

Social Networks Influencing Black Girls' Interpretations of Chris Brown's Violence Against Rihanna

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Abstract

This study identifies the social networks used by urban Black girls to interpret a highly publicized episode of dating violence and ensuing conflicts between hip-hop stars Chris Brown and Rihanna. Forty-three adolescent Black girls (age 11-17 years) were asked how they heard about the relationship conflicts and what they thought about them. The media, school peers, friends, and family members emerged as the key social networks participants relied on when gathering information about and interpreting reported incidents. The mainstream media was seen as portraying Brown, the perpetrator, negatively, whereas school peers, friends, and family were seen as portraying Brown in more mixed or positive ways. The degree to which participants viewed each source as influential depended on whether the source was seen as generally trustworthy and knowledgeable about hip-hop. While the media was a frequently cited source of information, participants did not trust the mainstream media's analyses. In contrast, hip-hop media was viewed as the most unbiased and accurate information source. The importance of these networks in supporting healthy relationships for Black girls is discussed.

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The relationship between hip-hop super couple Chris Brown and Rihanna has shone a spotlight on what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2008) has labeled a critical public health concern—dating violence (DV). In 2009, 20-year-old Chris Brown banged his 21-year-old girlfriend Rihanna's head against the passenger window of the car in which they were riding. He then punched her in the eye with his right hand while continuing to drive with his left, bit her, and ultimately put her in a headlock until she lost consciousness (Benjenstorf, 2012; Checkoway, 2009; Goldberg, 2013; Hopson, 2009). It has since emerged that this was not the first time Brown used violence against Rihanna in their relationship. Still, the couple has reunited several times following the widely publicized incident, even while Brown was under probation for his actions (Goldberg, 2013). On social media, the couple continued with open flirtatious communications and reportedly attempted to make each other jealous with new loves (Benjenstorf, 2012; Bull, 2012; Robertson, 2012). Once Chris Brown's probation and order of protection period ended, the couple began to go on public dates again (Goldberg, 2013). More recently, Rihanna released the song "Nobody's Business," just 4 years after the initial incident; this disconcertingly upbeat duet with Chris Brown openly defends their ongoing intimate bond (Eells, 2013).

This initial DV incident and subsequent relationship behaviors continue to gain worldwide attention not simply because of the couple's superstar status but also due to the incongruity between Brown's and Rihanna's initial images as innocent young adults. Until that time, Chris Brown was marketed as a mainstream hip-hop culture "good boy," with terms such as *charming*, *handsome*, *boyish good looks*, and *boy next door* being used to describe his persona (Goldberg, 2013; Robertson, 2012; Rothman et al., 2012). Similarly, Rihanna was viewed at the time as a *good girl* learning to "test out" her newfound sexuality (Checkoway, 2009; Goldberg, 2013). In fact, the last album she released before the incident was titled *Good Girl Gone Bad*.

Brown and Rihanna's behavior is considered very influential for Black adolescents for a number of reasons. First, Brown and Rihanna are popular and important figures among Black adolescent populations. They sing about issues relevant to urban Black experiences, and their idealized lifestyles and personas ensure they are viewed as important figures/role models (Bierria, 2012; Checkoway, 2009; Hopson, 2009). Second, they are part of mainstream hip-hop culture in the United States—a youth-driven popular culture genre that has been found to influence Black adolescents' intimate partnership

behaviors (Bryant, 2008; Rose, 2008). In particular, hip-hop scripts about Black womanhood have been found to influence Black adolescent girls' identity development and relationship attitudes (Bryant, 2008; Stephens, 2012; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Stephens, Phillips, & Few, 2009). Finally, Brown and Rihanna remain highly popular celebrities, and their multiple reunions have kept the couple in the public eye.

Although there have been several popular culture and academic discussions about what occurred and continues to take place between Brown and Rihanna, no studies have examined the sources of information Black adolescents relied on to make sense of the famous DV incident and the couple's subsequent interactions. The Chris Brown and Rihanna relationship was, and continues to be, widely discussed across a variety of social networks, including familial units (Hopson, 2009; Payne & Gainey, 2009), peers (Bierria, 2012; Dingfelder, 2010; Hopson, 2009), and the mainstream media (Checkoway, 2009; Rothman et al., 2012). Thus, the Chris Brown and Rihanna relationship provides a unique opportunity to determine what social networks urban Black girls use to gather information about DV and how that information is interpreted and utilized.

For these reasons, the present study's objective is to investigate the sources of information that influenced urban Black girls' perceptions of the Chris Brown-Rihanna dating abuse incident and the related events that unfolded afterward. We utilize social network theory (SNT) to frame our investigation of both these networks and the perceptions adolescent Black girls have about them via qualitative methods. SNT asserts that individuals learn appropriate relationship behaviors not simply through observation but also through the endorsements, criticisms, and norms expressed by those they interact with on a daily basis (Berkman, 2002). By using a qualitative approach, we can focus closely on subjective reports of social networks perceptions of this specific incident between Brown and Rihanna and its relevance to these girls' values and beliefs about intimate partner violence. These detailed reports will increase our understanding of how social networks matter for Black girls' beliefs about relationships and DV (Hollstein, 2011), and support practitioners' abilities to alter beliefs or interpretations that permit or promote violence among Black girls.

Review of the Literature

Dating violence is defined as physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional violence that occurs within a dating relationship (CDC, 2015). The CDC's 2013 *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Report* on high school students (Grades 9-12) revealed that Black adolescent girls experience higher rates of

physical DV (12.3%) than their male counterparts (8.2%). The prevalence of DV is also higher among 12th-grade students than among 9th-grade students (CDC, 2014), and the highest rate of relationship violence nationwide is among women aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 years (Catalano, 2012). The fact that DV victimization is higher for Black girls than boys and that it continues to rise after adolescence reinforces the importance of identifying early perceptions of these behaviors among Black girls.

