Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

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Dankoor, K.E.; Stephens, D.P.; Bogt Ter, T.F.M.

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Am I feelin' myself? A focus group study of African American college students' attitudes toward gender ideals in commercial rap music videos and their relevance for self-images

Kim Eva Dankoor[1] · Dionne Patricia Stephens[2] · Tom Ferdinand Maria Ter Bogt[1]

Abstract

Black American commercial rap videos have been criticized for portraying stereotypical gender ideals concerning gender-appropriate behaviors, appearances and attractivity, and heterosexual relationships. We explored to what extent African American college students reject (REJ) and value (VAL) gender ideals in these videos. Additionally, we examined the connections between the perception of these ideals and students' actual and ought self-images (i.e., attributes they believe they possess and those they perceive others in their social environment expect them to have). We focused on the self-image domains: gender-appropriate behavior, physical appearance, and mate desirability. Social Comparison Theory and Social Discrepancy Theory provided sensitizing concepts for reflexive thematic analyses of focus group discussions on music videos with eight college women and seven college men. Among women the themes were: Black women behave like sexual freaks (REJ); attractive women are exotic-looking (REJ) and naturally thick (VAL); and desirable women mates are beautiful, confident and toned-down (VAL). The themes among men were: Men are playas (REJ) and prioritize making it financially big (VAL); attractive men look fashionable and rich (VAL); and desirable men mates are emotionally distant (REJ) and provide for their partners (VAL). Same-gender comparisons of these ideals with the actual self resulted in both positive and negative self-images and emotions. The comparison of these ideals with the ought self-image resulted in negative emotions. These results demonstrate that portrayed ideals in music videos are relevant to the formation and evaluation of the self during emerging adulthood. Implications for future research and intervention programs are discussed.

Keywords Rap music · African American · College students · Gender ideals · Social psychology · Self-image

Introduction

"[…] And I'ma ice [add jewelry] your wrists like a player (Ayy).

Doctor Miami add layers, now the ass is fat like an acre.

[…] And I'll cream that pussy like mayos."- Young Thug.

"Twist his tongue like I, I mean.

I mean my body so out of this world.

Change my at name to astrogirl (astrogirl)." - Megan Thee Stallion.

The lyrics cited above from the popular rap song *Don't stop* (2020) by Megan Thee Stallion and Young Thug exemplify the formulaic content and limited range of gender performances in North American commercial rap music (Avery et al., 2017; Flynn et al., 2016). Commercial rap music is a subgenre of U.S. rap that, over the past two decades, has risen to become one of the most popular music genres

✉ Kim Eva Dankoor
     k.e.dankoor@uu.nl

1   Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht
     University, Utrecht, Utrecht, the Netherlands

2   Department of Psychology, Florida International University,
     Miami, FL, USA

globally, especially among young people. This subgenre and the accompanying videos often feature catchy hooks, polished production, and lyrics and imagery that focus on themes such as romance, sexual attractiveness, partying, and, more broadly, a wealthy and successful lifestyle, making them appealing to a wide audience (Christenson et al., 2019). The primary aim is typically to generate commercial revenue through album sales, streaming of songs and videos, and radio play, rather than to challenge societal norms or express the underground, countercultural ideas that are more prevalent in non-mainstream rap. Rap, the musical expression of Hip Hop culture, is deeply rooted in the history of Black music and socially connected to Black communities in major cities. The vast majority of U.S. rap artists, both women and men, are part of West African diasporic communities, including African American, Caribbean American and Afro-Latino American (Avery et al., 2017; Chang, 2007; Rose, 2008).

Consumption of the portrayals in Black commercial rap has been linked to traditional and cultural gender-stereotyped attitudes toward gender-appropriate behavior (Dankoor et al., 2023; Ter Bogt et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2005), physical appearance (Maxwell et al., 2016; Stephens & Few, 2007), and women-men relationships (Bryant, 2008; Dankoor et al., 2023; Stephens & Few, 2007) among African American and White adolescents, aged 10–18. However, research on the effects of (commercial) rap music on gender ideals among emerging adults aged 18–25 is limited and has predominantly focused on White emerging adults (Kistler & Lee, 2009; Wright & Rubin, 2017). Furthermore, with a few exceptions (Dankoor et al., 2023, 2025; Zhang et al., 2009), studies on rap music audiences have largely overlooked the impact of gender ideals on self-image formation, a critical factor for psychological well-being (Mann et al., 2004). According to Arnett (2000, 2023), emerging adulthood is a formative period characterized by the exploration of various possibilities in romantic relationships, sexual encounters, friendship, work, and worldviews. This exploration is critical for establishing personal relationships and professional goals, and to the further development of a healthy sense of self. It is therefore timely to study whether and how media, in this case rap videos, affect emerging adults in their ideas about themes that resonate heavily in these videos: gender appropriate behaviors, appearance and desirability, and investigate how these ideas inform a sense of self.

We focus on African American emerging adults, not only because they are understudied, but because they may– just like their adolescent counterparts–be particularly susceptible to the ideals portrayed in commercial rap. This heightened susceptibility arises from their potentially unique connections to the music and its creators, such as identification, which stem from shared ethnic and cultural backgrounds

(Conrad et al., 2009; Milkie, 1999). We will demonstrate that Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory (SCT) and Higgins' (1987) Self-Discrepancy Theory (SDT) are appropriate socio-psychological frameworks to explore and explain the phenomena under study.

Gender ideals in commercial rap

What do we know about the (cultural) gender ideals of gender-appropriate behavior, physical appearance and women-men relationships in commercial rap? With regards to *behaviors*; in a quantitative analysis of lyrics of over 500 songs of U.S. Black rap, R&B and pop artists, Avery et al. (2017) found that traditional gender stereotypes predominate in rap music. The femininity ideals often position women as sex objects, emphasizing their role in fulfilling men's pleasure; the portrayal of idealized masculinity encompasses traits such as being sex-focused, competitive, emotionally tough, risk-taking, and prioritizing material goods to enhance one's status. Other content-analytic studies of lyrics and visuals support the findings that gender-stereotypical behaviors—such as women being the targets of objectification and men doing the objectifying—are often portrayed in rap music (e.g., Karsay et al., 2019; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Furthermore, Flynn et al.'s (2016) quantitative content analysis of 600 popular song lyrics, including rap, revealed that women artists verbally self-objectify to a greater extent than men artists. Specifically, they more often present themselves as objects to be observed and evaluated based on their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness. Aubrey and Frisby (2011) quantitative analysis of 147 music videos also discovered that women rap (and pop) artists are more prone to sexual self-objectification compared to their men counterparts. However, it is important to note that record industry moguls may encourage women artists to engage in self-objectification to boost sales (Flynn et al., 2016; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009).

