

# Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity in Nigerian Hip Hop: An Evaluation of Gender Representation in Falz the Bahd Guy's Moral Instruction Album

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**Abstract**—The Nigerian hip-hop music genre, like the African American scene where it was adopted from, is riddled with musical lyrics that amplify and normalize hypermasculinity, homophobia, sexism, and objectification of women. Several factors are responsible for this anomaly; however, the greatest factor is the urge of hip-hop musicians to achieve the commercial success that is dependent on selling records and appealing to the established societal accepted norm for hip-hop music. Consequently, this paper presents a counter-narrative of this gender representation within the Nigerian hip-hop industry. This study analyzed the musical lyrics of the 'Hypocrisy' track on the 2019 album of famous Nigerian rapper, Falz the Bahd Guy; and argued that Falz in this album challenged the predominant ideas of hegemonic masculinity by singing in favor of LGBT people and women. Also, based on the success of this album, this paper argues that a hip-hop album can achieve commercial success without aligning with predominant hip-hop parameters of gender representation. The study recommends that future studies should evaluate the reactions of Nigerians to these gender presentations by Falz the Bahd Guy.

**Keywords**—Hegemonic Masculinity, hypermasculinity, LGBT, misogyny, sexism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

HIP-HOP is a cultural site of ideas that mirrors and projects the social realities of the societies from which it emanates from. Since its inception within the African-American society, this music genre has always been regarded for its social consciousness; as musicians historically employed the genre to express disaffection about the social and economic marginalization of blacks in America [1], [2]. However, the genre has often been characterized as violent because of how it confronts issues of structural marginalization of the black population and the overt gangster demeanor of the musicians [3]. Over the years, the genre has evolved from its historic social justice advocacy to a brand that is replete with themes that project hypermasculinity, violence, drug use, misogyny, homophobia, and sexual objectification of women. This problematic twist was heightened by the influx of corporate labels and rich capitalists who took advantage of the popularity that hip-hop had achieved [4] to explore these themes that are rooted in patriarchy [5]. As a result of this capitalist drive, the musicians

lost agency over the genre and have become subject to the dictates and decisions of label owners, corporate businesses, and advertisers [4].

Hip-hop emerged in Nigeria in the late 80s but did not become very popular until the early 90s. The adoption and growth of the genre in the country were facilitated by the availability of computers and music editing software during this period [6]. Also, the Nigerian broadcasting regulation that mandated radio and television stations to play 70% indigenous music content was a large contributor to the growth of the industry [7]. Like the African-American culture where it was adopted from, the Hip-hop industry in Nigeria was regarded for its initial consciousness as artists employed the genre to express dissatisfaction about the corruption, bad leadership, and economic mismanagement of the military and civilian governments [1]. As the genre gained popularity and wide acceptance, its style and presentation were domesticated to reflect socio-cultural artifacts like local languages [6], [8]. However, down the line, the industry evolved negatively as musicians took advantage of the mass consumerism that was fostered by capitalist investments [9] to produce songs that promoted violence, immorality, hypermasculinity, misogyny, and objectification of women [7], [10], [11]. These negative themes that the Nigerian and Afro-American hip-hop musicians promote with their music can be classified as themes of hegemonic masculinity. Connell & Messerschmidt describe hegemonic masculinity "as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" [12]. As such, the adoption of hip-hop to promote these oppressive themes is symbolic of the gender interpretations, roles, expectations, and performances that are attainable within the structures of patriarchal societies. Thus, any attempt to evaluate hegemonic masculinity or other media texts will be futile if it is not evaluated within the social structures and political economies that the texts exist in [2], [13]. As a social construct, hegemonic masculinity has influenced so many scholarly discourses concerning "men, gender, and social hierarchy" [12]. The investigations of this construct in the media have majorly focused on its social consequence on gender relations, mechanisms of application, uncovering masculine diversity, and exploring changes to its rigid principle [12].

