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Abstract

In today's pop culture world, celebrities are seen as perfect individuals with grand houses, cars, and entourages. When Chris Brown came on the scene in the mid-2000s, he was a teenage heartthrob who could do no wrong. That all changed when he brutally beat fellow music superstar and then girlfriend Rihanna in 2009. Brown's media persona came crashing down, along with seemingly everything else in his life. However, in a situation where many artists would normally descend and never return, Brown has surged back almost to the heights he reached prior to 2009. How did this happen? What does the role of the music industry play in this? The norms and tendencies of the popular music industry are examined to determine the external factors that both hindered and helped Brown's changes in reputation (and by extension, record sales) over time.

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Christopher C. Fritch

ABSTRACT

In today's pop culture world, celebrities are seen as perfect individuals with grand houses, cars, and entourages. When Chris Brown came on the scene in the mid-2000s, he was a teenage heartthrob who could do no wrong. That all changed when he brutally beat fellow music superstar and then girlfriend Rihanna in 2009. Brown's media persona came crashing down, along with seemingly everything else in his life. However, in a situation where many artists would normally descend and never return, Brown has surged back almost to the heights he reached prior to 2009. How did this happen? What does the role of the music industry play in this? The norms and tendencies of the popular music industry are examined to determine the external factors that both hindered and helped Brown's changes in reputation (and by extension, record sales) over time.

Introduction/The Incident

Prior to 2009, Chris Brown was becoming one of the most popular R&B/hip hop artists the world had ever seen. Album sales were through the roof, even at the age of *fifteen*. Right from the beginning, he had levels of charisma and stage presence that were unparalleled. It was almost as if he established a new genre that combined R&B and hip hop, one that was able to appeal to a much "softer" audience than the genre could normally sell to. Yes, it seemed like the teenage phenom could do no wrong. But in February of 2009, a domestic violence incident between Brown and then-girlfriend Rihanna would tear down the image that we had all known. I remember my parents telling me about what happened and as a fan of Brown, or as much of a Chris Brown fan as an eleven year old from upstate New York could be, I was as outraged as everyone else. I almost immediately swore off of Brown forever, as I then thought it made me realize the extreme nature of the two-faced lives many superstars in music live.

I remember when Brown released "Forever" in 2007. As a ten year old boy, I did not particularly care for the message of the song

about love and commitment: I loved watching him dance and how it seemed to mesh perfectly with the music. And I wasn't the only one; the hit American comedy "The Office" used it as a soundtrack for a wedding, and many actual weddings used this song, some of which became viral videos. A few years after the domestic violence incident, when I could grasp the lyrics and meaning of this song, its meaning to me was ruined by the change in Chris Brown's reputation. From then on, the image of Brown's free-flowing, synchronized dancing was ever sullied by knowing in the back of that childish mind that he's done terrible things, and that the music is supposed to distract and cover that up.

Mainstream Music Doesn't Care

But again, *I still watched and listened to his music*. WHY? Why was my conscience, and obviously many others if he has remained as successful as he has all this time, allowing itself to keep listening to Brown's music despite all of this? The careers of other superstars like Rick James, R. Kelly and even Michael Jackson were very damaged by highly controversial events in their personal life. However, despite these events

these artists have somehow retained their popularity. Michael Jackson received a tremendous mourning across the globe after his death, and R. Kelly still sells out his shows despite being sued for \$10 million on the accusations that had sexual relations with a minor, which was settled out of court. So is it solely the catchiness and the ability to dance to almost anything he releases? Maybe. Or is there something more ingrained in all of us that has allowed us to separate the music from the artists that produced it?

There are a multitude of different things that we can make of this anomaly, but first we need to remove the proverbial mask that has been created by the media. If we continue to allow what is reported in the news to fully make our decisions for us, with no assessment of the situation on our end, a very unfair impression of people can be created in scenarios where they may not deserve it. It is very common that we forget even the most popular figures in music are also human beings. The viewing public has such a scrutinizing eye that any mistake made is extrapolated into something it shouldn't necessarily be. This is not to say that domestic violence is made into something it shouldn't be or that it is not a heinous act; it is only to say the reaction when a celebrity does it is vastly different than in everyday civilian life.