Conrad et al. (2009) performed a quantitative analysis of 108 rap videos and found that women and men were held to different standards in their *physical appearances.* Women in these videos were confined to a single ideal form of appearance relating to their skin tones, hair textures, and facial features, whereas the looks of men characters differed more. The typical woman video model look features a slim body type and characterized by lighter brown skin tones, flowy hair, and defined noses. The incorporation of these beauty standards is believed to be a legacy of transatlantic slavery in which more "European-looking" Black women were afforded more value (Stephens & Few, 2007). Interestingly, authors have suggested that the idealized body shape among video models and women artists can also be a "thick" one, with large breasts, thighs, buttocks but a small waist (Burns

& Woods, 2019; Dankoor et al., 2025; Jennings, 2020; LaVoulle & Lewis Ellison, 2018).

Hunter's (2011) qualitative content analysis of 41 rap videos reported on imagery of *women-men relationships*, revealing the significant role of money in these relationships. First, regarding the display of romantic relationships: men rap artists often attempt to seduce potential girlfriends or wives with material objects or express romantic interest in women who have the same luxury lifestyle. These romantic narratives typically lack references to genuine emotional connections between partners (Hunter, 2011). Second, concerning the display of sexual attractivity and dynamics: portrayals of men artists throwing money at scantily clad women video models who dance seductively are common. Hunter (2011) argued that the rise in popularity of rap from the South, with the capital of Atlanta, contributed to the increase of strip club-like portrayals of women in rap. Similarly, Carbone et al. (2024), in their quantitative analysis of 200 rap song lyrics—including those from the U.S.—found that pairing women's physical attributes with material wealth serves as a status marker for men, further reinforcing gender hierarchies.

These content-analytic findings indicate that rap lyrics and videos often support historically defined behavioral roles of women in Western society as passive beings, primarily valued for their looks and sexual attractiveness (Davis, 1990) and that rap aligns with Western traditional hegemonic ideologies of masculinity, highlighting strength and success (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Levant et al., 2013; Rosenmann et al., 2018). Concerning physical appearance, the following observations can be made. While it has been reported that a thin, European-looking beauty standard is often featured in rap media, scholars have suggested the importance of an alternative thick ideal. This representation aligns more closely with an African American beauty ideal, offering a contrasting standard of attractiveness (Hughes, 2021; Hunter et al., 2021). Regarding mate desirability, it is notable that women are expected to be physically attractive and wealthy or impressed by material resources, while men are expected to be materially successful, largely emphasizing traditional Western gender roles and expectations (Davis, 1990; Rosenmann et al., 2018). How African American emerging adults negotiate these gender ideals, determine which to reject or value, and integrate them into their self-image remains an open question.

The actual, ideal and ought self-image in theory and empirical media research

SCT (Festinger, 1954) proposes that individuals have a natural inclination to actively compare themselves with similar (e.g., gender and ethnicity) and relevant (i.e., similarity

in goals/ideals) others, driven by the motive to evaluate themselves (Festinger, 1954; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Higgins' SDT (1987) explores the affective consequences of comparisons with others. Specifically, people who compare themselves with individuals they believe are more "ideal" may be confronted with negative emotions, such as disappointment, dissatisfaction and anxiety, because such negative upward comparisons are likely to reveal discrepancies between their *actual self-image* and *ideal self-image* (Higgins, 1987; Wang et al., 2023). Comparisons with popular media characters are believed to have negative consequences for people's self-images and psychological comfort as these characters present extreme ideals related to aspects such as appearances, (financial) successes, and sexual and romantic attraction (Corcoran et al., 2011; Dankoor et al., 2023, 2025; Kistler et al., 2010). Negative outcomes of such upward comparisons may be intensified when individuals believe that peers in their environment expect that they should resemble or act similarly to popular media characters. Then, they may experience negative emotions such as worry due to discrepancies between their *actual self-image* and their *ought self-image*, which concerns the inner representation of the expectations and demands of other people in their social environment (Higgins, 1987; Mankotia & Wesley, 2020). Conversely, individuals may experience positive emotions of inspiration and motivation when they believe they can narrow the discrepancy between their actual self-image and ideal or ought self-image (Dankoor et al., 2023, 2025; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

The self-image is a multidimensional construct. The relative importance of these dimensions can shift throughout different phases of people's lives. For example, children will most likely deem the *mate's desirability* self-dimension irrelevant, whereas adolescents and emerging adults place significant value on being perceived as desirable in the dating context. In contrast, the self-dimension of *physical appearance* tends to remain salient across ages (Harter, 2012; Neemann & Harter, 2012). We adopted Harter and colleagues' *Self-Perception Profile for College Students* (Neemann & Harter, 2012) and *Adolescents* -including 18-year-olds- (Harter, 2012) to select the dimensions relevant to this study. The focus was on: gender-appropriate behavior, physical appearance, and mate desirability.

The dimensions of gender-appropriate behavior and mate desirability are underexplored in SCT, SDT and media studies (Dankoor et al., 2023; Kistler et al., 2010), but a number of studies regard the links between media consumption, young African American people's social comparisons with media characters and appearance-related self-images. First, Milkie's (1999) comparative qualitative study found that African American adolescent women may not treat thin White magazine models as relevant comparison standards,

whereas White adolescent women may. Quantitative studies have confirmed that ethnicity can act as a buffer for African American girls and women. They often believed that the idealized images of White, thin models were not 'meant for them', and as a result, these ideals did not affect their self-image (DeBraganza & Hausenblas, 2010; Frisby, 2004). However, Zhang et al.'s study (2009) quantitatively found that African American college women with low ethnic identity, who internalized the mainstream thin ideal, may experience a lower self-image when engaging in upward comparisons with same-racialized models in rap videos exemplifying the thin body shape. The impact of the alternative thick body ideal in rap on (young) African American women has not yet been examined. However, a few studies that have reported on African American women's experiences with thickness have shown that pressure to align with this ideal may come not only from media, such as magazines and TV shows, but also from women's social environments. In this sense, both media-driven body ideals and the ought body ideal serve as influential standards. For instance, Capodilupo's survey study (2015) showed that idealized media images of beauty−in this case, characterized by a thick hourglass physique combined with European-looking facial features− might negatively affect African American women's self-image. This study further revealed that African American women may experience negative emotions, such as feeling undervalued or overlooked, when they believe that African American men compare their physical appearances with these idealized media images. Additionally, Capodilupo and her colleague Kim (2014) reported in their qualitative research that Black American women −including African American, Caribbean American and Haitian American− may experience pressure and frustration stemming from the perceived beauty ideals held by Black American men. Participants in this study expressed the belief that Black men in the U.S. favor the medialized ideal of a curvaceous physique paired with Eurocentric facial features.

