies – women as “female rappers,” somehow subpar to men, but Minaj sees herself beyond categorization. ‘I feel that I am doing everything the boys can and have done, plus more,’ she told ‘The Guardian’ in 2010,”³⁶ Minaj approached the industry with a powerful mindset and never looked back. She has utilized her platform to speak out about sexism in the hip-hop industry as well as calling attention to various artists who are attempting to enforce double standards upon women through their music. Minaj has continued to stretch the boundaries of what is expected of a Black female rapper. Rather than choosing to either be seen as a masculine symbol in hip-hop or an oversexualized icon. She's managed to cultivate her own “quirky” style as the life-size Barbie of hip-hop.³⁷

Black women having this agency and control over their images, reputations as rappers, and their own fashion has created a high point in history over the last thirty years. These are just a few of several founding mothers of female hip-hop that paved the way for artists like Megan

³⁵ Janell Hobson, “Why the Women of Hip-Hop Are Crying: Black Women's Hip-Hop Histories,” AAIHS (Black Perspectives, February 3, 2015), <https://www.aaihs.org/why-the-women-of-hip-hop-are-crying-black-womens-hip-hop-histories/>.

³⁶ Krishnamurthy, Sowmya. “Nicki Minaj Is the 21st Century's Insatiable Hip-Hop Monarch.” NPR. NPR, October 3, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/03/651761719/nicki-minaj-is-the-21st-century-s-insatiable-hip-hop-monarch>.

³⁷ Ibid (Krishnamurthy)

Thee Stallion and Lizzo. If it was not for these women, the current generation of female rappers would not be as successful as they are. As a society, thanks to the history leading up to now, we might've not even known the names of Megan Thee Stallion and Lizzo. They would not have had it as "easy" as they do now come to fame and being taken seriously by the rest of the hip-hop industry. But even though the path is paved, being a Black female in a male dominated industry is a dignified honor, accomplishment, and challenge.

CHAPTER TWO. HISTORY OF THE “BODY POSITIVITY” MOVEMENT, THE BLACK FEMALE BODY & HIP-HOP

As technology, specifically media, becomes a key component of the world’s current generation, the increase of body dysmorphia, self-comparison, and other body image issues have become a common factor amongst society. As a result of the increase of this common factor, it is important to highlight the mainstream messages that reflect positive views of body image that most people are exposed to. Mainstream messages in media stem from film, television, magazines, and other popular culture mediums.

The feeling of being content within your own skin has slowly become a foreign feeling to many. The positivity these characters embody in their films fall in line with the popular social movement, which is known as the body positivity movement. The body positivity movement is focusing on the love and equal acceptance of all bodies. Regardless of size, shape, gender, physical ability, and skin tone. This movement continues to challenge beauty standards and expresses undesirability as a social construct.

Popular culture is an aspect of civilization that is ideal to all demographics of society. Utilizing popular culture is an easy way to reach a mass population, which is why bringing attention to films with inspirational messages that make you feel comfortable in your own skin is contributing to needed research society may find as helpful. It’s needed in society to have credible resources that have the potential to guide individuals to positive popular culture pieces that at the end of the screening leave a positive message and influence.

In order to gain a better understanding of the connection between Black female hip-hop artists and the reclaiming of a positive Black female experience, focusing on the “Body Positivity Movement”, it is crucial that this text takes you through the history of feminism and body image. According to Cambridge Dictionary, “Body positivity is rooted in loving your body

and gaining self-confidence. Body positivity is a great starting point for many people on the way to deeper self-acceptance. Embracing body positivity is a radical act of self-care,”³⁸ Before we get any further it’s important to highlight where this history is rooted, which is in fatphobia centered around the Black community, specifically with women. According to Briana Dominici and The Zeneration Foundation, “it was created by fat queer Black women and femmes — a space by and for marginalized bodies, for anyone who felt cast aside compared to the strict beauty standards of the time period,”³⁹ Dominici continues by explaining that the movement is the product of plus-size women liberation which happened in the 1960s. The concept of Feminism plays a huge role in female liberation.

Cambridge fails to mention what my other sources did discuss, the fact that the movement was not created by its current dominating face, white heterosexual women, but Black women in the LGBTQ+ community. The last chapter discussed what the Black female body has endured, so it was not surprising how commonly the media represented them Black bodies as fat, ugly, and lethargic. The Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Eating Disorder Coalition explains that “Those with marginalized bodies were given a voice to advocate for body acceptance in colored individuals and those who identify as LGBTQ+. These individuals strived to create a safe and accepting environment for those who did not fit the strict beauty standards of that period,”⁴⁰ It became a powerful yet overlooked moment in history. A group of fat, Black, queer women demanding respect from society, it was major. In 1972, activist Johnnie Tillmon expressed, “I’m

³⁸ “Body Positivity.” BODY POSITIVITY definition | Cambridge English Dictionary, 2023. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/body-positivity>.

³⁹ Dominici, Briana. “The Black History of the Body Positive Movement.” *ZENERATIONS*, 21 Aug. 2020.

⁴⁰ Coalition, Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Eating Disorder. “The Forgotten Origins of the Body Positivity Movement.” Waterloo-Wellington Eating Disorders Coalition. Waterloo-Wellington Eating Disorders Coalition, November 26, 2021. <http://www.eatingdisorderscoalition.ca/blog/2021/11/26/the-forgotten-origins-of-the-body-positivity-movement>.

a woman. I'm a Black woman. I'm a poor woman. I'm a fat woman. I'm a middle-aged woman. In this country, if you're any one of those things you count less as a human being,"⁴¹ As someone who is living amongst westernized beauty ideals, Black women in the United States know what Tillmon is expressing in this quote. Her quote created discussion within the media.

The theme of those who felt "cast aside" in regard to societal beauty standards is still a major part of the movement. But it seems as though the history of who started the movement in the first place has been forgotten and framed as a product of whiteness. In reality, the "Body Positivity Movement" is the complete opposite of the product of whiteness. The movement is a product of pushing back against Western, white, beauty ideals. Jade Hayden in her article, "A Brief History of Body Positivity - It's Been around a Lot Longer than You Think" explains that "The body positivity movement - and the fat acceptance movement - has changed since its inception. Some say for the worse, some say for the better, but what remains is the fact that we are seeing more diversity when it comes to body types these days, both on screen and off it,"⁴² Currently, more women of all backgrounds are feeling empowered, liberated, and feel as though they can move throughout society without being scrutinized.

The "Fat Acceptance" movement is rooted within Body Positivity. The movement was originally known as the 'National Association to Aid Fat Americans', NAAFA for short. This association was founded in 1969 and brought attention to discrimination against plus-size people in terms of civil rights. According to Lance Newspaper, "In their early days, they focused on

⁴¹ Michaela Martin, "The Whitewashed, Diluted Reality of Modern Body Positivity: The Important Black History of the Body Positivity Movement," Be Well and Thrive (Ohio State University , February 18, 2021), <https://u.osu.edu/studentwellnesscenter/2021/02/18/the-whitewashed-diluted-reality-of-modern-body-positivity-the-important-black-history-of-the-body-positivity-movement/>.

⁴² Hayden, Jade. "A Brief History of Body Positivity - It's Been around a Lot Longer than You Think." Her.ie. Her.ie, August 4, 2021. <https://www.her.ie/life/a-brief-history-of-body-positivity-529107>.

letter-writing campaigns and providing a social network for its members, which included fat people as well as those who were attracted to fat people. NAAF began holding an annual conference, which allowed for people to meet, dance, celebrate, find community, and even find romance,”⁴³ But, this movement evolved into something toxic, the association changed their name to the “National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance”. This shift in thought resulted in more political issues surrounding the topic of people who are overweight. As a result of this health care and social biases were created which fed into the stigma of being overweight in the 1970s.⁴⁴

“Body Positivity” Movement & Social Media

The growth of the “Body Positivity” movement would not have been as successful as it was without the history that comes with it. But what has catapulted the reboot of “Body Positivity” as well as the reboot of fat acceptance, is the growth of technology and social media. The noticeable increase in progress began as a result of second wave feminism in the 90s, which manifested itself into fat activism. These activists were campaigning and explaining their experiences of how they’ve felt in a society that does not accept bigger bodies and that the diet industry is dangerous. Fat activism began appearing on Television, newspapers, and magazines.

As we make our way towards the 21st century, technology continues to develop at a rapid speed, now the “Body Positivity Movement” has the potential to reach people across the globe, rather than your local community, state, and even the United States. This movement is now available worldwide. Dominici mentions in her article that, “The significance of social media, and particularly Instagram, in the body positivity movement cannot be denied as more and more

⁴³ Jessie Hernandez, “Body Positivity 101: History, Journey, Acceptance,” *The Lance*, May 19, 2021, <https://lhslance.org/2021/opinion/body-positivity-101-history-journey-acceptance/>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* (Hernandez)

people across the globe were soon being exposed to the 'love the skin you're in' message,"⁴⁵ As a result of the popularity of this movement, a wide range of people are aware of the movement. But there are many that have no idea of what it is because, well, they rather be themselves and not conform to a group ideal. So, as a result of this, Hayden explains in her article that, "There are also plenty of people, celebrities and otherwise, embracing the movement without necessarily calling it that. They're just people with bigger bodies, posting pictures, and feeling good about themselves,"⁴⁶ Social media's place in society is undeniable. Its purpose ranges from staying connected with those around us to providing an outlet for self-expression. Social media continues to change how humans interact, establish and sustain relationships. In reality though, social media is such a young concept. As the years go by, we are learning more about the complexity within it and the potential effects that social media may bring on society.

Examples of these potential effects include low self-esteem, feeling inadequate in regards to others, and identity issues. The negative effects can even lead to developing body dysmorphia as a result of trying to mimic the unrealistic beauty standards. Social media beauty standards are simply unattainable. Just like brands try to put forward the best version of their product or service, people on social media do the same in regard to their personal lives. Social media has become a very selective game, picking and choosing what parts of your life are the best to highlight.

These platforms give countless opportunities to post the most desirable moments of one's life while tucking away the ordinary day-to-day aspects of it. Hiding what may be happening with life on the side in the long run can leave room for serious issues to appear. If life appears to be fine this may make it harder for parents, friends, or anyone to notice if help is needed. Not

⁴⁵ Ibid (Hayden)

⁴⁶ Ibid (Hayden)

only can this be detrimental to the person on social media, but as well as their audience. This strategy that is commonly used on platforms, has become one of the causes of distress among young adults and adolescents. Rather than getting on Instagram and having to already deal with comparing their favorite celebrity to themselves who have endless resources and money to enhance their life, they are comparing their self-image to people in their own backyard.

