Sexuality & Culture (2023) 27:57–77
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-10003-9

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Drip Too Hard? Commercial Rap Music and Perceived Masculinity Ideals and Actual Self-Evaluations among Black U.S. and Dutch Adolescent Men

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Accepted: 23 July 2022 / Published online: 9 September 2022

Abstract

Popular American commercial rap is believed to (re)produce cultural narratives of masculinity. Yet, there is no knowledge about the relationship between consumption of idealized masculinity in rap and young (Black) men's senses of masculine selves. This study aims to explore how sixteen American and Dutch Black adolescent men perceive ideals of masculine behavior, physical appearance, and mate desirability in commercial rap. Grounded in social comparison theory, it furthermore aims to understand whether these young men compare themselves to these ideals, and if so, how this informs their self-evaluations. A (hybrid) comparative thematic analysis of interviews with eight U.S. and eight Dutch adolescents revealed three masculinity ideals to be present in rap and congruent with the majority of the respondents' own ideals. First, it is appropriate for young men to be 'playas' and view (young) women as either (sexually) freaky girls or wifey material. Second, attractive men look wealthy, and, third, desirable men financially provide for their partners. The participants who endorsed these ideals and, subsequently, compared themselves to them, reported positive self-evaluations and emotions, which were believed to translate into their own behavior, appearance, and desirability. Interestingly, although the participants came from different cultural contexts, systematic differences in perception, attitude, social comparison and self-evaluation were not found. Suggestions for future research are provided and implications for intervention programs are discussed.

Keywords Black adolescent men · Gender · United States · The Netherlands · Rap music · Sexuality

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Introduction

Hip Hop culture and its musical expression, rap music, have become an integral part of global youth culture (Brown & Nicklin, 2019; Morgan & Bennett, 2011). Whilst the performers of rap music are diverse in terms of ethnicity, nationality, and gender (Morgan & Bennett, 2011), the performances within the global popular subgenre of (U.S.) *commercial* rap are intertwined with Black American culture, and expressions of a specific type of Black masculinity (Herd, 2015). Rap music was created by African diasporic communities in disadvantaged neighborhoods in New York City in the 1970s and developed within the context of a predominantly male industry (Li, 2019).

As the portrayals of Black (heteronormative) masculinity in (U.S.) commercial rap are believed to promote controversial messaging dealing with materialism, sex and traditional gender roles (e.g., Avery et al., 2017; Hunter, 2011; Karsay et al., 2019; Smiler et al., 2017), scholars have been prompted to explore how this subgenre may contribute to the shaping of the gender attitudes, values, and (sexual) behaviors of its global adolescent audiences. To date, a small body of research has informed our understandings about the ways rap consumption by involved adolescents -i.e., those who experience personal connections to rap and its characters- (Kistler et al., 2010; Moyer-Gusé, 2008) may relate to their development of sexuality and gendered ideals. However, a further exploration is needed for several reasons. First, the samples of the identified studies consisted mostly of young Black women or young White women and men (e.g., Bryant, 2008; Beentjes & Konig, 2013; Stephens & Few, 2007; Ter Bogt et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2005; Wright & Rubin, 2017); thus, the voices of Black adolescent men (those from the sub-Saharan African diaspora) have been relatively absent in this field. This is concerning given that (young) Black men may be more susceptible to the controversial messaging as they are more likely than other social groups to experience personal connections to the (male) rap characters, such as identifying with them, due to their shared gender and racial background (Conrad et al., 2009; Slatton & Spates, 2016). Second, despite its worldwide popularity, the cross-cultural reception of U.S. rap has received little attention (Wright & Rubin, 2017). By collecting data from two Western countries, this study offers a means to explore the relation between rap consumption and potential international trends regarding sexual and gender beliefs and related activities among Western Black adolescents. Furthermore, next to one's media environment (Anyiwo et al., 2018), one's cultural context may also play a fundamental role in shaping one's attitudes toward sexuality and gender (Abdolmanafi et al., 2022; Hofstede, 2001). Then, comparing U.S. and Dutch young men is particularly interesting (Boahene et al., 2022), since U.S culture is believed to endorse traditional gender roles and sexual beliefs to a higher extent than Dutch culture (Guerrero & Schober, 2021; Hofstede Insights, 2022; Hofstede, 2001). These differing cultural contexts may have consequences for the ways our respondents value the masculinity ideals in rap.Lastly, with the exception of one study among women (Zhang et al., 2009), rap audience research has not incorporated psychological processes

of self-evaluations; thus there is little knowledge of the relationship between rap consumption, (Black) adolescents' gender ideals, *and* their senses of selves and psychological well-being. This is particularly alarming since adolescence is a critical time for self-exploration, self-reflection and self-definition (e.g., Gayles & Garofalo, 2019). This study addresses the gaps in the literature by exploring how Black adolescent men from the U.S and the Netherlands perceive masculinity ideals in U.S. rap, how these ideals may inform their attitudes and associated behaviors, and how they may relate to their self-evaluations.