Chris Brown and Rihanna. Although DV occurs at alarmingly high rates in adolescent and young adult relationships (Dardis, Dixon, Edwards, & Turchik, 2015), the Chris Brown and Rihanna DV incident achieved an unprecedented level of national and international attention, being covered by mainstream news channels, newspapers, TV shows, and magazines (Rothman et al., 2012). This may be because of the youth, attractiveness, and overall popularity of the “golden couple” (Checkoway, 2009) and/or because of the severity of the incident (e.g., Rihanna’s loss of consciousness), which was evident in publicly broadcasted photos of Rihanna’s injuries. Today, the incident continues to be a source of controversy and even dark humor (e.g., Makarechi, 2013; Redden, 2013) and has spawned countless reviews of their enduring relationship (e.g., Benjenstorf, 2012; Goldberg, 2013; Robertson, 2012). There was even an Oprah TV special featuring Rihanna recounting their relationship, and a popular episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* “inspired by” these events (Vena, 2013). This prolonged mainstream media attention has contributed to an ongoing public discussion about the couple, gender roles in hip-hop and Black culture, and conflict in dating relationships.

While other celebrities have been involved in similar situations, Brown’s and Rihanna’s youth and status as hip-hop artists made this incident particularly relevant to urban Black adolescents’ experiences. Since its beginnings 40 years ago, hip-hop has directly influenced the identity development and interpersonal frameworks used by urban, Black adolescents and young adults in the United States. Today, mainstream hip-hop is the most accessible and widely promoted form of this broad and diverse culture (Rose, 2008; Stephens et al., 2009). Most research has focused on mainstream hip-hop’s influence on racial/ethnic minority youth’s behavioral outcomes, identity development, and psychological and physical well-being (see Stephens et al., 2009). Yet few studies have explored what resources urban Black girls draw on to negotiate hip-hop’s intimate relationship messages, or notions and occurrences of DV in hip-hop culture.

Social Network Theory. To identify the sources urban Black girls turn to when negotiating their understandings of DV, this study utilized SNT (Berkman,

2002; Simons-Morton, Haynie, & Noelcke, 2009). Broadly, SNT describes the shape and characteristics of social networks, including the structural properties of relationships among network members (e.g., number and strength of ties) as well as the types of relationships in a network and the nature of their influence. Social networks are the social relationships around a person, group, or organization that play a significant role in decision-making processes and ensuing behaviors (Berkman, 2002; Simons-Morton et al., 2009). By focusing on social networks, researchers can identify how individuals interact with network members around particular issues, as well as how network members interact with one another. Understanding the ways in which systems like social networks influence DV and other health issues is just as critical as examining more micro-level risk factors, such as biological factors, given the bidirectional and emergent nature of causality among variable levels (e.g., Kennedy, 2008).

As a paradigm focusing on how social relationships influence the content and acceptance of communications, SNT is well suited to help us identify what social networks and members influence urban Black girls' negotiation of DV information. SNT contributes to our understanding of this by helping map out how these relationships may affect feelings people have for each other, information exchange processes, or negotiations for more concrete resources (e.g., Berkman, 2002). This can be done using quantitative analyses of the structural aspects of social networks or using qualitative methods to examine the network surrounding an individual (Berkman, 2002). In fact, the earliest social network analyses were qualitative (Marin & Wellman, 2011).

SNT also recognizes and captures the fact that individuals are typically connected to multiple, overlapping networks that have differing levels of influence. SNT asserts that these different sites of information should interact to influence DV message negotiation as urban Black girls learn about appropriate relationship behaviors through the values and norms expressed by the close social units with which they interact (Berkman, 2002). For example, although adolescents consume high levels of relationship-focused media messages, communications from family members and peers can buffer the acceptance of unhealthy messages from these sources (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Bierria, 2012; Bryant, 2008; Stephens et al., 2009).

Method

This study employs qualitative methods because we are interested in the person-centered, idiosyncratic meanings participants ascribe to aspects of DV (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2003). Research has shown that qualitative methods are particularly useful when examining sensitive topics with

racial-/ethnic-minority populations (Few et al., 2003; Marecek, Fine, & Kidder, 1997), especially in the early stages of work on nascent topics. It has also been shown that participants' interpretations of individual systems of relevance, such as social networks, are especially well suited to qualitative methodology (Few et al., 2003; Hollstein, 2011). Thus, this study eschewed a priori research questions in favor of using SNT to focus on emergent themes, consistent with qualitative research's stance as a broad-based inquiry into spaces that are undocumented in other studies (Marecek et al., 1997).

Participants

A convenience sample of 43 Black adolescent girls attending two after-school programs in the southeastern United States participated in this study. These academically based programs specifically served girls residing in urban neighborhoods with low median household incomes and primarily Black/African American populations. The average household income for residents living in this area is \$24,994, which is more than one third below the county average (Miami Dade Department of Planning and Zoning, 2009).

The girls in the study ranged in age from 11 to 17 years, with a mean age of 14.8 years. All self-identified as Black ($n = 36$) or biracial including Black ($n = 7$). Familial national origin labels included African American ($n = 26$), Haitian ($n = 9$), Puerto Rican ($n = 3$), Dominican ($n = 3$), and Bahamian ($n = 2$) among others. The majority of girls self-identified as being primarily interested in male sexual partners ($n = 42$), with only one self-identifying as a sexual minority. A total of 21 girls in the study (49%) had been in at least one dating relationship at the time of the interview. The average number of lifetime sexual partners was 1.4 among the 15 participants who had had sexual intercourse. Twenty-eight girls had not experienced sexual onset at the time of the interview.

Interview Methods

Three weeks prior to the interview sessions, participants were given parental and adolescent consent forms to review with their primary caregiver. The forms included information about the interviews and an accompanying hip-hop-based DV intervention that would occur the week following the interview sessions.