Young minds these days are comparing themselves to even their friends, family and acquaintances. Men and women are found to both be battling these issues within social media. It's hard not to want abs, a flat stomach, long legs, and a perky body when that is a large portion of what is displayed on social media. But, all of this goes beyond body proportions, the idea of skin tone and the comparison of being white and being Black there is different treatment within that. Stephanie Yeboah discusses in her framework an important question, "Why the Body Positivity Movement is Crucial for Black Women". Yeboah states that, "the Black female body (in all its shapes) has been dehumanized, mammified, hypersexualized, and fetishized since the days of slavery, by the patriarchy and by white society. If our bodies weren't being used for comedic relief in comedies and cartoons, then they were being used as cautionary tales,"⁴⁷ This movement serves as a reminder to Black women that Black is beautiful, the comfort of your own body and skin is beautiful.

Reverting to the history discussed in the previous chapter, the beauty standards during the Renaissance era focused more on larger body sizes, a "well-rounded" body was the ideal back then. According to Yeboah's framework, "As the population of Black women who came to Europe as a part of the slave trade increased, the more these beauty ideals of having the 'perfect larger' shape were cemented in the countries that benefited most from slave trade. Coincidence?

⁴⁷ Stephanie Yeboah, "Why the Body Positivity Movement Is Crucial for Black Women," Stylist.co.uk (Stylist, 2020), <https://www.stylist.co.uk/books/extract-fattily-ever-after-stephanie-yeboah-books/419941>.

I think not,”⁴⁸ As a result of African slaves and domestic servants adding to the population of North and Western Europe, the influence of Black women as having the “perfect female body” became the standard. As a result of this influence, we now see this body type as a part of the cycle of trends that circulate within society. Every few years we enter a new era that pulls from the pool of beauty standards. The 1990s into early 2000s focused on the thin ideal. The fashion during this time as a result, focused more on low rise pants. This was so the fashion statement highlighted the torso area, displaying the thin ideal at the time.

The current generation we are, the 2020s, has managed to pivot the focus on a different section of the body. According to Yeboah, “African women were described as well-proportioned and curvy, and consequently viewed as physically appealing, yet the discourse about Africans suggested that their distinctive facial features made them facially unattractive,”⁴⁹ The current generation we are in has managed to focus both on the African physical features as well as the facial features. A prime example regarding the body is rather than focusing on the torso and utilizing low rise pants to accentuate the body. This generation has focused on high rise bottoms as a way to highlight the bottom half of the body. The high-rise bottoms pivot the focus from the torso to the hips, thighs, and bottom area.

An example of how this current generation is utilizing African features as a blueprint is the commodification of Black facial features. The rise of cosmetic surgery is a direct result of this. People are purposely, going out of their way to enlarge their facial features, such as lips, noses, and cheek bones. The long history of Black people being dehumanized, made fun of, and discriminated against has resulted in Black people being the blueprint of Western civilization.

⁴⁸ Ibid (Yeboah)

⁴⁹ Ibid (Yeboah)

Social media has contributed to the rise of this as a result of media being a tool to research, dissect, and then form the ideal style and look that an individual is searching for.

Social media is a powerful tool. Society has a habit of overlooking the powers that come into play when dealing with media. Social media has the ability to reach so many people just in the blink of an eye. As it is becoming a standard way of communication and celebration it is crucial to be aware of the negative effects that social media can potentially bring. The “Body Positivity Movement” has a lengthy history that society does not know about. The relevancy of this portion of the text is to correct what people may already know about this movement and to steer them in the right direction of scholarship and research.

Feminism, “Body Positivity” & The Black Female Body

A key idea that feminist theorists have chosen to focus on is the daily facts of life that are difficult in Western culture, specifically beauty standards. Susan Bordo, In Susan Bordo’s text, “Unbearable Weight”, through the feminist theory scope, she states that, “Feminists first began to develop a critique of the "politics of the body," however, not in terms of the body as represented (in medical, religious, and philosophical discourse, artworks, and other cultural "texts"), but in terms of the material body as a site of political struggle,”⁵⁰ Which remains true today, the body still is a political struggle, in various contexts, Specifically in regards to this text, the body as a political struggle is shown through the scrutiny of those who do not fit the “thinness” ideal that people in society strive for. Along with the idea of “diet culture” the revolving door of dieting foods, supplements, and other tricks to “avoid” being fat. This chapter as well as the entire thesis will be reiterating that people with eating disorders and or unhealthy eating habits are no longer just white women. This is common amongst people of color and men.

50 Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkley, California : UNIV Of California Press, 2003.

Body image issues are not exclusive to just one demographic, all walks of life experience this. This theory is known for expanding the concept of human choice and the push for freedom of all genders, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. The concept of feminism plays a huge role in female liberation. Bordo states that, “Female bodies have historically been significantly more vulnerable than male bodies to extremes in both forms of cultural manipulation of the body,”⁵¹ This is why feminist have made it a point to be a part of this liberation of the body, females fall under more criticism from society and like, Bordo mentions, has been a key part of history.

As a result of this long history of being under the scope of society, different types of reaction to different situations such as unequal pay, voting rights, unequal treatment, and body standards became apparent. This is because women have always wanted change, to be treated equally as compared to men. As feminism established itself, different types of it were created. Specifically, different waves of feminism were established, such as second-wave feminism, which is considered to be a popular interest. Second wave feminism was considered to be occupied by white women. Though this is true, second wave feminism focused on equality throughout the 1960s and 70s.

Third-wave feminism, which is a portion of today’s current generation, has chosen to embrace and normalize sexuality, as well as the expression of sex. The University of British Columbia expresses that, “Third-wave feminism fought to move away from slut-shaming and to embrace women’s sexuality. It redefined women as ‘assertive, powerful, and sometimes promiscuous’ and allowed them to have sexual liberation without the fear of being at fault for sexual harassment,”⁵² A key component within the transition into third-wave feminism, is the

⁵¹ Ibid (Bordo)

⁵² The University of British Columbia, “The Emergence of Intersectionality and Third Wave Feminism,” The Emergence of Intersectionality and Third Wave Feminism - UBC Wiki (The University of British Columbia, 2023), https://wiki.ubc.ca/The_Emergence_of_Intersectionality_and_Third_Wave_Feminism.

emergence of intersectionality. The inclusion of women of color began with third-wave feminism. Through the emergence of third-wave feminism, several issues became apparent and were able to be articulated properly.

A major issue amongst women of color was sexual harassment within the workplace environment. Before the exposure of third-wave feminism and still a common assumption today is that victims of sexual harassment had the potential to stop the harassment at hand. This is absolutely not the case. According to The University of British Columbia, “The third-wave worked to fight against slut-shaming / victim blaming and helped move towards sexual liberation for women. Moreover, it worked to ensure that a woman’s credibility was not tarnished when coming forward about sexual harassment,”⁵³ Third-wave feminism not only created a safe space for women to speak out about what they have gone through. But also support the statements that these women are choosing to come forward with.

Third-wave feminism created a support system that women now share with one another, this instant belief that you have towards an individual that is deciding to come forward with their experience. As a woman, you almost feel obligated to support each other and third-wave feminism is what fed into this obligatory sense of feeling. Third-wave feminism began in the early 1990s, what helped launch these new ideas of thinking within feminism is the new scholarship that began to surface. According to the National Women's History Museum Kerri Lee explains that “In 1989, lawyer and theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw developed “intersectionality” to show how someone’s various identities (race, class, gender, etc.) overlap to influence how they are treated,”⁵⁴ The goal of intersectional feminism is to separate itself from white feminism by bringing attention to women’s different points of views, experiences, and identities that are

⁵³ Ibid (The University of British Columbia)

⁵⁴ Lee, Kerri. National Women's History Museum, “Feminism: The Third Wave,” Women's History , June 23, 2020, <https://www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-third-wave>.

not white. The reason feminist theory has led to intersectional feminism is because there are multiple factors like race, class, and gender that lead to the oppression of a woman and in this context, her body.

The Black Female Body in Hip-Hop and “Body Positivity”

Recently, the movement is slowly tracing back to its roots as feminism has evolved and become more inclusive and intersectional. This becomes evident in popular culture, specifically the film industry. Third-wave feminism, which is today’s current generation, has chosen to embrace and normalize sexuality, as well as the expression of sex. The inclusion of people of color became more evident. Third-wave feminism is a step closer that truly involves those who created the “Body Positivity Movement” in the first place, Black queer women.

Now, the movement is slowly tracing back to its roots as feminism has evolved and become more inclusive and intersectional. This becomes evident in popular culture, specifically the film industry. Shanell Campbell’s article “Body Image in Popular Culture ” she mentions that, “Some might say there is just not enough diversity in American popular culture because the images you see on television, films, runways, social media and magazines are not of the norm. If the average woman wears a size 16 and up, there is no reason why we shouldn’t see more images of said women in popular culture,”⁵⁵ The development of third-wave feminism has resulted in popular culture striving to actively change the representation that is evident in mainstream media. In this text specifically, the strive has been in terms of different representations of bodies on screen. Though the entertainment industry is nowhere near being perfect. The progress towards a realistic representation is being pushed and artists like Megan Thee Stallion and Lizzo deserve to be highlighted.

⁵⁵ Campbell, Shanell. “Body Image in Popular Culture.” Her Culture. Her Culture, September 21, 2020. <https://www.herculture.org/2017/2/20/body-image-in-popular-culture>.

As a way to create positive messages and activate that reclamation of the Black female body, popular culture icons such as music artists have become the face of “the Body Positivity Movement”. The “Body Positivity Movement”, like Lori-Park’s play “Venus” and the hypersexualization of Black female hip-hop artists is in this reclamation stage. The movement that was created by Black bodies and later taken over by white bodies, is now reclaiming the ground the movement originated from. The movement itself is also about actively reclaiming your body rather than feeding into what standards society claims your body should achieve. The hip-hop industry is an example of the progress we are seeing as a society in terms of diversity and celebrating different body types.

Rather than only having the option to look up to thin white women, there is now the option to have people of all backgrounds as role models in the forefront. Dominici states in her journal that, “Fat Black actors like Queen Latifah and Mo’Nique have paved the way for their fat white counterparts in the acting industry to star in romantic comedies, yet even those they paved the way for, like Rebel Wilson, do not acknowledge who set the precedent.”⁵⁶ Rappers from the past generations have now found themselves pushing for more inclusivity in different corners of the entertainment industry. Queen Latifah remained true to herself throughout her career and it truly paid off in the end. This feeds into positive representation for Black female bodies and women who are plus size.

