Didn’t He Die? Record Labels Exploiting Late Black Rappers

by Sally Jebory, Irvine Valley College
Mentor: Prof. Emily Liu

Aspiring musicians dream of signing a record contract, associating it with financial security, fame, and a sense of legitimacy (Arditi 4). David Arditi explains in their book how, “Record contracts are notoriously exploitative of artists who sign away their copyrights in exchange for the potential to make it big” and artists “describing the relationship, however hyperbolically, as like slavery.” This was seen with the artist Prince who wrote “SLAVE” on his cheek starting 1993 to describe his relationship with Warner Brothers, and with George Michael in 1994 described his record contract as “professional slavery” during a lawsuit to claim his rights (2).

However, record labels can take the next step and go beyond by exploiting deceased artists, as seen with Tupac Shakur (2pac), whose estates released eight posthumous albums after his passing. The sudden death of rappers increases their fanbase to an all-time peak with their popularity increasing making it relatively easy to generate profit, resulting in record labels releasing unreleased music, despite no consent from the artist and uncertainty about whether the artist wished to have the work released, begging the question if this is really to carry out the artist's legacy or to simply make millions of dollars. Posthumous albums can be considered unethical due to no explicit consent yet could also be interpreted as showing respect to an artist. Another example that begs this question is through Jarad Higgins, stage name Juice WRLD, whose sudden death at twenty-one shocked many as he was a quick rising star. His record label announced the alleged three-thousand unreleased songs that they intend to drop. Yet there are many critics of how his record label dealt with his music, gearing it more towards an exploiting version rather than a proper preservation of memories and respect for the late rapper.

Records release posthumous songs due to the fame and publicly late artists receive, even if an artist had made it explicitly not wanting song collaborations. The single “Falling Down” by Gustavo Ahr (Lil Peep) featuring Jahseh Onfroy (XXXTentacion) brought lots of controversy as the song was published after the death of both rappers. Onfroy had found a snippet of Ahr's leaked song and decided to voice over it. Despite Ahr making it very clear that he never wanted to be associated with him or partake in any collaborations, their management pieced the songs together and released the song as a tribute to the two artists. Since Columbia Records has the rights to Ahr’s unreleased music, they have the ultimate say in what gets produced despite Ahr would have not wanted this song to be released (Boyd). Yet the song was a major hit for his label and estates being Ahr's first song to hit a billion streams.

While posthumous exploitation occurs in all genres and music artists, it is a particular problem for African American rap artists because they are a group that already contends with racial and social injustice. Young African American rappers are more susceptible to an early death with homicide being one of the leading causes of death for rappers as: “The leading category of death for African-American male decedents with reported ages of 15–34 yrs was homicide” (Lawson 212). With rap stigmatized through the glorification of violence, deceased American rappers tend to receive less respect after their passing. Kirshnik Ball (Takeoff) was shot and killed at a private bowling event on November 1, 2022, to which people at that party had taken videos of this and posted it all over social media and online. To the extent where content becomes more important than a person's own life.

A problematic form of exploitation of deceased artists occurs on social media. Fans of late Onfroy (XXXTentacion) received a notification from his Instagram account that his account was going live despite him deceased two years prior. It has been his mother and label promoting another artist and new music coming out by the label, leaving fans furious feeling as if his mother and label are destroying Onfroy’s legacy. Instagram has the option to memorialize a celebrity's account or remove it after a person passes away: “Memorialized

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accounts are a place to remember someone's life after they've passed away… The word Remembering will be shown next to the person's name on their profile" (Instagram). Some accounts are "Memorialized" officially by Instagram, while others are not officially recognized but are still influential and receive a lot of attention. The management of a deceased rapper on an Instagram account also falls under the unethical use of exploitation as it goes between the fine lines of using it for homage versus utter exploitation of the deceased artist for more profit and publicity.