Origin of Celebrity Elitism and Gender in Music

This separation of standards between celebrities and the viewing public has been going on since celebrities have existed. In this case however, the focus is on the timeline of rap and hip-hop music that started in the mid-1980s. The general consensus among the genre, then and now, is an overwhelming amount of male dominance and an idea that accumulating money, drugs, and even women is the root

of success. This began the coining of the term "thug" as a term of respect and pride. Made popular by Tupac Shakur in the mid-1990s, "thug music" was associated by many with the "dissolution of our family values nationwide" (Jeffries 35). This one-sided, negative connotation does not and should not contain all of Shakur's music, especially the tracks that pertain to love and sex. Even Tupac himself said, "Part of being [a thug] is to stand up for your responsibilities.... I want to be real with myself" (36). This hyper-masculinity can certainly account for a large portion of the misconception of extreme materialism within the industry.

The similar concepts of black manhood or black masculinity are very hot topics among discussion of hip hop and rap music. In its simplest of definitions, black manhood and black masculinity are the stereotypes, norms, and expectations put on African-American men by the predominantly white audience. This is not exploited directly by the artists; rather, the artists and their music are byproducts of a stigma created by consumers and "a give-and-take negotiation process between the artist and the music producer that has historically been heavily skewed toward the latter" (Balaji 22). Consumers communicate to the music producers what type of music is making money through album sales, and producers then bring on clients that can produce this type of music. It seems as though Balaji's findings would refute the idea that people like Tupac created the term "thug" and started the tough, rugged black male figure throughout hip hop and rap. And in a sense, it is; Tupac had a certain "tough guy swagger" about him that producers knew would sell albums, and the term "thug" was born. However, in a sense it reinforces the ideas of enforced male heterosexuality. Tupac's music personality is, as stated before, a product of the time. Without it, he

would not be able to be properly marketed to the rap music audience of the early 1990s.

A more contemporary example of this can be found with Lil' Wayne and his hit song "Lollipop" released in 2008. In an interview about the song with *Vibe Magazine*, Wayne is asked about being referred to as a "ho" by fellow rapper 50 Cent, to which he replies, "Yeah...I'm like Trey Songz, no homo" (38). The term "no homo" is included because Wayne wants to make clear that he does not have sexual feelings toward Trey Songz. This type of pressure on men does not only apply to music, but all of masculinity in today's culture as well. Men are conditioned since childhood by other men to avoid being overly sexual and emotional, and avoid judgement by constantly reasserting their own manhood. Some of the most powerful and most influential artists, including Tupac, Lil' Wayne, and especially Chris Brown, address a sense of vulnerability and loneliness in their work. At some point, they must then counteract it with other messages to avoid losing the aforementioned male dominance.

Similar societal pressures and expectations have been put on women in music, either by men in the industry or by other women in society. These pressures have led to a gender divide in the definition of what makes an ideal, "independent" woman. From a male perspective, an ideal woman is one who pays her own bills, has an education or is pursuing one, and is creating an overall good home life (Moody 54). It is not an earth-shattering insight that hegemonic values placed on women are drastically different and belittling at times. However, it is worth delving into why and how it is done. Historically speaking, in a patriarchal and capitalistic society like American music certainly is, the interpretations of masculinity and femininity overlap:

The masculine circle converges with the norms of society, providing a masculine signature and overriding the feminine circle. Women can either try to translate their points of view into a masculine mode or try to separate alternate models of communication. Therefore, women's perspectives are often not openly articulated. As a result, their expression is muted. (Moody 45)

This can be seen at work in a variety of different mediums. Primarily how each gender is talked about or described is very telling of how this divide functions. There are terms that are used for men that are seen as terms of pride and something to gloat about, where similar terms used to describe women are very derogatory and not seen as appealing. As Moody describes, terms like "playboy" and "stud" are meant to be positive for men but terms like "slut," "bitch," and "whore" are meant to be negative coming from men and are certainly received that way by women.

As more women have broken into the mainstream of hip hop music, they are beginning to make a strong identity of what a woman in hip hop is. They are beginning to "own" some of these labels in an effort to gain strength in numbers from them. Artists like Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj are prime examples of women who know exactly what they are, what they want, and how they want to get it. In modern hip hop, as Moody also found, strong women in music equate independence with being independent sexually. More specifically, "getting and giving good sex—and the importance of men paying to be with them" (Moody 55). Sometimes, though, these clashes between genders can create the expression of real-world problems within the music, some of which may exhibit messages that may not have been intended.

