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## **Agenda Setting Theory in Hip Hop Context**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This concept paper examines the need to understand one media representation theory which is Agenda Setting Theory. Agenda Setting Theory provides an important framework for researches in researching ideas to improve women's lives in a sociocultural context which sets the agenda on how to equate a woman's worth to her body appearance and sexual functions. The study therefore relies on extensive literature on agenda setting theory. The paper finds that agenda setting theory is relevant in the study of hip hop music as it portrays the ways media sets the agenda on how women are to be portrayed to garner sales.

**Keyword:** Agenda Setting Theory, Mass Media, Women, Music, Hip Hop

### **1. Introduction**

This concept paper examines media representation theory which is Agenda Setting Theory. Agenda Setting Theory was first introduced in 1972 in Public Opinion Quarterly by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. This theory was developed as a study on the 1968 presidential election between Democratic incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson and Republican challenger Richard Nixon. McCombs and Shaw surveyed 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina on what they thought were the most important issues of the election how that compared to what the local and national media reported were the most important issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This paper therefore is divided into four sections namely this introduction, overview of Agenda Setting Theory, Agenda Setting in hip hop music and conclusion

### **2. Agenda Setting Theory (AST)-Overview**

AST describes the "ability of the news media to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda" (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). This is to say that if a news item is covered most frequently, the audience will regard the issue as more pertinent compared to other issues in the media.

The idea of AST's role in the media can be traced back to a book, 'Public Opinion' by Walter Lippmann (1922). In his first chapter as '*The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads*' Lippmann argued that the mass media create pictures of the world and inform viewers about the world events. However, he anticipated that the pictures provided by the media were most of the time incomplete and distorted. Viewers can see only reflections of

reality and not reality itself in the news media. However, those reflections provide the basis for viewer's perceptions about the world.

Lippmann's idea that the news media influenced the pictures in viewer's heads was tested in an empirical test in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw during the 1968 presidential election of the USA. At that time, the existing theory was that the mass media had only limited effects on the public. McCombs and Shaw (1972) however concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign. The public therefore is fed on what their ideas and notions of the world should be and vice versa.

Bernard Cohen (1963) stated that 'the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.' This attention cycle can be linked to Lazarsfeld and Merton's (2007:236) statement that "the audiences of mass media apparently subscribe to the circular belief: 'If you really matter, you will be at the focus of mass attention and, if you are the focus of mass attention, then surely you must really matter.'" AST in its most basic sense is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media (AST, 2012). AST changed the notion of *what* to *how* media affects work at a micro social level and as such, although individual autonomy is pertinent, viewers often choose what issues to indulge in based on issues predetermined by the media (Matei & McDonald, 2010). Instead of directly implanting issues into the brains of viewers, media constrains and nudges the possible ways in which viewers can view reality. AST interconnects in four main functions namely:-

- Media Agenda (issues discussed in the media)
- Public Agenda (issues discussed and relevant to public)
- Policy Agenda (issues that policy makers consider important)

AST has continued to be an area of research interest for many social scientist and mass communication scholars and this is attributed to three main points: (1) the steady growth of its literature, (2) its ability to integrate a number of communication research subfields under a single theoretical umbrella, and (3) a continuing ability to generate new research problems across a variety of communication settings (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Thus AST does not confine itself in the areas of political agenda but rather can be linked to other field of research deemed relevant.

Research in AST has proven to evolve into other areas of mass communication research as stated by McCombs and Shaw (1993). AST which is naturally incorporated in studies of political issues and news coverage was tested in the music industry by Burns (1998). Burns (1998) used a survey and content analysis method to find an agenda setting effect on the listeners of a country radio station. The songs they heard on the station were perceived as the "most popular" songs at that time. This created a high salience among the songs being played. Just as news stories that are given a credible amount of attention are issues of high salience, songs that are given a credible amount of attention are issues of high salience, thus proving that agenda setting can reach beyond the bounds of political and news coverage issues (Reinisch, 2003).

Castello (2011) stated that media power is not restricted to selecting and transmitting issues but is actively involved in the configuration and reconfiguration of frames. This function is especially evident in mass media namely music. Conway (2008) and Boczkowski (2011) stated in their respective studies that AST is the most effective means of how viewers receive and understand their news. In his study, Conway (2008) found that there was a higher recall of information that is seen as negative compared to that of positive. This can be linked to the representation of women in the hip hop lyrics as their under representation and words used to describe them tend to linger in listeners mind

compared to positive things mentioned in the lyrics. On the other hand, Boczkowski (2011) stated that news stories (images) have a better staying power among viewers compared to those typically displayed more frequently by how many individuals have read the specific articles. This means the sharing, promoting, and gossip of stories will quickly circulate and legitimize the media's story. Both authors support the idea that the newer generation tends to be more visual learners and most often do not research beyond their means gaining their news from the media.