Literature Review

I: Culture and Politics

Of many discussions in regard to African American music in society, scholars have looked at African American artists and their relationship with politics and culture ultimately conveying this interconnection through rap. The big ideas scholars have discussed are the use of lyrics in rap songs to convey emotions in regards to political standings longing for liberation during the emergence of rap in the early 1990s. Clarence Lusane, a Professor at Howard University in the College of Arts and Sciences, published a paper in 2004 titled "Rap, Race, and Politics", takes the approach in regards to the debate that has surfaced around the hip-hop genre rap and the emergence of gangsta rap. Lusane goes into explaining the expressiveness of hip-hop and the use of rap in regards to activism and politics as a space for the youth to voice themself, explaining rap emerged as another spectrum of Hip Hop that had "become the dominant cultural environment of young African-Americans, particularly males" during the Reagan Era due to the lack of resources to instruments they had (403). The author then discusses the use of rap as a political outlet, serving as a contributor to political influence through rap lyrics protesting for equality. Additionally, Lusane acknowledges the gender issues in rap and the large misogyny in that industry due the how women are perceived in rap songs with song lyrics sexualizing and degrading women. The author concludes by expressing how hip-hop will neither "destroy black America nor the political panacea that will save it, but is a part of the ongoing African-American struggle constantly reaching for higher and higher modes of liberation" (Lusane 415). Lusane brings into consideration the conversation of rap intertwined with the need for social change as well as the more negative sides of rap music in regards to the lyrics that contain violence, misogyny, and profanity. Timothy J. Brown, Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication Studies at West Chester University, made an in-depth study of Tupac Shakur and his impact on African American culture. Unlike scholar Lusane, Brown argues that gangsta rap, despite all its criticism around the 1990s, has emphasized the positive influence and effect of rap towards the youth of African Americans. The author discusses Shakur's death and how dismissing his death by calling him a "thug" brushes off "Shakur's legacy as an intellectual, political figure, and an urban folk hero" (559). The author's studies have found that "Shakur extends the cultural values that underlie African American rhetoric to construct a message that is more complex, enlightened, and introspective than what usually characterizes public criticism of gangsta rap" (Brown 559). As Shakur's music evokes strong emotions to characterize African American protest through music and the struggles that societal issues are ignored. The author then goes on to do an in-depth study of Shakur's lyrics and their deeper implications and effect on society. Concluding with commentary in regard to Shakur expressing the contradictions "of contemporary society- a society of great wealth and great poverty, a society of the privileged and the underprivileged, and a society of just and unjust" (Brown 570). Shakur desired change and used his music as an outlet to fight against oppression and injustice that the Black community faced. Continuing Brown's conversation, Alridge, an associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Georgia and James B. Stewart, a Professor of Labor Studies and Industrial Relations and African American Studies at Pennsylvania State University discusses the development and growth and effect of hip hop in "Introduction: Hip Hop in History: Past, Present, and Future." The authors describe hip hop as a form of communication through dance allowing emotions to be expressed through movement and the beat. The two authors go against the negative connotation seen with rap like scholar Brown

and shine light on the “socially and politically conscious hip Hop shares common ideas and ideology with the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement and the larger Black Freedom Struggle” (Alridge and Stewart 193). Emphasizing the way hip hop was being used towards the ongoing liberation struggles and oppression African Americans had felt. Since these articles had been published in 2004 and 2005, few other scholarly sources have examined rap’s relationship to political and cultural struggle, despite rap remaining to be a popular music genre.

II: Economics, Copyright, and Inequality

Scholars have examined the quick rise in the popularity of the rap music industry and how quickly it turned into a multi-billion industry, resulting in the easy exploitation of artists. K.J. Greene, a Professor at the Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles who teaches ‘Contacts and Copyright Law’ published a paper in 1998 titled “Copyright, Culture & (and) Black Music: A Legacy of Unequal Protection”, as Greene discusses the immense popularity of African American music, blues, jazz, R&B and rap generating millions of dollars: “in a multi-billion industry, such as the record industry, it seems difficult to reconcile the fact that while Black-created music is omnipresent, the flow of dollars has only occasionally created Black millionaires” (377). Greene examines the inequality in the distribution of music and the lack of wealth received by African American artists. The author explains how the management and publishers were white and “As a result, Black artists as a class were denied the economic benefit of the copyright system despite the economic incentives the labels received from them” (358). African American artists are being held to a disadvantage by having the copyright system used against them. Scholar Lusane also discusses the amount of revenue generated from rap and the economic opportunity: “...in 1990 rap brought in $600 million… in 1991 sales rose to about $700 million” (405). Lusane explains how rap music is a small investment and brings in big returns to producers but rap artists themselves only receive a little of this revenue. Lusane and Greene elaborate the economics and capitalism side of rap from the years 1998 and 2005. According to more recent statistics, Susic, from Headphone Addict, says “In 2016, the hip-hop industry was worth $15.7 billion.” (2023). In a little over a decade the industry has immensely increased in dollar value. Yet both papers are outdated as it was published two decades ago as management has changed as Black artists no longer are limited to signing with white music producers. There are more successful African American producers as many big-time rappers have founded their own record labels such as; Travis Scott with Cactus Jack Records, Drake with OVO Sound, Future with Freebandz, Lil Baby with 4PF, Chief Keef with 43B, Young Thug with YSL Records, and more. However, issues of power dynamics for aspiring new artists are still pressuring issues that result in easy exploitation.

Another point of view that has been extensively studied by authors is copyright laws lack of protection towards African American rappers. The scholar Greene studies the inequality of the copyright system for African Americans: “the law largely ignored or overlooked by legal scholars: how African-American music artists, as a group, were routinely deprived of legal protection for creative works under the copyright regime” (340). Greene discusses the lack of protection African American artists get despite their impact on American culture and music in America: “Music scholars have noted that Black artists, as a class of performers, routinely found their works appropriated and exploited by publishers and managers” (358). The author concludes their topic in regards to the discriminatory treatment African American artists have been treated through United States copyright laws and how they hope in the future for artists to be more educated and to be cautious of the copyright risks with the internet. The author also debriefs the first amendment and the “values of free expression” (380), yet not discussing how many Black rappers' lyrics are being used against them through court trials and a reason to throw them into jail. The scholar Greene’s paper was published over two decades ago, leaving such gaps in their research.