As a result of positive representation during the early years of female hip-hop, the growth of female rappers has doubled in the past couple decades. According to Dr. Halliday, “The state of hip-hop is rampant with women rappers like Nicki Minaj, Megan Thee Stallion, Cardi B, Mulatto, Doja Cat, and Rico Nasty and many more who are reclaiming their bodies and also using their sexuality to their advantage to fight against a sexist culture or simply just express

⁵⁶Ibid (Dominici)

themselves, a stark difference from the women rappers who were at the top in the 90s such as Lil Kim and Foxy Brown,”⁵⁷ Scholars recognize the work that Black female hip-hop artists of this current generation are contributing to. The reclaiming of the Black female body is far from over.

The centuries of hardship have resulted in a lifetime of reclamation that each generation has an obligation to contribute to. Dr. Halliday expresses how she is in tune with the concepts of self-liberation and self-respect and how this line can easily be crossed. Halliday shares that, “As a North Carolina Native, she grew up being taught the traditional Southern standards about how women should govern and “respect” themselves and realizes the negative impact of those teachings. In opposition, she says that the freedom to express oneself is empowerment,”⁵⁸ The conversation surrounding the approach the current generation of Black female hip-hop rappers are taking has resulted in mixed emotions coming from the general public, as well as those a part of the academic community.

But not everyone has the same background as Dr. Halliday. Dr. Halliday is an assistant professor at the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies and program in African American and Africana Studies at the University of Kentucky. She specializes in the study of cultural constructions of Black girlhood and womanhood in material, visual, and digital culture in the 20th and 21st centuries. Her research interests include sexuality, Black feminism, and radicalism in Black popular culture.

As a result of Dr. Halliday’s background, she is able to appreciate and connect to what the current generation of Black female rappers are embodying. The purpose of what these artists are doing does more than give society a nice tune to listen to, there is more depth than what

⁵⁷ Danielle Harvey, “Hip Hop and the Female Image: How the Genre Has Shaped a Culture and Impacted Women and the Careers of Female Rappers,” KISA Public Radio (KISA Public Radio, March 6, 2021), <https://kisaradio.org/hip-hop-and-the-female-image-how-the-genre-has-shaped-a-culture-and-impacted-women-and-the-careers-of-female-rappers/>.

⁵⁸ Ibid (Harvey)

meets the eye. Dr. Halliday expresses that, “you’re told like, keep your legs closed and that’s it. And it’s like, ‘okay, but what happens if I decide to open my legs? Right? Do I get to say that I like this or I don’t like this? And I think that Black women rappers, contemporarily, provide some of those lessons. If your mom is not going to tell you, who’s going to tell you,”⁵⁹ Dr. Halliday calls attention to the dialogue that these artists are creating through the use of their lyrics.

As young individuals there is this struggle to communicate what is needed. This is as a result of lacking experience in life. Parents often struggle with having conversations about taboo topics such as sexuality, sex education, and female empowerment with their children. This can stem from a variety of reasons. Black female rappers have utilized these taboo conversations as topics for their music creating a storytelling dialogue that educates those who are listening about female autonomy. The way these artists have been able to approach these taboo topics is in a form that is catered to the generation at hand. As a result of this the generation creates a connection to the framework, the artist, and the message at hand.

Rap, much like other forms of musical art, often requires the ability to read between the lines in order to receive the entire message behind the song. Society needs to take the time and truly appreciate what Black female rappers as a whole are offering. The rappers of this current generation have continued to follow down the path past generations have created, as well as establishing their own voice within the entertainment industry and the social justice aspect of artistry.

⁵⁹ Ibid (Harvey)

CHAPTER THREE. LIZZO: BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS OF REPRESENTATION

Melissa Jefferson (Lizzo) is a proud African American female singer, rapper, and instrumentalist who plays the flute. The reason for choosing to focus on someone who is well known around the world is because of the influence Lizzo has managed to have on people, a lot like other celebrities. Lizzo expresses in a NPR interview, “So where there was a wave of feminism where we were burning bras, now I'm like, my bra is in your face. I think that is just a testament to human beings and how we evolve. I think that the wave of feminism right now that's overtly sexual and in your face, I think, is just the response to where we were,”⁶⁰ Lizzo is in tune with previous waves of feminism, but she's aware of the fact that things are changing as well. The change is through a different route of feminism, like stated before in Lizzo's quote, society is more in your face rather, unlike past history. Women come from a long history of “being put in place”. It's time this trend comes to an end. This current stage of feminism is in everyone's face to see whether they like it or not.

Rather than creating this facade to portray to her audience, Lizzo chooses to remain authentic so that her audience feels less alone and closer to her. Lizzo has managed to play a major role in the “Body Positivity” movement that has become popular in the past few years, so it is crucial this framework focuses on her as an influencer. Lizzo's music and social media presence is centered around celebrating oneself and remaining positive about your body. As social media becomes an integral part of society, the rise in body surveillance and self-comparison to others has become more apparent. The more positive influence that comes from the elite of the United States society, the greater potential younger generations will have in regard to body positivity. This chapter will be applying Susan Bordo's feminist ideas and Lev

⁶⁰Terry Gross, “Lizzo on Feminism, Self-Love and Bringing 'Hallelujah Moments' to Stage,” NPR (NPR, July 4, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/04/738474527/lizzo-on-feminism-self-love-and-bringing-hallelujah-moments-to-stage>.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to Lizzo's song "Rumors" direct media representation examples from her TikTok medium and discusses how Lizzo embodies her true beauty and encourages everyone to do the same as her, love themselves. The function of this text is to analyze Lizzo through the feminist theory scope, sociocultural theory scope, and draw attention to the rising icon that Lizzo is.

In Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*, she discusses ideas such as weight, eating disorders, media representation, and how high the standards of female beauty are held to. This is through the feminist theory scope, though there will be a critique of Bordo's point of view. This paper will be noting that people with eating disorders are no longer just white women, this happens to men and people of color as well. Susan Bordo's work is along the lines of being outdated but still a very beneficial framework to learn from. Further details of Bordo's narrow opinion regarding eating disorders and body image will be included in this text.

As a result of humans being humans, the struggle of remaining body positive has been common amongst all generations. Much like other generations, the younger upcoming generations feel the urge to change themselves and try to improve their appearances. Bordo explains that "Every celebrity image you see- in the magazines, in the videos, and sometimes even in the movies- has been digitally modified. Virtually every image. These images are teaching us how to see. Filtered, smoothed, polished, softened, sharpened, re-arranged. And passing. Digital creations, visual cyborgs, teaching us what to expect from flesh and blood. Training our perception in what's a defect and what is normal,"⁶¹ In a society who sees the world through popular culture these days, celebrities are a key factor in what society is identifying with and wanting to be like. Celebrities such as artists, actors, fashion designers,

⁶¹ Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003.

influencers are represented in mediums of popular culture, when there are celebrities reflecting a specific body type, often people who look up to popular culture figures want to emulate them and will sometimes try anything to get that accomplished.

The feminist theoretical approach has become a popular yet useful theory that has been around as early as 1794. Examples of this theory back in the early era are the necessity for women to have an education, the freedom of marginalized women and regarding the illegal voting of women. Feminist theory is an advocate for the comprehension of unequal and oppressive gender connections. An important concept that feminist theorists are focusing on is the daily factors amongst society that involve gender ideas relations throughout Western culture. The factors that have become apparent throughout society have the potential to lead a person to be at risk for body image issues and also eating disorders. As a result of feeling inadequate to societal standards, people often come to the conclusion that if they remain in control of their appearance, they may have success in obtaining the “ideal” image that society wants. This is often manifested through unhealthy behaviors. Body surveillance has become an integrated part of society. This is the result of what technological growth has provided society. People now have the tools to compare themselves to one another.

In Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, he explains that the attitudes of family, peers, and cultural beliefs have an impact on how individuals perceive themselves. Although sociocultural theory’s rooted research is in the study of children and their development as a process they acquire these cultural values, beliefs, and strategies to utilize in life, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory will be adapted through contemporary frameworks focusing on body image. The specific framework that will be used is known as Paquette and Raine’s case study, *Sociocultural context of a women’s body image*. The case study applies sociocultural theory to the concept of body image. The main focus of the case study itself is to concentrate on how

women's personal sociocultural context influences their body image.⁶² Paquette and Raine make astounding points in their research. According to their case study, "Body image literature suggests that the sociocultural environment may contribute to the development and maintenance of body dissatisfaction by the transmission of norms of thinness through the mass media, specifically advertising by the fashion, beauty and cosmetic industries who stand to gain from women's body dissatisfaction,"⁶³ The normalization of thinness throughout the mass media is a barrier within society that Lizzo wants to break down. As a plus-sized Black woman in an industry that is dominated by whiteness and thinness, she chooses to empower herself and others as a role model.

Deeper Analysis of Lizzo as an Artist and Person

Before we move on to the analysis of Lizzo's musical framework and direct media representations, let's utilize this time to gain more understanding of her not only as an artist but also as a person. Melissa Viviane Jefferson, who is also known as Lizzo is an American singer, songwriter, flutist, and rapper. She was born in Detroit, Michigan on April 27th, 1988.⁶⁴ Lizzo has more than just talent running through her veins in regard to music, she also has knowledge in her brain. Lizzo studied classical music at a university. According to Planet Radio, "Lizzo is a classically trained musician, having studied at the University of Houston and specializing in playing the flute,"⁶⁵ Lizzo is the true representation of breaking down barriers and cultural norms in regard to multiple aspects of life. Her being a flutist is one major example, often in popular

⁶² Paquette, Marie-Claude, and Kim Raine. "Sociocultural Context of Women's Body Image." *Social Science & Medicine* 59, no. 5 (2004): 1047–58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2003.12.016>.

⁶³ Ibid (Paquette & Raine)

⁶⁴ Kids, Encyclopedia Facts. "Lizzo Facts for Kids." Lizzo Facts for Kids. Kiddle, 2021. <https://kids.kiddle.co/Lizzo>.

⁶⁵ Dodds, Emma. "11 'Good as Hell' Facts about Lizzo." KISS. Planet Radio, August 2, 2021. <https://planetradio.co.uk/kiss/entertainment/music/lizzo-facts/>.

culture and classical music the instrument is depicted as an object used by thin, petite, quiet, white women. Lizzo is not a petite, white woman, she's displaying the fact that you can be a plus-sized, loud and proud, black woman playing the flute. It does not matter what race, size, and gender you are, do what makes you happy and share that talent with the world.