As of yet only one study has reported on young Black men's comparisons with popular media characters (Dankoor et al., 2023).Interestingly, interview data revealed that African American and African (Surinamese) Dutch adolescent men often experience positive emotions −such as inspiration and motivation− when making upward comparisons with men rap artists. These comparisons can also enhance their self-perceptions in areas like gender-appropriate behavior, physical appearance, and mate desirability, particularly when they believe they can narrow the discrepancy between the artists' successes in finances, displays of wealth, and ability to attract women and their own.

More research is needed on media-related comparisons among African American emerging adults, particularly

regarding African American men. Nearly all existing studies have focused on the experiences of adolescent and (emerging) adult women and their comparisons with popular media models, leaving a significant gap in understanding the perspectives of men. Additionally, with the exception of one, all the studies mentioned above have centered on physical appearance as a self-dimension, overlooking other significant aspects of self-image that play an important role in the lives of young people (Harter, 2012).

The current study

Rap serves as a vital medium for many adolescents and emerging adults (Christenson et al., 2019), with its lyrics and videos presenting standards that are relevant for self-comparisons across various dimensions (Dankoor et al., 2023, 2025; Zhang et al., 2009).This study specifically focuses on the understudied group of African American emerging adults and is novel in several additional ways. First, it explores not only perceptions of and attitudes toward models (or standards) in rap but also the process of comparison with these standards and the extent to which they impact self-image. Second, while previous research has predominantly focused on appearance-related ideals, this study also includes two additional key dimensions of self-definition: gender-appropriate behavior and mate desirability in relation to media exemplars. Third, by incorporating the relatively understudied concept of the "ought self-image," this research situates media studies within a broader social framework (Dankoor et al., 2025; Mankotia & Wesley, 2020). This perspective is crucial for understanding the processes of self-definition (DiMaggio & Markus, 2010) and represents a significant contribution to the field of self-image research (Lowy et al., 2021). Fourth, although women have been studied more extensively in terms of media influences on self-perceptions −particularly regarding physical appearance− there is a scarcity of research on men in the aforementioned domains. Finally, our study adopts a qualitative approach, addressing the call for more culturally-sensitive, qualitative research in self-image (and SCT) studies (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014; Dankoor et al., 2025; Lowy et al., 2021; Poran, 2006). Through this approach, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how rap media impacts comparison and self-image formation processes among African American emerging adults.

Focus groups are useful for exploring culture-related topics. The participants primarily talk to each other rather than the researcher, and therefore these dialogues may give access to culturally-specific languages and attitudes. Furthermore, focus group settings encourage openness rather than inhibition and may be especially useful when investigating topics that require further extensive explorations

such as self-image (Kitzinger, 1995; Maxwell et al., 2016; Stephens & Few, 2007; Tiggemann et al., 2000). There-fore, this method of research was adopted. The following research questions were addressed:

1. *How do African American emerging adults, who regu-larly consume rap music, perceive and value gender ideals in commercial rap videos with respect to gender-appropriate behavior, physical appearance, and mate desirability?*
2. *How do these ideals inform self-comparison processes and respondents' actual self-image across these three dimensions?*
3. *How do these comparison and self-image forma-tion processes interact with pressures in the social environment?*

Methodology

Participants

We conducted two focus groups, one all-women and one all-men, with college students who self-identified as Afri-can American. These eight women and seven men aged 18 to 21 (mean age: 20.3 years) attended a large university in Atlanta. Following approval from the Institutional Review Board of the university, students were recruited on cam-pus. They were told that the group discussions would be about 'contemporary rap culture'. We employed purposive sampling to select students who frequently and consistently consume rap music videos, as their 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016) is expected to provide detailed and insightful perspectives on gender portrayals in commercial rap and their connection to self-image. During recruitment, we asked the students whether they consumed at least one hour of commercial rap music videos per week. One hour was selected as the minimum viewing threshold to ensure sufficient information power while maintaining inclusivity for participants with varying levels of video consumption. We did not set a maximum number of viewing hours, as our goal was to capture a broad range of viewing experi-ences. Other study eligibility requirements included: (1) self-identifying as African American, and (2) being 18–21 years old. The participants studied sociology, psychology, arts, education, Africana studies, or business economics. All the college women identified as cis women and college men as cis men. Thirteen of the fifteen respondents identified as heterosexual, and two college women identified as bisexual. Lastly, the respondents were either single or casually dating

at the time of data collection. The principal investigator employed pseudonyms to identify participants' comments and protect their confidentiality.

Procedure

Before the focus group sessions, students were asked to sign a consent form indicating they agreed to participate. The two focus group conversations -one with women and one with men- were conducted on separate days in private classrooms at the university. Each session lasted approxi-mately 210 min.

At the start of each session, the principal investigator introduced herself and her assistant and explained the defi-nition of *commercial* rap. The participants were allowed to talk briefly about the latest rap hits and trends before the investigator initiated the questioning. Based on Festinger's (1954) similarity hypothesis in terms of ethnicity and gen-der, our exploration solely focused on same-gender ideals and comparisons. The first three opening questions, "How would you describe the ideal woman/man with respect to behavior?", "And with respect to looks?", "And with respect to mate desirability?", were asked to verify the extent to which the students' readings of the same-gender ideals in rap videos coincided with our conceptualization of these ideals. The first and second key questions, "Are those ideals relevant for African American women/men?" and "What does meeting/not meeting those ideals mean for you?" tapped into respondents' perceived (sub)cul-tural gender beliefs, attitudes toward these ideals, social comparisons, and perceived discrepancies between their self-images. The last key question, "How do those portray-als make you feel?" was asked to evaluate their emotions regarding their self-images. The assistant took notes dur-ing the sessions that included emerging themes and striking non-verbal behavior. Throughout the focus group sessions, the participants seemed comfortable. They treated each other respectfully, appeared to feel *safe* sharing their inti-mate thoughts, and used culturally specific languages (i.e., African American Vernacular English expressions such as "keep it 100" "turned-up" and "baddies", and contempo-rary rap slang such as "drip"). The investigator and research assistant's insider status (i.e., African Surinamese Dutch and African American, both knowledgeable in rap culture) may have helped them feel at ease.