A more recent study was done by Micheal Spiro Drecolias, “Tupac and Beyond: The Implications of the Tupac Hologram on Copyright and the Right of Publicity and What it May Mean for the Future of Music” as this work was published in 2014. The author extends the conversation started by Greene to bring up how the

entertainment business finds it easy to exploit an artist even after death as Drecolias uses the example of Shakur's hologram at a Coachella concert in 2012, as his studies found that "A person's appearance is not static. Therefore, infringement on a person's name, picture, likeness, and voice are not typically protected by copyright law. Copyright law focuses on the protection of recorded creative expression, not the persona or dignity of a human being" (22). Yet the author believes that it is "clear that unauthorized use of his image by a company that developed a hologram would be a violation of his right of publicity" (Drecolias 26). The author concludes by saying how there is no law in regard to this issue during that time, as even now during this time there isn't one. There have also been no new studies in regard to copyright laws- especially with deceased artists and their rights of protection. This also brings up issues due to the continuous advancements in technology being able to create more realistic looking holograms, deepfakes, and Artificial Intelligence, as the law has failed to keep up in protecting artists.

III: Homicide and Death Rates

African American homicide rates among rappers has been continuous, as there has not been a great deal of research in regard to this topic and the impact it has on an artist's posthumous content. Brown's argument for Shakur after death was that he gained immortality as "singles and CD's were released after his death. Shakur's popularity increased after his death, as his record sales grew, while his life became the subject of books, college courses, television documentaries, and films" including academic conferences that had been addressing Shakur social impact and legacy (560). Since this paper analyzes Shakur's album "Greatest Hits", it fails to mention this being a posthumous album and fails to mention Death Row and Interscope Records to have ownership with unreleased material profiting immensely due to the large sales after the death of an artist.

The lack of research on this has been evaluated by Carl Lawson, faculty director at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, assistant professor, and director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, in their paper "Mortality in American hip-hop and rap recording artists, 1987–2014". The author explains the amount of media coverage on this subject but lack of study from scholars. Lawon provides an analysis on the deaths of American hip-hop artists analyzing the deaths of the artist from 1987 to 2014, the year it was published. The scholar took account, "the decedent's age, sex, race, cause of death, state names, and city and state of death" (Lawson 211). Their findings result in the highest percentage of death being homicide at 55%, with 97% of the descendants being male, and for "racial/ ethnic demographic characteristics were as follows: 258 (92%) were black, 10 were white, and 12 were Latino)" concluding with the leading death being homicide. Lawson argues how due to the "increase in the number of deaths from 1995 onward is also thought to be a result of the tremendous growth in rap music, as it became increasingly popular, creative, and easier to record and distribute, which in turn brought a rapid growth in the total number of hip-hop and rap recording artists" (Lawson 213). Lawson discusses how the environments where there is a higher rate of homicide falls under the category of young African American male death of the ages 15-34 years of age (214). This paper and its investigation has limitations that are mentioned by the author, including possibilities for other deaths and categories that have not been stated in the media. Since the paper was published in 2014, it too is outdated as more races are involved with the hip-hop industry as well. Dianna T. Kenny, a Professor of Psychology and Music, Department of Performance Studies in the University of Sydney and Anthony Asher an Associate Professor at the University of New South Wales, Sydney Australia take a wider approach and talk about popularly musicians and their lifespans in their paper "Life Expectancy and Cause of Death in Popular Music. Is the Popular Musician Lifestyle the Road to Ruin?." This study of theirs continues on the conversation started by Lawson. In their results section, the two authors say, "Statistically significantly higher rates of homicide were evident among 7 of the 17 genres, particular world, hip hop, and rap. Most of these deaths occurred under age 35" (Kenny and Asher 41). They then drew a larger conclusion to find that musicians tend to die earlier and are "in greater proportions from violent deaths (accident, suicide, homicide)" (Kenny and Asher 43). These findings by both scholars beg the issue of homicide among the Black rap community that continues to increase, emphasizing how fame cannot protect these rappers from gun violence.

Associate Professor at Pace University Dyson College of Arts and Sciences, Melvin L. Williams and their colleagues offer a different perspective in regard to the impact of a rapper's death to those around them in their paper “For the Dead Homie: Black Male Rappers, Homicide Survivorship Bereavement, and the Rap Tribute of Nipsey Hussle”. Williams and colleagues go on to explain homicide survivors and their grief as well as stating that “Homicide is the leading cause of death for Black youth aged ten to twenty-four in the United States. Homicide remains the leading cause of death for Black men aged twenty-five to thirty-four, as more young Black men are killed annually than young men of any other racial-ethnic group in the United States” (99). The author discusses the influence of rap music on the amount African American men being therapeutic as they use lyrics as a tool to use to grief as seen through memorializing a rapper's death with a tribute song, yet he also mentions how homicide is a major theme in rap music (97). Unlike previous scholar's studies, William and colleagues express a different side of homicide through tribute songs and the tragic side towards being a homicide victim. During the conclusion of this scholar's paper, William and his colleagues mention how they do not acknowledge or mention anything in regard to Nipsey Hussle's posthumous and his legacy. Both scholars Lawson and William and their colleagues discuss homicide rates for African American rappers that are not typically talked about among scholars. This topic should be studied by more scholars as rap is a popular music genre and the death rates among African American rappers is concerning with many victims being teenagers/ young adults.