The purpose of this study is geared towards exploring how a Nigerian hip-hop musician is promoting changes to the rigid presentation of hegemonic masculinity in the Nigerian hip-hop

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scene. While Hip-hop as a media genre influences societal ideology about what “it means to be a male or female”, it can also serve as a site for countering the predominant narratives [13]. A few scholars [3], [14] have argued that, despite the overwhelming thematic projections of hegemonic masculinity in hip-hop, there are musicians within this genre who are offering an alternative to gender representation through their music. Thus, the researcher, in this paper, argues that Falz the Bahd Guy, in his *Moral Instruction* album challenges hegemonic masculinity themes. To achieve this, the researcher conducted a critical discourse analysis of a song in the album. This study is important because it extends the focus of gender investigations in Nigerian music from just evaluating problematic themes to embracing positive projections of gender issues.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term hegemonic masculinity is a concept that incorporates a body of ideas of rigid masculinity that subjugates women and resists other forms of masculinities that are not in compliance with hypermasculinity. This term was developed to criticize the notion of this repressive masculinity [15]. As such, this construct has influenced so many scholarly discourses concerning “men, gender, and social hierarchy” [12]. All that is inherent of this dominant form of masculinity is socially constructed by influential members of the society that include priests, journalists, academics, playwrights, academics, and musicians [15]; and “are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” [12]. As a member of this group, musicians construct and project gender roles and performances from their experiences, views, and fantasies of societal norms about gender; and these constructions “help shape our view of the world” [13].

Hip-hop as a music genre is a symbolic site for the sharing of gender roles, expectations, and performances. Investigations of this genre of music in many cultures around the world have revealed that hegemonic masculinity themes are ubiquitous in the music lyrics and videos [2], [7], [16], [17]. The themes reflected in hip-hop music are hypermasculinity, misogyny, homophobia, hypersexuality of female and male bodies, and objectification of women. These representations in hip-hop and other forms of music receive their validation in social acceptance, cultural consent, and institutionalization of these norms [12], [18]. In his explanation of these themes and the society, Blanchard [4] claims that “hip-hop is a symptom of cultural violence, not the cause”. As such, one can rightly argue that hip-hop’s gender representation is a symptom and reflection of rigid cultural norms of gender presentation and not the cause of this dominant masculinity.

Hypermasculinity is one of the most pronounced gender themes in hip-hop music lyrics and videos. This concept as explained by gender scholars suggests problematic conventional societal expectations that a man should be “exceptionally strong, violent, hypermasculine, and sexually promiscuous” [3]. Beyond music, this expectation is also

common in sports, where men -especially black men- are appreciated and valued based on their physique, strength, virility, and exceptionality [3]. Concerning all men, Donaldson argues that while this idea is “centrally connected to all men dominance, not all men practice it. Though most benefit from it” [15]. This argument proposes the idea that not all men can fit into this construction of a supposed ideal man [12], [14], [19]. Gender is a performance [20] and as such the restrictive projection of men by hip-hop becomes problematic as it delegitimizes the masculinity of other men who do not perform it to fit the hypermasculine frame. Rap beefs are an example of hip-hop situations where musicians project the indispensability of their manliness and regard other men with derogatory feminine terms like pussy and bitches [19]. This superior masculinity is also expressed in hip-hop through brags about affluence and sexual promiscuity [18]. Similarly, within the framework of this dominant masculinity is the idea that women are men’s sexual objects and the prowess of masculinity is validated by the woman [15]. This latter idea informs the musicians’ brag about sexual prowess and projection of women as greedy because they love money and are dependent on the man. As such, women are described with demeaning terms such as *ho*, *bitches*, and *gold diggers*. Also, the women are objectified through the lyrics and dressings in music videos as tools for the man’s lecherous pleasure [19]; and as such aligns into the patriarchal societal norms that regard the woman in gender discourse as the dependent ‘other’. This clearly describes the most pronounced findings of hegemonic masculinity in hip-hop because it is the focus of most hip-hop research. However, this focus has mainly been on music by male hip-hop musicians.