Another fact about Lizzo that also is an example of her breaking down the barriers of representation is that she practices veganism. She relieved the world that she was switching to the vegan diet in a stream of TikTok videos. According to One Green Planet, her diet includes a green smoothie with coconut water, kale or spinach, and frozen fruit. She loves a salad and usually has one for lunch, including colorful veggie options like avocado, white onions, broccoli, red cabbage, and kale”⁶⁶ Lizzo has utilized platforms like One Green Planet, interviews with magazines, and her social media to normalize veganism, especially in regard to people who do not necessarily meet the vegan diet stereotype. Since the process of being vegan can be difficult it's associated with people who have a thin lifestyle.

Often in society when a stereotype is not true to its shape this makes people uncomfortable. As a society and much in American culture there is this concept of being “fatphobic” and “fatphobia”, this is manifested through the misinterpretation of what it actually means to be on a vegan diet. Gilian Fisher in an article titled ‘I’m not just a vegan. I’m a fat vegan,’ “If you’re vegan you’re automatically sporty, slender and consider kale a primary food group. Increasingly veganism is being seen not as an ideology, but as a cure for being overweight. The fact is, veganism is not a diet, as my size 20 trousers can firmly attest to. It’s a lifestyle which aims to boycott all animal agriculture,”⁶⁷ People forget the focus of what it is to

⁶⁶ Erskine, Eliza. “Lizzo Talks about Adopting a Vegan Diet.” One Green Planet. One Green Planet, July 1, 2020. <https://www.onegreenplanet.org/vegan-food/lizzo-talks-about-her-vegan-diet/>.

⁶⁷ Fisher, Gillian. “I’m Not Just a Vegan. I’m a Fat Vegan.” Metro.co.uk. Metro, July 13, 2019. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/07/13/im-not-just-a-vegan-im-a-fat-vegan-10221031/>.

be vegan, like Fisher mentioned veganism is a lifestyle that is not focusing on weight loss or to be a part of the thinner and more athletic stereotype of.

The lifestyle is focused on not contributing to the consumption of animal products, which is what our society has based itself on. Fisher continues to explain that the stereotype surrounding veganism, “holds the body up to even greater scrutiny than usual, effectively creating a ‘veganer than thou’ hierarchy where being fat seems not only as a failing but as un-vegan,”⁶⁸ Lizzo has had much contact with this type of scrutiny, as she’s always in the public eye. She’s had countless comments under her social media posts making statements along the lines of vegans who are plus-sized are not being able to truly stick to their diet, that they are simply trying to be something they cannot deliver.

This past summer she used her TikTok platform to try and put an end to the fatphobic comments, generalizations of vegans. Stated by Vegnews, “The 33-year-old musician shared a video of herself in her underwear eating a vegan egg sandwich over an audio clip of a woman saying, ‘I’m seeing way too many plus-sized vegans. Are y’all frying the lettuce?’” Lizzo clapped back further in her caption of the TikTok video. “Yes, actually I do,” Lizzo said in reference to fried lettuce. “Shout out to all my fat vegans—we look as good as we feel ... and to the haters, good luck chasing that narrow beauty standard,”⁶⁹ This is just one small example of how Lizzo is constantly choosing to uplift herself and others rather than wallowing in self-pity because of negative feedback from her audience. Lizzo is actively defying her sociocultural context and the personal interactions that surround it. Rather than feeding into the cultural belief that veganism and the thin ideal stereotype are associated, Lizzo continues to go against this norm by not only

⁶⁸ Fisher, Gillian. “I’m Not Just a Vegan. I’m a Fat Vegan.” Metro.co.uk. Metro, July 13, 2019. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/07/13/im-not-just-a-vegan-im-a-fat-vegan-10221031/>.

⁶⁹ Starostinetskaya, Anna. “Lizzo Shuts down Fat-Shamers on Tiktok with Vegan Egg Sandwich.” VegNews.com. VegNews, August 19, 2021. <https://vegnews.com/2021/8/lizzo-tiktok-vegan-egg-sandwich>.

being her true self. She does not let the scrutiny of her body amongst society and her audience get the best of her, she uses it as a driving force to break down cultural barriers. Fisher states that, “In just the same way that not all omnivores live on greasy fry ups, not all vegans cram in the cauliflower rice,”⁷⁰ Everyone is their own person, with individual wants, needs, and tendencies. No one fits a certain mold nor should have to. Lizzo is a role model for the example of not being the cookie cutter representation of a vegan or even a flute player. She, like all of us, is her own person.

A major fact about Lizzo that showcases her, and her talent is the fact that she won three Grammy awards in 2020. Artists that have been working for decades aspire to have at least one of these awards and Lizzo’s been able to achieve three. According to Planet Radio, “2020 was a seriously good awards season for Lizzo, winning Best Urban Contemporary Album for 'Cuz I Love You', Best Pop Solo Performance for 'Truth Hurts' and Best Traditional R&B Performance for 'Jerome'. She was also nominated in four categories at the 2020 BET Awards, winning one of the categories,”⁷¹ Her third studio album *Cuz I Love You* is what helped Lizzo obtain mainstream success. Lizzo’s album taps into a vulnerable side of hers, the songs reflect body positivity and self-love. Not only was the creation of *Cuz I Love You* inspired by ideas of Lizzo, but the album itself was produced partially by her. According to Terry Gross’ NPR interview, “And from being trained, I think it's easier for me to speak a language to producers, and I can speak engineer to the engineers. I think we all just have so much fun nerding outI'm credited as a producer on a couple of the songs because I was there, and my DNA is in there as well,”⁷² Not only did Lizzo put her heart and soul into this album, but she was also able to play an active role in the piecing

⁷⁰ Ibid (Fisher)

⁷¹ Ibid (Planet Radio)

⁷² Gross, Terry. “Lizzo on Feminism, Self-Love and Bringing 'Hallelujah Moments' to Stage.” NPR. NPR, July 4, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/04/738474527/lizzo-on-feminism-self-love-and-bringing-hallelujah-moments-to-stage>

together and production of her artwork. Not many artists have had the pleasure of doing this, since not many people who study music become music video making, album creating, award winning artists. While not many artists become scholars in the field of music which include being versed in theory, general music performance, and having a trained ear for different types of frequencies and harmonies.

Not only is she able to share her producing abilities, she also displays her flutist talents in front of a global audience in efforts to normalize the use of the instrument, specifically in the rap genre. Lizzo expresses in a 2019 interview, “I think that flute and hip-hop are very sexy. I think that flute and hip-hop have gone together for a long time. I think this is just the first time you actually see the artist actually playing the flute. There wasn't a disconnect,”⁷³ The fact that there was no disconnect when it came to Lizzo’s flute playing and the direct image of it on the screen is what resulted in the discussion of flutes in rap. Other artists in the rap industry have used the flute as a part of the instruments in their background music but did not choose to have it depicted on screen. Examples of artists and their songs involving the flute is, Future and his song “Mask Off,” Metro Boomin is a producer of this song and many others in the rap industry and chooses to include the flute in most of his intros, yet never was a flute seen in a music video.

This may be due to the stereotype of who plays the flute and where it is “supposed” to fit in. Like stated before, the flute is often known to be played by thin, petite, women who are classically trained in the instrument. Along with the fact that the flute is “supposed” to be in the classical music category rather than the hip hop genre. Lizzo, much like the rest of her career and existence, has managed to break down cultural barriers as being one of the few people in rap to showcase her flutist talents and to be one of the only artists to proudly display the action of using the instrument in a global setting.

⁷³ Ibid (Gross)

Release of the Album “Cuz I Love You”

Since the release of this album, Lizzo’s career has flourished into a movement that embodies empowerment and confidence for all shapes, sizes, and walks of life. Lizzo chose to express during a NPR interview in 2019, “I think what's different about this music is that I'm just a little bit more vulnerable than I am ever before. Even my vocal is a little bit more vulnerable. So, I wanted to tell - and I wanted to show vulnerability and strength on this album - and even to the album cover. Like, you know, being completely naked, but also looking so comfortable with myself, I think, is a testament to this album showing vulnerability and strength.”⁷⁴ Another example of how Lizzo chooses to embrace her body and indulges in self-love, she uses her album as a way to publicly express her self-love and body empowerment. The action of this has been able to let others feel the same comfort that Lizzo feels within herself.

The album “Cuz I Love You” produced the 2021 Grammy award winning song, Rumors. This song will be analyzed in the exploration of Lizzo’s direct media representation. This may have been Lizzo’s biggest hit yet. According to Film Daily “Do These Songs Prove Lizzo Is the Queen of Self Esteem?”, “Rumors” is one of the most popular songs this year. Lizzo & Cardi B spit fire on the track and Lizzo delivers some hot takes,⁷⁵ The fact that it’s becoming more common for there to be female rappers in a male dominated industry has a sense of female empowerment on its own, add on the fact that this music reflects feminist ideas. The song is fresh, upbeat, and reflects the concept of self-love. The choice to examine the song *Rumors* stems from the pushback Lizzo has received from the beginning of her career. According to Daily Mail Online: Lizzo on Body Positivity and Cardi B, “The tune serves as an anthem against those who have attacked the talented star for proudly showing off her ample assets in a bid to

⁷⁴ Ibid (Gross)

⁷⁵ Jesse, Sean. “Do These Songs Prove Lizzo Is the Queen of Self Esteem?” Film Daily, October 17, 2021. <https://filmdaily.co/obsessions/lizzo-body-positivity/>.

advocate body positivity,”⁷⁶ Like anyone who is trying to bring something new and empowering to society there is always an audience that is not in favor of change and the betterment of society. Rumors is more than just a song, it’s a representation of how strong and unchained Lizzo and Cardi B are.

Along with how free they believe society should feel, especially women, have long been under the hegemonic hold of the male gaze. As an example of reversing the gender roles in regard to the male-gaze, Lizzo’s word choice in her first verse of the song is interesting. Film Daily expresses that, “Lizzo adds more heat by saying ‘my smoothie cleanse and my diet / No, I ain’t fu%\$ Drake yet,’”⁷⁷ It’s refreshing to see a new perspective that’s catering to the female point of view rather than the male’s point of view. Film Daily continues to explain that, “Lizzo flips the script on gender norms with this line about Drake. Lizzo is quoted as saying ‘there are so many times where girls’ names get dropped in songs because they’re fine.’ In addition to being a leader of self-confidence, Lizzo is also changing gender paradigms in the music industry,”⁷⁸Lizzo noticed that men were doing this in their songs and decided that if they can do it, so can women. Throughout this text the discussion of Lizzo as someone who’s currently breaking down cultural norms and barriers in society. This is an example of how she continues to do so within her lyricism as an artist.