IV: Forms of Exploitation and Homage Debate

As homicide rates of African American rappers continue to be a problem, exploitation has become more common, and scholars have raised concerns about exploitation during the artist’s lifetime, but not about exploitation that has occurred post-death. As rap has been vastly increasing in popularity, Lusane gives an example of exploitation through alcohol companies targeting African American rappers to promote their products through lyrics: “This exploitation of these rappers' popularity was denounced by the community activities and black health activities around the country” (407). As the scholar is discussing when rap was first emerging in the 1990s and the different types of ways companies would exploit the artists. David Arditi, associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas, published a book, *Getting Signed: Record Contracts, Musicians, and Power in Society*, to go deeper into the ideology of getting signed by a record label and how exploitative it is for an aspiring artist. Arditi mentions a few rap artists: “Most aspiring singers, rappers, and bands today hear about Lil Pump’s $8 million deal, Juice WRLD’s $3 million contract, and XXXTentacion’s $10 million deal” as the author emphasis the one-sided point of view to glorify the instant wealth in the music industry that is not particularly accurate. Arditi describes many methods and examples for all artists, however, fails to mention any exploration with an artist after death, specifically deceased rappers. This was also published in 2020, as both Juice WRLD and XXXTentacion had passed.

Some scholars have viewed the exploitative elements of deceased artists; however, another debate argues the posthumous representations as a form of homage to an artist preserving their legacy. As previously stated, scholar William and their colleagues, takes this view with Nipsey Hussle and the homage through tribute songs as they not only respected him but his legacy as well: “..the twenty-six rap tribute songs expressed Black male rapper’s love for Nipsey Hussle, while claiming familial bonds with Nipsey Hussle and the larger Hip Hop community. As grief of Nipsey Hussle’s legacy, the rappers humanized him as a “motivation,” a “real big brother” ... “teacher.” someone who was entrepreneurial, ... exhibited unwavering loyalty, ... provided intellectual stimulation. And supported young rap artists” (Williams et al. 108). Similar to the scholar Brown who studied Tupac Shakur’s Greatest Hits albums, and who emphasized the positive effect the album had on the youth of African Americans. The authors study rap tribute songs to deceased artist Nipsey Hussle as a means to grief and communicate in regard to their deceased friend, as well as expressing criticism regarding homicide rates among African Americans. Nipsey Hussle had been shot outside his own clothing store causing months-long grieving, being compared to Tupac Shakur’s death in regard to the overwhelming grief among rappers resulting in memorial services and touching rap tribute songs (Williams et al. 90). Through the shared grief and

using songs as an outlet of expression, the artists have been able to express great honor and respect towards Nipsey Hussle and preserve his legacy.

Research Question

Previous scholars have had conversations examining African-American hip hop and rap in regard to their cultural impact towards American music, protection with copyright laws, inequality among record label contracts, and the high percentage of homicide rates. However, none have examined more recent times of the passing of late rappers and how they are being exploited through other means aside from posthumous albums. Existing studies are outdated, as there have not been enough studies regarding the exploitation of deceased rappers. This study aims to look through the management of Instagram accounts of young deceased Black rappers, to identify the difference between exploitation and homage among the usage of their accounts.

Methodology

In this paper, I analyzed five Black rappers who have passed away but have Instagram accounts maintained in their name. The five I studied are rappers with the largest posthumous following as of November 2023 ranging from 5.7 million followers to 21 million followers. I also examined the record labels of these artist Instagram accounts to evaluate their use of the deceased artists. I examine each artist individually using my second Instagram account that does not follow any musicians, to keep unbiased with likes/comments and the Instagram algorithm.

	Artist 1	**Artist 2**	**Artist 3**	**Artist 4**	**Artist 5**
Legal Name and stage name	Jasheh Onfroy (XXXTentacion, or X)	Jarad Higgins (Juice WRLD)	Kirsnick Ball (Takeoff)	Tupac Shakur (2Pac)	Ermias Asghedom (Nipsey Hussle)
Instagram account @	*xxxtentacion*	*juicewrld999*	*yrntakeoff*	*2pac*	*nipseyhussle*
Instagram account @ of label company	*badvibesforeveroffical*	*gradea*	*qualitycontrolmusic*	*(no Instagram account for Amaru Entertainment)*	*allmoneyinjroc*
Date of passing and age at death	June 18, 2018 20 years	December 8, 2019 21 years	November 1, 2022 28 years	September 13, 1996 25 years	March 31, 2019 33 years
Cause of death	Gunshot, Murder	Accidental Overdose	Gunshot, Murder	Gunshot, Murder	Assassination
Follower count Nov '23	21 million	11.9 million	10 million	9.2 million	5.8 million

Table 1: Overview of artists examined, including artist legal/ stage name, Instagram account title, record label Instagram account title, date of passing, cause of death, and following count.