There are contentions about the place of female hip-hop musicians in this phallogocentric position of their gender in the genre. Mathe argues that the commercial success of female hip-hop musicians like Niki Minaj and Cardi B has given women the platform to push back against the misogynistic narratives of females [3]. This position is in incongruence with an inadmissible post-feminism idea that amplifies the defeat of patriarchal marginalization because a few women have achieved professional and commercial success. Also, the manner these female musicians achieved this commercial success is rooted within the structures of patriarchy because they, like their male counterparts, are hyper-sexualizing their appearances, brag about wealth, and project the ideal man as muscular and indispensable. This is very evident in their music lyrics and videos, and gives credence to the argument that the yearn for power “can lead to the subordinate group trying to emulate the dominant group” [18]. Therefore, it is justifiable to argue that the female hip-hop musicians have become willing partners in the subjugation of women and seem aloof of it because of their commercial success. Furthermore, in hip-hop, there is an amplification of heterosexuality as the ideal sexuality; and this is foundational to the discourses of hegemonic masculinity [15], [21]. In a bid to conform to the rigidity of hegemonic masculinity, hip-hop musicians sing homophobic lyrics that attack the sexuality of LGBTQ people [15] and represses other performances of

masculinity [12], [14]. Dhaenens & De Ridder posit that projections of hypermasculinity in hip-hop is a “means to preserve the supremacy of the heterosexual matrix” [14]. This is often reflected in their music through homophobic expressions like “no homo”, and describing other men as pussies, fag, or faggots to regard them as weak and not man enough [15]. These projections, while mostly not directed at queer people, limit the opportunity to promote non-binary sexuality within a genre where homophobic rants are a crucial marketing theme [19].

Finally, there have been studies structured to explore a push back against the ideas of hegemonic masculinity within hip-hop. These studies argue of a general consciousness of musicians to be better by challenging hegemonic masculinity themes through their music. For example, Mathe [3] explored the presentation of black masculinity by commercially successful musicians in American hip-hop. Mathe argues that hip-hop has evolved and recently, musicians through their music are deconstructing the idea of toxic masculinity that is often associated with black masculinity. While this argument by Mathe to an extent is true, the number of musicians embracing the deconstruction of these problematic themes is far fewer than the number of musicians who still promote these profit-oriented themes. Also, the musicians who can do this are those who have attained a level beyond the control of corporate forces and record labels. Like Mathe’s argument, from their analysis of the Weekend and Frank Oceans’s music, Dhaenens & De Ridder [14] explain that musicians can capture themes that resist hegemonic masculinity and still achieve commercial success. The musicians whose music they studied, sang against female subjugation, and strongly represented queer people in their music. Continuing in this perspective, this study also seeks to analyze the lyrics of a hip-hop artist who projects counter-narratives to hegemonic masculinity.

#### *A. Gender Discourse in Nigerian Hip-hop*

The approaches of scholarly analyses of lyrics and video contents of Nigerian hip-hop have been quite diverse. These investigations have explored hip-hop as popular culture [1]; the use of language by Nigerian hip-hop musicians [6], [22]; social roles and implications of hip-hop as popular culture [1], [8], [23]; and the representation of gender and women in hip-hop [10], [11]. The findings of these studies have been significant as they present newer approaches to explore the Nigerian hip-hop genre. As it concerns this present study, the findings from studies that investigated gender presentation in Nigerian hip-hop have been similar. The studies [7], [10], [11] revealed that the musicians in their lyrics and videos project the ideal man as hypermasculine and heterosexual while the woman as inferior and a sexual object of the man's fantasy.

These investigations of gender in Nigerian hip-hop have been particularly lopsided towards exposing the societal and capitalist motivated gender presentations by musicians. Onanuga studied the portrayal of women in lyrics and music videos of three Nigerian male hip-hop musicians. His study revealed that women are portrayed as greedy, self-indulgent,

and objects of men’s pleasures [10]. In a similar study, Oyemade & Abodunrin did a critical analysis of the language of two popular Nigerian hip-hop musicians in a bid to establish misogynistic themes. Their investigation revealed that the musicians objectified women, contextualized women as an ‘other’, and compared them to inanimate objects. Also, the male musicians prioritized the appearance of women over their intellectual capabilities [10]. Oikelome also explored the lyrics of hip-hop music and posits that “much of the mainstream hip-hop lyrics music in Nigeria has been reduced to a never-ending obsession with women and sex” [7]. Interestingly, he further notes that “the sexual exploitation in hip-hop culture is done with the consent and collaboration of women” [7].