Masculinity Ideals in Commercial Rap

Content-analytic studies from the last decade have shown that male performers in rap videos and lyrics are often portrayed as financially successful, as evidenced by luxurious houses, jewelry, cars, designer clothing (e.g., Avery et al., 2017; Christenson et al., 2019; Hunter, 2011). Additionally, their behavior emphasizes men's sexual dominance and control over women and treating their female counterparts exclusively as sexual bodies while ignoring their character (e.g., Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Avery et al., 2017; Karsay et al., 2019; Smiler et al., 2017). Avery et al., (2017) quantitative analysis of 500 lyrics of U.S. Black artists found that traditional gender role stereotypes predominate in the genre of rap. Most rap characters exert their masculinity by bragging about their wealth and their competitiveness, and treating women as sexual conquests. Smiler et al., (2017) quantitative lyrical analysis of 1250 songs revealed that rap artists, in comparison with artists from other genres, are more likely to address sexual behavior in their songs and refer to sexual behavior more explicitly. Furthermore, Hunter, (2011) qualitative content analysis of different types of romantic male–female relationships in rap found that possessing luxury items mediated these relations. Specifically, the primary male character either seduces his potential girlfriend/wife with material objects or is romantically interested in a particular woman because of their shared luxury lifestyle.

In her review of gender relationships and sexuality in rap, Herd, (2015) outlines several social forces that may account for these one-dimensional portrayals of (Black) masculinity, such as patriarchal, capitalist and racist values in Western society, music corporations' urge to maximize sales by manipulating stereotypical portrayals of Black men, and certain behavior patterns among Black men in disadvantaged neighborhoods who may have been stripped of traditional sources of dignity.

Masculinity Ideals and Fans' Attitudes and Behaviors

Consumption of the masculinity ideals in rap has been linked to gender-stereotyped attitudes and behaviors regarding roles and sexuality and these adversarial outcomes may be greater when one experiences personal connections to the genre and its characters (i.a., taking a special liking to the genre, identifying with its characters). Although Black men are more likely than other social groups to have such connections -and this may be truer for men who also share the same ethnicity with the characters- the identified studies have mostly focused on Black women or White women

and men. Ter Bogt et al.'s (2010) survey study showed that *liking* rap music/R&B plays a more important role in one's masculinity ideals than being exposed to sexualized content in different media (TV/music videos/internet). The young Dutch men (majority White) who preferred rap music/R&B accepted the ideals that *real* men are cool, macho, and tough to a larger extent compared to peers who did not like this type of music. Ward et al.'s (2005) experimental research in the U.S. showed a relationship between Black adolescents' degree of identification with rap characters and desired masculinity traits. The young African American participants (30% male) exposed to gender-stereotypical rap videos who identified with the characters, were more inclined to believe that men should be cool, rich, and attractive. The respondents in this experimental group who experienced weaker personal connections to the characters believed these traits were less important. In another (survey) study examining the relationship between sexual content in music (lyrics/videos/social media) and U.S. and Australian college students' (majority White) sexual cognitions and risks, it was revealed that exposure to sexual lyrical content in rap may be positively associated with the endorsement of traditional masculinity ideals (e.g., men are tough) and adversarial sexual beliefs and behaviors among U.S. students who have an affinity for rap (Wright & Rubin, 2017).

A few survey and experimental studies reported the connection between involvement with rap and masculinity ideals in the context of male–female relationships. The Dutch survey research of Konig and Beentjes (2013) found that young Dutch men (7% Black) who viewed rap videos more frequently, discussed them with friends more often, and regarded the videos as realistic were more likely to endorse the ideal that men should dominate in sexual relationships. Bryant (2008) discovered that viewing frequency of rap videos among young African Americans was related to the endorsement of negative male–female relationships, such as female sexual objectification and *player-lover* (casual dating) escapades. In addition, the participants in her U.S. survey study (30% male) who took a special liking to the genre of rap, had more adversarial attitudes toward male-female relationships compared to the participants who were less involved with the genre. These existing studies provided insights in the (potential) relationship among involvement with rap and masculinity ideals. However, research in this area of study that prioritizes Black adolescent men's perspectives is crucially needed. The way that the young Black men in our study value the portrayed masculinity ideals may have consequences for their self-evaluations; social comparison theory (SCT; Festinger, 1954) is an appropriate framework to explain these processes.

SCT

Initially proposed by Festinger (1954), SCT suggests that people are constantly evaluating themselves by comparing themselves with similar and relevant others. The directions of such social comparisons (upward vs. downward and assimilative vs. contrastive) are believed to determine whether the outcomes on individuals' actual self-evaluations and emotions are positive or negative (Corcoran et al., 2011; Festinger, 1954; Higgins, 1987; Wills, 1981). For example, comparisons

with similar and relevant others, such as popular same-race rap characters, who are perceived as more *ideal* and *successful* (upward) are presumed to result in negative self-evaluations and feelings, especially when one's actual self-evaluation *contrasts away* from the ideal standard (emphasizes the differences between oneself and the standard) (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Based on Festinger's similarity hypothesis (1954), the African American participants in our study are may be more prone to view the Black male rap characters as relevant (and ideal) standards for comparison; not only because of their similar ethnicity but also because of the potentially high(er) congruence-due to their shared national cultural context- between the (traditional) masculinity ideals in rap and theirs. Then, these respondents may also experience extra feelings of pressure to meet these ideals, embodied by the popular rap characters, due to the *masculinity role strain* their society may (also) put on them (Bowman, 1989; Jones et al., 2018).