I: Level of Instagram Activity on Account/ Posts and Comments

Celebrities after passing away have an increase in fanbase and publicity. I analyzed their Instagram following count before and after death. Many artists increase in popularity after death, as there is a spike in their follower count. Due to this I looked at the rapper's most recent post made and saw the amount of likes on it/ consumer

engagement. For each account, I will examine if the account is deactivated, memorialized, or active and being run by management/ estates. I examined the changes made by the account's estates and managements and what that further proves; any deleting of posts, removing followers, and changing up the account after the artist has passed.

Regardless if the account is active or, I examined the amount of activity there is with comments and engagement from fans/ followers. I analyzed the types of comments occurring and engagement throughout the account and their posts, by gathering thematic ideas through the most recent and popular Instagram post; aiming to find ones implying exploitive behavior or homage. The thematic ideas found being mainly fans expressing grief and missing the late rappers filled with mostly love in the comments. Analyzing comments with the theme of the artist's passing and possible forms of interaction by users allowing me to identify intentions and communication trends of Instagram users' comments.

II: Level of Capitalist Exploitation

I evaluated what the accounts ‘biography’ section has and any external links and if they link to songs, merchandise (clothes and vinyl's), or some sort of advertisement. Lastly, I looked at what percentage of family members are maintaining these merch websites and other sites. By doing so, I not only looked at the account being used and active but also possible ways of gaining revenue from the deceased artist's social media account. From the five accounts, all of them were found to have merch, to where four of them are being managed by family members, and three rappers whose merchandise was created after their passing.

III: Fine Line Between Exploitation and Respect/ Homage

I aimed to examine whether a deceased artist is exploited after death through Instagram users and the management of the artists’ Instagram accounts. Due to the amount of publicity a celebrity gets after passing, many people start to follow their Instagram accounts. Some argue this is for the person to mourn and remember the person, while others believe it is because of the bandwagon. However, those accounts whose record labels continue to keep active and market on continue to grow with active fan engagement.

Through examining certain deceased artist record label accounts and viewing their Instagram Biography and Instagram Post, I analyze how the account continues to use the deceased artist name. I analyzed common thematic ideas finding strong resentment and disappointment towards the record label in the comment section alluding more towards exploitation through posts that promote the artist's music after death.

Results

I: Instagram Usage Among the Accounts/ Changes per Rapper

Out of the five Instagram accounts analyzed, four of them have been used after the passing of the artist. Of the five, only Takeoff’s Instagram account remains unused. None of the accounts are memorialized as of November 2023. All of the accounts continue to receive an increase in follower count and constant comments on their most recent posts filled with heart emojis and expression of “rip” towards the artist.

XXXTentacion

XXXTentacion’s Instagram account biography states that it is being managed by estates, being his mother and management. After his passing, X’s account began following his mother, younger brother, and two other accounts associated with his name/ brand even though before his passing, he followed 0 accounts. The accounts are “@xxxtentacionffoundation” and “@badvibesforeverbrand” as the first one is a foundation founded in his name that is no longer active, and the other one is a clothing shop made after his passing. His account was mainly changed after his death during the year 2018, but as of now stays consistent with only

having one Instagram post, that continues to receive comments and likes throughout the day despite it being posted five years ago.

Juice WRLD

Juice WRLD's does not explicitly state in his biography that it is being run by anyone; however, throughout posts that have been made after his death, the user addresses themselves as being his mother and Grade A, his record label, through pictures and captions that have been posted. The only changes to this account are the number of posts posted after his death. The account's Instagram engagement is huge, with videos posted after his death having over four million views and posts having over a million likes.

Takeoff

As mentioned above, Takeoff's Instagram account has not been managed by anyone, yet is also not memorialized. The account has received a lot of attention since his death, as there has been an abrupt increase in following count but also in engagement with the last post Takeoff made.

Tupac

Tupac's account was created in March 2014 as stated on the Instagram website, it also says how the account was verified in November 2016, approximately 18 years after Tupac's passing. The purpose of this Instagram account is a place to continue Tupac's legacy as expressed in the Instagram biography. The account is managed by his Estates who are very active with posting, posts average around 8-10 posts per month, with an active user engagement by fans.

Nipsey Hussle

Nipsey's account does not explicitly state who is managing it, however it could be assumed it is being run by his team. The only thing that changed about this account is the increase in popularity and the posts made after his passing. Due to his tragic assassination, Nipsey Hussle received a lot of media attention and increased his following account and fanbase.

II: Instagram Biography: Music, Merchandise, Biographies

Each of the five accounts have links in their Biography that link to either songs, merchandise/ clothing line, or book.

XXXTentacion

The link on his biography links to a website called www.makeouthill.com, to where a posthumous single is displayed "Vice City" followed by a message saying "To Jaheh's Supporters Across the world", written by his estates talking about the impact of X's music saying, "visit www.makeouthill.com now to sign up and stay up to date with X-related news, and be the first to be notified as the site evolves. Follow @makeouthill on Twitter for more updates." The message towards his fans suggests a more business take rather than preserving X's legacy.