The scope of these gender studies in Nigeria has been limited to just women’s representation thereby limiting the scope of exploring other gender performances and how they are projected [3]. Also, the investigations have mainly focused on the music of male hip-hop musicians. Though the genre is male-dominated, quite many women also sing hip-hop in the country and no investigation seems to have explored gender presentation by Nigerian female hip-hop musicians. While this current study does not extend the scope by analyzing the music of a female musician, it, however, explores gender issues -like homophobia -beyond female representation. Furthermore, while the investigations of hip-hop in Nigeria have mainly been contrived to reveal negative findings, other scholars [1], [23] that explored the industry have argued against these problematic projections of the industry. These contrasting scholars mainly project the socio-cultural significance of the industry and have argued that the industry should not be explored in critical isolation as a popular genre that promotes just negativity. For example, Inyabiri argues that the projections of wealth in the music lyrics and videos are just imaginative attempts by marginalized Nigerians to experience the wealth and affluence of the rich class and therefore contend that the contents of these hip-hop musicians reflect the challenging social realities of Nigerians [23]. His sentiment was similar to Adedeji’s, who argues that it is problematic to generalize about the unconsciousness of Nigerian musicians to social-political realities because some musicians still sing conscious music [1]. While these propositional exploration arguments are plausible, they are still parochial in the sense of progressive explorations. The nature of conscious music as explicated by Adedeji [1] mainly focuses on political issues and thus shuns the themes of hegemonic masculinity that are more amplified in Nigerian hip-hop. Also, Inyabiri’s [23] argument that the hip-hop musicians sing conscious music does not take cognizance of the lyrical and visual evolution of the industry from social justice issues to capitalist motivated themes such as sexual objectification and misogyny. Despite the inadequacy of their arguments, this study takes the suggestion by the two scholars - Adedeji [1] and Inyabiri [23] - that studies should also explore positive themes in the Nigerian hip-hop industry. It also extends the scope of investigations of Nigerian hip-hop lyrics to accommodate for previously neglected gender

appropriations.

### III. METHODOLOGY

To explore positive themes in Nigerian Hip-hop music, this researcher analyzed the lyrics of a track – *Hypocrite* -in Falz the Bahd Guy's 2019 album. This track was purposely chosen because the gender-related positions the musician explored in it are almost non-existent in the music of popular Nigerian musicians. While most of the tracks on the album focused on social-political issues structured around poor political leadership in Nigeria, there were instances where Falz challenged rigid and problematic societal gender expectations and performances. It is important to know that while the music is not particularly queer oriented as an aspect of this study is, the infusion of some gender ideas by *Falz the Bahd Guy* can disrupt predominant social ideas about sexuality [24]. These instances might not be very prominent in the album, but it is enough to bring to fore this progressive exception in Nigerian hip-hop.

### IV. DISCUSSION

Being a trained lawyer and the son of one of Nigeria's foremost human rights lawyer and activist -Femi Falana-, many might not have dismissed the possibility of the themes that Falz explored in his *Moral Instruction* album. However, devoting an entire album to what Adedeji termed 'conscious music' [1] in 2019 was an industry defying moment that Nigerians only witnessed during the times of music legend, Fela Anikulapo Kuti. In recent years, musicians like Sound Sultan, Eedris Abdulkareem, African China have also explored socio-political narratives [1], [23] in their music especially at a time before the financial boom of the industry. But since the local and international boom of the Nigerian music, musicians have mainly crafted their music lyrics and video content to project "picture-perfect, heteronormative and neo-liberal fantasies" [14] rooted in capitalist profit-making ideologies. Falz in this album explores social-political issues that were centered around grand corruption, bad leadership, religious intolerance, prostitution, domestic violence, police brutality, and human rights violations.