It is therefore befitting to link AST to studying the effects it has on hip hop music in order to this study will attempt to apply agenda setting demonstrate the important role that entertainment news plays in the generation of today's news agenda.

### 3. Agenda Setting Theory in Hip Hop Music- An Overview

Among media theory that is relevant for this genre is Agenda Setting Theory. Szymanski, Moffitt and Carr (2010) stated that "agenda setting theory provides an important framework for understanding, researching, and intervening to improve women's lives in a sociocultural context that sexually objectifies the female body and equates a woman's worth with her body's appearance and sexual functions." Apart from that, agenda setting reviews the after effect of media objectification involving women in terms of bodily harm and psychological problems they may face while trying to live up to the portrayal of women in the hip hop videos and lyrics.

Hip hop music on the other hand began in 1974 by DJ Kool Herc in the Bronx. Hip hop was relatively new and did not receive recognition until 1988 when the genre was finally aired in MTV channels. This music genre is now famous worldwide and also among researches due to its underrepresentation of women in its music videos and lyrics generally. The genre has received numerous backlash from researches due to its pervasive language and representation of women such as Cundiff (2013), Stephens and April (2007), Morgan (2005), Kistler and Moon (2009) to name a few.

Hip hop has become a central and vital part of entertainment today (Schmidt, 2013). According to Schmidt (2013), music videos objectifying women in obscene manner has become the selling point for the entertainment market, and this is seen involving females of different races throughout the whole world. The agenda set by the media by under representing women will allow public to think that it is acceptable to objectify women in a degrading manner. In Mulvey's (1975: 63), *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, she stated that "the beauty of the women as an object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look."

Entman (1993) offered a detailed interpretation of how media provide audiences with schemas for interpreting women. For him, essential factors are selection and salience. Mass media therefore selects some aspects of perceived reality and focuses this to the audience. In this study, women are the focus here, they are underrepresented in the hip hop lyrics and this is therefore projected to the public who view this as a norm and go on promoting women as such. Goodstat (2014) stated that evidence of agenda setting involving women can be found everywhere, from the media to women's interpersonal experience, specific environments and cultures in the world where agenda setting of women is cultivated and condoned. These media outlets constantly expose the fact that women are more often sexualised and portrayed in 'objectified manners' which include wearing provocative clothes, serving nothing more than decorative objects for men and emphasised as being useful only for their physical parts. When society recognises a

particular trend, they tend whatever else to imply in this response that women are to be treated as such.

The agenda set by the media in hip hop at times also puts a woman in a limbo as the perception of media on women is changing according to what media deems as sellable. A woman could be pressured to look thin in one society and heavy bottom and voluptuous in a different society. This agenda setting in the hip hop genre brings much confusion to women that they resort to artificial enhancements to improve their figures. In other words, girls and women are conditioned from a young age to view the body as a *work in progress* or something in constant need of alteration. Instead of being satisfied with their body as a whole, they concentrate on what separate entities they lack (Kilbourne, 2002).

When examining agenda setting and the media's influence on an audience, one has to consider the audience's predisposition to certain beliefs. According to the audience effects model, the media's coverage of events and issues interact with the audience's pre-existing sensitivities to produce changes in issues concerns. This means that an audience that is already highly sensitive to an issue will be most affected by an issue that is given increased news exposure while the same issue may have a limited effect on other group (Freeland, 2012).

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the discussion, it is palpable that agenda setting theory is embedded in media theories and studies. Agenda setting theory was created to media and its role in creating an agenda for the public. This theory is also relevant for this study as it able to research women and how media representation affects their physical health and wellbeing. When the media sets the agenda on the representation of women, viewers or researchers alike at times demand for equal rights and representation but though numerous studies have pointed out this issue, media still underrepresents women as the notion has been embedded in the minds of the viewers for a long period of time. This is supported by Szymanski, Moffitt and Carr (2010) where they stated that "agenda setting theory provides an important framework for understanding, researching, and intervening to improve women's lives in a sociocultural context that sexually objectifies the female body and equates a woman's worth with her body's appearance and sexual functions." The theory then is relevant for this study as it discuss representation and viewers and how media can manipulate the very existence of women in the industry. Agenda Setting Theory posits that the more audiences are exposed to factors such as sexual representation, submission or violence in music, the more they accept the objectification of women over time (Gerbner, et.al, 1994).

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