



Amplify Dot appearing at Wireless Festival

In the male dominated world of rap music female performers are often presumed to have feminist intentions. **Kate Moore's** analysis of 10 contemporary male and female British artists aims to determine whether this was the case.

Women in rap music

Stylistic choices as acts of defiance or compliance?



Baby Blue

“They say that he real cos
he say what he feels”

Blade Brown, In your dreams

Rap is one of the most popular yet controversial genres of music to emerge in the 20th century. In the 1970s a youth movement which became known as hip-hop developed in the Bronx region of New York City, comprising many different art forms, one being rap music. Stereotypically rap has been seen as the music of black, inner city male youth. The controversy surrounding rap comes from the fact it is seen to promote a way of life in which crime and extreme violence is normalised. Adding to the sea of controversy was the emergence of a sub genre in the 1990s known as ‘gangsta rap’ which, along with tales of violence and crime is also overtly misogynistic and homophobic. However the popularity has continued to rise in the 21st century, receiving huge amounts of airplay on both mainstream radio stations and television music channels across the world.

It is a genre that is frequently associated with hyper-masculinity, with lyrics promoting sexist attitudes and even violence towards women. I am interested in how female artists use linguistic resources, such as lyrics and pronunciation, in order to forge a female identity amid misogynistic rap culture. I am particularly interested in features of the female performers’ language that could be classified as variants of the **Jamaican Creole Patois**; previous research has found it to be an accent and dialect frequently associated with masculinity and



Ms Dynamite

often used in the performances of black male rap artists. However my analysis also looks at a number of different linguistic resources and how they are combined in order to create a unique identity for female rappers.

Jamaican Creole Patois

A Creole is a language originally derived from two or more already existing languages. Jamaican Creole has its origins in slavery, which resulted in many languages coming into contact. It was brought to the UK mainly in the 1950s due to mass migration.

Style and identity

Style is a key concept in sociolinguistics and early definitions suggested that style was influenced by contextual factors, such as the formality of setting. For example, a job interview setting might invite the interlocutors to use a more standard accent and formal style. Other work suggests that style (in the form of accent or dialect) is used by speakers in order to associate themselves with a group of people they wish to identify with. These definitions initially appear relevant when analysing the pronunciation of artists during their performances. We could suggest that female rappers

Variant

If there is more than one possible pronunciation of a sound we say there is a linguistic variable. Each possible pronunciation is called a variant.

Variationist Research

Research which looks into the differences which occur in the speech of people who speak the same languages. For example differences between genders, geographical locations, ethnicities.

found six female artists and four male artists whose work was appropriate for this analysis. The female artists I analysed in this study are Lady Leshurr, RoxXxan, Amplify Dot, Baby Blue, Lioness and Mz Bratt. The male artists included in the study are Sneakbo, Blade Brown, Skepta and Youngs Teflon. Despite the focus of the study being on female artists, it was important to analyse the work of their male contemporaries in order to see how a male identity was projected, and how this differed (if at all) from the projection of a female identity. Among the

dentals with either /t/ or /d/ as opposed to Standard English /ð/ or /θ/. This means that words such as ‘thing’ would be pronounced ‘ting’ and ‘that’ would be pronounced ‘dat’. Another two variants of word initial dentals are also possible in the performance of all but one of the artists; these are /f/ or the deletion of the dental altogether. This means ‘three’ could be pronounced ‘free’ and ‘them’ could be pronounced ‘em’. The pronunciation of word initial /f/ as opposed to /θ/ has been documented in another study regarding pronunciation in popular music, with the indie rock band from Sheffield, Arctic Monkeys, using the pronunciation in their song ‘Mardy Bum’. It is not surprising that both urban rap artists from London are using this variant along with northern indie artists, as the variant has frequently been documented as a ‘youth’ feature which is spreading across the country. This means that for the rappers analysed it is possible to use variants which can be classified as Standard English, Patois and ‘youth’. Stylistically this is interesting as it suggests that variants are used creatively by performers, and are not just a result of appropriateness to the genre or an attempt to align themselves with a certain group; this is clear from the wide range of variables used by each artist.

The highest users of Patois variants are two female artists. This goes against much previous work in sociolinguistics which suggests that women use more standard forms than men in the case of variables which are not undergoing change. One explanation for this finding may be that because rap is heavily marked as a male genre, female artists use Patois variants as a way to appear more masculine



Lady Leshurr – Female rappers may not rap about being the boss, but they wear it on their T-shirt

