Rap Music and Rap Audiences: Controversial Themes, Psychological Effects and Political Resistance

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Research on rap music has turned from a lack of attention to an alarmist examination of the genre. In the 1980s, rap music was seldom studied by scholars in the academic community (Dixon & Linz, 1997). Today rap has increasingly been considered a troubling form of musical expression related to a number of negative psychological outcomes (Barongan & Hall, 1995; Johnson, Adams, Ashburn & Reed, 1995; Johnson, Jackson & Gatto, 1995; Johnson, Trawalter & Dovidio, 2000; McLeod, Eveland & Nathanson, 1997). Although it is clear that rap and other forms of music do periodically contain misogynist and violent themes (Jones, 1997), research has not thoroughly addressed how rap music audiences respond to these themes. Furthermore, rap research has not fully identified which factors may moderate or mediate the negative effects associated with exposure to the music.

In the current paper, we argue that a program of research should be undertaken by communication researchers that examines the themes contained in rap music. In addition, this research program should investigate the effects of exposure to rap with special attention given to the nature and composition of rap music audiences. An examination of the "agency" of rap producers and rap audiences is especially needed. Few studies have investigated whether rap musicians and fans can exercise adequate control over the rap product that is distributed. However, before we outline this program of research, we offer a review of some of the early rap studies. Afterwards, we discuss some of the more recent rap investigations that have been dominated by negative effects research.

Early Rap Research

Although rap music was born in the 1970s, most critics and scholars acknowledge that rap became a significant musical force in the 1980s (Powell, 1991; Rose, 1991). Rap was almost immediately criticized for its "street" message and origins (Binder, 1993). At the same time it was hailed for its commercial success (Stephens, 1991). Early on, most media scholars simply ignored rap. Quantitative scholars specializing in media effects were especially quiet during this era, even though many such scholars had claimed in other contexts that the examination of music as mass communication was important (Dixon & Linz, 1997).

A Widening Interest in Rap

Most communication scholars did not change course and begin to study rap music until the early 1990s. Much of this new research focused on the cultural roots of rap music (Binder, 1993; Kuwahara, 1992; Pressley, 1992; Rose, 1991, 1994). These scholars made two interesting observations. First, they claimed that rap music was a form of cultural expression. Second, they stated that understanding rap was rooted in understanding the cultural underpinnings of the music.

Rap as Cultural Expression. Several scholars and critics have made the argument that rap music is a form of cultural expression rooted in African American culture (Dixon & Linz, 1997; Dyson, 1996; Powell, 1991; Rose, 1991, 1994; Stephens, 1991). They argued that rap music is deep-rooted in African American oral traditions such as signifying, toasting, and playing the dozens (Bennett, 1999; Dixon & Linz, 1997; Rose, 1994). Some even go further to suggest rap is a cultural "CNN" whereby African Americans communicate with one another through the lyrics in the songs (Rose, 1994).

Another primary contention of these scholars was that rap music arose from the oppressive status of blacks in the United States (Rose, 1994). Rap in essence became the voice of urban plight in response to oppression. Blacks, according to this argument, created rap due to the unique experiences of poor urban youth. Rap blatantly points the finger at American establishments that historically and presently oppress African Americans (Pinn, 1996; Rose, 1994). As a result, rap was seen as a vehicle of resistance even by non-blacks who appropriated the music and style of hip-hop culture. In addition, the technology of sampling and music production wrought by the modern urban era were instrumental in advancing rap's cultural expression (Haines, 1999; Hutchinson, 1999; Rose, 1991, 1994). Black urban youth utilized these tools in order to project their experiences that often focused on issues of racial oppression and hyper-masculinity (Fenster, 1995; Pressley, 1992).

Reacting to Rap's Roots. Not only did these scholars suggest that rap music is rooted in the cultural expression of the African American experience, they also proposed that discomfort over rap music in mainstream society was fundamentally tied to a discomfort with the black underclass that comprised rap's core fan base (Lynxwiler & Gay, 2000; Powell, 1991; Rose, 1991). These researchers contended, for instance, that rap music was scorned by the black middle class because they did not share the experiences of poor blacks (Fenster, 1995). Others suggested that those who despised rap music were conservatives who took issue with rap's political message (Bennett, 1999; Dixon & Linz, 1997; Henderson, 1996).