When the values and interpretations of gender clash, it can create a very controversial, but also very profitable, set of topics in hip hop or rap music. One of these controversial topics that has sprung up in the 21st century is domestic violence and Intimate Partner Violence (or IPV). The most well-known song concerning this issue is “Love the Way You Lie,” the instant smash hit by Rihanna and Eminem in 2010. The song tells the story of the relationship between Eminem and his ex-wife Kim Scott. It portrays the vast and abrupt swing of emotions that comes from volatile relationships, creating a chain of events leading up to physical violence. While there is a large group of people that are well

aware of this, many people wish to forget that it actually exists or create delusions that rationalize IPV. When asked about the process that went into producing the song, Rihanna said “It’s something that a lot of people don’t have a lot of insight on, so this song is a really powerful song, and it touches a lot of people” (Thaller and Messing 623). Both Eminem and Rihanna have experienced IPV first hand, with Eminem and his ex-wife and, of course, Rihanna with Chris Brown. In Thaller and Messing’s piece on misperceptions of IPV, they found these six myths or common misconceptions surrounding Intimate Partner Violence:

Myth 1 (M1)	Most women could get out of an unsafe relationship if they wanted to	Direct Victim Blaming
Myth 2 (M2)	Some women who are abused secretly want to be treated that way	Direct Victim Blaming
Myth 3 (M3)	Some women initiate intimate partner violence by treating their men badly or taking the first swing	Direct Victim Blaming
Myth 4 (M4)	Most intimate partner violence occurs when a man has been drinking or has lost control of himself	Perpetrator Exoneration (Indirect Victim Blaming)
Myth 5 (M5)	Much of what is referred to as intimate partner violence is a normal reaction to relationship conflict	Minimization or Normalization of Violence
Myth 6 (M6)	Intimate partner violence is low-class, not something that happens in my neighborhood	Minimization or Normalization of Violence

Source: Thaller and Messing, 626

In far too many cases, celebrity or not, Direct Victim Blaming is very present. For many outsiders, this is a way of separating themselves from the situation and absolving themselves of all possible involvement and potential feelings of guilt. This is the most common reaction among today’s culture, and was a main piece in the aftermath of the Brown-Rihanna incident. Immediately after it found its way to the news, people had their attention on Brown. However, as time went on, there was a large backlash against Rihanna. On social media, people were attacking her, insinuating that she antagonizes Brown and “makes him want

her.” Many people also believed that Brown wouldn’t just do that; Rihanna must have said or done something that made him cross the line. One explanation for this could be due to the misconception that many IPV incidents are initiated by the woman, and that the man is acting in self-defense, no matter how unproportional it may be (Myth 3). In “Love the Way You Lie,” the woman is always portrayed to take the first violent action, and the man is only trying to fend her off. In a similar manner to Moody’s, Thaller and Messing conclude that society is under the impression that “men who abuse women do so as an unintended and unexpected

extension of otherwise acceptable behaviors” (632).

Much of this can also be easily traced back to Rihanna’s established reputation of being bold, outspoken, and never taking criticism from anyone. With this reputation, it began a large chain of slowly relieving the guilt and blame off of Brown, which Thaller and Messing fittingly classify as Perpetrator Exoneration, or Indirect Victim Blaming (626). The other major behavior that these myths articulate is a minimization, or “dumbing down,” of this violence. In this case, many people saw what happened as 2009 as a normal instance of what happens in resolving relationship conflicts. This myth is likely a result of it being seen among everyday life, and due to the previous myths, is seen as a normal occurrence. In the video for “Love the Way You Lie,” many of these emotions are realistically and explicitly portrayed in a chronological fashion. Images of a young woman being handed a teddy bear after a brief violent confrontation and lyrics like “She fucking hates me and I love it” (628) confirm the presence of these trains of thought. These types of studies and findings have only increased in strength and validity in the past 30 years, as domestic violence has become a far more public issue, the rights of women have been taken much more seriously than they ever were, and real-world issues or concerns have made their way into the lyrics of the biggest stars in music.