Analysis of Lizzo and Cardi B’s Song “Rumors” & Critique of Bordo’s Feminist Approach

Lizzo uses her knowledge of feminism and passion for body positivity to transform the negative connotation of modernity, social media, and body image into an empowering movement

⁷⁶ Moustafa, Abi. “There’s a Bias about People Who Look like Me’: Lizzo on Body Positivity and Cardi B.” Daily Mail Online. Associated Newspapers, August 14, 2021. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-9892805/Theres-bias-people-look-like-Lizzo-body-positivity-Cardi-B.html>.

⁷⁷ Iibd (Jesse)

⁷⁸ Iibd (Jesse)

for people of all shapes and sizes. She managed to do this through her artistry. Let's begin the analysis of Lizzo's award winning framework, here's a prime example of Lizzo creating an uplifting and non judgemental, body positivity anthem, "Lizzo, teach me about big girl coochie (okay), Last time I got freaky, the FCC sued me, But I'mma keep doing what I wanna do, 'Cause all the rumors are, all the rumors are true, yeah,"⁷⁹ Cardi B's feature in Lizzo's framework displays a dialogue between two empowering, popular, outspoken, celebrities. With the encouraging lyrics in the hands of two strong feminist artists, this song and the rest of Lizzo and Cardi B's careers are subscribing to the long struggle women have had with the discussion of body dissatisfaction and unrealistic body expectations.

Lizzo chooses to be different in every aspect of what she presents to the world, this is her way of defying her sociocultural context, rather than taking in account how people feel about her, she ignores it. Lizzo's purpose for being different is so that she can inspire people to be accepting of themselves and others. Bordo explains that the celebrity is, Bordo expresses in her "*Material Girl*" article about postmodern bodies and Madonna, "Contrasting herself to anorectics, whom she sees as self-denying and self-hating, completely in the thrall of externally imposed standards of worthiness, Madonna (as she saw herself) stood for self-definition through the assertion of her own (traditionally "female" and now anachronistic) body-type,"⁸⁰ In a generation where thinness is the idealized body type, Madonna made a statement rather than be what society wanted her to be. Madonna became an idol to people across the globe because of the way she chose to expressively celebrate her body. Lizzo is this era's icon for breaking down the cultural ideal for a woman's body image. Lizzo isn't curvy nor thin like Madonna, yet she presents her body as beautiful as Madonna used to.

⁷⁹ Lizzo and Cardi B. "Lyricfind." LyricFind, 2021. <https://www.lyricfind.com/>.

⁸⁰ Ibid (Bordo)

Bordo's choice of using Madonna as an example in her text reflects the fact that there is much need for an updated icon in popular culture that is empowering and showcases positive body image. Susan Bordo reflects in her framework that it's often white women that need a role model for body positivity. This is most likely due to the fact that white women were often the only demographic that felt comfortable expressing their insecurities back in earlier generations. In the current generation that we are in, it's apparent that this is no longer the case. People of all intersections experience body image issues, honestly black bodies in the media have experienced more scrutiny and criticism than any other body type in media. Bordo does not even touch on the constant surveillance the black female body is constantly under, especially as a popular culture icon.

Gloria Jean Watkins, also known by her famous pen name Bell Hooks is a black, social activist, feminist American writer, who is well known for writing about intersectionality, hypersexualization, love, and feminism has chosen to write several frameworks regarding black female bodies. Hooks states that, "Bombarded with images representing black female bodies as expendable, black women have either passively absorbed this thinking or vehemently resisted it,"⁸¹ Like any other human being, if someone sees representations like themselves consistently represented in a negative light then the thought process will be structured to believe that this is how I'm supposed to look, feel, or act. In Western culture the concept of representing black female bodies as easy to access and hypersexualized, this leads to the consistent surveillance of body image. Bell Hooks continues to explain that "Popular culture provides countless examples of black female appropriation and exploitation of 'negative stereotypes' to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits of it. Since black female sexuality has been represented in racist / sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black women singers

⁸¹ Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

which suggest they are sexually available and licentious,”⁸² Lizzo is an artist that utilizes the exploitation of ‘negative stereotypes’ this is a way to remain in control of her own image.

Rather than someone else choosing to hypersexualize her, she is beating them to the point. This is a way for Lizzo and many other artists to have a direct say and prediction in what the public is thinking. An example of Lizzo’s framework *Rumors* that resembles this action, “They don't know, I do it for the culture, goddamn, they say I should watch the shit I post, oh goddamn, Say I'm turning big girls into hoes, oh goddamn, They say I get groupies at my shows, oh goddamn,”⁸³ Lizzo in these lyrics expresses that she is not worried about people who are trying to walk over her or undermine what she has accomplished. She serves what she wants the public to think of her on a platter, which according to bell hooks has a long history in the black female entertainment industry. These lyrics also represent the fact that Lizzo will not let outside sources get the best of her, this is an example of her choosing to defy her sociocultural context rather than indulge in it.

Lizzo chooses to not let society have a hold on her, much like Bordo’s example of Madonna. Bordo explains that “feminine voluptuousness and the choice to be round in a culture of the lean were clearly connected to spontaneity, self-definition, and defiance of the cultural gaze - the terms set by that gaze have now triumphed,”⁸⁴ The hegemonic use of the “cultural gaze” will always be apparent. The United States has been established based on what hegemonic white men find attractive, this will remain a common trend. Thanks to celebrities and other popular culture figures, such as Lizzo, these “beauty standards” that society idolizes are now being challenged. As a result of this, a healthier mindset is created. Not just for our current society, but for the younger generations that are developing throughout this time and in future

⁸² Iibd (Hooks)

⁸³ Iibd (Lyricfind)

⁸⁴ Iibd (Bordo)

time. It is not healthy for young children to be already thinking about decisions in regard to their diet to be a part of the cultural norm.

Bordo explains in her section *Postmodern Bodies*, that case studies have mentioned that almost 80% of nine-year-old suburban girls are choosing to focus on their body rather than focus on being a carefree child. The purpose of Lizzo's framework is to minimize the number of people that feel are not comfortable with themselves. Everyone should be able to feel comfortable in their own bodies, Lizzo is an advocate for that. Icons and role models like Lizzo are much needed in the world, especially after hearing the statistics that Bordo explains. Continuing on with the analysis of Lizzo's feminist framework, the song "Rumors" iterates, "Spending all your time tryna break a woman down, Realer shit is going on, baby, take a look around , If you thought that I was ratchet with my ass hanging out , Just wait until the summer when they let me out the house, bitch,"⁸⁵ Lizzo chooses to use these lyrics as a way to express that she no longer cares about what the rap industry has to say about her, or society in general for that matter.

Bordo explains that Madonna is in control of her image, not trapped by it; the proof lies in her ironic and chameleon-like approach to the construction of her identity, her ability to 'slip in and out of character at will,' to defy definition, to keep them guessing,"⁸⁶ Much Like Madonna, Lizzo is in control of her image and not consumed by it, her songs are an example of this. Lizzo's social media presence establishes her as a transparent person that chooses to give advice and have genuine interactions with her fans. Also, like Madonna, Lizzo uses this chameleon-like approach that allows her to be liked by all demographics. Well, most demographics in regard to Madonna. Bell Hooks actually has an entire chapter in her book that is

⁸⁵ Iibd (Lyricfind)

⁸⁶ Iibd (Bordo)

used to critique Madonna. Hooks expresses that, “Needless to say, if Madonna had to depend on masses of black women to maintain her status as cultural icon, she would have been dethroned some time ago,”⁸⁷ Hooks continues to solidify why the use of Madonna as a feminist icon example is in need of an update in order to include the acceptance of intersectionality, such as race and body type.

The dislike of Madonna among the African American population is not for no reason. The pattern of Madonna attempting to commodify black culture through the use of her songs, fashion and make up choice is seen as a danger within the black community rather than a compliment. This attempt to emulate “black joy” is seen as a white supremacist tactic of inflicting oppression and exploitation. Hooks calls attention to an interview with Madonna, “where she talked about her envy of black culture, where she stated that she wanted to be black as a child. It is a sign of white privilege to be able to ‘see’ blackness and black culture from a standpoint where only the rich culture of opposition black people have created in resistance marks and defines us,”⁸⁸ The want to commodify black culture is something that Madonna has had an infatuation with ever since she was a child. The fascination with blackness has become a trend throughout history. White women have been able to gain a presence through the fascination and envy of black culture. What makes the concept of envy so dangerous is that, according to Hooks, “it’s always ready to destroy, erase, take over, and consume the desired object,”⁸⁹ The “desired object” in this context is sadly in correlation with the black female body. This is what Madonna is trying to do when she chooses to appropriate aspects of black culture that are not hers. This is a prime example as to why black women need a role model to look up to, throughout history it’s been evident that there are role models for white men and women to look up to who are proud of

⁸⁷ Iibd (Hooks)

⁸⁸ Iibd (Hooks)

⁸⁹ Iibd (Hooks)

their bodies. This has not been the case for black women, as these cultural icons are often pushed to the point of not being comfortable due to hypersexualization. Lizzo serves as a make up for the lack of diverse representation that positively promotes the black female body.

Analysis of Lizzo's Direct Media Representations. Lizzo, like many other celebrities, has been able to reach her audience and people who may not even know who she is through the concept of interviews. Television hosts, journalists, and media specialists have the skills to ask compelling questions that provoke thoughtful answers. Lizzo has managed to be transparent throughout her interviews, here is an example of that. Lizzo expresses in an interview, "I think it's lazy for me to just say I'm body positive at this point. It's easy. I would like to be body normative. I want to normalize my body. Now, you look at the hashtag 'body positive,' and you see smaller-framed girls, curvier girls. Lotta white girls. And I feel no way about that, because inclusivity is what my message is always about. I'm glad that this conversation is being included in the mainstream narrative."⁹⁰ This answer to a basic question about society has managed to represent what Lizzo's stance is in regard to body positivity. The answer to this interview is to share with society that she is a popular culture figure who does care about the society and what is affecting people in it day to day. Lizzo's interviews have managed to be able to promote similar content throughout her career, which is body positivity, liberation for all, and the normalization of bodies. In the Vogue interview Lizzo explains how impressed she is that body positivity is remaining part of mainstream culture, this is potentially due to the amount of popular culture dialogue that is intertwined with the concept.

⁹⁰ Paris, Calin Van. "Lizzo Wants to Redefine the Body-Positivity Movement." Vogue. Vogue, September 24, 2020. <https://www.vogue.com/article/lizzo-october-cover-story-body-positivity-inclusivity>.