Several researchers have assumed that comparisons with popular media characters are mostly *upwards*, potentially harming individuals' selves (Corcoran et al., 2011). Though researched in a different context, recent research suggests that upward comparisons may also yield positive outcomes (e.g., Kang & Liu, 2019; Meier & Schäfer, 2018; Peng et al., 2019). For instance, Kang and Liu's survey study (2019) revealed that U.S. college students' comparisons with (more) attractive and financially successful people who are perceived as (overall) similar, may result in positive self-evaluations regarding these two measurements. Furthermore, an older study in an academic context informed us about the ways *perceived attainability* relates to positive affective responses. Lockwood and Kunda's experimental study (1997) demonstrated that Canadian college women's upward comparisons with academic 'superstars' might also lead to self-enhancement and the positive emotion of inspiration. This occurred when they *assimilated* their self-evaluations toward the 'superstars' and believed that they could narrow the discrepancy between their (actual) selves and these ideal standards and, thus, attain similar *successes*.

Examining people's (actual) self-evaluations requires a multidimensional approach (Harter, 2012) because individuals evaluate themselves in different domains of their lives, and their age may also determine which (self) dimensions they deem significant. We adopted Harter's (2012) *Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents* to select the dimensions relevant to this study. The focus is on 1) (masculine) behavior (Do I like the way I behave?), 2) physical appearance (Am I good looking?), and 3) mate desirability (am I desirable as a mate for the people I would like to be dating?). Although researchers have benefited from understanding how comparisons with music media characters relate to White adolescents' self-evaluations of different dimensions (e.g., Kistler et al., 2010; Mulgrew & Cragg, 2017) and how, specifically, comparisons with female rap characters, may relate to African American women's (bodily) self-evaluations (Zhang et al., 2009), research on how Black adolescent men's comparisons with music media characters (rap) may have consequences for their senses of selves is non-existing.

Current Study

This research aims to explore how Black male adolescents who frequently consume rap and have personal connections to this genre and the characters negotiate the masculinity ideals in rap and how they relate to their self-evaluations. We sought to expand existing investigations in three ways. First, we targeted an understudied, yet potentially vulnerable group: Black adolescent men. Therefore, our findings will largely contribute to the fields of rap audience studies (i.e., gender and sexuality) *and* social comparison studies. Second, we moved beyond 'attitudes toward ideals' and also incorporated psychological processes of self-evaluations. With the exception of one study (Zhang et al., 2009), rap audience research has not explored these processes. Lastly, most existing studies have either investigated U.S. populations or non-U.S. populations. Comparing U.S. and Dutch young men will bring valuable perspectives concerning racial and cultural contexts. Our qualitative approach enabled us to thoroughly document the respondents' thought processes and capture the nuances behind their ideals and self-evaluations. This study addressed the following research questions: *How do U.S. and Dutch Black adolescent men perceive and evaluate the masculinity ideals in U.S. commercial rap music? Are these ideals relevant for social comparisons? Are these ideals a reference for actual self-evaluations of their own masculine behavior, physical appearance, and mate desirability?*

Method

Participants

The key personnel from local teen centers in Atlanta and Amsterdam were contacted to assist with the recruitment of Black adolescent men. Study eligibility requirements included: self-identifying as Black; being between 14 and 19 years old; consuming rap daily -at a minimum of 30 min a day- and experiencing personal connections to rap and its characters (i.e., liking, wishful identification, perceived similarity, and parasocial relationships). We drew from empirical popular music studies and Moyer-Gusé's (2008) review of involvement with entertainment characters to select these four *connection constructs* and phrase our selection questions for the participants (e.g., "Do you follow your favorite rap characters on social media?"). A total of sixteen participants were recruited. Eight U.S. respondents self-identified as African American, and eight Dutch participants self-identified as Creole Surinamese. Creole people from the former Dutch colony Suriname are the largest ethnic group from the sub-Saharan African diaspora that migrated to the Netherlands. All participants preferred and listened to rap music (liking). Furthermore, most respondents were inspired by the way rap characters act and dress (wishful identification), felt that Black rap characters know what that are going through as young Black men (perceived similarity) and/or followed their favorite rap characters on social media (parasocial relationship).

All participants lived in cities (Atlanta and Amsterdam) considered important Hip Hop regions in their respective nations (Hunter, 2011; Krims, 2002). Fifteen out of the sixteen participants attended high schools and one Dutch participant attended a vocational school. Lastly, all respondents identified as cis men and heterosexuals, and none reported being in a serious romantic relationship at the time of data collection. The main researcher created pseudonyms to identify participants' comments and protect their confidentiality.

Procedure

Before the interviews, participants were asked to signify their participation agreement on a consent form, and those under the age of sixteen were required to provide a consent form from their parents. After consent, participants were invited to attend an individual interview at local teen centers in Atlanta and Amsterdam (between January and August 2019). Conducted in private rooms, the interviews ranged from sixty to eighty minutes. They were conducted in the native languages of the participants, and all were later translated into English for publication.