Data analysis

The principal investigator videotaped the two focus group sessions and transcribed them verbatim. The analyzed data

included the actual text (statements made by the students) and the notes of the investigator and the research assistant: these multiple data sources were collected to triangulate the data. A rigorous hybrid method, combining deductive and inductive approaches to coding, was employed for thematic analysis (Xu & Zammit, 2020), allowing themes–patterns of meaning– to develop from the raw data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). We utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) flexible and reflexive step-by-step method, which emphasizes "an organic approach to coding and theme development and the active role of the researcher in these processes", to guide our reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). The investigator, a heterosexual cisgender African Surinamese woman from the Netherlands, kept an introspective research diary to reflect on her relationship with the participating students, her research assistant, and the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This practice enhanced the trustworthiness of the research process by offering a comprehensive account of her reflections and decisions (Ahmed, 2024). After reading the transcripts and notes multiple times (initial familiarization of the data), the investigator employed both deductive and inductive coding methods to generate the codes (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Based on the research questions and theoretical concepts, the investigator developed a priori category manuals, one for college women and one for college men, in Microsoft Word 2019. She divided each overarching concept (i.e., self-dimensions) into two sub-concepts: (1) gender ideals, and (2) self-images. Subsequently, she attached descriptive in vivo codes to the manuals. In the following stage, the investigator searched for the inductive semantic themes connected to the ideals the participants rejected or valued. These processes entailed developing the prevalent codes that were most relevant to the research questions into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Subsequently, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) qualitative, reflexive approach to thematic analysis and coding reliability, the second and third authors were invited to review the themes. They cross-checked the codes in the manuals against the developed themes and they encouraged reflection and greater depth engagement (e.g., in what ways did your background shape your interpretations? And what were the contradictions within the data?). While defining the final themes, theories on (sub)cultural gender ideals were reviewed, and transcripts were triangulated with the notes of the investigator and the researcher assistant. Furthermore, theories and prior studies on social comparisons and self-image formation were reviewed to interpret these processes. Lastly, member checking, which entailed sharing the results with the participants to verify their accuracy, strengthened the validity of this study (Ahmed, 2024).

Results

The results were organized around the self-dimensions central to this study. Table 1 presents an overview of the developed same-gender ideal themes per self-dimension (REJ =rejected ideal/VAL =valued ideal). Per theme, we provide an example quote illustrating rejected and/or valued ideals. In the results section, we further discuss additional participant quotes that support the narratives of the same-gender theme. The frequencies of the themes are also shown in the table. For example, all eight college women rejected the portrayed behavior of 'Black women are sexual freaks', and all seven college men rejected the portrayed behavior of 'emotionally distant men', but valued the portrayed behavior of 'wealthy Black men'. We use the term "Black" in our results instead of "African American" because it reflects the preferred terminology of the respondents.

Gender-appropriate behavior

Femininity ideal: black women are sexual freaks (REJ)

When the interviewer asked how women in rap videos behave, the college women stated that the average *video model* behaves as a submissive sexual being with an unstoppable sexual appetite. For example, Brenda said, "They act like they want to please men all the time, like they can't control themselves or something." When the conversation focused on the behavior of *women rap artists*, there was a debate on whether the expression of their sexuality could be perceived as "empowering" (Deborah). However, the participants concluded this is not the case as these artists are "not in control of their bodies" (Aubrey). Deborah added:

> I hate to put it like this, but they [rap artists] are just good sexual objects. They want you to want to have sex with them. It's all for the entertainment of men; the twerking, the [sexually] freaky lyrics, and the outfits. Look at Nicki Minaj [artist]. I want to look at it from an empowering feminist standpoint, like, 'yeah, sis, do you!' But it is all about money. They want to sell records, so it's not their decision. (Deborah)

The participants did not value these behavior ideals because, as they stated, they do not believe it is a genuine feminist expression. Furthermore, they believed that portraying sexually submissive video models and overly sexual women rap artists may change non-Black people's perception of Black women. For instance, Carla said, "I don't like that people from other races think that all Black women are easy and loose [promiscuous]." Hillary added, "Yeah, it's the media, and music videos…you know…all those stereotypes of us.

Table 1 Description and frequencies of Same-gender ideal themes

Theme	Description	Example quotes	Frequency rejected ideal n (%)	Frequency valued ideal n (%)
Gender- appropriate behavior: Black women are sexual freaks (REJ)	Words or phrases that describe preferred women behavior in rap videos	"It just looks like all Black women are sex-crazed…like… freaks, yeah. I don't want to be associated with that behavior. I think it is wrong." (Eve)	8 (100)	N/A
Physical appearance: Attractive women are exotic-looking (REJ) and naturally thick (VAL)	Words or phrases that illustrate what a 'beautiful woman' looks like in rap videos	"I used to want straight 'Dominican' hair, but not anymore […]." (Carla) "I like big butts, boobs, and a tiny waist, but it has to be real though." (Aubrey)	8 (100)	7 (88)
Mate desirability: Desirable women mates are beautiful, confident and toned-down (VAL)	Words or phrases that highlight how a desirable woman acts and/or looks like in rap videos	"I am pretty. I go to college. I don't do the whole turned-up thing [i.e., excessive partying]. I am a whole catch!" (Brenda)	7 (88)	N/A
Gender-appropriate behavior: Men are playas (REJ) and prioritize making it financially big (VAL)	Words or phrases that describe ideal men behavior in rap videos	"They use girls, that is lame[…]." (Nathan) "To be 100 [honest] with you, I feel that I need to make a lot of money." (Harald)	7 (100)	7 (100)
Physical appearance: Attractive men look fashionable and rich (VAL)	Words or phrases that illustrate what an attractive man looks like in rap videos	"Yeah. Clothes make the man, haha. It makes you hot! You gotta have expensive shoes. Like Giuseppe's [brand] or something." (Ian)	N/A	6 (85)
Mate desirability: Desirable men mates are emotionally distant (REJ) and provide for their partners (VAL)	Words or phrases that highlight how a desirable man acts and/or looks like in rap videos	" They are cold toward their women." (Michael) "My girl, my wifey. I would treat her really nice [financially]." (Lance)	7 (100)	7 (100)

People will automatically assume that we are all freaks." Their descriptions of video models and women artists' behaviors seem to correspond with the cultural-historical stereotype of the Jezebel. This racialized stereotype, which emerged during transatlantic slavery, depicts African American women as having an insatiable sexual appetite and as more sexually deviant compared to women from other ethnicities (Collins, 2004).

College women's self-images in relation to the behavior ideals

Even though the behaviors of the video models and women artists did not resemble the students' behavior ideals, as they rejected such acts, they did evaluate themselves in relation to such images. For instance, Aubrey said, "As a Black woman, you have to think twice about what you are wearing. It's frustrating and annoying." Carla responded, "Yeah, I don't wear short shorts in the summer. I have a big butt, and I don't want people to think I am trying to show it off and that I am just as easy as those girls in the videos." The other students laughed and sympathized with her comment.

Deborah added, "Yeah, you don't want people to think that you are showing off your butt and looking for something [sex]…just as with twerking; I only do that at home, haha." The other participants agreed by nodding and sighing, "yeah."