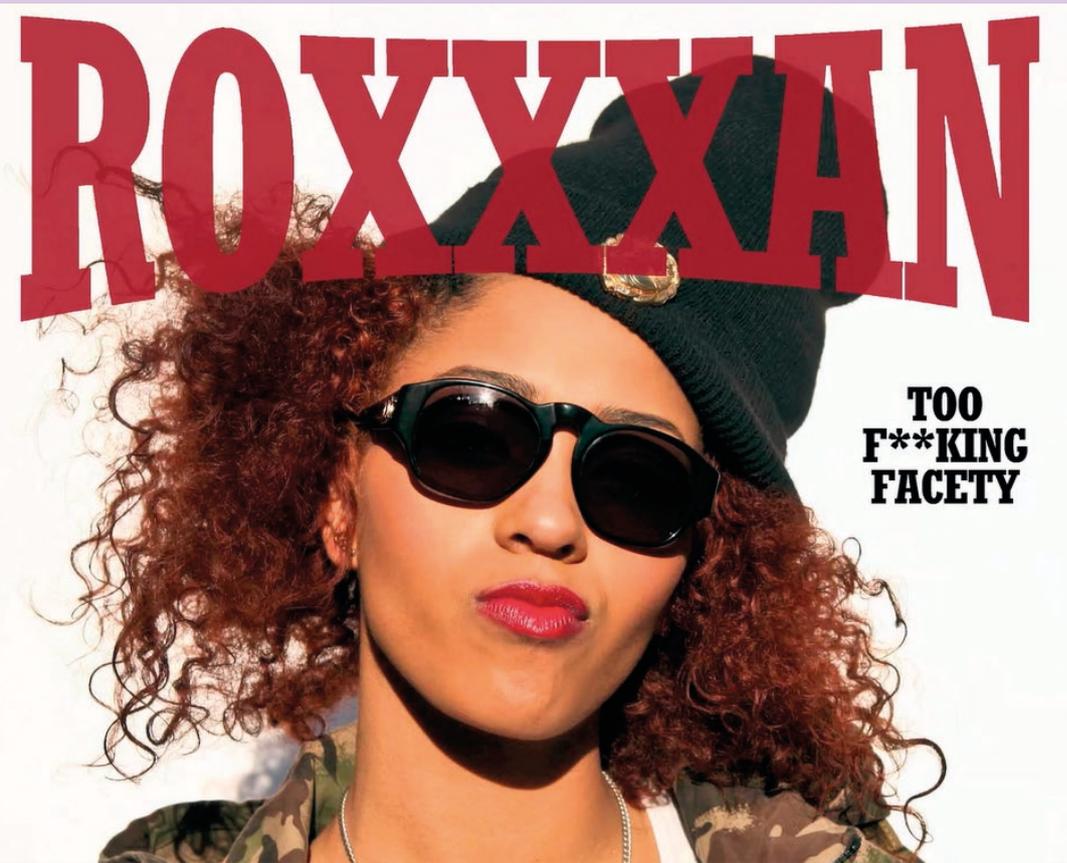
use Patois variants in their performances because Patois is appropriate within the rap genre, and they are trying to identify themselves with male rappers, as rap and masculinity seem to be intrinsically linked.

The majority of previous research into linguistic variation in popular music performances has focussed on all-white, all-male samples and research into rap music has focussed on American artists. Therefore I analyse the lyrics of female, black British rap artists. Using the video sharing website YouTube along with a popular website for urban culture ‘grmdaily’, I

many strategies used by female artists during their performance to participate in rap culture their use of Patois, **dialogism** and naming terms stood out.

“We run tings”

I analysed each artist’s performance in order to identify variants that could be classed as the Jamaican Creole Patois. Despite there being many possible Patois variants available to each artist, only few variants actually appear in the performances. By far the most commonly used variable by both male and female performers is the production of word initial



“I’m badder than a boy named Diddy, run the city like a unit led by Fi’ty”

RoxXxan as part of the Female All Stars, Roc the mic

in an attempt to define themselves as credible and authentic rap artists. I found that male and female artists only used Patois on a partial basis, and stuck to features which were easily usable and recognisable as Patois. For example artists occasionally used copula deletion, which means the verb “to be” is missing from a sentence, therefore instead of “we have been running this thing so long” we get “we [] running this thing so long”, which is a feature of Patois often stereotyped and commented on by prescriptivists. The partial use of Patois suggests that it is a *conscious stylistic choice* which is combined with other linguistic and non-linguistic choices to create a unique rap identity for

each performer, whether they are male or female.