Dixon and Linz (1997) found, for instance, that tolerance for rap music was imbedded

in cultural dispositions and political attitudes. Their study revealed that cultural factors such as appreciation of linguistic exaggeration and African American humor were related to tolerance for controversial rap music. In addition, political attitudes regarding sexual freedom and beliefs about rap's contribution to societal degradation were also predictive of tolerance for rap.

Since these early studies that focused on rap's cultural roots, there has been a shift in the predominate themes contained within the music. Much of rap ceased to challenge political oppression and instead exploited violence and misogyny to sell records (Negus, 1999; Pinn, 1996). The concern over these controversial themes may have been partly responsible for the increased attention that effects researchers paid to rap music.

In summary, we have noted that communication researchers ignored rap music early on but later turned their attention to the genre by focusing on the cultural roots of the music. Many of these scholars suggested that reaction to rap music was rooted in a lack of cultural understanding of rap and its origins. However, since this early research, much of mainstream rap music seems to have increasingly contained violent and misogynist themes. We explore how scholars have begun to investigate the effects of these themes below.

Sounding the Alarm: Research on Misogynist and Violent Rap Themes

Starting sometime around the mid-1990s media effects scholars and critics ceased to be primarily concerned with the cultural aspects of rap, and appeared to turn their attention to the impact of rap music on audience members. Much of this work appeared to be rooted in concerns about misogynist and violent lyrics in rap. Below we discuss some of the major conclusions reached by these scholars.

Effects of Exposure to Violent Rap Lyrics. There is a long history of research on the effects of violent television on behavior. Media effects researchers have documented that violent television has a number of psychological effects on viewers. These include desensitization to actual acts of violence, learning aggressive behaviors, and increased fear of victimization (Harris, 1999; Huessman & Miller, 1994). It was not difficult for these media effects scholars to apply this theorizing to rap music. Rap music had been accused by critics for some time of containing excessively violent themes (Armstrong, 1993; Lynxwiler & Gay, 2000).

These studies reveal several interesting trends. The strongest findings seem to suggest that violent themes in rap music can prime other violent thoughts (Hansen, 1995; Harris, 1999). Johnson, Jackson and Gatto (1995) tested whether such a priming process would lead rap music to encourage black teens to engage in violent

behavior and drug selling. They found that teens exposed to violent rap music expressed greater acceptance of the use of violence and reported that they would likely engage in violence in the future. In addition, black teens exposed to rap videos were more likely to support the illegal acquisition of wealth.

Other studies have suggested that rap music has become so associated with violence that exposure to rap alone conjures images of aggressive behavior. For example, Ballard, Dodson and Bazzini (1999) found that antisocial rap lyrics were less likely to inspire prosocial behaviors than antisocial country/pop lyrics. They concluded that the media may link rap fans with a lack of adaptive behavior. Another study by Rubin, West and Mitchell (2001) found that rap listeners showed more aggression and distrust of authority than non-rap listeners. A third study by Fried (1999) had participants read a violent lyrical passage which was described as either a rap song or a country song. She found that the reactions to the lyrics were significantly more negative when the passage was described as rap rather than as country. Finally, rap's association with aggressive behavior and misogyny is so pervasive that McLeod et al. (1997) concluded that exposure to rap music is linked to increased support for curbing lyrics that may be viewed as objectionable.

In summary, the majority of these studies appear to suggest that a form of priming is operating with rap music and violence. In other words, rap music has become so associated both with blacks and with violence, that exposure to violent rap themes may elicit aggressive thoughts in listeners (Hansen, 1995). Evidence also seems to suggest that a similar process may be at work with regard to the misogynistic themes that may appear in the music. We discuss this process below.

Rap Music and Misogyny. In addition to the contention that violent themes in rap increase aggressive behavior and attitudes, many effects scholars and critics have also claimed that rap music perpetuates misogyny. In fact, many scholars note that some rap lyrics attempt to objectify, devalue, or subjugate African American women through insulting and subordinating words such as "bitch, ho, and skeezer" (Henderson, 1996; Pinn, 1996; Powell, 1991; Rose, 1994; Watts, 1997). Some of these scholars have suggested that black women have historically been convenient targets on which black men release their aggression (Pinn, 1996, 1999). Content analyses have provided some support for the notion that much of the most popular rap music appears to contain objectionable lyrics (Ballard et al., 1999).