Of concern to this study is the manner that Falz the Bahd Guy pushed back against and chastised Nigerians about homophobia and restriction of women's expression of themselves. As already explicated in the review of literature about gender discourse in Nigerian Hip-hop, the musicians, through their craft, amplified restrictive heteronormative sexuality by projecting homophobic slurs. Falz, however, projects a different position by singing in favor of the protection of the human rights of Nigerian LGBT people. He explores this controversial topic in his song titled 'Hypocrite' that featured fellow Nigerian singer, Demmie Vee. Like the name of the track suggests, Falz explicates the counter-positioning of Nigerians about value-laden issues and argues that everybody is a hypocrite. The chorus of the song states that

*People just dey do like say dem no dey shit* {people

behave like they have no dirt}

*People just dey do like say dem no dey breath oh* {people behave like they do not breathe}

*People just dey do like say dey get superpower* {people behave like they have superpowers}

*People just dey do like say dem no dey weak oh* {people act like they are strong every time}

*Ah ah ah ah ah*

*Nobody wan dey sow where e no dey reap oh* {no one wants to sow where they will not reap}

*Everybody is a motherfucking hypocrite oh*

*Eh ah*

*Everybody is a motherfucking hypocrite oh*

*Oh, na na*

*Everybody is a motherfucking hypocrite oh*

With this chorus, the musicians observe that people act very sanctimonious, but their behavior is at variance with the front they always project. The song that was sung in pidgin English -a local way of speaking English that is native to Nigeria-essentializes human imperfections that everyone must embrace and acknowledge but argues that people have refused to do that. This prompts him to refer to everyone as hypocrites who do not live to the realities of their fallibility. Putting all these into perspective Falz makes this comparison with Jesus to amplify

*People just dey do like say na dem be Jesus* {people behave like they are Jesus}

*People so wicked but they so religious* {people are wicked but also religious}

Putting all these into perspective, Falz makes this comparison of Nigerians with Jesus to amplify his argument that people are acting pious and religious but on the other hand, are wicked to their fellow humans. Thus, exposing the paradoxical nature of the positions of Nigerians about issues like homosexuality in turn gives credence to his position that everyone is a hypocrite.

In confronting pervasive homophobia in Nigeria, Falz's lyrics argue within the construct of religious piety and the fundamental human rights of individuals to express their sexuality anyhow they choose to. The direction of Falz's argument in the song is symbolic as it challenges the overwhelming nature of public discourse and positionality about the sexuality of LGBT people in Nigeria. The sexuality of members of the LGBT community is criminalized in Nigeria and as such, has created a hostile situation for the expression and performances of their sexuality [25]. The basis for this criminalization has been associated with the teachings of the Abrahamic religions that most Nigerians practice, and a faux acceptance of the non-existence of non-binary sexuality in pre-colonial Nigerian cultural systems [26]. Thus, homophobia has been a consensus point for the two major religions - Christianity and Islam - in Nigeria; and the justifications for violence, repression, and murder of LGBT people have constantly been dug out of the holy books of both religions. He sings that

*We dey talk human right* {We have conversations about human rights}

*We no be respecter* {we do not respect it}

*Who are we to crucify the homosexuals?*

*Most of una don dey involved from time* {most of you are involved from time}

*But no be anybody business who you wan climb* {It is no one's business who decide you sleep with}