The principal investigator (PI) and a graduate student conducted the individual interviews as an optional after-school programming activity option. After confirming that both the parental and adolescent consent forms were signed, adolescent participants completed two documents (1) a demographic

questionnaire and (2) a questionnaire assessing hip-hop culture consumption and DV beliefs and experiences. These documents were then placed in an envelope and sealed by the participant. On the front of the envelope, participants wrote a pseudonym of their choice to be used as their participant identification code and transcription name in the audiotaped interview that followed.

Each participant was then interviewed one-on-one in a private conference room in the after-school site by the PI or graduate student. Interviews were guided by a questioning route that used semistructured yet flexible questions to gather girls' perceptions about the initial Brown and Rihanna DV incident that had taken place 3 years prior, as well as events in their relationship up to the time of the interview. The interviews lasted between 9 and 38 minutes. Some questions included are following: What had you heard about the Chris Brown and Rihanna incident? Who did you speak to or spoke to you about the incident? What kinds of things did they say about what occurred between Chris Brown and Rihanna? What do you think about things that were said about Chris Brown and Rihanna since the incident? What do you think of their relationship today? Additional prompts related to the primary questions were included to probe for more in-depth responses.

Data Analysis

Four undergraduate research assistants (RAs) transcribed the interviews. Two additional RAs verified the completeness and accuracy of the transcripts. This involved each transcription file being checked against the original audio file twice. RAs did not review the interviews they conducted or the files they transcribed. Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously, using the constant comparative method. This method of analysis involves continually comparing and organizing data to clarify, substantiate, and elaborate an experience or phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Specifically, as themes were classified they were compared across categories to create the analysis of initial observations. As such, the identification of themes underwent constant refinement throughout the collection and analysis progressions, continuously feeding back into the process of category coding (Patton, 2002).

The first stage of analysis in the study involved reviewing each transcript line by line using a coding scheme developed by the PI. The PI constructed a preliminary coding framework after in-depth reading of the transcripts; SNT constructs—including social context, levels of influence, and social influence—guided this analysis process. Sections of text were coded by issue or theme and additional codes were added as new themes emerged. The PI and three RAs trained in qualitative methods first read all the

transcripts in their entirety, then coded and organized the data to identify key themes related to sources of DV information and attitudes toward the content of their information. During the second stage of analysis, initial codes were reviewed and organized into groups or categories; additional codes were added as new themes emerged. Themes and categories were then examined across the whole data set and in relation to each specific interview. The PI and the three RAs then met to discuss and further refine each set of themes, resolve differences, and reach consensus on a coding scheme. Discrepancies were resolved first by revisiting and reviewing the data and then through group discussion.

To ensure validity, key themes were summarized, reviewed, and mutually agreed on. Credibility was enhanced by continuous and prolonged engagement with the participants. Workshops addressing health communication skills, adolescent intimate relationships, verbal aggression, and sexually transmitted diseases had been conducted by the PI at the site over the past 24 months. Finally, the interviewers' field notes helped document immediate insights and thoughts regarding the interview sessions. These tools help ensure credibility of the data collection, highlight dissimilarities/similarities in the data, and variations in the interpretation (Hollstein, 2011; Marecek et al., 1997).

Results

The results presented here are organized around three major themes that emerged from the data regarding the Chris Brown and Rihanna DV incident and the continued relationship: (1) the social networks' utilized in discussions about the incident and ensuing events, (2) the content of social networks' discussions about the incident and ensuing events, and (3) perceptions of social networks' trustworthiness and accuracy about the incident and ensuing events.

Social Networks Discussing Chris Brown and Rihanna's Relationship

All participants in the study reported some knowledge specifically about the Chris Brown and Rihanna incident and the ensuing relationship conflicts between the couple. When specifically asked about the initial DV incident, the majority perceived themselves as being knowledgeable ($n = 23$) or very knowledgeable ($n = 16$) about the case. Only four participants reported having little knowledge, and none reported having no knowledge of the incident.

To better understand Black girls' knowledge about the violence in Chris Brown and Rihanna's relationship, we first coded for where participants got information about the case. The media ($n = 43$), school peers, ($n = 38$), friends and close-age siblings ($n = 34$), and parents ($n = 19$) emerged as the social networks most often reported by these girls as providing information they used to understand the couple's conflicts.

Media. The most cited source of information about the incident and ensuing relationship conflicts was the media; all participants reported that they first heard about the fight and subsequent conflicts through media reports ($n = 43$). Media was coded as any publicly accessible broadcasting and narrow-casting medium. In the present study, this included only newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and the Internet. Participants repeatedly referenced broadcasts about the couple from these outlets when discussing the incident and subsequent reunion. Reports describing the incident were primarily taken from television and radio talk show programs, Internet articles, music channel brief reports (e.g., Black Entertainment Television [BET]; Music Television [MTV], Video Hits One [VH1]), or magazine articles.

Like, I saw it on [BET show] 106 & Park. But it was on the radio a lot, too. It was, like everywhere in the news and I saw it on the [magazine] covers when I was in the stores. (Mackenzie, age 13)

Every time you looked at something [on television] it was being talked about. Chris and Rihanna—it was everywhere. Everyone had to know 'bout what was going on. (Trenae, age 13)

They was talking about him on Ricky Smiley [syndicated radio morning show] just today. They ran into each other at a club and Drake and [Chris Brown] got in to it because [Drake] was with Rihanna. Chris is still jealous but he already got another girl. (Minaj, age 15)

School Peers. School peers were the second most frequently mentioned social network. In the present study, school peers includes those individuals of the same age, class, education, and broad social status as the participant but whom the participant did not consider emotionally or socially close. Thirty-eight girls mentioned "classmates," "acquaintances," "friends of friends," or individuals attending the same school as a relevant social network. As such, the category of "school peers" represents a broad social network from which participants drew information about Chris Brown and Rihanna rather than close, individual friends.