Juice WRLD

Juice WLRD's link, juicewlrd.link.to/Face2Face to a posthumous single "Face 2 Face" on multiple platforms: Apple Music, Amazon Music, Deezer, iTunes Store, Pandora, Soundcloud, Spotify, Tidal, YouTube and YouTube Music.

Takeoff

Takeoff's link, qualitycontrol.lnk.to/InfinityLinks, consists of the last album he released before passing and all the places to stream; Spotify, Apple Music, iTunes, Amazon, YouTube music, Audiopack, and Pandora. The account also links music videos on YouTube for the album 'Only Built for Infinity Links'. Under those videos, there is an option to put your email and to get updates from either Quavo, Takeoff or Motown. The last part of the website is a spot to access the album's merchandise.

Tupac

For Tupac, the account has two links in the biography, one being shop.2pac.com, a website to shop for Tupac merchandise, and the second being the linktree to Tupac's biography, linktr.ee/tupacshakurbook.

Nipsey Hussle

Nipsey has linked a website for his clothing line themarathonclothing.com attached to his biography. For both Takeoff and Nipsey, these websites have been on their account before their passing and had been part of their career.

III: Instagram Comments and Posts

On all five of the accounts the majority theme of the comments is along the lines of "RIP", "miss you", and heart emojis. For each account, I only examined the top comments or most recent comments. A top comment on Instagram is the first comment people can see when viewing an account, they are the ones with the most likes that appear at the top of a post. I was able to examine the most recent comments by going on post and Instagram showing me the most recent comment. Instagram posts comments when clicked on either take you to the top comment or most recent comments made, so I analyzed whatever is being listed at the top of the comment thread.

XXXTentacion

The account of XXXTentacion only has one post as of now, with 32.3 million likes and 10.8 million comments, and will continue to increase due to fans commenting every 1-5 minutes. By scrolling through his comment section, I was able to see how frequent the number of comments the account received. Flooded with new comments expressing grief and fans expressing their longing towards their favorite artist. Although the majority of the comments are filled with heart emojis, crying emojis, and comments like "I miss my xxxtencaion he will always be my king 😥 " (@gabxskkk) as well as comments regarding other accounts advertising their own, "If you miss 'xxxtentcion' then follow me! 👀" (@oic_saad), and those who are trolling, with one receiving a lot of likes by calling him a racial slur. Despite his passing almost six years ago, his Instagram account continues to grow and have user engagement.

Juice WRLD

Comments through Juice WRLD's account includes 2 main themes: fans expressing their mental struggle and depression and the rest who share their grief and wish him well. The top comment for his most recent post, made on May 23 of 2023 being a very long written out paragraph saying, "Dear JuiceWRLD, I hope this letter reaches you in the realms where your spirit now resides. I am writing to express my profound admiration for your artistry and the impact you had on the world of music during your time with us…" (@preciousarugu) which continues with 6 more paragraphs. Juice WLRD's account has posted 22 photos after his passing with the majority of them promoting his posthumous music and release of albums as well as written out posts in forms of text, messages from his mother and Grade A talking about releasing Juice's music. There is a post from his mother about mental health awareness and how support is available- especially due to the depression Juice WLRD had and his fans have seen through his common section.

Takeoff

The last post he uploaded on his account on October 31st, of 2022, continues to receive a lot of media engagement. His last post has 1.3 million likes and over 159k comments, which continue to increase every hour. When compared to his older post before his passing his engagement through Instagram likes only ranges around 40k-100k likes.

Tupac

On Tupac's account, the photos posted after death consist of different types of art forms such as tattoos and murals, and people wearing his clothing merchandise. As well as quotes from Tupac promoting a newly made Tupac Biography and promoting the "Dear Mama" documentary series. The frequency of the post ranges around eight per month. A recent post from August 14, some examples of the top comments include, "Bro still posting after his death💀" (@attila._6) and "Really need to up your content because Pac was top tier not tattoos and merchs.. Sad" (@2pacunlimited).

Nipsey Hussle

Nipsey's account features 18 posts after his passing mainly about the legacy of Nipsey and memorization, with the majority being about his clothing shop. The account has not posted in a year, since November 15, 2022. The first post that was made after Nipsey's death was one announcing his memorial at the Staples Center, date, time, and location to celebrate his life. The post has 1.8 million likes and 126K comments and users continue to comment daily/ weekly. Nipsey's most recent post made on May 20th, 2022, received a comment saying "Bro, they keep editing yo music on apple music. VL don't sound nun like when you released it" (@3strikejefe). A post made on September 5th of 2019 shows videos of the clothing store that Nipsey made, where the top comment says "Killed by another black man whe[n] are yall going to take accountability and change that?" (@anthonyjbrolives).