Masculinity ideals: men are Playas (REJ) and prioritize making it financially big (VAL)

The college men believed that men rap artists' behavior is primarily centered on flaunting wealth; they tend to engage in extremely "flashy" behavior, which may come across as "ignorant" [i.e., unmannered] (Josh). Although they did not sympathize with the rap artists' flashy behaviors, they all valued the portrayed ideal of the *wealthy Black man* because it signifies that, no matter from which position you started, you can become financially successful as a Black man in a dominant White society (e.g., Michael: "It inspires me to see Black men who came from the struggle making it big now. That means I can make it too."). Achieving similar successes seemed paramount. For instance, Lance said, "I am thinking Jay-Z [rap artist/entrepreneur] money, that is

real money. That's what I want. He was a drug dealer, made music…knew how to invest." To which Ian replied: "Yeah, I wanna make those power moves too. I don't want to worry about money at all." This wealth ideal may reflect a traditional stereotypical gender norm still reverberating in U.S. culture, namely that masculinity should entail prioritizing financial success (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Rosenmann et al., 2018). Viewing same-ethnic *models* emphasizing the importance of wealth may have intensified these students' perceived ideal (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).

Furthermore, all the students thought that most rap artists are portrayed as "playas" (Michael) in their videos - treating women as one-dimensional sex objects whose emotions can be disregarded. The participants did not value such behavior anymore. Once they got older, they started to realize that valuing women and emotionally connecting with them is not "weak" (Harald) but "…actually a sign of strength." (Nathan).

College men's self-images in relation to the behavior ideals

The rap artists were perceived as relevant comparison standards for self-evaluations as they embody the portrayal of the *wealthy* Black man. Differences in financial status between the artists and the college men did not immediately result in negative upward comparisons; their current life phase seemed to have obstructed potential negative outcomes. In their opinions, it is "logical" (Ian) that they have not "made it big" (Michael) yet since they are still in college and working on their careers. At first, the students talked about the positive emotions they experience when they watch those portrayals. For instance, Lance stated, "It inspires me. It pushes me to work hard and think big. Make power moves…invest." Another student, Josh, added, "It's uplifting. You want something better than too." However, when the principal investigator asked whether they encounter other emotions, they revealed that negative emotions sometimes arise. For example, Nathan said:

> You [rap artist] want me to believe I am more of a man if I have a lot of money. It's a competition, and I don't always like how it makes me feel. When there is a competition, you have winners and losers. What if I don't make it? Am I a loser, then? Am I less of a man? Sometimes I have to turn the video off. (Nathan)

The other students agreed, and Michael and Harald responded with the following comments, "To keep it a 100 [to be honest], sometimes I do feel pressure to make it big," "Yeah, I also feel pressure to make money. As a man, you want to take care of the people around you." Lastly, a few college men shared that the 'playa behaviors' of rap artists

made them feel good about themselves when they were younger because, for them, such behaviors prevented girls from "using" (Michael) them first.

Physical appearance

Femininity ideals: attractive women are exotic-looking (REJ) and naturally thick (VAL)

College women characterized the physical appearance of women artists and video models as "Black with a foreign or exotic look. You know like the small nose and wavy long hair" (Aubrey), "plastic-looking" (Felicia), "big butt and breasts" (Brenda), and "a small waist" (Gigi). A brief discussion about the *video models'* skin tones followed. The participants argued that, nowadays, a wider range of brown shades is being portrayed, meaning that, in the past, you would only see light to medium brown-skinned video models, but now, you also see (deep) dark, brown-skinned women. For instance, Brenda said, "Look at Bria Myles or Juju [video models]; they are Black…dark-skinned. They are baddies [beautiful women]. And they have the [ideal] bodies." None of the college women valued the exotic looks of video models and women artists anymore but a significant majority did value the bodily ideals in rap videos as long as it is not surgically enhanced. For instance, Carla said, "Nobody wants to have small breasts and a flat butt. But it has to be natural though." The other participants laughed, and Felicia replied, "I think White girls want to have a flat butt, though. They are not into thickness." Their acceptance of the portrayed bodily ideals and their distinction between Black and White (young) women may support the notion that the full-figured body ideal is cultural (Dankoor et al., 2025; Hughes, 2021; Hunter et al., 2021).

College women's self-images in relation to the physical appearance ideals

The students who felt that they embody Afrocentric physical characteristics (i.e., facial features, darker-skinned, Afro-textured hair) revealed that the video models and women artists in rap with perceived more Eurocentric traits (Conrad et al., 2009; Walker Gautier, 2021) made them feel insecure when they were younger, but that family interventions, such as talks with family members about beauty, made them more confident. Furthermore, the participants who valued the thick body ideal in rap videos and considered the women with such physiques relevant comparison standards, evaluated themselves against those women. Most of these students experienced positive actual self-images (e.g., Aubrey: "It makes me appreciate my thickness," Carla: "Yeah, I am proud of my big butt"). Furthermore, all these participants

felt motivated, explaining that viewing the (natural) full-figured bodies in rap motivates them to work on themselves. For instance, Brenda stated, "They make me wanna eat better and go to the gym." Felicia and Deborah responded, "Yeah, like extra squat exercises in the gym to work on my booty, haha" (Felicia), "a juicy booty haha" (Deborah).

The participants experienced a shift in their emotions when their perceived ought body image was discussed. They revealed that they think that men at their university expect them to have similar bodies as the thick women in rap. Eve said:

> That [body ideals in rap] is a little intimidating sometimes, like as a girl you are very self-conscious about your looks, and sometimes there is a guy on campus you like, and that kinda feels like …urgh…you know. I don't have a huge, HUGE butt but I have a nice personality. That should be the most important thing! (Eve)

Felicia added, "I get angry when I have to tell a guy like: 'Okay, I am not shaped like those girls, but I have other amazing qualities."

Masculinity ideal: attractive men look fashionable and rich (VAL)

College men focused mostly on the rap artists' dress styles when describing their physical appearances. For example, Harald said:

> Designer things…when they come up, they usually wear simple things, more street stuff. But when their albums grow, they become more aware of designers, like Balenciaga and Lanvin…more toward Louis Vuitton and stuff. Look at Pharrell [producer/rap artist], who went from a skater brand to working with Louis.[…] as they evolve, they start collaborating with designer brands. (Harald)

Other students supported his claim by shouting the names of other rap artists who collaborated with luxury brands (e.g., "2chainz", Kelvin). According to these students, men's and women's attractiveness are rated differently, which is reflected in rap videos. "Men just have to look dope and rich," Josh said, whereas women have to be "baddies [physically attractive]" (Josh). Harald explained why that is, stating, "I don't want to sound bad but if you want to sell your music, you have to look good…You know, pretty face, big breasts and ass. Otherwise, we [men] are not going to check for you." This notion appears to reflect a traditional gender role stereotype, emphasizing men's finances and women's

physical appearance (Davis, 1990; Rosenmann et al., 2018). Most of the college men valued the (expensive) appearance ideals and believed that Black men rap artists are worldwide trendsetters.