Lizzo expresses in her interview that it would be lazy for her to just be someone who is positive about their body. As a celebrity, she believes that it is her duty to use her power and be a true advocate for the normalization of bodies and to push the positive body narrative. Lizzo chooses to hold herself to a higher standard because of the fact that she is no longer an average person. She is consistently under the spotlight and is looked up to by people that relate to her. Lizzo chooses to reflect on her personal experiences and perceptions of her experiences in these interviews. This is how Lizzo is embodying the defiance of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Paquette and Raine explain that "From the perspectives of these women, body image is not a static construct, but has multiple elements, is dynamic and fluctuating. This 'fluid' representation of body image appears to be embedded in women's experiences and perceptions of those experiences,"⁹¹ The fact that she chooses to be vulnerable publicly is what is helping her build a genuine connection with her fan base. She is sharing with her audience how she has been able to defy what society has to say about her. Lizzo is who she is because that is who she wants to be, she continues to encourage everyone to do the same.

Lizzo's Use of her TikTok Platform. Lizzo's use of her social media is unlike any other celebrities that I have come across. She chooses to interact with her fans, as I scroll through TikTok I notice her commenting on TikToks that I have already commented on. Along with this she engages in her own comment section, replying to comments from fans or even people that may have a negative opinion on her. Lizzo, unlike many celebrities but a few still do, has recently taken these engagements a step further with her audience. Lizzo dueted one of her fan's videos, which is putting her video side by side with her fan's and Lizzo chooses to display her reaction to the video as she pleases. The fan's video was a parody version of her song "Rumors" that we just analyzed in the previous part

⁹¹ Ibid (Paquette & Raine)

of this text. Here is the first line of the lyrics, “They don’t know I do it for the plus size community,”⁹²This is in parallel to the lyric of Lizzo’s “They don’t know I do it for the Culture” Rather than this song being a negative parody like many are, it is a parody that is stating what Lizzo has been trying to do all along, be an icon for everyone especially the plus size community.

The fact that Lizzo has managed to keep a close relationship with her audience through comments, interactions on other social media platforms, and being authentic and transparent through her interviews over the radio, online, or in magazines. According to Pauquette and Raine’s use of sociocultural theory, “women may reinterpret the sociocultural messages transmitted to them by those with whom they have relationships. Reinterpretation in a more positive context may provide women with an opportunity to develop a sense of agency, and resist negative messages,”⁹³Lizzo’s positive messages have managed to help people reinterpret their sociocultural context to something that is more positive and uplifting. The fact that she has been able to establish a connection with her audience is what has led to this possibility. The parody continues on by saying, “They say I should be ashamed and lose weight,”⁹⁴This is parallel to Lizzo’s line that says, “They say I should watch what I post”. The fan is standing up with her full body on screen showing her stomach. Lizzo is on the other side of the screen, mouthing the

⁹² Jefferson , Melissa. “Lizzo on TikTok.” TikTok. TikTok, August 15, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@lizzo/video/6996668048983821573?_d=secCgYIASAHKAESPgo8Jc eF0gEopx6HpludtDHduoSUIHJi7TatsdQzIGm3D%2FT1sbEKna49PAP%2Bg1qTSgS1InapKPP ACmSvZITtGgA%3D&checksum=5ed6556b3390621aafefded181a55974903a1c501ff88b94abe8200db78c1dc5&language=en&preview_pb=0&sec_user_id=MS4wLjABAAAA-SQspwcaM9sUk68X-zdFmFMr4G_qpI6gUG5awsFkGSI&share_app_id=1233&share_item_id=6996668048983821573&share_link_id=18CAE583-6A57-4707-BA8C-7EF4FCE21A9F&source=h5_m&tamp=1639778626&tt_from=copy&u_code=ai8j0&user_id=3022085&utm_campaign=client_share&utm_medium=ios&utm_source=copy&_r=1

⁹³ *Ibid* (Pauquette & Raine)

⁹⁴ *Ibid* (Jefferson)

words with this fierce, sexy, confidence. Lizzo is doing this due to the commonality of women feeling powerless in the society we live in. Paquette and Raine's use of sociocultural theory explains that this is due to the lack of change, "the huge fashion, cosmetic and diet industries, and the media that promotes them. In effect, they may perceive themselves as helpless pawns of the larger social structure that apparently creates the 'toxic environment' which perpetuates 'normative discontent' with their bodies,"⁹⁵Lizzo creates content so that she can contribute to a more positive piece of society rather than feeding into the "toxic environment" that creates the trend of normalization in feeling discontent. Lizzo uses this upliftment for her fans in order to break the normalization of feeling discontent within one's own body. Millions of people saw Lizzo's TikTok that was uplifting her fan, who like Lizzo, also has an unconventional body and saw beauty in it. This is a powerful way to publicly display body positivity. The parody and TikTok end with, "But I'm here to show that its ok to embrace the body you're in,"⁹⁶This lyric is parallel to the Lizzo's line that sings, "Turning Big girls into Hoes," The TikTok finishes with Lizzo saying "Period" which is a phrase that is known to society as a way of solidifying a statement, Lizzo put her stamp on this TikTok and gave her fan the upliftment that she needed. As she does this to one-woman, other Lizzo fans and people who respect Lizzo see this TikTok and think positive thoughts regarding bodies, not even just their own but all bodies in general. Lizzo has managed to normalize all bodies for all people, thanks to her consistency and drive with the concept of body image and embracing it.

The purpose of this framework has been to bring attention to Lizzo as an updated feminist icon that is relatable amongst all intersectionalities. This was accomplished through the

⁹⁵ Iibd (Paquette & Raine)

⁹⁶ Iibd (Jefferson)

application of Susan Bordo's text *Unbearable Weight* and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that was applied to Kim Raine and Marie Claude Paquette's case study" Sociocultural Context of Women's Body Image." These two frameworks served as the backbone for this seminar text. The application of Madonna as a body positive icon resembles an outdated version of what Lizzo is trying to implement. Lizzo has managed to help make all demographics of people feel welcome and included, while Madonna is catered towards the white and thin beauty standard.

What does Lizzo's role in the entertainment industry represent?

Lizzo serves as a feminist popular culture icon that has been able to tap into her powers of a well-known figure in the spotlight and has utilized her platform for the greater good. Lizzo represents the normalization of the female black body in a space that is accepting of everyone. This is evident through the song analyzed above *Rumors* and her other albums, how she carries herself under the public eye, and on her social media platforms. Lizzo's mindset and legacy of being body-normative is a concept that will outlast her lifetime. This framework is a representation of it.

CHAPTER FOUR. MEGAN THEE STALLION: BAD B*TCHES HAVE BAD DAYS TOO

With the rise of powerful black female hip-hop artists like Megan Thee stallion, Lizzo, and Cardi B, contemporary examples of the hypersexualization of black female bodies continue to become evident. Is this in the same context as historical examples of the black female body? No. This is a new route of representation like Suzan Lori-Parks' play, their framework is liberating. Women have been oversexualized in the rap industry since the first guy picked up a mic. The male rapper stereotype includes a gold chain, loads of money, and women being used as background props. A huge "achievement" in the rap industry often includes access to wealth and women which is usually represented in large quantities. Success in this genre has become a recent achievement for women, their success looks different than male rappers. As the want to be an independent and proud woman increased, it seems that the success of female rappers did too.

Throughout the rap industry it's become more equal in terms of representation for women to display and embody similar dominant roles as men. An example is choosing to express sexual desires and intentions. Instead of being an afterthought in a song, female rappers have brought women's pleasure to the forefront of their music. Female sexual pleasure has become a form of expression that was suppressed for centuries. Outward expressions of sexuality are now being celebrated instead of belittled. A sexual woman is no longer being criticized, she's celebrated and empowered.

Deeper Analysis of Megan Thee Stallion as an Artist and Person

Before we move on to the analysis of Megan Thee Stallion's musical framework, direct media representations, and influence let's gain more insight about her as a person. Megan Jovon Ruth Pete, recognized as Megan Thee Stallion is a strong African American, openly bisexual,

female rapper. Thee Stallion graduated from Texas Southern University with a Bachelor's of Science with her degree in Health Administration in 2021.

She is from Houston, Texas which is quite evident in her musicality. According to Rolling Stone magazine, "Her music is unapologetically Southern, with her thick Houston accent bouncing effortlessly over sensual and bare trap beats, allowing her lyricism and delivery to shine through,"⁹⁷ Thee Stallion is not afraid to be her true authentic self, especially when it comes to the hip-hop industry. She learned about the industry from an early age, thanks to her late mother Holly Thomas. Stallion's mother was also a rapper, her stage name was "Hollywood".

Megan grew up wanting to be much like her mother. Growing up surrounded by music and someone in the hip-hop industry from an early age she became infatuated with music and the idea of writing her own lyrics. Stars Unfolded explains that "Megan was inclined towards music from a very young age. Instead of going to daycare, Megan spent her childhood accompanying her mother, Holly Thomas, to recording sessions,"⁹⁸ The idea of having music as a career rather than a hobby has always been on Megan Thee Stallion's mind. Her mother engraved that ambition into her character from the stage of life as a toddler. Stars Unfolded shares a quote that Meg stated, "My mom is the first female rapper I've ever known. I'm thinking, like, okay, yeah, this is normal. Everybody's doing this,"⁹⁹ This idea of commonality within Meg's perception helped create a sense of encouragement and normalcy surrounding female rappers. Since Thee Stallion witnessed her mother do this at such ease, she felt as though she should follow in her

⁹⁷ Gomez, Jade. "How Megan Thee Stallion Earned Her Confidence." Rolling Stone. Rolling Stone, March 18, 2019. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/megan-thee-stallion-freestyle-808378/?sub_action=logged_in.

⁹⁸ Stars Unfolded, "Megan Thee Stallion Height, Age, Boyfriend, Family, Biography & More " Starsunfolded," StarsUnfolded/Megan Thee Stallion, March 9, 2021, <https://starsunfolded.com/megan-thee-stallion/#:~:text=Megan>.

⁹⁹ Ibid (Stars Unfolded)

footsteps and make her mother proud. As a result of this, Thee Stallion grew very close with her late mother, and took the tragedy of her loss very close to heart. Luckily, Thomas was able to witness her daughter's success and the growth of her career from the year of 2017 to the year of 2019.

As a result of Megan's success, before passing away in March of 2019 she became Megan's manager. Nicola Garoutte from Linkoping University states that, "Meg started rapping at 14 (2009) and she went viral when she was at Prairie View A&M University where she was rap battling men. She gained her fame via freestyling on social media, specifically instagram,"¹⁰⁰ Thanks to this early exposure to the hip-hop scene, Meg is comfortable in who she is and what she brings to the table. Aside from having a mother previously in the music industry, Meg has had to fight for her music to be taken seriously.