History repeating itself

Another recurrent feature I found in the songs analysed, including those by male artists, is the use of dialogism. Dialogism is a concept first introduced by the Russian philosopher and literary critique Michael Bakhtin, and essentially means that everything is understood in the context of a greater whole, which leads to ‘meaning’ being constantly renegotiated. Dialogism occurs in rap when an artist references another artist by name or by reusing their lyrics. When referencing other artists, the performer is interacting with a larger discourse of rap, citing that which has gone before them. By re-uttering lyrics the artist

is not simply borrowing the original meaning of the words, but recontextualising the lyric in order to create new meaning whilst simultaneously working within the larger discourse of rap music as a genre. One song I analysed was Rock the Mic performed by a group of six female artists, the main refrain being “la di da di, we likes to party, we don’t cause no trouble we don’t bother no body”. These lyrics were taken from the song Lodi Dodi by the famous American rap artist Snoop Dog. The male rapper Blade Brown aligns himself with a significant hip-hop artist, Alpo in his song In your Dreams: “Throwing money, popping bottles, feeling like Alpo”. Here we can see dialogism is being used by male and female artists in order to associate themselves with prominent artists in the hip-hop genre, either by mentioning them by name or by reusing their lyrics. In the song Rock the Mic the female artists celebrate their skill and power as rappers with lines such as “I’m astounding the flows cold” or “Females in the thing got to accept it”. The use of the lyric from Lodi Dodi highlights the inherent problem for female hip-hop artists attempting to project a strong female image. Lodi Dodi was produced by the prominent American producer and rap artist Dr Dre, who publically assaulted female rapper Dee Barnes, not to mention his reputation for domestic violence.

“I spit bars like a beast, that’s my mojo”

Baby Blue as part of the UK Female Allstars

Therefore by using dialogism to mark themselves as authentic, the female performers in ‘Rock the Mic’ are paying

homage to one of the most famous rappers in the industry who makes no apologies for his violence towards women. In this sense, the female artists are attempting to gain power and project their own female identity, but are confined by the patriarchal nature of rap culture itself and could be seen as reproducing the power relations that already exist.

So rhymin' has never been a chore try a ting and you find out how a lion makes a roar.

“So rhymin’ has never been a chore try a ting and you find out how a lion makes a roar”

Lioness as part of the Female All Stars, Rock the mic

What’s in a name?

Another important stylistic device used by the female and male artists analysed was their choice of naming terms, how they refer to themselves and others. The names given to women by the male performers were: ‘chick’, ‘bitch’, ‘wifey(s)’, ‘girl’ and ‘bugatti’. The use of ‘bitch’ and ‘chick’ reduce women to the status of animals, with ‘bitch’ having more negative connotations than ‘chick’. The use of ‘chick’ suggests that the woman in question is soft, vulnerable and has little power of her own so is therefore no threat to the male. The word ‘bitch’ implies the woman is dangerous, and a potential threat to the males trying to control her, perhaps a formally domesticated animal that has turned on its owner. The female artists analysed also name other women as animals by using the word ‘chick’, however ‘bitch’ is not used between females in this study. Nonetheless, the

convention in rap to name women as animals is clearly recognised by the female artists in the descriptions they give of themselves, for example the artist RoxXxan states “I’m an animal, walk in my safari” whilst one female artist has chosen ‘Lioness’ as her performance name. In both these cases, it would seem the women are attempting to gain power by projecting themselves as powerful wild animals (as opposed to the more vulnerable animal metaphors available), rather than allowing men to define them as such. This attempt to project a strong image using animal metaphors is problematic because again it is reaffirming negative stereotypes which suggest women are subhuman. Stereotypes often have a negative impact as they serve to reduce people to a certain set of characteristics, emphasise them and highlight differences between groups. Normally stereotypes are used by those in power against groups with less power such as women, and we can see this happening with women in rap and popular music in general. Metaphors are interesting because they only work if they can be understood, so the fact the woman as animal metaphor is so commonly used means that the belief women are in some way subhuman to men has been so well-perpetuated it is easy for most people to understand. So in the case of the female rappers that I analysed, rather than challenging negative images about women, by naming themselves as animals they are aiding the hegemonic ideal, and are consenting to their control, without males having to enforce it. In this sense female rappers are trapped by negative stereotypes and even when trying to challenge them by taking ownership and choosing

the type of animal they are, they are still reinforcing and strengthening the powerlessness they are trying to escape.

The inequality in power between male and female rappers is even more striking when considering how men are named in rap songs particularly by one another. The following terms are used in the songs I analysed for this study: ‘nigga’, ‘little man’, ‘boss’. In no instances are the men referred to as animals, they are a ‘boss’, obviously implying power and control. Also they are not ‘boys’; they are ‘men’ as opposed to women who are referred to as ‘girls’, which is an example of infantilization, a process by which – in this instance – women are reduced to the status of young children, showcasing another stylistic choice which reduces the power of women. Despite ‘nigga’ being a racial label, reclaimed by black speakers from its use as an insult used by white speakers, it is not a term used by the black female performers, suggesting it has masculine connotations, excluding females from using it.