College men's self-images in relation to the physical appearance ideals

The college men who valued the appearance ideals and perceived the stylish rap artists as relevant comparison standards for self-evaluations, generally engaged in negative upward comparisons with these artists. They expressed that, on occasion, they think they already should have had the financial means to buy the latest high-end fashion items. As Michael said, "I am not able to afford it now, but I need to find money to buy the new Balenciaga shoes, so I can be fresh [look good] again, haha." Lance added, "Maybe if I can find another strong source of income, I can buy more designer stuff." Harald responded, "Yeah, when I watch some of those rappers' drips [outfits], I be like, why can't I get that now? It is so unfair. Makes me a little upset." These students believed their college campus environment expects them to meet these appearance ideals. They explained that their men college peers could tell by the way they dress, which rap artists they listen to and what kind of "drip" (Harald) they try to adopt. Their perceived ought self-image contributed to negative emotions as it elicited pressure. As Ian said, "Rappers from Cali [California] dress differently than rappers from here [Atlanta]. So you can kinda tell, and you kinda want to have that look. I do feel pressure sometimes." Conversely, Michael revealed how he feels when he *does* look like one of his favorite rap artists: "It makes you feel special because people at [name university] will think you are famous or something."

Mate desirability

Femininity ideal: desirable women mates are beautiful, confident and toned-down (VAL)

When the principal investigator asked how the ideal woman mate (girlfriend/wife) is being portrayed in rap videos, the students stated that those women are "beautiful" (Aubrey), "confident" (Brenda), and more "toned-down" [i.e., modest in sexual behaviors] (Hillary) than the women who have decorative roles (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). They explained that *toned-down* women are sexually inhibited and would rather stay home than go to parties. Carla characterized such women as "church-type-of-girls." However, the college women believed that the culture surrounding rap (i.e., its presence on social media spaces and reality television) has a "major influence" on making "*turned-up* women"

[strip club dancers and/or women who seemingly express sexual agency and like to party] (Deborah) not only sexually appealing but also romantically appealing. For instance, Deborah said, "It is weird, in the videos you show us that you want a toned-down woman, but in real life, you date and wife up turned-up girls." The other participants responded to Deborah's comment by yelling out the names of strip club dancers who were in a serious relationship with a rap artist, such as "Lira Galore" and "Amber Rose" (Hillary). A significant majority of the college women valued the woman mate ideals portrayed in rap videos (i.e., beautiful, confident, toned-down).

College women's Self-Images in relation to the woman mate ideals

The college women who viewed the beautiful, confident, toned-down women in rap videos as relevant comparison standards seemed indifferent toward the beauty of rapper's girlfriends/wives because they regarded those portrayed ideals as unrealistic. For instance, Eve stated:

> I am not worried about that. It's a fantasy, and it's fake. They [the wives] still look good at 6.00 am …face full of makeup…hair done, like in Rick Ross' [rap artist] video. She's a baddie [beautiful woman] all the time, like how? No Black woman goes to bed without her hair wrapped in something… Nobody looks like that all the time. (Eve)

The participants did make negative upward comparisons with the portrayed confidence levels of the girlfriends/wives. They revealed that the undeniably confident attitude of these women motivated them to work on their own confidence as they believed that their lack thereof made them less romantically appealing. Furthermore, the college women said they believe their men peers expect their girlfriends to be turned-up instead of toned-down. For instance, Gigi stated, "It is hard to find a man because even regular guys want turned-up girls now. They want girls who can do flips [are sexually very skilled] in the bedroom and brag about their skills. They're not looking for church girls." Carla responded, " I am at home studying…being a good girl, you know, not being a ho, not turning-up, but nobody wifes me." Their comments seem to indicate that they endorse a traditional (polarized) categorization of women: you are either nurturing and modest (the *good Madonna*) or overtly sexual (the *bad Whore*) (Kahalon et al., 2019). Experienced discrepancies between their actual self-image (*good* women) and ought self-image (turned-up -*bad*- women) resulted in negative emotions. These students expressed that emotions of frustration, anger, and worry sometimes arise because

they are not sure if they will meet a romantic partner soon (e.g., Deborah: "I think that this little Hip Hop thing [the culture surrounding rap] took my man [made it hard for me to find a man]").

Masculinity ideal: desirable men mates are emotionally distant (REJ) and provide for their partners (VAL)

The college men shared that the ideal man mate (i.e., man rap artist) in rap videos takes care of his girlfriend/wife *financially*. They further said that although the portrayed ideal partner can provide financial security, he seems emotionally distant. He is not "in tune with his feelings" (Nathan) and does not "give his whole heart to his woman" (Harald). The participants did not value the portrayals of emotionally distant men; as now more mature men, they believe that emotionally connecting with women is ideal behavior (see masculine behavior). They did value the financial provider ideals (e.g., Kelvin: "Of course, men should do that." Michael: "Yeah, and you get loyalty in return. My woman has to be loyal if I pay all the bills."). Their endorsement of this ideal seems to reflect traditional gender arrangements rooted in evolutionary and sociocultural mechanisms (Buss & Barnes, 1986); men are expected to be financial providers (Davis, 1990). The students continued to explain why they valued such portrayals. For instance, Nathan said, "I think that it [portrayals of men taking care of women financially] can strengthen romantic relationships within the Black community because it shows something different than *men using women* and men bragging about how many women they slept with."

College men's self-images in relation to the man mate ideals

The students considered the 'provider portrayals' relevant for social comparisons. At first, they did not engage in negative upward comparisons and brought up the same arguments when the group discussion was focused on the portrayal of the *wealthy Black man* (see masculine behavior). The participants believed that they are doing what they can (i.e., attend college and work on their future careers) to attain a financially comfortable life in the future that will enable them to financially provide for their partners (e.g., Kelvin: "[…] keep working hard to get to your goals," Michael: "Work hard, and then you can make it too. Wife up a beautiful, loyal woman, haha", Ian: "They [rap artists] set a good example [providing]. It is motivating!"). However, the college men also revealed that sometimes negative emotions of worry arise because they are not sure if they are "gonna make it" (Nathan). They want to become financially successful not only to achieve financial freedom but also

because they feel that women still expect men to be providers; thus, seemingly, the discrepancy between their actual self-image and future ought self-image contributed to negative emotions. Josh disclosed:

> Maybe you don't have to pay for everything when you are married. Some women are really empowered. It is not the 50s anymore, you know…they also have the freedom to dress sexy if they want to. But I still think that women expect you to at least take care of a large portion of the bills. Especially when you have kids together. I also want to do that…as a man. (Josh)

Discussion

This focus group study aimed to gain a more in-depth understanding of how African American college students interpret and negotiate same-gender ideals in commercial rap videos. We explored how these ideals relate to their actual self-image of gender-appropriate behavior, physical appearance, and mate desirability, as well as how rap ideals deemed relevant interact with the pressures in the social environment regarding these themes.