The primary investigator (interviewer) asked the participants to describe the masculinity ideals in rap and share their thoughts about these portrayals. She then turned her questions to their social comparison processes and self-evaluations, using Festinger's (1954) and Higgins' (1987) theories on *selves*, comparisons, and self-discrepancies to guide these questions. Per (self) dimension, she asked questions such as: "To what extent do you think you meet these ideals?" "Why? Why not?", "How do they make you feel?". She also prepared questions like "Can you give an example of a rap video"? to obtain further information if the initial answers were unclear or incomprehensive. The investigator took notes during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The interviews were videotaped and transcribed verbatim. A rigorous hybrid comparative thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Xu & Zammit, 2020), which involved deductive and inductive coding, was utilized to analyze the interview transcripts. The primary investigator, who also transcribed the interviews, developed (a priori) two category manuals in Microsoft Word 2019 based on the research question and theoretical concepts and frames (i.e., self-dimensions, masculinity ideals, social comparison processes, and emotions). One manual was used for the U.S. respondents and one was used for the Dutch participants.

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive step-by-step approach (six steps) to guide our (comparative) thematic analysis regarding the *masculinity ideal themes* on each self-dimension (i.e., masculine behavior, physical appearance, mate desirability). We followed the first four steps for both the U.S. and Dutch data to generate thematic structures that could be compared for similarities and differences. First, the primary investigator (1) reread the transcripts and notes several times and produced an initial list of interesting evidence, (2) then she produced initial in vivo codes and placed them in the manuals under the a priori category

masculinity ideals -validity of the coding was checked through deviant case analysis, these cases ensured that researcher bias was minimized- (Anderson, 2010). Then the primary investigator invited the other authors to verify the codes (e.g., compare them with their interpretations): minor disagreements were solved through discussions and both manuals were updated accordingly. Thereafter (3) broader patterns of shared meanings were identified across the data sets and prevalent codes, those codes that were mentioned by at least four of the eight respondents, were developed into themes. During the fourth step the themes were reviewed which entailed (4) checking whether they capture the essence of the coded data. While reviewing the themes, the primary investigator also triangulated the transcripts with her notes and integrated theories (e.g., masculinity roles, norms, and ideals in Western societies) and prior studies to interpret the phenomena. In this phase she also critically compared the U.S. themes with the Dutch themes and invited the other authors to evaluate them. As the developed *masculinity ideals themes* were similar, the last two steps concerned both the U.S. and Dutch data sets. In the following phase (5) the primary investigator named the final descriptive themes and wrote down how many participants agreed with these themes. Thereafter, she compared the social comparison processes of the U.S. and Dutch respondents, and related these processes to theories and studies on self-evaluations and discrepancy emotions. In the final phase (6) the results section was written (thick description of data) and the views of the Dutch participants were translated into English.

Results

The findings are organized around the self-dimensions central to this study, namely; masculine behavior, physical appearance, and mate desirability. Table 1 presents an overview of the three masculinity ideal themes that were developed during the in-depth interviews with the participants. Their frequency are also shown in Table 1. These endorsed ideals form the basis for the respondents' actual self-evaluations which are discussed after each theme.

Masculine Behavior

It is Appropriate for (Young) Men to be 'Playas' and View Women as Either Freaky Girls or Wifey Material

When the interviewer asked how the average male rap character behaves, the participants stated that he sometimes displays his political/humanitarian side but that his behavior is centered mostly on *playing* women (casually date multiple women) and treating his *temporary women* or female models disrespectfully, i.e., as interchangeable (sex) objects, "whores" (Gerard, DU), and "sluts" (Frank, U.S.). Half of the respondents (four U.S. and four DU) seemed to have conflicted feelings about the *playa- and sexual misogynistic behavior ideals* in rap. They believed that this behavior is not ideal for men in the larger context of gender relations, but also identified

Table 1 Description and frequency of masculinity ideal themes

Themes	Description	Example quotes	Frequency *n* (%)
Masculine behavior: It is appropriate for young men to be 'playas' and view women as either freaky girls or wifey-material	Words or phrases that describe appropriate and preferred behavior	"There's a difference between real women and sluts, and a slut knows she is a slut and not a wife." (Frank, U.S.) "It's good to have multiple girls, but you shouldn't only use them for their p*ssy." (Carlos, DU)	8 (50)
Physical appearance: Attractive men *look* wealthy	Words or phrases that illustrate what a physically attractive man looks like	"They look very clean. Everything on point. They look like money, I like that." Antwon (U.S.) "They wear a lot of expensive clothes, beautiful clothes. That's why they shine. A man is supposed to shine, that makes him hot." (Ferdinand, DU)	13 (81)
Mate desirability: Desirable men financially provide for their partners	Words or phrases that highlight how a desirable mate acts or what he looks like	"Yes, a man should spoil his girlfriend and the more money he has, the more he can take care of her." (Brian, U.S.) "I think a man should buy jewelry and bags for his girl. It shows that he is not selfish and really cares about her." (Gerard, DU)	13 (81)

benefits, and sometimes engaged in similar behavior. For instance, Frank (U.S.) made the following comment concerning the 'playa' behavior: "It's hard sometimes. I know you should treat girls and women with respect, my dad always says that… but I like having multiple girls too." Furthermore, the participants also stated that dating multiple girls is cool as long you as you can financially afford to do so. For instance, Evert (DU) said:

It's cool to have more than one girl. A lot of guys also brag about that stuff. I think guys should only do that when they can also pay for every date though. You don't want to be lame and not pay, you know (Evert, DU).