At school, everyone was talking about it at first. They got into a fight, she got assaulted, and he went to jail for it. That what I know, but you heard different things round the [school] yard. (Brickilla, age 15)

At break [in school] they was talking 'bout how . . . how she gave him herpes, and he beat her up. And then I heard it was something that had to do with Jay Z, and, what else I heard? Yea, that's it. Everyone—they was all saying something. (China, age 16)

At lunch [school peers] was talking about how they are back together again. This is the third time, right? Everyone wanted to know why they keep breaking up then getting back in secret. Everyone knows. (Blue, age 16)

Friends and Close-Age Siblings. A third network that emerged as a source for information on the Chris Brown and Rihanna incident was that of friends. Friends were differentiated from school peers by the fact that they are emotionally and socially close to the participant, communicate regularly, and engage in discussions about personal topics. Close-age siblings are those identified as participants' sisters and/or brothers who are also in the adolescent stage of their life span. These relationships are based on a familial and recognized kinship connection. Based on these criteria, friends and close-age siblings were often interchangeably referred to in discussions about this type of social network's influence. Together, friends and close-age siblings were the third most cited social networks used by participants when seeking information or having discussions about the couple's relationship conflicts ($n = 34$).

Parental Figures. The first three social networks used by participants were reported without prompts from the interviewer. In contrast, parental figures emerged as a significant social network only after girls were specifically asked about those "close to them" who may have discussed Chris Brown and Rihanna's relationships. Parental figures included adults labeled as a parent or reported as having a parent-child relationship with the participant. After this question prompt, 19 participants shared information they received from their mother and other close maternal figures (e.g., aunts, significantly older same-sex siblings, stepmothers) about the incident. Only seven participants mentioned comments made by fathers or male parental figures at any point in the interview (e.g., stepfather, mother's boyfriend).

Content of Social Networks' Discussions

Although participants reported these four social networks as sources of information about the initial DV incident and ensuing events, the interpretation of

the content of each networks' messages differed. Most of the content proffered by these social networks focused on issues related to perpetrator versus victim responsibility. According to 23 of the participants, media reports were perceived as holding Chris Brown responsible for the assault. Except for when citing responses from individual hip-hop artists, the media was viewed as primarily focusing on police reports documenting the incident, courtroom proceedings of Brown's prosecution, and Brown's familial history with DV (recalled through interviews with his mother and other family members). This media portrayal led the majority of participants to initially agree that Chris Brown was at fault and was wrong to have assaulted Rihanna ($n = 39$).

Chris Brown shouldn't have done that that was wrong. I don't like him no more because he did this to Rihanna. Because a man should not hit a woman. (May, age 16)

Yeah, I agree, it's wrong [that Chris Brown hit Rihanna]. (Poochie, age 16)

Did not agree [with Chris Brown's actions]; it is not ok for a guy to put a hand on a woman. (Plumhead, age 15)

However, the possibility that Rihanna may be partially or wholly responsible for Chris Brown's actions emerged when about half of these girls ($n = 23$) pointed out mainstream media biases they perceived existed, shaping their attributions of blame. Information from other close social network sources also raised doubts about Chris Brown's full culpability. While it did not represent the majority, nearly one quarter of these girls reported comments that placed blame on Rihanna from school peers ($n = 9$), close friends ($n = 12$), and siblings ($n = 10$). Comments such as the ones below highlight these networks' attitudes about appropriate factors leading to DV victimization and perpetration.

I think it, well, me and my friends we all decided together that it was, it was Rihanna's fault because Chris Brown would have never did that if they weren't together that night or, or like they were in, like if Rihanna would've never said what she said to make Chris Brown want to beat her up or whatever. (Trenae, age 13)

My sister, like, really love Chris Brown. And [sister] starts [saying] "Why they [only charge Brown]? That's not fair, they both should have went to jail" cause they both did something. (Sweet Cake, age 13)

Um, my sister was in shock she couldn't believe it. She thinks Chris Brown is so sexy and sweet so he couldn't have done it on purpose or anything. Like, he didn't mean to. (Tee, age 16)

Well, I remember my cousin telling me that Rihanna gave him herpes and he went to the hospital and they told him and when he got home he beat her up because she gave him herpes. They put her on the Internet when Chris Brown hit her, but there was like make up, that wasn't real. (Poochie, age 16)

Some participants reported similar sentiments from their parental figures, whose comments centered mainly on the consequences of violating appropriate gender roles in intimate relationships. When considering Chris Brown's actions, for example, 12 girls stated that parental figures and adult family members described his behavior as what men "typically" do when they are pushed by a woman or a woman purposefully attempts to trigger a man's anger. Thus, Rihanna was viewed as escalating the situation by not engaging in gender-appropriate behaviors (e.g., submissive, silent, obedient, passive), thus creating a context where Brown's behavior should have been expected and appropriate.

My momma and daddy was laughing. They was saying "See—look that is just what they get from dealing with these boys, they young boys they just only want one thing, and you won't give it to him so of course he hit you." My daddy was like she should have defended herself even if he did hit her, my daddy said you're supposed to let no man hit you no matter how strong he is. My momma was just . . . she didn't care. (Nakayla, age 15)

Yes, my mommy said that she was like mad at Chris Brown because he did that to [Rihanna]. But my mommy still thought that it was Rihanna's fault—even my daddy, my brothers—they said she should have known what he was about. My daddy said that well, it was all Chris Brown fault, and Rihanna fault. Because they shouldn't have been together that night. And Rihanna shouldn't have ever said what she said to get him upset. (Trenae, age 13)

[Her mother] was like, yeah he was wrong for what he did but he apologized! They hurt him too by cutting his music [from radio station rotations] and stuff like that. But he did apologize; he didn't sit back and said, ok, that is done. (Barbie, age 16)

My grandma felt bad for Rihanna. She was like "She is a poor defenseless woman who couldn't defend herself and all those bruises"—she just felt bad. My uncles said like "Oh that is what she get"—cause most women feel like they powerful men. Like [women say] "If you hit me I am calling the police, if you hit me I will throw you in jail." Some women feel that way, and other feel like "Oh I am scared here 'cause he may break my neck and stuff." (Princess, age 15)