During the focus group discussions, it was apparent that the students' readings of the femininity and masculinity ideals in rap videos corroborate that traditional gender stereotypes dominate rap music, with femininity ideals emphasizing woman beauty and sexual appeal, while idealized masculinity is portrayed through traits such as sexual prowess, competitiveness, and material status (e.g., Avery et al., 2017; Hunter, 2011). But it is important to note that the students showed their agentic abilities by both rejecting (REJ) and valuing (VAL) aspects of the portrayed ideals. These negotiations led to the following overall evaluations and themes among women: Black women behave like sexual freaks (REJ); attractive women are exotic-looking (REJ) and naturally thick (VAL); and desirable women mates are beautiful, confident and toned-down (VAL). The themes among men were: men are playas (REJ) and prioritize making it financially big (VAL); attractive men look fashionable and rich (VAL); and desirable men mates are emotionally distant (REJ) and provide for their partners (VAL). Although college women and men did not evaluate all the portrayed ideals in rap videos as positive, their relevance for self-evaluation purposes appeared to be high among this population of students.

Students' upward social comparisons with the rap ideals resulted in both positive and negative actual self-images and emotions. Positive outcomes occurred when the students believed they embodied these ideals or felt inspired and motivated to achieve them. They experienced less

appreciative self-images and negative emotions when they believed they did not possess certain ideals or should have already attained them. Interestingly, the students' self-guide of the ought self-image, i.e., how they perceive others in their social environment expect them to be, was an important source of negative emotions. In the remainder of the discussion, we will delve deeper into our results and connect them to findings from previous studies.

Gender ideal themes on appropriate behavior, appearance and desirability

Our first research question regarded how African American emerging adults value gender ideals in commercial rap videos. Our results show that the college women rejected the feminine behavior ideals in rap videos as if all Black women were sexual freaks. The portrayals of excessively sexual Black women in rap videos, similar to the cultural-historical stereotype of Jezebel (Collins, 2004), contributed to the college women's choice to dress modestly to avoid associations with this stereotype and associated behaviors. This result seems to align with previous qualitative research grounded in Black feminist and intersectional perspectives, which has shown that Black American college women– including African American women and those from Nigeria, Ghana, Sudan– may make more modest clothing choices due to their awareness of the Jezebel stereotype (Leath et al., 2021).

With regard to physical appearance, our finding that college women may prefer a naturally thick body seems to support previous qualitative and quantitative research indicating that a voluptuous body type is ideal within African (American) communities (Dankoor et al., 2025; Hunter et al., 2021; Hughes, 2021). The women's evaluations of the portrayed beauty ideals in rap videos also revealed that they do not value the "exotic" look anymore (e.g., Eurocentric facial features and wavy hair). Nevertheless, studies showing that "Western" beauty ideals can be relevant for some African American women (Capodilupo, 2015; Walker Gautier, 2021), highlight the importance of a holistic approach to examining African American women's physical appearance ideals and body image, which may be shaped by both Western and African American beauty standards.

The college women's ideals of mate desirability are highlighted in the final theme, emphasizing that desirable women are beautiful, confident and toned-down. Interestingly, the college women's categorization of women as either "toned-down, good girls" or "turned-up, bad girls" reflects the gendered stereotype of the *Madonna* (good) versus the *Whore* (bad), a prevalent binary in Western society (Kahalon et al., 2019). Ward et al.'s survey study (2019) revealed that African American women's endorsement of

such binary stereotypes in popular media might encourage passive sexual behaviors in adult relationships as they strive to uphold the "good girl" image, potentially leading to negative consequences for their relationships, sexual satisfaction and pleasures. It is important to acknowledge that Hip Hop feminist sensibilities, supported by qualitative empirical research, have highlighted the potential for sexually explicit women rap to have empowering and liberating effects on (young adult) women's sexuality. Rap artists, such as Nicki Minaj, Megan Thee Stallion and JT express their sexual agency and desires frankly, which, in the context of African American women lived experiences, implies defying traditional submissiveness *and* respectability politics (i.e., restrictive beliefs about African American women's sexuality rooted in fears of perpetuating the Jezebel stereotype). By challenging binary notions of "respectable good women" and "sexually bad women" contemporary women rap artists may carve out space for African American women to explore their understanding of and possibilities for sexual satisfaction and pleasures on their terms (Hall, 2024; Jennings, 2020; Johnson, 2021; LaVoulle & Lewis Ellison, 2018, Lewis, 2024).

The college men's responses to the question of how they negotiate gender ideals in rap videos indicated that the common denominator in their valued masculinity ideals across the three dimensions is economic prosperity. These respondents seem to adhere to the traditional belief that masculinity is defined by prioritizing financial success (Levant et al., 2013; Rosenmann et al., 2018). Although little is known about (young) African American men's same-gender ideals in the context of rap, our results align with results from Ward et al.'s (2005) quantitative and Dankoor et al.'s (2023) qualitative study. They found that African American adolescent men who frequently consume rap and identify with its characters believe that men should be rich. But our respondents did not unequivocally value wealth. For instance, they explicitly stated that they did not sympathize with the behaviors of men who *only* show their love by taking care of their girlfriends/wives financially but not emotionally. The respondents' desire to connect emotionally with their (future) partners may also increase their self-efficacy in a romantic relationship (Nielson et al., 2022). Furthermore, zooming in on the college men's masculinity ideals within the mate desirability dimension, their preference for a traditional gender arrangement in which the man financially provides for his partner, appears to contradict research suggesting that gender roles are generally less differentiated within African American culture (see Jones et al., 2018, for a full review).

On a more general note, certain portrayed ideals held notable significance for our respondents. Brown et al. (2005) have introduced the notion of media as a "super peer" in sexual affairs. Media showcase behaviors, styles, and values that young people may adopt; they legitimize what is considered acceptable, desirable, or "cool," much like peers do. Our results show that rap is indeed a relevant medium that functions as a super peer regarding gender ideals. However, our study also demonstrates that respondents interact with media content selectively, adopting elements that align with their beliefs while rejecting those that conflict with their system of attitudes and opinions. Our findings highlight the importance of a theoretical framework that posits media consumers as active participants who evaluate, adapt, and test their behavior against media examples (Milkie, 1999).

The actual self-image in relation to the ideals

Our second research question asked how the gender ideals inform self-comparison processes and respondents' actual self-image across the three self-image dimensions. First, although the college women rejected the "freaky" sexual behaviors exhibited by women video models and artists, they still found these portrayals relevant enough to engage in self-evaluative comparisons. Perhaps because research has shown that the Jezebel stereotype can significantly influence Black women's sexual decisions and behaviors in their daily lives (Leath et al., 2021). Their comparisons revealed that they evaluated their own (public) behaviors as better than those of the comparison standards (downward comparisons) as they consciously decided to dress more modestly than the women in videos and to not twerk in public. This result contrasts with the belief that comparisons with popular media characters are inherently upward (Corcoran et al., 2011; Kistler et al., 2010). Second, the college women's upward comparisons on the other two dimensions yielded outcomes that were, respectively, positive for one dimension and negative for the other. Positive outcomes arose when the women perceived similarities between their bodies and those of women artists and video models or believed they could attain similar body types, feeling inspired and motivated as a result. Conversely, negative outcomes were evident in the mate desirability dimension, where the women's actual self-image and emotions suffered. They felt their confidence levels fell short compared to the confidence displayed by the girlfriends or wives of men rap artists in videos.