“I’m a boss you da fake type”

Sneakbo, I’m A Boss



Rapper Sneakbo

Another metaphor for women found in rap songs is women as food, with female performers referring to other women as ‘honey’. The male artist Sneakbo states he will “doggy that spice until the sheets

turn red”, ‘spice’ in this instance meaning an attractive woman. ‘Spice’ and ‘honey’ are types of food stuff which are added to meals to give additional flavour, they are not main ingredients and could easily be left out of any meal. Therefore this metaphor implies that the role of women in the world, especially in relation to men is unimportant, they are optional are there to give added pleasure, nothing more. Along with the food metaphor the violent imagery evoked by the lyrics of Sneakbo illustrate a highly misogynistic attitude towards women, suggesting that ‘successful’ sex involves inflicting violence on the female body.

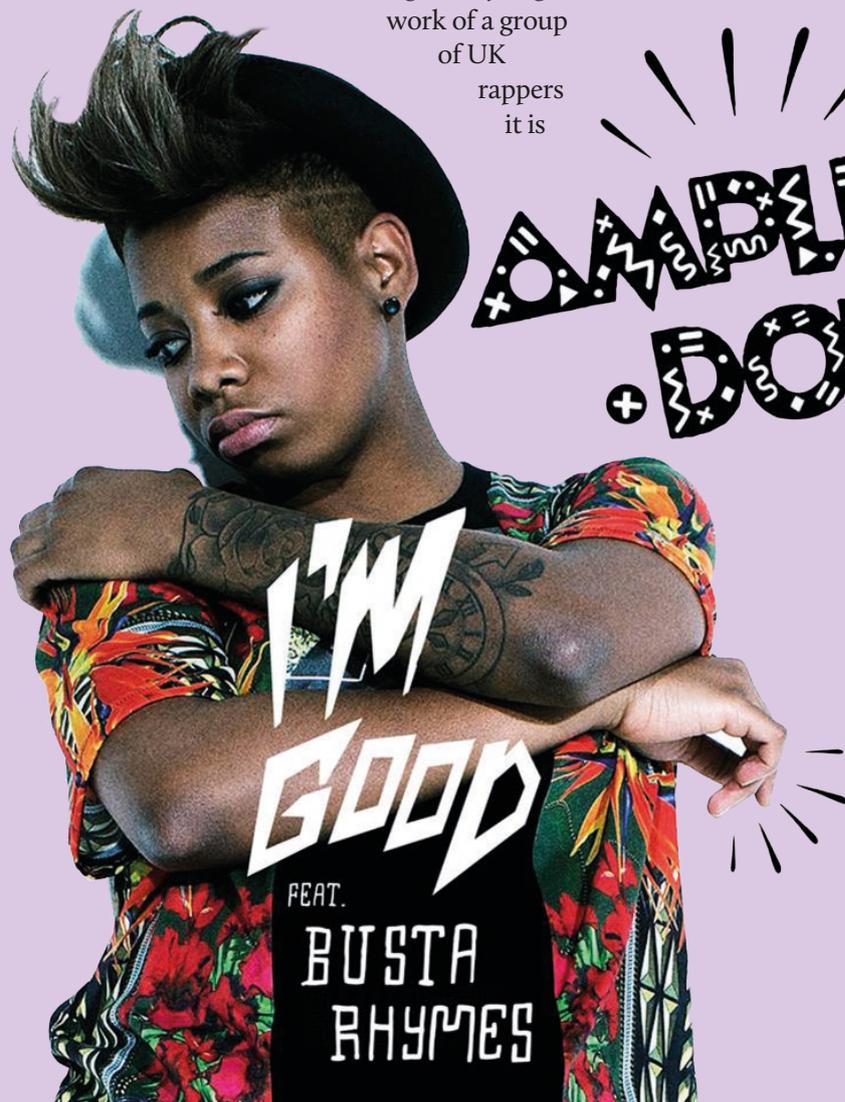
Defiance or Compliance?

Through analysing the work of a group of UK rappers it is

clear to see that stylistic choices, including the use of Patois, dialogism and naming terms, are important in creating an authentic rap identity for both male and female performers. The patriarchal and often misogynistic nature of the rap culture means that women rappers are left in a difficult position, as they want to appear as both female and as authentic rappers. In order to achieve a unique rap identity for themselves they use similar stylistic techniques to males, with the use of Patois, dialogism and naming terms. However it appears to be that women often struggle to project an empowered female image using stylistic choices associated

with rap music as much of the representational practices are built around misogyny. The end result is that although female artists defiantly use stylistic choices, they are often compliant in the hegemonic powers at play, reproducing negative stereotypes and patriarchal power relations. However it is important to seek out those voices in rap which stand against misogyny and violence, offering positive messages of resistance. Ms Dynamite is a celebrated female UK rap artists who frequently questions rap culture with lyrics such as “you talking so much sex, but you not tell the youth ‘bout AIDS, you not tell them ‘bout consequence”, taken from her song ‘It Takes More’. Here we have an example of rap being used to promote positive attitudes towards sex, illustrating that rap is capable of being empowering, even if the songs that receive the majority of mainstream airplay may not be.¶

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Find out more

Books

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