Rap researchers have gone beyond identifying the misogynist themes and have investigated whether this type of music may lead to a number of negative psychological outcomes. For example, Gan, Zillmann and Mitrook (1997) found that exposure to rap laden with sexual imagery fostered distinctly unfavorable evaluations of black women. Barongan et al. (1995) discovered that misogynist music facilitates sexually

aggressive behavior. In addition, a study by Johnson, Adams, Arshburn and Reed (1995) revealed that women who viewed rap videos of women in sexually subordinate roles showed greater acceptance of violence than females who were not exposed to these videos. A study by Wester, Crown, Quatman and Heesacker (1997) also uncovered that even men unfamiliar with rap music culture who are briefly exposed to sexually violent rap music become more likely to believe that men and women have adversarial relationships.

In summary, the priming paradigm appears to explain reactions both to violent and misogynist rap themes. According to this perspective, these controversial rap topics are structured around social ideas that are schematically represented in memory. In the course of viewing rap music videos or listening to rap music, these schemas are primed in memory, making them more likely to be used in subsequent judgments and interactions (Hansen, 1995; Hansen & Hansen, 1991). In terms of violence and misogyny, these ideas are presented in memory and primed by exposure to rap. This, in turn, makes perceivers more likely to be positively oriented towards aggressive thoughts and anti-women attitudes.

In spite of the interesting work that has been done so far, we believe that much more research needs to be undertaken. Below, we discuss some of the overall problems with the aforementioned studies, and we propose a research program that needs to be undertaken in order to move forward with research in this area.

Understanding the Rap Message and Rap Audience

Although several studies appear to document that rap music contains violent and misogynist themes and that these themes can have an impact on viewers, the vast majority of this research does not fully investigate the intricacies of the rap audience. In addition, the general content of rap music is a "moving target" with many iterations and various sub-genres and styles. In other words, the rap audience and the content of rap are extremely complex phenomena that require much more in-depth study. Below we contend that one of the deficiencies of prior rap research is its focus on white audience members or black adolescents exclusively. Afterwards, we discuss some of the complexities regarding the rap audience demographically and culturally. Finally, we lay out a specific research plan that takes all of these factors into account.

Prior Work on the White Rap Audience. Almost all of the research regarding the effects of rap music have focused on whites (Ballard et al., 1999; Barongan & Hall, 1995; Eveland & McLeod, 1999; Fischoff, 1999; McLeod et al., 1997). A few studies have examined African Americans, but most of these have focused on African American teens (Hakanen, 1995; Johnson, Adams et al., 1995; Johnson, Jackson et al., 1995; Johnson et al., 2000). This is significant because there is some evidence to

suggest that the rap audience itself is diverse and includes both whites and blacks, teens and middle-aged adults (Gladney, 1995; Haines, 1999; Rose, 1994).

However, we understand some of the reasons why whites have received so much attention in prior work. First, whites purchase more rap music than African Americans. Second, whites have very little contact with blacks. As a result, they might use the content as a surrogate for contact with African Americans (Haines, 1999; Stephens, 1991). Third, white rap consumption may influence rap music's marketing and promotion patterns. For example, Haines (1999) has observed that the popularity of so-called gangsta rap coincided with an increase in white consumption of rap music. Some whites have even appropriated rap as an expression of rebellious resistance. A few critics have called whites who engage in such appropriation "culture vultures" (Haines, 1999; Stephens, 1991). These three reasons suggest that it is important to understand white audience members' reaction to the music. However, focusing too much on white audience members may limit our understanding of rap and its effects. We explore some of these issues below.

Blacks and Black Culture as Central to Rap Culture. The focus on white audience members draws attention away from the fact that rap music was created by the black community and continues to be associated with black culture (Dixon & Linz, 1997; Rose, 1994). Below we argue that two issues are important with regard to the centrality of blacks within the culture of rap music. The first has to do with the extent to which African Americans are the central producers of the music. Second, it is important to examine the various constituencies that make up the black rap audience and consider how they might be engaged in deconstructing and/or consuming the messages to the songs.