'Cause . . . my momma kept on making me think about it. She was like what if that was you, you know you say it's your husband and stuff. She was just like, saying that to make me think about it, it was like what if that was you or whatever, like that, and I was like, I really thought about it and I took [Chris Brown posters] all down. (Plumhead, age 15)

Social Networks' Trustworthiness and Influence

Participants reported spending a considerable amount of time attempting to distinguish between what they thought was fact versus fiction within the messaging from various social networks. No one source was viewed as having the most truthful version of the story about the couple's relationship. Rather, these adolescents felt there were multiple sides to the situation and no one source had all the information that was needed to make a definitive decision about what occurred between the couple since the reported incident. Perceptions of the accuracy and bias of each social network's information informed how participants gave value to Rihanna's and Chris Brown's behaviors. This was evident from the response the girls shared about each sources' inaccuracies and biases.

They were saying oh Chris Brown blah, blah, blah, but I'm thinking like ya'll don't know. Ya'll just listen to what the media said, the tabloids gunna say anything just to get attention just to make money, so at the end of the day it's gunna be over, it's gunna be money over everything 'cause they making money but ya'll the ones falling into it. Ya'll don't know what happened 'cause don't nobody was—wasn't there, but only them two. (Sunny, age 15)

It was on the news and it says something about Chris Brown hit Rihanna. So I'm thinking, I could see Chris Brown doing that 'cause they say he got anger problems. But at the same time I'm like, you can't just do it toward him. She gotta have a side in it too 'cause everybody gotta have their faults when they do something. (May, age 16)

Despite being the first source of information participants looked to, mainstream media sources were clearly viewed by the majority of girls as the social network most often providing inaccurate information about the incident ($n = 23$). The distortion of facts was portrayed as both direct (e.g., inaccurate reporting, photo shopping victim photos) and indirect (e.g., presenting conflicting stories, covert biases in reporting).

All the media and the tabloids was like photoshoppin' all these pictures of Rihanna's face, tryin' to make it seem like it was really that bad, And I'm like,

“Ya’ll didn’t see her face when she came out of the car so ya’ll don’t know.”
(Que, age 14)

I was like ya’ll shouldn’t believe what the media say cause’ everybody has something to say at the end of the day. But [the media] gotta cover the whole parts of the [story] . . . (China, age 16)

Like the media makes it worse. Like, you can’t have privacy everything is always on TV, or in the newspaper or in a magazine. And half of the time it don’t be true or it don’t be the whole truth. (Plumhead, age 15)

In contrast to mainstream media reports and news articles, hip-hop media sources were viewed as providing accurate information. This distinction was clearly made when these girls pointed to programming and magazines that are targeted to and primarily consumed by Black adolescent audiences, including programs on BET, Tom Joyner Radio Show, and local hip-hop radio stations.

They were playing both of [Rihanna’s and Chris Brown’s music] on [BET after-school music program] 106 and Park. So they didn’t take no sides. It was like . . . like they let them work it out without telling us to think one way or another. (Peanut, age 15)

Like on Tom Joyner [syndicated morning radio program] they talked about it. Most were against Chris, but they let both sides be heard. (Tasha, age 15)

They was making fun of them yesterday [on local hip-hop radio station]. Like they had someone pretending that they were Rihanna and Chris Brown. But it was just a joke. It wasn’t mean—just kinda funny. I don’t think . . . I wasn’t offended because it wasn’t trying to hurt anybody. (Pooch, age 16)

Furthermore, a third of these girls ($n = 8$) specifically pointed to music videos and song lyrics released in the years following by Chris Brown and Rihanna as important hip-hop media sources of information about their conflict and continued relationship dynamics. For example, her “Man Down” music video served as a source of insight into Rihanna’s state of mind at the time of its release for three of the participants. Recorded 1 year after the altercation, in this video Rihanna shoots a man that attacks her and sings about her regrets for her actions. Brown’s contribution to rapper Tyga’s 2013 song “F— for the Road” and his own song “I Can’t Win,” also from 2013, were pointed to by some study participants as examples of “apology songs” to Rihanna following the publicized attack. Furthermore, eight of these girls pointed to

the song “Nobody’s Business” that Rihanna and Chris Brown recorded together 3 years after the incident. The main refrain of this song is “You’ll always be mine, sing it to the world/Always be my boy, you’ll always be my girl/Nobody’s business, nobody’s business.” According to the study participants, these songs and videos provided them with the two artists’ first-person insights about the DV incident, the nature of their current relationship, and each of their “true” personality characteristics.

Well after she made the music video “Man Down,” that’s what made me think of her negatively. (Nakayla, age 15)

She sings about [Chris Brown] and gets violent. She is not over it . . . she is not alright in the head even now. You can tell by the songs and stuff. There is a lot of baggage on her mind. (Ladybug, age 14)

He’s sorry. You know he is hurting. You can hear when he’s singing [the song “Crawl”]. (Bria, age 16)

School peers, friends, and close-age siblings were also viewed as social networks most knowledgeable and trustworthy about the incident and couple’s ongoing relationship dynamics. A total of seven participants specifically mentioned these social networks when sharing what was viewed as factual and accurate information about the conflicts between Rihanna and Chris Brown.

Discussion

Clearly, the Chris Brown-Rihanna incident was a pivotal popular culture event for this group of urban Black adolescent girls. Ninety percent of participants reported being knowledgeable both about the initial DV incident between Rihanna and Brown and about ongoing behaviors in the relationship. Furthermore, all participants made comments about the couple’s interactions in the years following the incident (e.g., reports of meetings, interview comments, music video portrayals, song lyrics). Thus, the widespread public discourse and continued discussions in social networks means that these adolescent girls have experienced some degree of exposure to a DV incident and behaviors of the individuals after the event. From these responses it is clear that these participants are already formulating beliefs about DV, conflict negotiation, and gender role expectations that inform experiences in intimate relationships. Given that Black adolescents place great importance on the experiences of popular culture figures, particularly within hip-hop, it can be

asserted that this specific incident would be particularly powerful for helping these girls develop understandings of DV within their own lives (Hopson, 2009; Stephens, 2012).