IV: Instagram Account of Record Label

From the five rappers, I then examined their main record label/ their independently made Instagram account as well. Of the five, only three rappers are included in their record labels biographies. Tupac's record label, Amaru Entertainment does not have an Instagram, so it is not applicable here, and Takeoff's, Quality Controls, does not include him in their biography. However Quality Controls does post on their account, @qualitycontrols, anniversary dates of Takeoff's albums. After Takeoff's passing, they posted in regard to the media to stop posting Takeoff's shot video and to respect his and family's privacy.

XXXTentacion

With X, the account @badvibesforeveroffical is marked as a fan page saying, "Account Ran by Estate & MGMT *No Impersonation Intended*". All the posts are strictly X, including images of him as well as anniversary dates of certain songs.

Juice WLRD

Through Juice WLRD's record label, @gradea on their biography they have @juicewrld999 listed as first, followed by two other artists. They have 61 posts; the majority of the posts consist of Juice WLRD content. After looking through the most recent posts made by this account that are advertising new releases, the top comments, saying "Grade A is corrupted they are the reason juice is dead" (@jakeo.ko) and "Yall can't be real fans. Idk how yall are ok with this. Continuing to release a dead man's music is kind of fucked up. Is the album even done? Like is if fully when he envisioned it to…" (@mimiiesho) as the comment continues allowing a user to press more to continue to read. More top comments saying, "Y'all killed my boy :(" (@ghyllammanerasool), that same post consisting of multiple comments saying, "Yall walkin L", "Grade L", "Drop", and "I cried when I

saw this but fr Grade L u a bitch…", "why yall sold 90% of juices catalog bruh", "Love how you guys forgot about his cause and keep releasing shit music he never wanted released, y'all are embarrassing af" with replies commenting "fr". The slang "af" stands for as fuck, "fr" refers to for real, and "L" refers to taking a loss carrying negative connotation.

Nipsey Hussle

For Nipsey's, the account is managed by his bodyguard, who claimed to have retired from being bodyguard, who posted lots of pictures in regard to the passing of Nipsey and the great grief and tragedy. The most recent post on November 29 of 2023 is a video of Nipsey captioning it promoting the 'All Star' puma and Marathon collaboration with the top comment saying "Damn man 🕊️ 💯 😔 Nipsey Hussle presence is missed everyday the marathon continues forever 💯 " (@dra_extra).

Discussion

The objective of this paper was to examine ways that deceased African American rappers are being exploited on Instagram after their death. I was looking to see if the accounts would be officially Memorialized by Instagram, however I found that none of them are. Both Juice WRLD and XXXTencation had their accounts briefly memorialized by Instagram, however this did not last due to their management logging in and posting on it. After an account is memorialized, the memorialization will be removed if someone logs back into it. Leaving the question whether it is just or unjust to log back into an account removing the memorization, if it does perceive the memory by continuing to post on the account. I proceeded to analyze the amount of engagement on the accounts, as well as the increase in popularity and most popular comments. I also examined the user's biography and any external links. The findings may suggest exploitation of the artist's name from the people in charge of the accounts whose intention of continuing their legacy. The four accounts that have been used after the artist passing from management try to come off as homage, yet some of the findings seem to say otherwise through the use of merchandise after the rapper's passing.

Previous research acknowledges the increase in fame after an artist passes away; I was clearly able to identify this trend among all the Instagram accounts due to the amount of increase in both their following count and interaction with posts. As the scholar Drescoilas talks about this phenomenon explaining the obsession with celebrities and how "Americans have developed strong emotional ties to celebrities that society has deemed famous. The emotional ties are often so strong that fans feel as if they actually know the celebrity, and begin to think about them as if they were a close personal friend" he then goes more specific in regards to the music industry and how fans "form an internal bond with the artist, and are more likely to support them by buying albums, concert tickets, merchandise, ect" (2-3). However, the scholar ties this to the obsession record labels business have on profiting off artists and uses Tupac Shakur as example. As I found through Tupac's Instagram account that was created after his passing, having a large following count of over nine million followers, and active engagement by fans.

Implications

Instagram Account Usage

The management of these rappers who utilize the rappers account after passing, suggest exploitation despite some intentions being good. The official "memorialization" was found on none of the accounts. However, after the passing for XXXTentacion and Juice WLRD, official Instagram did memorialize the account however it got removed due to the rapper's estates logging into the account and posting. As this removes the official memorialization since the account is considered to be used with management posting on it. The estates are choosing to go back and login and post on the account despite the artist being dead. Juice WRLD's label,

Grade A, is a clearer identification as all of their posts are Juice WRLD content, except for two. The record label sold 90% of Juice's music to Opus Music Group with a multi-million-dollar deal. The themes from the comments from fans are more indicative towards homage towards preserving their memory and being inspired by them, and the overall wellbeing of the artist. After analyzing the rapper's Instagram posts and comments, I believe they may suggest more towards homage and serving as a place to share grief towards their favorite deceased artist.

Merchandise Under Rappers Name

Record labels are more likely to sell merchandise for an artist after their death than before, which may suggest a clear identification of exploitation. Through the account's biography links, their management has been able to capitalize on the artist's name. I was able to see the point similar to what scholar Drecolias said in regards to the increase in fame celebrities receive after they pass away (3). I found my research to be similar especially with the comments left by fans, as seen with the long essay written under Juice WRLD's Instagram post left by a fan. As quoted above in X's external link, his management turns the whole message into a marketing and advertising opportunity.