As suggested earlier, African Americans play a unique role in the creation of rap. The overwhelming number of performers in rap music are black. This would suggest that they have a tremendous amount of influence over the music. However, there has been some contention over whether black performers have the ability to affect the content of their music. Some of this controversy is related to the issue of who controls the distribution of rap recordings. Some have framed this issue as a battle between independent labels (also known as "indies") versus major labels (Gladney, 1995). Some observers contend that the independent labels allow hip-hop artists to pursue alternative commercial venues in order to maintain authenticity. This is because these labels are typically run by African Americans or by whites who are trying to create a niche in the market. However, major labels encourage commercial gain that retards the development of valid cultural expression (Gladney, 1995).

In summary, the black community is extremely important in terms of the production of rap themes, but these themes are partially shaped by the distribution outlets of the

music. Below we discuss how the constituency of rap music itself is complex and consists of several perspectives and interests.

The Complex Black Rap Audience. The rap audience itself has many different elements. One element that has been understudied has been black women performers and audience members. As suggested above, a number of studies appear to suggest that some rap music contains misogynist themes, and that those themes can have a negative psychological effect on rap consumers. However, we need to understand the extent to which black women performers and audience members use the music to challenge sexist assumptions regarding black women.

For instance, bell hooks (1994) has suggested that black women are perpetually negotiating "the gaze" that relegates them to sexualized and subordinate positions compared to men. This gaze is often resisted by black women who find it disempowering. Furthermore, some women have not only resisted this gaze, but they have created an alternative gaze where they try to make onlookers see them in a new light.

Rap music videos may allow some female artists to find alternative ways to present themselves (Roberts, 1994). For example, Roberts (1994) observed that rap artist Queen Latifah draws upon African musical and cultural tradition to critique sexism and racism in her music. McLean (1997) observed, for instance, that African American and Latina females actively used rap music to construct sexual expression that did not subordinate them to men.

Overall, this section has suggested several things. First, whites have received a tremendous amount of attention by those studying the impact of rap music. Second, rap themes are complex and influenced by various market forces along with black culture. Third, the rap audience itself is complex. Black women represent one aspect of this audience that must receive more attention in future work. Particularly important is the issue of how black women contend with sexism and objectification. Below we outline a few specific steps that should be undertaken in order to advance our knowledge of rap music and rap audiences.

Advancing a Research Program on Rap Music and Rap Audiences

In this section we outline a research program designed to address some of the shortfalls of past research. Specifically, we suggest that a two-prong research program be undertaken that utilizes a number of methods. First, a long-term content analysis that tracks both rap music themes and outlets is important. The second prong involves investigating all facets of the rap audience, with special attention directed towards women. We explore each of these below.

Understanding Rap Themes. As mentioned above, rap music contains a number of themes. Several studies have been conducted on rap music's effects, but only a small number of studies have actually studied rap's themes, and most of these studies are dated. We suggest that a long-term quantitative content analysis be undertaken that can track the trends in rap lyric messages. In addition, we believe that textual analyses are extremely important in order to understand the complexity of meaning that underlies rap lyrics. Each of these approaches should focus on visual analysis and pay particular attention to the themes contained in rap videos. Misogynist representations are often contained in the visual depiction of women's bodies, and challenges to sexism are also often visually communicated.

Understanding the Rap Audience. We believe that more studies should be done on black audience members to understand 1) what impact rap music has on them, and 2) what kinds of meanings they take away from the music. For instance, we need to understand how the audience actively critiques the music rather than just understanding how they are affected by the music. Especially important might be how the rap audience uses the music to socialize and interrogate the problems in their lives including sexism and racism (Hutchinson, 1999). One of the important areas that should be addressed is whether the rap audience is willing or ready to accept nonsexist, non-stereotypical images of black women in rap music. Undertaking this prong of the research program will require focus groups, surveys, experiments, and in-depth interviews. Although we have not identified every aspect that needs to be addressed with further study, we believe these to be good initial goals.

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