These girls' exposure to and understandings of the initial DV incident and subsequent interactions between the couple underscore the importance of addressing DV within Black adolescent populations from an early age. As it is normative for adolescents to experiment with romantic relationships from early adolescence, the relationship between Chris Brown and Rihanna provides a developmentally important opportunity to observe and "learn" about intimacy skills. As romantic relationships are a common source of conflict not only within adolescent couples but also among their school peers, it is necessary to provide Black adolescent girls with conflict negotiation and healthy relationship skills prior to dating onset (Debnam, Howard, & Garza, 2014; Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009).

Given that Black adolescent girls typically begin dating and experience sexual onset earlier than other racial/ethnic adolescents (CDC, 2008), this education is particularly important in light of the correlation between earlier sexual behavior and higher levels of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse (CDC, 2008; Mulford & Giordano, 2008; Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2011). Specifically, being under the age of 18 years, dating at an early age, and sexual activity prior to age 16 years put adolescent girls at increased risk for DV (CDC, 2008; Debnam et al., 2014; Halpern et al., 2009; Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2011). Furthermore, adolescent girl's DV victimization has been found to increase in frequency and severity of violence as they age (Halpern et al., 2009; Mulford & Giordano, 2008; Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2011).

Although the majority of the girls in this study who had been in at least one dating relationship at the time of the interviews were over the age of 16 years, and over half had not experienced sexual onset, they are still at risk via experiences within social network and community contexts. Specifically, having a friend involved in DV, community or neighborhood violence exposure, and living in resource-limited communities, like the ones where these study participants resided, were found to directly increase adolescent girl's risk for DV victimization (CDC, 2008; Payne & Gainey, 2009; Vagi et al., 2013). This means that these urban Black girls' social contexts and personal networks directly impact their potential risk for victimization, even if they have not yet personally experienced DV or been part of an intimate relationship.

These results also highlight the importance of examining social networks in shaping these Black adolescent girls' perceptions about Chris Brown's assault on Rihanna and beliefs about DV, gender roles, and intimate relationships. For this group of girls, the mainstream and hip-hop media, school

peers, close friends, and family members emerged as valued sources for information about the DV incident. However, the content provided by each network differed, and each had varying degrees of influence on participants based on their beliefs about the network's trustworthiness.

Media

Given that this incident of DV and the ensuing interactions between the couple have been widely covered in both hip-hop-focused and mainstream media outlets, it is not surprising that participants reported mainstream media as the most often used source of information about Chris Brown and Rihanna's relationship. Entire blocks of TV and radio programming and magazine issues were devoted to the topic immediately after the DV incident, throughout Chris Brown's subsequent sentencing, and more recently, over their rekindled relationship and run-ins at various locations (Benjenstorf, 2012; Bierria, 2012; Bull, 2012; Goldberg, 2013; Robertson, 2012). However, while there was a high consumption of media coverage of the couple over time in our sample, the mainstream media was often perceived as an untrustworthy source. Participants viewed mainstream media as providing information about the initially reported DV incident and ensuing interactions between the couple, but they widely acknowledged this network's biased interpretations of hip-hop and Black cultural content.

In fact, prior research has clearly noted mainstream media's focus on stereotypical, negative aspects of hip-hop culture, including violence, sexism, and homophobia (e.g., Rose, 2008; Stephens, 2012; Stephens et al., 2009). It is rare for mainstream media to acknowledge the positive aspects of hip-hop culture and its importance to Black youth. This imbalanced coverage is so pronounced that many researchers and consumers of the culture have been openly critical and distrustful of mainstream media reports about hip-hop culture and its figures (Bierria, 2012). Thus, participants' view that the mainstream media directly and indirectly distorted Chris Brown and Rihanna's relationship is supported by the research examining mainstream media portrayals of hip-hop.

Beyond portrayals of hip-hop culture, there is a history of distrust by the Black community in mainstream media's portrayals of Black people. This distrust is particularly evident in research examining constructions of Black manhood in the mainstream media (Hurt, 2006 ; Washington, 2000). Examples have been seen in the coverage of the O. J. Simpson criminal case and, more recently, in coverage of criminal accusations against Bill Cosby. Both these Black men were icons in mainstream and Black media. Yet, when these figures stood accused of murder and violent sexual assaults,

respectively, reactions in the media and public were divided along racial lines (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014; Alderman, 1997; Carbado, 1997; Ehrenreich, 1996; Hastie & Pennington, 1996; Washington, 2000), with mainstream media portraying these men more negatively. This is also true in the coverage of criminal cases involving Black men who are not celebrities. Black men have been and continue to be unfairly treated by the justice system compared to White men (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Ehrenreich, 1996; Gomez, 2015; A. Thomas & Blackmon, 2015; Washington, 2000). Understandably, many urban Black adolescents and young adults believe that the justice system is fundamentally racist and corrupt (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Ehrenreich, 1996; Gomez, 2015; Thomas & Blackmon, 2015; Washington, 2000). As a result, the mainstream media is often assumed to support police perspectives and, in turn, fail to accurately capture the “truth” of urban Black male’s experiences (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Ehrenreich, 1996; Washington, 2000).