Young Age of Passing

After taking the average of all five artists (20+21+28+25+33/5) the age of death is 25.4, so ~25. According to Wolkewit and their colleagues, they conducted a study to see if the "27 club" is truly an accurate phenom. The "27 club" is a myth to where that is the age popular musicians pass away. They found no real connection with the number 27; however, an increase was found in the risk of death for a musician in their 20s and 30s (Wolkewitz et al. 3). This indicates the young age of death found among artists, yet especially with Black rapers. This is an issue that can affect the future of rap.

XXXTentacion, Juice WLRD, and Tupac Shakur passed away suddenly right at the start of their peak in their career. The three of them changed the rap industry through their influence, leading to the devastation of fans after their passing. As looked at with scholar Drecolias who mention Tupac's cult following after his death, that I believe is why he has such a popular appearance on Instagram. X and Juice continue to receive lots of popularity, as not only have their Instagram following count increased more than double but so have their streams of music, hitting billions of streams. More forms of exploitation are seen though the rappers who died at a young age, right at the start of their fame, which I believe results in them being more popular on Instagram as well as their estates posting and being active on their social media. Their death at a younger age also suggests that they are closer in age to Instagram users, especially with XXXTentacion and Juice WLRD getting popular on SoundCloud and getting signed due to their number of streams. In 2018 X Spotify stream for his "?" album had over eight billion as he was the most streamed rap album (Susic 2023). As discussed with scholar Brown who discusses Tupac after his death and his immortality reflects through his Instagram, as it is filled with fanart, merchandise and a new documentary. These findings can also find how since these three had passed away during their prime, they had a lot more to give to the world, as seen with Juice WRLD who Grade A claimed he had 3k unreleased music.

Looking at Takeoff and Nipsey who have passed away in their late twenties, early thirties do not experience the same type of exploitation. Through Takeoff's account, it is not being used or managed, and Nipsey Hussle's account was only after his passing and is not being used anymore. Yet, this does bring back the phenomenon of celebrity obsession and the amount of fame they received after their passing. Takeoff, who used to be a part of grammy winning group Migos, who was considered the least popular of the trio until his death that resulted in heavy publicity on social media. Nipsey's assassination was a devastation to all, as spoken about with scholar WIlliams and colleagues.

Public Relations/ Marketing

To keep unbiased, I used my second Instagram account instead of my main account to not affect the Instagram algorithm. On this second account, I got an advertisement from the merchandise account for Juice WRLD, @999.club suggested a post to my account talking about the Black Friday sale, the few comments all had the same theme with comments saying, “sickening”, “pathetic”, “no words.”, and “just using him for the money 😐.” The 999 club was made by Juice WRLD’s mother to honor his death, and encourage people to speak out about their mental health. Similar to Juice WLRD, the artist X’s mother also made merchandise after her son's passing, however received lots of criticism and is not publicly advertised anymore. However as mentioned before, X’s account follows the clothing brand as the shop itself and website is still active and ships.

Although there is no clear identification whether these actions are exploitation or homage, they could represent both. These findings suggest both uses of exploitation due to the popularity of these artists after passing and the ease of using them for more profit and revenue. However, the accounts also post tribute and posts to preserve the legacy of these artists. Due to all the artists' passing being sudden and unexpected, they have experienced more popularity. I believe these suggest larger implications in regards to a celebrity's fame and how easy it is to profit over a celebrity's name after death. It also opens new questions in regards to Black-on-Black homicide, as four of the artists had been killed by another Black man. The results also indicate the lack of respect given to these rappers through the lens of the media and the music industry exploiting these rappers, with no consent from the deceased rappers.

Limitations and Future Implications

This paper constitutes many limitations; I am only analyzing five deceased rappers and only examining their social media on Instagram. There are many forms of exploitation through other sources of media that I did not study, such as Twitter, YouTube, and streaming platforms. Further research interviewing rap artists as well and examining podcasts that touch upon this subject of exploitation with deceased rappers would help gather more supporting information. The amount being limited to five rappers limits me to only viewing them, especially since they were chosen due to their popularity on Instagram (regarding their following count). Future studies can look through songs and specific lyrics/ verse that could also be beneficial with this research aim in regard to expressing the artist's views in regard to exploitation and other means of grief with losing rappers at a young age.

Conclusion

I hope researchers take inspiration from this study and continue this conversation. There is a major lack of research when it comes to Black hip-hop artists, especially those who are deceased, but legacy continues. Despite the genre of hip-hop/ rap being vastly new, these occurrences of the death among young Black rappers are too common to be left unspoken about among scholarly studies. The music industry and social media continues to exploit Black artists, by looking at possible forms of exploitation identifying these trends and unethical behaviors. These rappers have contributed to the rap industry and whose legacies should remain untarnished and honored.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Liu for comments on an earlier draft of this article and their support and encouragement throughout the process of conducting this research project.

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