A teenager should not have to rap battle grown men, but it was necessary to be taken seriously in a genre of music that is dominated mostly by men. As a result of being exposed early to the rap industry and an accumulation of putting herself out there repeatedly, Meg has reaped the benefits of her artistry. But throughout the years she has had to prove herself time and time again in order to get noticed. Rolling Stone expresses that, "At the time (2018), she had only recently begun rapping professionally, but you wouldn't guess it based on how confidently she delivered her explicit lyrics over an instrument version of Drake's "4pm in Calabasas,"¹⁰¹ As a result of being so bold enough to utilize a popular culture icon like Drake's beat, Megan acquired massive amounts of streaming numbers. These numbers were in comparison to fellow female rap artists. So, 300 entertainments gave her a record deal that year in 2018.

¹⁰⁰Garoutte, Nicola. "An Intersectional Feminist WAP." diva-portal.org. Linkoping University, 2023. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1676580/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid (Rolling Stone)

Fast forward to two years later in 2020, The Stallion made the “Time’s list of 100 most influential people of 2020”. Taraji P. Henson states in the “Time” article about Meg discussing her hit singles and talent that, “You would be a fool to think that’s all there is to her. She’s deep. She’s enrolled in college. She’s an entertainer. She’s a free spirit; I see that in her. The industry might try to pigeonhole her in this rap game, but she’s got a plan much bigger,”¹⁰² The popular culture icon has people in her corner of all sections of society. Society has gravitated towards Meg since the beginning of her mainstream journey back in 2017. The people in her fanbase support her bigger picture and want to see her keep winning.

Release of the Hit Single “Body” (2020)

The third single from Megan’s debut album “Body”, opens with explicit moaning sounds followed by the phrase, “Body-Body-Body-Body-dy-dy-dy. The song focuses on celebrating the different shapes and sizes that everyone’s body comes in. The stallion states in a “Elle ” fashion interview that, “Although we have so many incredible women in hip-hop killing it right now and in the past, there’s still a shift [that needs to happen] around the perception of a woman owning her sexuality. Powerful women who have agency over their bodies aren’t something to look down on,”¹⁰³ Popular culture icons have become a guide for people to look up to.

Black female artists are choosing to utilize this role as a way to help society progress in a “body positive” manner, which has resulted in an intersection of reclaiming of the Black female body and the liberation of the female body. Another example of Megan the Stallion’s agency

¹⁰² Burton, Christian. “Megan Thee Stallion Is in Time's ‘100 Most Influential People’ List.” Breaking Celebrity News, Entertainment News, and Celebrity Gossip - Celebrity Insider. Celebrity Insider , February 22, 2022.

¹⁰³ Nerisha Penrose, “Megan Thee Stallion on Policing Women's Bodies and Why WAP Is so Important,” ELLE (ELLE, November 29, 2021), <https://www.elle.com/culture/music/a33863991/megan-thee-stallion-wap-interview/>.

over her body is found in the lyrics of her song “Body” from her album “Good News” released in 2020. Megan Thee Stallion expresses that, “The category is body, look at the way it's sittin’ (yeah), That ratio is so out of control”¹⁰⁴ In a society that is flooded with people hating their bodies it’s important to pay attention to those who love their bodies and want others to as well. Megan Thee Stallion does an amazing job in this song expressing positives about her body.

Megan talks about her “ratio”; she is musically expressing her love for her body and is utilizing language that people often use to complain about their bodies. Megan Thee Stallion continues to express, “You know I'm the hottest, you ain't ever gotta heat me up, I'm present when I'm absent, speakin' when I'm not there”¹⁰⁵ Megan normalizes the conversation of expressing your love for your body, in society these days people believe it's considered to be “showing off” or being “full of yourself” when confidence is apparent. In an interview Meg expresses that, “I choose my own clothing. Let me repeat I choose what I want to wear. It’s my body. It’s literally mind,”¹⁰⁶ Thee Stallion does not dress the way she wants because of showing off for the male-gaze, she is dressing to please herself and appreciate her own body. Like everyone else, Meg has a mind and body of her own, she can do what she wants when she wants with it. This is an example of articulating agency and autonomy.

Not many artists share the inspiration behind their work, but Thee Stallion does not hesitate to share. Thee Stallion shares with Bazaar Magazine that the inspiration of the hit single “Body” was as a result of being stuck in quarantine during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Much like others in the world, being stuck in the house and forced to be conscious of the body and self-image resulted in Meg becoming closer with herself and loving her body more.

¹⁰⁴Ibid (Megan Thee Stallion)

¹⁰⁵ Ibid (Megan Thee Stallion)

¹⁰⁶Lauren M. Jackson, “The Importance of Being Megan Thee Stallion” (BAZAAR, April 30, 2021), <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a35496164/megan-thee-stallion-march-2021-cover-story/>.

While many people were struggling with this idea of loving their bodies and being stuck inside with them, unable to use active distractions. Thee Stallion was inside working on an anthem for people to turn to during this time of need mentally.

The Stallion Trends

While focusing on the celebration of bodies in general, Meg utilizes this time to highlight the “Stallion” body type. This body type is not catered to the long standing “thin ideal” beauty standard of western civilization. “Stallion” is a phrase referring to a woman that is tall and curvy as opposed to being short or medium height on the thinner side. The “Stallion” body type represents two articulations of the body that were once not considered to be “appealing” in society and combines them into one ideal that is not a trend to be. Along with the inclusion of different body types, Meg’s songs have created a wave of dancing on several social media platforms. People who do not usually find themselves dancing, are participating in the trend. Many are taking it a step further by recording themselves and posting the video in their news feeds. This is an example of Thee Stallion encouraging society to be comfortable with themselves and enjoy the body that they are in. Megan Thee Stallion as an icon is contributing to an inclusive definition of beauty in a healthy and positive light, that many generations were in need of during their adolescent years.

Another example of a trend that Thee Stallion has influenced is the idea of having a “Hot Girl Summer”. This concept went from being an idea that everyone joked about in the form of memes. But now it is a concept and even a movement. The “Hot Girl Summer” movement started with the release of Megan Thee Stallion’s 2019 album titled “Fever”. Throughout this album, the idea of having a “Hot Girl Summer” is established. According to “Exclaim” media,

“Laced with acerbic, ultra-confident rhymes, *Fever* served as a constitution for all that Hot Girl Summer would become. On it, Hot Girl Meg establishes that “hotness” is, above all, a mindset. Not unlike many acts that came before her, Megan raps about partying, having great sex, making money, and accomplishing her goals,”¹⁰⁷ Meg creates this idea that you can be successful, accomplish your goals, be comfortable in your own skin, and still have fun! This approach is different to what other female rappers have done in the past.

Much of the older generations cater to the idea of personal actions and what is happening to them personally. Exclaim media expresses that, “What sets Megan apart from her predecessors is her unabashed, ‘me-centric’ approach to these activities. Where many of Megan’s foremothers reinforced patriarchal ideals in their music, *Fever* overtly decentered men’s desires and put Megan’s in the forefront. Why cry over a man when you could be making money. That’s not Hot Girl behavior,”¹⁰⁸ Through the development of this trend “Hot Girl” becomes a trend that keeps people and their emotions in check. This trend started as a way to make sure an individual enjoys their summer. Now it’s an idea that helps people enjoy their lives and remain focused on the bigger picture.

As any powerful and smart woman would do, Megan Thee Stallion filed for her popular phrase “Hot Girl Summer” to be trademarked. The signature phrase was approved as Meg’s trademark in September of 2019. Exclaim media states that, “This was a huge win for the Houston Rapper, especially in light of failed trademark attempts from women like Kayla Newman (creator of the profitable phrase ‘On Fleek’) or Cardi B who was unsuccessful in trademarking her often imitated “okurr.”¹⁰⁹ This is clearly a celebration for Black women and

¹⁰⁷A. Harmony, “From Meme to Movement: How Megan Thee Stallion's 'Hot Girl Summer' Went from Internet Trend to Cultural Shift,” Exclaim, 2019, <https://exclaim.ca/music/article/>. ¹⁰⁸ Ibid (Harmony)

¹⁰⁹ Ibid (Harmony)

People of Color that have had innovations in the past and have not been recognized for them. Black bodies have had a clear history of being exploited without credit where it is due and lack of compensation for their creativity and or their hard work.

Megan Thee Stallion and her coined “Hot Girl Summer” phrase represent more than just the balance of a balanced lifestyle expressing agency. The popular phrase represents the evolution of Black creativity. The once impossible road of being credited and taking ownership of one’s product has rightly become situated on an almost level playing field. As a result of the long-standing scrutiny against Black bodies in western civilization, there sadly will never be an equal playing field. Intersectionality will continue to be the evidence that sets apart those who naturally get what they want and those who have to fight tooth and nail for their benefit.

Release of Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B’s Song “WAP” (2020). The body-positive themes touched on by Cardi B and Megan the Stallion in “WAP” align with mainstream feminism, which is currently what we’ve previously mentioned “Third wave feminism”.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the point of the female rappers’ song “WAP” lies in giving women the option to explore not only their personal autonomy, but political as well. The celebration of not feeling obligated to societal standards, results in a woman being able to do what she wants with her body without being judged or objectified.¹¹⁰

Here is a set of lyrics from the hard hitting single, “Your honor, I’m a freak bitch, handcuffs, leashes, switch my wig, make him feel like he cheating, put him on his knees, give him some’ to believe in,”¹¹¹ stated by Megan Thee Stallion. The confidence and continuation of lyrics of this nature is not just a coincidence. It’s a theme and pattern that female

¹¹⁰ Salzman, Eva. “Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion Flex Femininity in 'WAP': The Ithacan.” The Ithacan, September 17, 2020. <https://theithacan.org/columns/cardi-b-and-megan-thee-stallion-flex-femininity-in-wap/>.

¹¹¹ *Megan Thee Stallion Says Her Song "Body" Is Meant to Celebrate All Bodies, YouTube* (YouTube, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfMBkFW0WF0>.

artists are striving for. Much of these younger generations are drawn to the confidence of popular culture icons.

This is as a result of being in this navigation period and attempting to properly situate themselves in society. The younger years of an individual's life are quite often unsure and about finding their sense of agency and purpose. So, popular culture icons that seem confident in what they are doing, give off a sense of comfort and strive for the audience listening. This mirror phase comes into effect while appreciating the artists' framework. This sense of "Hey if she can do it, I can do it" type of mentality.