It is important to note that this divide between mainstream media’s portrayals of the world and the experiences of Black people in America actually served as a catalyst for the birth of the one media genre that these Black urban girls viewed as trustworthy—hip-hop. Hip-hop began as an African American and New York-born Puerto Rican (Nuyorican), urban-based culture of creativity and expression that specifically expressed the concerns, beliefs, and worldviews of this population. Hip-hop was initially a vehicle for expressing anger and frustration within a society that viewed these groups as worthless and excluded them from mainstream economies and opportunities (Hurt, 2006; Rose, 2008; Stephens et al., 2009). Until the emergence of gangsta rap, hip-hop was a fringe culture primarily produced, marketed, and sold only in urban Black communities. The highly promoted media images of gangsta rappers reinforced the stereotypical hypersexual, violent Black male that police needed to control (Hurt, 2006; Rose, 2008). Taken together, the perceived biases in mainstream media’s coverage of Black individuals and events understandably reinforce these girls’ perceptions that “non-Black” media will not be fair and will not provide inaccurate information about Chris Brown—whether they viewed his actions as wrong or as right.

School Peer Cultures

This study supports results from other research about the role of peer cultures’ values in shaping perceptions about a popular culture DV event and subsequent interactions between the couple. School peers were widely relied on and considered a knowledgeable and trustworthy source of information. The strong influence of school peers on participants’ understandings of the couples’ volatile relationship is important given school peer group norms’

influence on girls significantly increases at this stage of the life span (George et al., 2013; Kornienko & Santos, 2014).

During adolescence, peer groups serves as a context through which girls learn about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and conformity to the group is required to achieve acceptance and approval in their peer culture (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Giles & Maltby, 2004; Kornienko & Santos, 2014; Shi & Xie, 2013). In fact, Kornienko and Santos (2014) found that adolescent girls who feared being negatively evaluated by their school peers were more prone to depression. Furthermore, given the correlation between hip-hop culture and urban Black youth's relationship behaviors, messages about intimacy and dating from school peers, friends, and siblings would more likely be perceived as valued and accurate (Stephens et al., 2009; Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

In this study, school peers were described as largely supporting Chris Brown and holding Rihanna at least partially responsible for his violent behaviors. This finding supported results from a Boston Public Health Commission polled of 200 adolescents about their attitudes regarding this event; results revealed almost half of the respondents felt the initially publicized assault must have been Rihanna's fault (Dingfelder, 2010). Narrative accounts from youth workers and teachers noted that high school students often question why Rihanna "kept arguing with him if she knew he was violent" and that she "must have done something to make him so angry" (Dingfelder, 2010). Furthermore, recent popular culture polls have further shown that adolescents are supportive of Rihanna forgiving Brown and feel that what occurred was not that serious an event (Benjenstorf, 2012; Checkoway, 2009; Dingfelder, 2010; Hopson, 2009; Rothman et al., 2012).

Future research needs to explore more deeply the within-group differences existing with Black adolescent girls' school peers. This is required because there are a number of individual difference variables that shape the degree to which an individual wants to or is able to embrace/reject peer group values. Shi and Xie (2013), for example, found that high-status peers are particularly influential in girls' school peers, an effect that is stronger among African Americans than Hispanic Americans and White Americans. Furthermore, because peer group structure can promote both negative and positive behavioral outcomes (e.g., Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Kornienko & Santos, 2014; Laird, Bridges, & Marsee, 2013), it is important for researchers to have a clear picture of peer relationships within this population.

Close Friends and Siblings

There is a large body of research examining the importance of close friendships and sibling relationships in Black communities. Although little research

has focused specifically on Black girls, it was not surprising that close friends and siblings were a key social network for girls in this study. Research has shown that friends and siblings provide important emotional, psychological, and physical support for Black women across their life span (see Few et al., 2003; Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, & Brown, 2013; Wallace, Hooper, & Persaud, 2014). Their importance has been linked to the fact that Black women feel they can hold open and honest discussions, share personal information, and engage in both age and culturally relevant conversations with those they consider members of their “sister circles” (George et al., 2013; Laird et al., 2013; Soli, McHale, & Feinberg, 2009; Wallace et al., 2014; Whiteman, Bernard, & McHale, 2010).

This sense of trust and shared identity is particularly important when considering Black adolescent girls’ willingness to discuss sensitive issues (Few et al., 2003; Wallace et al., 2014). Studies that focus on sexual health-related issues have found that close friends and siblings are typically among the first Black adolescent girls confide in or seek out information from (George et al., 2013; Soli et al., 2009; Wallace et al., 2014; Whiteman et al., 2010). Adolescent girls in research by Vagi et al. (2013) reported that they would confide in a close friend before anyone else if their partner was attempting to control, insult, or physically harm them. These findings reinforce the importance of developing in-depth research that focuses on how close friendships and sibling relationships shape Black girls’ perceptions of and experiences with DV. Furthermore, the ways in which cross-gender and cross-race/ethnicity friendships could buffer or imperil Black girls’ risk for DV victimization needs to be explored.

Parental Figures

As was found in prior research, parents were perceived as playing a key role in socializing their daughters about dating relationship behaviors, including DV (Akers, Yonas, Burke, & Chang, 2011; Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; George et al., 2013). Parenting influences have been shown to directly contribute to Black adolescents’ racial identity and self-image, which protected against common negative responses to racism including succumbing to peer pressure and negative social messages (Stephens et al., 2009; Turnage, 2004; Wilson, Dalberth, & Koo, 2010).

As with school peers ($n = 9$), parental figures ($n = 7$) were mentioned as a network that placed some responsibility for the relationship conflicts on Rihanna. Some parents mentioned Rihanna should know her “place” as a woman, which is to be submissive and accepting of stereotypical frameworks of Black masculinity and femininity (Rose, 2008; Stephens, 2012; Stephens

& Phillips, 2003). While the majority of participants did not report hearing these types of comments, the fact that this message was found to be consistent across two social networks makes it important to explore. Peers attitudes tended to focus on what she should expect as a consequence. This may be the result of a desire to maintain groups' norms and to ensure they "fit in" through the expression of perceived "appropriate" peer values.