The college men engaged in negative upward comparisons on the physical appearance dimension as they believed that they should have already been able to buy the same expensive clothing as the rap artists. Interestingly, they experienced *both* positive emotions of inspiration and motivation to attain similar successes and negative emotions of pressure and worry when they made upward comparisons on the behavior and mate desirability dimensions because they were unsure whether they were able to reach their financial

goals in the future. The positive emotions reported by the college men align with a previous qualitative study among African American and African Dutch adolescent men, which found that comparisons with rap characters' wealth can inspire and motivate (Dankoor et al., 2023). Nonetheless, future research may want to explore how these "wealth ideals" affect African American men rap listeners across different age groups, with older men potentially experiencing heightened pressure, worry, and goal-striving stress to have already attained certain financial goals. These negative emotions could be further exacerbated by societal racialized inequalities (Sellers et al., 2011).

Lastly, the results regarding the positive outcomes of upward social comparisons for both college women and men seem to align with earlier quantitative and qualitative SCT research, which found that similarity with upward comparison standards (Kang & Liu, 2019) and the perceived attainability of their successes (Dankoor et al., 2023, 2025; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) can be motivating and pleasant. This suggests that African American rap consumers may use upward comparisons with rap characters to improve in specific self-domains. Consequently, our findings may also contribute to the literature on social comparison motives (e.g., Corcoran et al., 2011).

Ideals and social pressures, incorporating the ought self-image

A third research question regarded the way in which the college students' comparison and self-image formation processes interact with pressures in the social environment. Our study clearly demonstrates that the effects of media consumption cannot be studied in isolation; both the media content itself and the dominant beliefs and attitudes within the social environment influence the potential impact of media representations (Dankoor et al., 2025; DiMaggio & Markus, 2010; Capodilupo, 2015; Capodilupo & Kim, 2014). The students' ought self-image was an important source of negative emotions. For both college women and men, the ought self-image was relevant to the physical appearance and mate desirability dimensions. For the college women, the voluptuous body ideal holds a certain appeal which is reinforced by validation from their men peers, resulting in negative emotions of pressure and worry. These results are consistent with earlier quantitative and qualitative findings suggesting that African American women may feel the need to conform to African American men's idealized notions of bodily beauty to compete in the dating market, leading to significant pressure (Capodilupo, 2015; Capodilupo & Kim, 2014). Moreover, interestingly, while the college women expressed a clear preference for a more modest, toned-down ideal, they experienced negative emotions when discussing

their perception that their men peers might favor "sexually freaky," "turned-up" women.

Regarding the college men's ought self-image: they believed that (1) their men college peers expect them to wear stylish clothing and (2) their future girlfriends/wives expect them to be able to financially provide for them. These expectations resulted in negative emotions such as pressure and worry. Our findings align with those of Nielson et al.'s (2022) survey study, which emphasized men peers as key socialization agents influencing adherence to cultural masculine ideals. Furthermore, while previous research has shown that African American adolescent men may feel motivated by financial providership expectations (Dankoor et al., 2023), our study demonstrates that such expectations can also lead to negative emotional outcomes.

Strengths, limitations and future directions

The strength of this study lies in addressing gaps in the literature on rap videos' effects on young people by focusing on African American emerging adults and delving into the connections between gender ideals in rap and consumers' self-images. Exploring three self-dimensions and incorporating the understudied concept of the ought self-image further added relevance to this study (Dankoor et al., 2025; Kistler et al., 2010; Mankotia & Wesley, 2020). In a broader context, we demonstrated the significance of SCT (Festinger, 1954) and SDT (Higgins, 1987) within media studies. It is precisely the combination of comparisons with media-derived ideals, perceived as relevant, and the pressures experienced from the social environment that drove the self-images and emotions of our respondents.

Still, the present study had a few limitations that need to be acknowledged. Our study was based on a small sample ($n = 15$) of African American college students from the Atlanta area; therefore, our results may not be generalizable to a different population. For example, African American emerging adults without a college education or in less urbanized parts of the United States may assign different values to the ideals in rap videos. Future studies should duplicate this study with a more diverse sample of young African American women and men, examining the intersections of factors such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, location, and class. This method allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how different aspects of identity intersect and influence one another (Walker Gautier, 2021). It would be interesting to actively include people with different sexual identities because increasingly more LGBTQI + artists are expressing their orientation through rap (e.g., Lil Nas X, Saucy Santana, Doechii, and Cardi B). Furthermore, it may be interesting to focus on rap consumers who experience varying degrees of unique connections to rap and its

characters, as this level of involvement may influence how relevant the ideals portrayed in these videos are to one's self-image (Dankoor et al., 2023, 2025; Frisby, 2004; Kistler et al., 2010). Lastly, some of the respondents stated that certain ideals, such as "exotic" feminine beauty and emotionless masculine behavior, became less valuable because they aged. Therefore, it seems important to continue to explore rap music's influence on young African Americans across different age groups, as they may internalize (or reject) these ideals differently during various stages of development.

Conclusion and practice implications

Our research uncovered that considering gender-stereotypical ideals relevant and engaging in active social comparisons with them, might inspire and motivate women to exercise in the gym, and adopt a healthier lifestyle, and encourage men to strive for financial security. But we also found negative emotions when one believes that peers expect a specific look or set of mate behaviors. Moreover, the positive emotions of inspiration and motivation may give way to negativity when individuals encounter the realization that certain ideals are more challenging to achieve than initially anticipated. Therefore, this study has an implication for (African American) educators, clinicians and healthcare professionals. First, it is believed that young women are more susceptible to media images than young men (Kistler et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023), however, our results indicate that equal attention should be given to young (African American) men (also see Dankoor et al., 2023). Therefore, schools and community organizations should integrate intervention programs, such as media literacy education programs, to educate young African American individuals about (the history of) stereotypical gender relations in rap videos and in larger society through an intersectional lens. Such programs should also stimulate open dialogues between young people about their expectations in the context of love, sex, and interpersonal relationships, as well as what they perceive others expect from them (ought self-image). This may foster empathy among peers regarding self-images and insecurity issues. Intervention programs seem essential for developing critical media skills early on, which may enable them to adopt strategies for enjoying rap videos with minimal negative outcomes on their senses of selves. In addition, understanding how portrayals in the popular and controversial commercial rap genre relate to the ideals and self-images of young African American women and men is crucial for clinicians and health care professionals in helping them develop healthy romantic and sexual relationships, as well as positive self-views.

Declarations

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