With these lyrics, he also explores how Nigerians do not uphold the fundamental human rights of LGBT people by constantly crucifying them for their sexuality. Falz accuses everyone of this repressive dispositions and further questions what right Nigerians have to crucify LGBT people because it is not anyone's business how an individual chooses to express their sexuality. The points raised by Falz in this song are the themes that have shaped LGBT advocacy or liberation movements in Nigeria and Africa. The advocacy organizations have argued for the decriminalization of LGBT sexuality [27] because these homophobic legislations infringe on the fundamental rights of individuals to express their innate sexuality. Also, in this song, Falz challenges the sexual restrictions and violence against women in a patriarchal cultural system like is evident in Nigeria. Women in societies have always been regarded as the sexual 'other' [28] and in gender discourse, essentially survive for the pleasure of the man. This phallogocentric idea has informed the duality of representation of women in hip-hop and popular culture generally. In hip-hop, women are referred to as *hos*, *bitches*, or *whores* [11] when they are considered as 'sexually active'; and also through their projections, place the honor of purity on the women who maintain their chastity. Within society, this operates as an unwritten law to moderate the woman from exploring her sexuality within the magnanimity of the man [10]. However, despite the value that man places on the 'purity' of the virgin woman, he still is not contented as he constantly seeks sexual pleasures and the affirmation of his sexual prowess from the women he terms whores, thus putting the woman in an inescapable box of a problematic dual identity.

*Because she no be virgin* {Because she is not a virgin}

*You know meet well* {You did not meet her well}

*But the one wey tie scarf* {but the one that wears a scarf}

*You no give am hell* {did you not give her hell?}

He notes that men disparage women when they are not virgins and they do not also treat the 'virgins' better than they treat those they call impure. The one that wears a scarf as used in the lyrics is a popular metaphor in Nigeria for religious females who are often assumed to be pure because of their Chastity. Also, Falz spoke against domestic violence by projecting that men are pretentious in public yet abuse their spouses in their homes.

*You dey form gentleman when we dey with* {You pretend to be a gentleman in public}

*But you go still go home beat your wife to stupor* {But you beat your wife to stupor at home}

Despite the counter-commercial themes that were projected in this *Moral instruction* album, the critical reception of the album in Nigeria has been surprising. The album also

achieved industry recognition by winning 3 awards that include the album of the year at the 2019 Nigerian Hip-hop awards popularly called Headies awards [29], breaking into the ranks of award winners, as the first politically charged music album to win the coveted award. The reason for the wide popularity of the album can be associated with how Falz explored the socio-political realities that Nigerians can resonate with. As such, one cannot argue that it was accepted because of the specific gender issues that this study evaluated. This is because the gender issues explored by this study are popular gender norms that have achieved unofficial cementation in Nigerian societies. Therefore, Nigerians could have embraced the album for confronting government insensitivity but ignored Falz's messages that challenge the deep-rooted ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Future studies might evaluate the reactions of Nigerians to Falz's challenge of homophobia and women subjugation. Invariably, the success of this album reveals that musicians can succeed in the political economy of cultural media production without aligning their lyrics and music videos to project problematic commercial motivated themes [14].

In conclusion, while adulating Falz for using his music to represent and speak on behalf of marginalized groups, he cannot be absolved from the problematic gender narratives that are promoted through Nigerian hip-hop. Falz's also has several songs and music videos like *Karashika*, *Something Light*, and *Sweet Boy*, that have also projected ideas that objectify women, portray them as greedy, and promote restrictive masculinity. It is even arguable that his stage name, *Falz the Bahd Guy*, projects an idea of an "exceptionally strong, violent, hypermasculine, and sexually promiscuous" man [3]. This amplifies the argument that the capitalist drive of the musicians have made them lose control over their art and have become subject to the decisions of the label owners, corporate businesses, and advertisers [4].

## V. CONCLUSION

This study relies on scholarly arguments that studies should explore positive themes in the Nigerian hip-hop industry by extending the scope of investigations of Nigerian hip-hop lyrics to accommodate for previously neglected gender appropriations. Thus, this study investigated how *Falz the Bahd Guy* challenges themes of hegemonic masculinity through his music. The study reveals that through his music, Falz challenged pervasive homophobia and repression of women that is pervasive in Nigeria. Also, this study argues that *Falz the Bahd Guy* while able to achieve this, still promotes the problematic gender representation themes that have characterized hip-hop music in Nigeria.

Based on the findings, this study recommends that future research may extend the focus of this research by investigating the opinions of Nigerians about the gender presentations that *Falz the Bahd Guy* promoted in this album.

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