Their endorsement of the 'playa' ideal seems to reflect the gender-stereotypical notion that it is okay for men to *conquer* multiple women and, perhaps, even gain status by doing so (Boahene et al., 2022; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Interestingly, they argued that (young) men should commit to one woman when they get older:

When you are young, you do 'young boy stuff.' A lot of bragging about the girls you got. But when you are older, you need to respect women more and settle down with one woman. Thirty is a good age to do so. Look at all the older rappers; they do it too (Hef, DU).

Furthermore, concerning the characters' behaviors that can be labeled as *sexual misogynistic*, they accepted those portrayals because they believed that there are two types of (young) women: promiscuous "freaky girls you *only* have [sexual] fun with" (Hef, DU) and good girls who are "wifey [wife] material" (Derek, U.S.). Their *bad girl-good girl* contrast resembles the Madonna-Whore dichotomy (Kahalon et al., 2019). Such thinking patterns do not recognize the complexity of (young) women, and may reinforce traditional patriarchal arrangements. Two of the eight respondents who accepted this idealized dichotomy of women's roles, Antwon and Derek (U.S.), revealed that their parents' *interventions* (talks about misogyny in rap) made them reflect on their behavior. For instance, Derek said: "My mom and dad always tell me that that's not the way to treat women so I try to listen to them and do better. They are usually right, you know." The other eight participants (four U.S. and four DU) did not sympathize with the *playa- and sexual misogynistic behavior ideals* in rap and stressed their concerns about the potential negative effects on young kids.

Social Comparisons and Actual Self-Evaluations

U.S.

The four U.S. respondents who endorsed the *behavior ideals* in rap compared this behavior with their own. For example, Antwon felt that his current dating life was less exciting than the portrayed 'playa' lifestyles of rap characters, but he believed that he would attain the same 'playa' status when he will be older and will have more money to spend (Antwon: "I don't have a lot of women yet, haha…but that will come when I am older and have more money."). Conversely, Frank thought that he already has the same 'playa' status as the rap characters. Moreover, he believed that he treated his casual dates better than the rap characters because he has the "respect"

not to tell "his girls" that they are the only ones. Three of these four participants, Frank, Brian, and Derek, compared some rap video scenes with their experiences at parties. The, in their minds, right to value some girls primarily for their bodies prompted these respondents to think that there are similarities between them and the rap characters. For example, Brian said,

The sexy [promiscuous] girls want that type of attention, they know what they be doin'. They also wanna be like those women in the videos, so I will treat them like that, just as the rappers do. It's okay then (Brian, U.S.).

For these four respondents (Antwon included), consuming the *behavior ideals* in rap did not result in negative self-evaluations (or negative emotions). Probably because they either integrated their comparisons and evaluations of the ideal standard (assimilation) -i.e., believing that similar *successes* are reachable or experiencing similar events- or felt that they were doing even better than scripted in the standard -i.e., treat girls better- (Higgins, 1987; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Wills, 1981).

The four participants who rejected the behaviors of the rap characters were unmotivated to engage in comparisons because these behaviors did not reflect their ideals. Even so, positive feelings of pride and strength seemed to occur among this group of young men, because they were not 'affected' by the 'playa' and misogynistic messaging in rap. For instance, Clarence stated the following: "I am strong enough to follow my own preferences and do what I want to do and not what the rappers want me to do."

DU

The Dutch respondents (four) who agreed with the behavior ideals in rap compared their 'playa' skills with those of the rap characters. For example, Gerard and Hef acknowledged that they do not date as many young women as the rap characters do, but they believed that their skills and attraction were similar to those of these characters (assimilation). For example, Hef said, "I do have the same cool swagger as the rappers. Girls really love that." Interestingly, Carlos (just like Frank, U.S.) said that he treats girls he dates better than the rap characters do. He believed that he is more "loyal" than them (loyal is an interesting word choice and seems contradictory). He further explained that he thinks that "his girls" can "always count on him" (hence, loyalty). This appeared to have led to a positive self-evaluation ("I can get a lot of girls because of it."). Another participant (Andre) engaged in a contrastive comparison: he wished he had the same confidence as the rap characters:

I wish I was a little bit more confident, but not cocky though. When I see those rappers it only motivates me. Motivates me to work on my confidence and act a little less shy and humble it makes me want to work on that more (Andre, DU).

His perceived discrepancy between him and the rap characters seemed to have led to positive feelings of inspiration. He further stated that he thinks that he will attain similar levels of confidence when he is older (Andre: "I just have to grow up a little bit and go through more stuff."). Like their U.S. counterparts, the Dutch participants' assimilative comparisons and self-evaluations (i.e., similar prowess/attraction and posturing/confidence is attainable in the future) and perceived superiority

over the ideal standard (treat girls better) diminished negative self-evaluations or emotions.

For the four respondents who did not sympathize with the behaviors in rap, the portrayals of these ideals seemed irrelevant for social comparisons. They appeared to have a *live and let live* attitude toward these ideals. For instance, Donavan said: "They [other young men] make other choices. I don't mind. Do your thing!" (Donovan).