In contrast, parents' statements blaming Rihanna appear to be tied to beliefs about a woman's responsibility to protect herself, which is a great concern in Black urban communities given the levels of violence exposure in these contexts (Kennedy, 2008). Akers et al. (2011), for example, found that the main motivator for Black parents to initiate discussions about sexual health issues was a desire to prevent their daughters from experiencing victimization from sexual molestation, assault, or DV. Research shows that the content of Black parent-daughter discussions about relationships often focus on self-respect and self-esteem as key influences on adolescents' ability to make good decisions in dating relationships (Akers et al., 2011; O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, & Watkins, 2001). Thus, a woman who falls victim to male manipulation or violence may be viewed in some contexts as at fault for not protecting herself as she had been taught.

The fact that mothers were the most often mentioned parental figure with whom girls discussed the Chris Brown and Rihanna case likely reflects the fact that Black mothers' are typically responsible for sexual health communications with daughters (O'Sullivan et al., 2001; Usher-Seriki, Bynum, & Callands, 2008). Research also shows that healthy maternal communications and behaviors can serve as a protective buffer against racial/ethnic minority daughters' engagement in unhealthy sexual health practices (Paradise, Cote, Minsky, Lourenco, & Howland, 2001; Turnage, 2004). More importantly, direct and indirect communications from mothers are used by daughters when attempting to negotiate sexual health information received outside the home, including via mainstream and Black-targeted media (Fasula & Miller, 2006; Turnage, 2004; Usher-Seriki et al., 2008). Given their proximity and power as a social network, future research must explore the influence of mothers specifically on daughters' negotiation of hip-hop's messages about dating and romance.

One reason only seven participants mentioned fathers or male parental figures as networks informing this incident may be that direct discussions about sexuality in Black families are generally held between mothers and daughters (e.g., Akers et al., 2011; Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; George et al., 2013). Black fathers' discussions about sexuality with daughters typically focus on behavioral consequences rather than relationship negotiation skills (Hutchinson & Cederbaum, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010). Fathers have been

found to also indirectly communicate relationship role expectations through the modeling of ideal male partnership behavior for sons and daughters, rather than through direct conversations (Akers et al., 2011; Cooper, 2009; Hutchinson & Cederbaum, 2010).

Taken together, these findings highlight the need for additional research on the quality and quantity of parent-daughter discussions about DV in the Black community. Given that rates of victimization are disproportionately high in this population, discussions about DV need to be viewed as a necessary topic when parents discuss broader sexual health issues. Fathers, in particular, should be targeted in interventions seeking to empower parents to talk about DV and sexual health concerns with their daughters. Further studies are needed to identify the unique nature of Black father-daughter communications and to develop strategies that help them communicate effectively about DV.

Study Limitations

Although this study provides foundational research information about an important popular culture incident, there are limitations that must be considered. First, the use of qualitative methods may limit our ability to make broad generalizations regarding the results of this study. Specifically, only 43 Black adolescent girls participated in this study. Although appropriate for qualitative methods (Patton, 2002), this small sample size means that researchers must recognize that the findings are reflective of the perceptions of a specific group of urban adolescent Black girls. For example, it remains to be seen whether girls in a more rural or resource-rich community would assign the same meanings and values to the DV messages presented in mainstream hip-hop culture. Also, the use of face-to-face interviews may have lead participants to provide what they viewed as socially desirable responses.

The age of the participants at the time of the discussions with the social networks and time they are reflecting on these discussions during the interview must be considered. The participants' interpretations of the communications may be shaped by their current stage of development and may not reflect what they believed at the time of the initial incident. Future work should include questions focusing on changes in attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs that participants may perceive as having taken place.

Finally, this study used one specific couple's experience with DV as reported in mainstream hip-hop culture as a stimulus for discussion. However, DV has occurred among other hip-hop artists, and those instances may be understood differently. For example, rapper Dr. Dre assaulted journalist Dee Barnes in a nightclub due to an alleged act of "disrespect," Eminem admitted to verbally and physically abusing his ex-wife, and Big Pun's wife released a

movie that included scenes of him pistol whipping her in front of family members (see Stephens, 2012). Similarly, artists in other genres of music have well documented cases of DV that may be perceived in a still different light by Black girls (e.g., country singers George Jones, Tracy Lawrence, Loretta Lynn, and Rodney Atkins; rockers Seth Binzer, Wes Scantlin, and Tim Lambesis). Exploring incidents of DV from other hip-hop figures or within other musical genres would provide us with more comprehensive knowledge about this population's perceptions of and social network usage for interpreting DV.

Conclusion

This research illustrates how individuals draw on and negotiate social networks with varying and even conflicting information and interpretations. SNT asserts that individuals draw upon messages from valued social networks to give meaning or understand events around them. This is evident by the ways in which these girls sought to sort through the information they had received about what initially occurred and continues to take place between Chris Brown and Rihanna, and assign values to their behaviors. The trajectory of the couple's relationship led to two emergent themes—the construction of truths about the incident and victim/perpetrator responsibility.

Clearly the four social networks noted in this study are important across various behavioral domains for Black girls. The results from this research make an important contribution to the limited empirical knowledge in the field specifically regarding DV and Black adolescent girls' negotiation of DV messages. The lesson for researchers is that to fully understand urban Black adolescent girls' DV experiences and attitudes, you must gather relevant information on their culturally unique beliefs, their interactions with others, and their environments. Furthermore, it is not enough to simply point to media incidents as influential without distinguishing the target audience, and how it is being interpreted by that population. Given the short- and long-term implications of DV, it is necessary that all factors providing relationship values and skills to Black adolescent girls are included in efforts seeking to reduce DV within this population.

Future research should focus on identifying how to enhance these social networks' ability to engage in healthy discussions about DV using a culturally appropriate context and sources of information, such as mainstream hip-hop culture rather than general mainstream media sources. This will further ensure that Black adolescent girls have safe spaces to engage in difficult conversations. This will, in turn, increase girls' comfort with addressing DV in their personal lives and their overall sense of empowerment.

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