During the popularity of this song, conservative and often white, men found the lyrics to be quite discomforting. Rolling Stone Magazine states that, "WAP" wasn't 24 hours old yet before Republicans tried to steal the spotlight and stoke a meaningless backlash,"¹¹² A Republican running for congress, James P. Bradley couldn't even wait until 10am, the morning the "WAP" music video was released to criticize the song. He did not waste any time to post statements online regarding his thoughts and feelings about the song. Bradley stated that, "Their new song #WAP (which I heard accidentally) made me want to pour holy water in my ears and I feel sorry for future girls if this is their role model,"¹¹³ The control that men have had over women (generally) since the beginning of time has resulted in the living generations of conservatives uncomfortable and some even angry. The idea of women having control over their own bodies and then voicing that opinion though contemporary framework has made closed-minded individuals uncomfortable. According to Emma Liggins from Concrete Online's article

¹¹²Charles Holmes, "The Conservative Crusade against 'Wet-Ass Pussy'," Rolling Stone (Rolling Stone, August 12, 2020), https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/wet-ass-pussy-ben-shapiro-conservative-backlash-1042491/?sub_action=logged_in.

¹¹³ Ibid (Holmes)

“The Importance of ‘WAP’ Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s Unapologetic Masterpiece”,
 Here came everything they feared: sexually liberated Black women shamelessly voicing their desires, making plentiful use of expletives and reclaimed racial language,”¹¹⁴ Throughout history, women have been told to remain as “lady-like” as possible, which includes: remaining quiet, spoken when told to, only expressing agency when it comes to a man’s pleasure instead of their own. This involves putting others' pleasures in front of their own.

Megan Thee Stallion as well as other artists of this generation, like Lizzo, have made it a point to celebrate a woman’s sexual agency disconnected from the male counterpart(s). An example of lyrics from the song we are discussing, “Macaroni in a pot, that’s some wet a** pu**y, uh”¹¹⁵ This analogy is used to describe what happens to a woman when she is aroused, excited, and experiencing sexual urges. These lyrics from the popular single celebrates and encourages women to be vocal about their needs and wants when it comes to sexual pleasure.

The use of this playful analogy displays the topic of sex as an approachable topic that is meant to be discussed rather than stigmatized and made as a taboo in society. Liggins continues to express that, “Bizarre as it is to entice a man with one’s metaphorical ‘macaroni in a pot’, it kicks patriarchal standards of objectification and feminine delicacy where it hurts. Sex is freed from the chokehold of male power fantasy and reclaimed as something for *both* parties to enjoy,”¹¹⁶ Megan The Stallion, along with Cardi B both create this safe space for everyone to be loud and proud about their bodies, sexuality, and sexual agency.

¹¹⁴Emma Liggins, “The Importance of ‘Wap,” Cardi b and Megan Thee Stallion's Unapologetic Masterpiece,” Concrete-online.uk (Concrete, March 1, 2021), <https://www.concrete-online.co.uk/the-importance-of-wap-cardi-b-and-megan-thee-stallions-unapologetic-masterpiece/>.

¹¹⁵Heran Mamo, “Here Are the Lyrics to Cardi B's 'Wap,' Feat. Megan Thee Stallion,” Billboard (Billboard Hot 100, September 29, 2020), <https://www.billboard.com/music/lyrics/cardi-b-wap-lyrics-megan-thee-stallion-9456405/>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid (Liggins)

Megan has managed to stay true to her self-image as well as maintaining a safe space for everyone that supports her. As a popular culture icon, she takes her influence seriously and wants the best for her fans and the Black community. This is in terms of both physically and mentally. In Megan's latest album "Traumazine" she lets the world know that she has anxiety in her song "Anxiety". The Stallion expresses in her song, "a bad b8tch, and [she] got bad anxiety,"¹¹⁷ She's continuing to utilize her platform as a way to connect with her audience as well as being supportive of them. The closeness that Meg has created with her fanbase has paid off in the long run in regard to the fame and fortune she has accumulated. Not everyone can be successful under the spotlight. But The Stallion has managed to impress the entertainment industry with the growth she has displayed in the past half decade or so.

Megan has recognized the platform she carries with her and what she as an educated woman can contribute to the minds of anyone that listens to her. As an individual with anxiety, The Stallion has combined her needs and her educational background in health administration to create a safe space that focuses on mental health resources for everyone. Teen Vogue expresses after an interview with Megan, "Megan Thee Stallion has been open about seeking therapy after her parents died, saying that 'it's ok to ask for help. And it's ok to want to go get therapy.' And because we know that mental health treatment works, Megan sent an important reminder that it can help you "bounce back like bad b*tches always do,"¹¹⁸ The safe space is an online website

¹¹⁷"Megan Thee Stallion - Anxiety." NEW lyrics. Textu.pesen.online, August 13, 2022. <https://textu-pesen.online/megan-thee-stallion-anxiety/>.

¹¹⁸Brittney McNamara, "Megan Thee Stallion Is Helping Fellow Bad b*tches with Their Mental Health," Teen Vogue (Teen Vogue, September 26, 2022), <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/megan-thee-stallion-launches-new-mental-health-resources-website>.

titled, “Bad B*tches Have Bad Days Too” so anyone has the ability to access these resources. Some of the resources available include the “National Crisis Text Line”, “Suicide & Crisis Lifeline”, “Strong hearts Native Helpline”, and the “Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration National Helpline”.¹¹⁹

Megan also has a section within her website that is specifically for helping the Black community and the LGBTQ+ community. This is also through the use of specific hotlines, therapies, and therapists. For an example the website has, therapy for Black girls, Black men, offers the” LGBTQ+ Psychotherapist of Color Directory”, and the “Black Emotional & Mental Health Collective”.¹²⁰ Since the pandemic started back in 2020 with COVID-19, the increase of need for mental health resources has increased. Vogue shares that, “Since 2020, people across the world have started experiencing anxiety and depression, according to the World Health Organization. In the U.S. young people and certain marginalized groups experienced increased levels of anxiety as related to the pandemic,”¹²¹ Megan as a popular culture icon has taken notice of what is going on in society as well as within marginalized groups, specifically in the Black community.

Over the course of centuries, a stigma has developed surrounding the topic of mental health in the Black community. This stigma often turns people away from seeking the help they actually need. Instead of going to a physician and seeking treatment, many in the Black community rely on their spiritual faith. According to the “National Alliance on Mental Illness”, “One study showed that 63% of Black people believe that a mental health condition is a sign of personal weakness. As a result, people may experience shame about having a mental illness and

¹¹⁹Megan Thee Stallion, ““Some Days I Just Hate Everybody, ”” Bad Bitches Have Bad Days Too, 2022, <https://www.badbitcheshavebaddaystoo.com/>.

¹²⁰Ibid (Megan Thee Stallion)

¹²¹Ibid (McNamara)

worry that they may be discriminated against due to their condition,”¹²² This anxiety of how an individual may be perceived by others in the community has prevented people from seeking help. But there is more reasoning behind the lack of mental health treatment in regard to the Black community.

There is this long existing distrust of medical care in the United States when it comes to Black bodies. Suzanne Dworak, School of Social Work explains that “Historically, African Americans have been misdiagnosed at higher rates than white patients, and Black communities have been exploited by the U.S. government and medical community in the name of medical advancement,”¹²³ This is why the need for therapists who have similar backgrounds is important. When there are similar backgrounds present the barriers of mistrust and stigma slowly begin to be broken down. It’s very beneficial for the Black community for icons like Megan Thee Stallion to be vocalizing their struggles with mental health and how it is ok to get help. The Black community can look to someone who is in the spotlight and a part of the community as a green light for mental health.

Megan Thee Stallion touches on this subject in an article with “Black Doctors”, “As a Black person, and when you think of therapy you think of ‘Oh my gosh, I’m weak’, you think medication, and you just think the worst. ‘That’s kind of what you see on TV too; like, therapy wasn’t even represented in the media as something that was good. Now it’s becoming safe to say

¹²²National Alliance of Mental Health, “Mental Health in Black Communities: Challenges, Resources, Community Voices,” NAMI California (NAMI, June 18, 2021), <https://namica.org/mental-health-challenges-in-african-american-communities>.

¹²³Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, “Why Mental Health Care Is Stigmatized in Black Communities,” Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work (USC, 2019), <https://dworakpeck.usc.edu/news/why-mental-health-care-stigmatized-black-communities>.

‘Alright now, there’s a little too much going on. Somebody help me,’¹²⁴ Thee Stallion and her website have contributed to the breaking down of barriers in terms of stigmatization of mental health in the Black community. This proof that Meg is a true icon of “Body Positivity” she has chosen to not only focus on the free expression of sexuality and the body as a natural entity. She has also focused her influence on the idea of a healthy mental state. You cannot be “Body Positive” without a healthy state of mind.

Megan Thee Stallion serves as an intersectional feminist icon. She has utilized her platform for not just the benefit of herself, but for the communities she is a part of and the people that support her. The popular culture icon has continued to create a safe space that celebrates the inclusion of all bodies, skin tones, and sexualities. The Stallion represents the normalization of seeking mental health resources, the Black female body, and being comfortable in your own skin. This is evident through the creation of her mental health website, the songs “Body” and “WAP” previously analyzed, and her interactions with the public eye. Megan’s strive for love and prosper in the Black community, LGBTQ+ community, and in society in general will outlive her existence. This thesis is a documentation of her effort and strides towards the “bigger plan” she’s been focusing on.

¹²⁴Jasmine Smith, “Megan Thee Stallion Launches Mental Health Resources Website,” BlackDoctor.org, September 27, 2022, <https://blackdoctor.org/megan-thee-stallion-mental-health>

CONCLUSION

So, as social media becomes an integral part of society, the rise in body surveillance and self-comparison to others has become more apparent. The more positive influence that comes from the elite of the United States society the greater potential younger generations will have in regard to body positivity. The purpose of this framework is to highlight the positive messages and icons that are currently flooding the hip-hop industry. Not only is the hypersexuality of Black female artists in the hip hop industry contributing to the body positivity movement. These artists are paving the way for future female artists to have the option to express their sexual agency and thrive in the rap industry amongst males.

An important reason for this research is for the fact that it is needed in society to have credible resources that have the potential to guide individuals to positive popular culture icons and songs, that at the end of the album or song there is a positive message and influence. This text plans to fill in the gaps of research that is needed to be tackled in the fields of media, mental health, and popular culture. The second and most important purpose of this text and presentation is to create a space for conversations that have the opportunity to result into change. As well as informing society that the Black female body can do as she pleases, which has been a long time coming according to history previously stated. The reclamation of the Black female body is long overdue for Liberation and celebration, be a part of this change.

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