“Doubleness” of Thugs in Music

The image of hip hop and rap music has also changed drastically since its inception in the mid-1980s. Initially, with groups like N.W.A and the Beastie Boys topping the charts of the genre, the stigma was created that this new type of music promoted violence, misplaced aggression, and many other negatively impacting behaviors. As time went on though, and even at that time,

this vision of the genre was not entirely accurate. In an analysis of the content within rap music videos, Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang expose the more positive side of hip hop and rap, something that is very rare among critics of modern music. In a close look at the lyrics of hip hop and rap music from then and now, it appears that “there are mixed findings in prior research suggesting that rap music contains both controversial and community promoting themes” (134). In a sense, it feeds off of the figure that 68% of rap music is founded on ideals of respect, and that messages of this nature can be seen just as often as images of violence (135). This is in part due to the change in listener preference since then, but it also indicates the existence of a “doubleness” so to speak, where an artist makes both types of music in order to create a larger audience.

This sense of “doubleness” is not a new concept, but it has a more profound effect on music in popular culture and how the public reacts to the artist’s usage of it. Even in my own experience in growing up in a similar timeline to Chris Brown’s, it is clear that his most famous moments were caused by the media exposure of his more brash songs and actions. As stated before, my most profound impression and recognition of Brown was after the 2009 incident. It speaks to the power the media holds over its viewers, and how even artists can be greatly influenced or swayed by its actions. For Brown, it is interesting to observe how he has changed as an artist with age as well as how his personal life has reflected the music he releases. It is commonly known that a lot of what Chris Brown releases does, in fact, follow the conventional guidelines of R&B, hip-hop, and rap. However, he has had a way of showing his “softer side” without giving away his masculinity, and these tracks and albums tend to be overlooked at times throughout his career. For example, for every song like “Back to Sleep” or

“Ayo” where the lyrics contain nothing but sexual overtones and him calling all the shots in a relationship, there are songs like “Forever” and “With You” that talk about loving/respecting one person and discussing actual human emotion. Early on in his career, the majority of his tracks expressed emotion uncharacteristic of male music. But after the incident, his albums became very objective and reflective of his frustration over what occurred with Rihanna. In the past year with the release of “Royalty,” an album named after his newborn daughter, the songs are very future-oriented and forgetting the past. In “Little More,” the music video depicts Brown playing with his daughter and sets a very peaceful scene. “Zero” talks about a previous relationship in which Brown “*gave a hundred percent but all I got from you was zero...zero.*” He shows frustration for his newly realized waste of time, but moving on is the right thing to do in order to do what is best for him and his child.

Conclusion

So the question still remains: why are these songs about IPV and a mass objectification of women so popular and given a free pass by the viewing public? It would appear that, as shown by Thaller and Messing’s myths, that a lot of what the media has shown us about domestic violence has been accepted as a part of modern relationships (Thaller and Messing, Myth 5). If this becomes a common assumption, then people will learn to accept it as part of popular culture. And if these messages are seen by children and young adults, who often look up to these artists or performers, the cycle of accepting these behaviors becomes perpetual.

And why do people gravitate towards his more explicit tracks? While there are an abundance of reasons, it is most likely because of the hookup culture that has grown into the mainstream in the 21st

century. This culture is more concerned with more fast-paced and spontaneous interaction rather than love that lasts for a long period of time. Without a doubt, the standards of music that must be met and the content of said music that needs to exist in order to stay relevant have certainly changed. The life and times of Chris Brown have certainly been interesting and hard not to know about. Is he a model citizen by any means? Absolutely not. But I believe that today’s culture warrants an incredibly one-sided view of pop culture stars and their actions. While what he has done and how he has acted is not normal or the conventional ideals of a “good person,” many forget that nearly every human being, regardless of their fame or social standing, is shaped by their surroundings, *especially when they’re young*. Try to imagine being fifteen years old, reaching an unexpected level of success in an industry that glorifies almost nothing but sex, male dominance, and practically bathing in their self-absorbed world. At that point, one can only put themselves in that position and ask if they would be able to break from that mold. The 2009 incident certainly knocked the progression of Brown’s career down a few rungs on the ladder, and of course that is his fault. However, looking at how the music has evolved since those times should say something: It should tell an onlooker that once the media has a stranglehold on your personal life, it is a very difficult uphill battle that takes years to get out of. Life has a way of humbling those that fall off the tracks, but for those like Brown that seem to want to find their way back, they must create an avenue to do so.

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