Physical Appearance

Attractive Men Look Wealthy

All the respondents described the physical appearance of the average rap character as follows: high-end clothing, expensive shoes, and excessive amounts of jewelry. According to most of these young men, male rap characters have to "look like money" (Antwon, U.S.) to be perceived as attractive, whereas female rap characters need to have "a pretty face and a big booty" (Clarence, U.S.). Their notion seemed to reflect a traditional gender role stereotype, emphasizing men's finances and women's appearances (Davis, 1990; Rosenmann et al., 2018). More than half of the participants (seven U.S. and six DU) agreed with the *appearance ideals* in rap, making comments such as, "Their drips [outfits] are crazy, who doesn't want that? " (Brian, U.S.), and "Of course that is ideal." (Ben, DU). The respondents who rejected these *ideals* (one U.S. and two DU) critically reflected on the expressions of materialistic attitudes and noted that they feel that men should spend their money more wisely. For instance, Hef stated:

Us men always want to proof that we have money, but we don't always have to do that. It's kind of lame and dumb. You don't always have to proof that you are a *man*. I like it when men buy cheaper clothes and cars and invest in companies or something. Be smart with your money (Hef, DU).

Social Comparisons and Actual Self-Evaluations

U.S.

Six of the seven U.S. participants who endorsed the *appearance ideals* engaged in assimilative comparisons. Rap characters do have more high-end fashion items, these young men stated, but they still believed that on their *good days,* they could achieve the "same drip [outfit]" (Greg). This made them feel attractive. For instance, Frank said: Some days, I be gettin' it. I wear a Rolex [expensive watch], Balmain's [luxury shoes], and some Versace [high-end brand] jeans. Rappers really hype up certain brands. When I go to a party, and I wear fits [outfits] like that, I look good. Period! I look like money then (Frank, U.S.).

Furthermore, the respondents' perceived discrepancy between their appearances on their not-so-good days and those of the rap characters did not result in negative self-evaluations. Probably because they seemed to believe that they

could narrow this gap in the future. For example, Greg stated: "*When* I have the money, I can look like that every day." For now, the *appearance ideals* in rap seemed to aesthetically inspire (Antwon: "Sometimes I take pictures of dope [great] outfits with my phone so I can go look for the same stuff.") and motivate (Brian: "it motivates me. It shows me what to strive for.") these young men. Howard, the participant who engaged in contrastive comparisons with the rap characters, expressed that their appearances led to both negative feelings of frustration (e.g., "I want that jewelry now!"), and positive feelings of motivation (e.g., "I have to work hard on my own career goals so I can get it too."). For the respondent (Derek) who did not accept these appearances, those (undesirable) looks were deemed insignificant for social comparisons. He disclosed that although his friends endorse such looks, he does not feel pressured by his peers to succumb to these ideals. As he explained, "We all let each other be."

DU

Two out of the six Dutch respondents who agreed with the *appearance ideals* in rap believed that they come close to such looks. Evert especially feels this way when he buys a new designer outfit from head to toe; he then thinks he is (even more) "attractive, drippy, and fresh." Gerard stated that he is still developing his fashion style, but he seemed pretty confident about how he currently looks:

I look really good, if I may say so…I do need an upgrade, though, so I can be even hotter, haha. I am now at a Nike [sports brand] level, but I want to go to Balenciaga [high-end fashion brand]. I am telling you honestly; I really love brands (Gerard, DU).

Evert and Gerard's assimilative comparisons resulted in a positive self-evaluation of their attractiveness. These two young men further said that the portrayed *appearance ideals* motivate them to work hard on their career goals so that they will be able to buy (more) luxury items when they are older (Evert: "It would be dope [great] if I could buy more designer outfits right now, but I just have to work hard."). The other four participants, who also endorsed the appearances of rap characters but considered their looks to be different from the looks of these ideal comparison standards (contrastive comparisons), responded differently about their perceived *large* discrepancy. For example, Ben developed a reflective coping mechanism: he buys items within his budget and thinks to himself, "There are more important things in life than having the same clothes as Migos [rap characters]." For Carlos, Donovan and Ferdinand, the perceived *large* discrepancy appeared to have led to both the negative feeling of frustration (e.g., Ferdinand: "It [expensive clothing] is hard to watch sometimes…It makes me a little bit jealous.") and the positive emotion of motivation (e.g., Carlos: It just motivates me to reach my own goals.").

For the two participants who rejected the *appearance ideals* in rap, those looks seemed irrelevant for social comparisons. They believed that spending so much money on clothes is "lame" (Hef).

Mate Desirability

Desirable Men Financially Provide for their Partners

The participants also agreed about the *mate ideals* in rap. According to them, desirable mates spoil the women they adore (these women seem to be more valued than the ones you *play* with) by taking care of them financially and buying them lavish gifts (Gerard, DU: "They buy bags for the girls they like. Like in the song 'Chanel.'", and Eduard, U.S.: "They take care of their girls. They buy them cars and clothes."). Seven U.S. and six Dutch respondents endorsed these ideals; they believed that a man should provide for the woman he adores and spoil her with gifts. To this point, Carlos (DU) highlighted, "Your girlfriend or wife deserves all the gifts. They already go through a lot: periods, getting pregnant, and taking care of kids."

They further said that they believed that the more material wealth a man has, the more attractive he becomes to women. This may also explain why some participants equated wearing designer brands and"look[ing] like money" (e.g., Antwon, U.S., Frank U.S.) with their level of attractiveness (see: physical appearance). Their comments appeared to reflect traditional gender arrangements and mate selection processes rooted in evolutionary and sociocultural mechanisms (Buss & Barnes, 1986); that is, men are primarily valued for their money and are expected to be financial providers (Davis, 1990; Glick & Raberg, 2018). The three young men who rejected these *mate ideals* (one U.S. and two DU) believed that a man's worth lies in his personality and not in his finances. For instance, Ferdinand (DU) stated: "Women like respectful, calm men who listen. That's more important than money."

Social Comparisons and Self-Evaluations

U.S.

Five of the seven U.S. participants who agreed with the *mate ideals* in rap believed that they treat the girls they adore fairly the same (assimilation). Their comparisons resulted in positive self-evaluations. That is, they felt that they were doing what they can within the context of their lives (Brian: "Boys my age shouldn't buy expensive stuff yet. Small gifts are okay."), and financial budget (Clarence: "I buy a gift within my budget. Rappers buy a car.", and Antwon: "I can't buy bags yet, they're a little bit expensive but I can take my girl to a nail salon."). They were confident that there would come a time that they can spoil their girlfriends with lavish gifts similar to those rap characters buy for women. For now, they viewed those portrayed ideals as motivational and inspirational. For example, Greg said:

When I see a rapper buying his girlfriend stuff, like a beautiful necklace or something, I think to myself: "yeah, it is pretty cool to give a necklace to your girl." I don't have a girlfriend now, but I want to buy stuff like that for my future girl (Greg, U.S.).

The two other respondents, who also accepted these ideals, emphasized the differences.

between them and the rap characters. These contrastive comparisons did not result in negative self-evaluations or feelings; instead, positive emotions occurred as they motivated them to work hard on their career goals to be able to spoil their partners. To this point, Derek highlighted,

It makes me feel good to see rappers buying gifts for their girls, it motivates me. It also shows that they really love their girl, you know…You spend money on your really beautiful and sexy girlfriend, because she deserves that (Derek, U.S.).

Finally, Frank, the young man who did not view the rap characters as relevant comparison standards (rejection *mate ideals*), was unmotivated to engage in social comparisons. Nevertheless, he mentioned that he believed that men who buy lavish items for their girlfriends are "dumb" because those women may "use you for your money."

DU

Four of the six Dutch respondents who endorsed the *mate ideals* felt that they are not that different from the average rap character (assimilation). Just as their U.S. counterparts, they said that they do not have that much money to spend, but being able to buy small gifts makes them a desirable mate (too). For instance, Gerard stated, "Rappers buy a Chanel [high-end fashion brand] purse, and I buy a small bag from the H&M [retail store]. It is the thought that counts." Thus, their comparisons yielded positive self-evaluations and feelings of pride (I can buy small gifts). Moreover, the portrayed ideals also motivated these young men to work hard on their career goals to increase their financial budget and narrow the discrepancy between them and the rap characters (Donovan: "It motivates me to get more money. My day will come."). They further revealed that watching rap characters buy gifts for women makes them feel good because it shows that they not only objectify women but also show "affection" towards them (Donovan). The two respondents who endorsed these ideals but emphasized the differences between them and the rap characters (contrastive comparisons) did not experience negative self-evaluations because they either felt they were too young to meet those ideals or focused on perceived other qualities they possess. Andre noted:

I don't think boys my age should buy expensive stuff for girls yet, so I am not worried about all that. I can probably also afford all those things when I am older, though. I think it is important to take care of your girl. I will only start a [romantic] relationship when I have enough money (Andre, DU).

To the latter point Evert, the other participant who engaged in a contrastive comparison, revealed, "I like who I am. Wanting to change will only give you stress. I just try to satisfy my girl in other ways."

The two respondents who did not accept these ideals, were unmotivated to engage in social comparisons. However, Ben expressed that the negative feeling of worry sometimes arises because he does not want young women to think that *real* men buy lavish gifts to show their admiration.

Similarities

We anticipated that the U.S. participants would be more likely than their Dutch peers to endorse the traditional masculinity ideals in rap and, subsequently, view the rap characters as relevant (ideal) comparison standards. However, our findings indicated a large congruence between these groups of young men. Even respondents' directions of social comparisons (e.g., upward assimilation), self-evaluations (e.g., attainability), and (discrepancy) emotions (e.g., motivation) were highly identical. Perhaps for both U.S. and Dutch participants, their *racial similarity* with the rap characters motivated them to regard these characters as their "super peers," informing them about normative masculinity ideals and their actual selves (Kistler et al., 2010, p. 618).

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to gain a better understanding of the relationship between commercial rap music consumption and U.S. and Dutch Black adolescent men's masculinity ideals, and self-evaluations of masculine behavior, physical appearance, and mate desirability. The participants' readings of the masculinity ideals in rap coincided with the discussed content-analytic studies (i.a., Avery et al., 2017; Smiler et al., 2017). They believed that male rap artists casually date (*play*) multiple women and treat them like "sluts", wear expensive clothing and jewelry, and financially take care of the women they adore. Most of the U.S. and Dutch respondents valued these masculinity ideals and expressed that they (a) think it is appropriate for (young) men to be 'playas' and to view women as either "freaky girls" or "wifey-material" (masculine behavior); (b) believe that attractive men *look* wealthy (physical appearance) and; (c) are of the opinion that desirable men financially provide for their partners (mate desirability). In line with the discussed audience studies (e.g., Bryant, 2008; Ter Bogt et al., 2010; Wright & Rubin, 2017), we found that rap may (covertly and overtly) transmit traditional masculinity ideals to its listeners. But it should also be noted that we were able to capture the nuances in some of their attitudes (e.g., men should stop *playing* women when they are thirty).

Moving beyond 'perceptions and attitudes toward ideals', the current investigation also showed that the participants' differing national cultural contexts did not result in significant differences between their social comparison processes. The participants who viewed the rap characters as ideal comparison standards against which they evaluated themselves, appeared to experience mostly positive self-evaluations and emotions (e.g., inspiration, motivation). These findings are in contrast with previous quantitative music media and comparison studies that found that comparisons with music media characters have mostly negative consequences for young (White) men's self-evaluations (Kistler et al., 2010; Mulgrew & Cragg, 2017). The positive outcomes in our study can be explained by the directions of the participants' comparisons (mostly assimilative upward comparisons) and the perceived *attainability* of their internalized ideals. The most interesting finding was that even the participants who considered themselves to be different from the average rap character

-i.e., contrastive upward comparisons- appeared to think that they can (still) attain the same successes (i.e., financial, female attraction) as the characters and they felt motivated to work hard to reach it. Perhaps the often displayed narratives of upward economic mobility within rap, broaden these young Black men's notions of what is economically possible for (marginalized) men who look like them. This may have led to the expectation that in the future, (huge) financial successes are attainable for marginalized Black men whose opportunities are, unfortunately, still not equal in Western capitalist societies (Avery et al., 2017). Finally, in line with other SCT studies in other contexts (i.e., social media and academia), our study showed that positive outcomes of upward comparisons might be related to factors such as perceived similarity (Kang & Liu, 2019) and attainability (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study provided valuable contributions to the knowledge of the relationship between rap consumption and (involved) Black adolescent men's masculinity ideals and self-evaluations. Nonetheless, future research may want to address some limitations of this study. Our samples were carefully matched but small; therefore, data transferability is restricted. This investigation should be replicated on a larger scale to corroborate the finding that Black male rap consumers across different national cultural contexts might be a part of the same *interpretative community* and view the (potential) *models* in rap in a highly similar fashion. Furthermore, comparative research (i.e., ethnically diverse samples) -especially in the North-American cultural context- may further help us in understanding the significance of one's ethnicity for the endorsement of the traditional masculinity ideals in rap (Conrad et al., 2009; Slatton & Spates, 2016) and social comparison processes with its characters (Festinger, 1954). Lastly, as it pertains to third generation Black male immigrants in Europe, it might also be interesting to put this study in a (broader) ecological framework and explore to what extent the cultural context of their receiving countries may also contribute to the shaping of their gender beliefs -i.e., family socialization- (Guerrero & Schober, 2021).

Implications and Conclusions

Interestingly, this study found evidence that in Western capitalist societies, being involved with rap and internalizing its materialistic morale may motivate one to strive to achieve financial security. However, it must also be noted that rap instill or sustain a rather traditional set of gender roles in their audiences, though not unequivocally. Interventional programs provided by schools and community organizations seem imperative. For example, media literacy programs that aim to educate Black adolescents about the history of stereotypical gender relations in rap and in larger society, may be helpful in developing critical media skills and gender awareness among this group of rap consumers. Parents should also be encouraged to engage in open and educational conversations about the portrayals of gender in rap with

their sons. These conversations may also help young Black men to understand gender relations and make (more) conscious decisions in their dating and sex lives. For instance, idealizing male 'playa' behavior (and seemingly also endorsing the sexual double standard which entails evaluating young men positively for having multiple partners and evaluating young women negatively for the same behaviors) may have negative consequences for (young) men's well-being as they might feel pressure to engage in (potentially) risky sexual behaviors (Boahene et al., 2022).

Lastly, the messages of Black masculinity are far from the only symbolic expressions in lyrics and videos that young Black people encounter or seek. Future research could extend this work to examine how modern female rap narratives celebrating female sexual and financial agency inform beliefs and behaviors of similar groups of Black adolescent men in both countries. Such research, supported by these findings, may also assist in the further development of interventional programs.

Author Contributions All individuals who have made a significant contribution to the work are listed as co-authors. Kim Dankoor wrote substantial parts of the manuscript. Dionne Stephens and Tom ter Bogt helped edit the manuscript, oversaw data collection and helped conduct the data analysis. All authors have approved the final version of this manuscript.

Funding No funding was received for conducting this study and the authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Declarations

Competing interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical Approval No invasive questions were asked during the interviews. Therefore this research did not have to be evaluated by the Ethics Review Board of Utrecht University. The respondents who were younger than 18 years old provided informed consent form from their parents. All respondents participated on a voluntary basis and could quit being interviewed at any moment.

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