Whites and Rap Music: Is it Really All Bad?

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Introduction

Due to the overwhelming number of whites and other non-blacks that listen to rap music, frequent rap events, and wear clothing influenced by rap culture, the media and popular press have come to view rap as the long-awaited solution to race relations in the United States. The media bills whites who listen to rap as less racist, and more liberal than other whites (Newsweek, 2000; Nightline, 2000). This recent positive view of rap starkly contrasts the negative view of rap that has dominated American society since the early 1990s. Rap is more commonly linked to violence, drug use, misogyny, disregard for the law, and prejudice towards whites (Rose, 1991; Ogbar, 1999; Armstrong, 1993; Fenster, 1995; Politically Incorrect, 2000). However, while much research has focused on the relationship between rap and these negative claims (Wester, Crown, Quatman & Heesacker, 1997; Su-lin, Zillman & Mitrook, 1997; Johnson, Adams, Ashburn & Reed, 1995; Orange, 1996; McLeod, Eveland & Nathanson, 1997; Took & Weiss, 1994), positive claims have not been as rigorously investigated (exceptions include: Dixon, 1997; Zillman, Aust, Hoffman, Love, Ordman, Pope & Seigler, 1995; Bryson, 1996; Lynxwiler & Gay, 1999; Thompson & Brown, in preparation). The present article reviews empirical research that offers support for the existence of a positive relationship between Whites' out-group attitudes (e.g., racism and liberalism) and rap music.

Rap History

Rap music developed in the Bronx borough of New York City by black and Latino youth in the late 1970s during the emergence of a post-industrial economy that disproportionately disadvantaged their communities. Rap has maintained many of the vestiges of its birth, with rap artists continuing to be lower class blacks from the inner city (Fenster, 1995; Ogbar, 1999; Quinn 1996). In addition, rap's songs tend to center on inner city living with themes ranging from violence and anti-white sentiments to black history and black nationalism (Rose, 1991; Fenster, 1995; Quinn, 1996).

Whites' Interests of Rap Music

Despite being an art form dominated by blacks and black culture, rap is very popular

among whites (Ledbetter, 1992; Fenster, 1995). Rap artist Common (1999) is quoted as saying, "[at my concerts] all I see are coffee shop chicks and white dudes," alluding to the large number of whites found at rap concerts. In addition to attending concerts a number of sources identify whites as the largest consumers of rap (Samuels, 1995; Leland, 1992; Kelley, 1994; Kitwana, 1994). Whites are responsible for 70% of rap sales and the owners of major rap magazines such as The Source and XXL, which are major vehicles of rap culture (Kleinfeld, 2000). Whites' interest in rap is quizzical however, considering that rap is predominantly created by and often associated with blacks. Whites' interest in rap then begs the question of what role rap plays in the attitudes and behaviors of white consumers.

Rap's Impact on Racial Attitudes

Rap is largely believed to play a negative role in society (Kitwana, 1994; George, 1998; Ogbar, 1999; see Politically Incorrect, 2000). In the early 1990s rap's profane, violent, and anti-government themes instigated the advent of the parental advisory sticker (Ogbar, 1999; Fenster, 1995). Researchers later provided support for parents' concerns by finding that exposure to rap with violent themes can negatively impact its listeners. Findings from several studies indicate that whites exposed to violent rap are more likely to become angry (Ballard & Coates, 1995), view women negatively (Su-lin, Zillman & Mitrook, 1997), use drugs, receive poor grades (Took & Weiss, 1994), and negatively stereotype and discriminate against blacks (Johnson, Trawlwater & Dovidio, 2000).

Conversely, rap has also been linked to more positive aspects in its listeners. A recent Newsweek article (2000) subtitled, "Is hip-hop a unifying force that could save America?", suggests that rap may be a remedy for racial tensions. Similarly, in a Nightline (2000) special report on rap, Ted Koppel stated that, "[hip hop] has infused the lives of white teenagers and young adults with black sensibilities," while another reporter noted, "[…] you do see all kinds of different kids mingling together […] talking to each other through the music." These quotes suggest that rap may be responsible for increased interracial contact and/or awareness in whites. Quotes in a New York Times article (Kleinfeld, 2000) entitled, "Guarding the Borders of the Hip Hop Nation: In the Hood and the Burbz, White Money Feeds Rap. True Believers Fear Selling Out," offer further support for a link between rap and whites' racial attitudes. In the article, a white hip hopper was quoted as saying, "I [see] it as my job to get white people to talk about race," and "that he belonged in either a rich white neighborhood where he could persuade residents to integrate or in the true 'hood' where he could organize [i.e., mobilize blacks]" (Kleinfeld, 2000).

Theories on attitudes and behaviors equated with positive outgroup attitudes indicate that there may be some truth to the media's claims about the relationship be-

tween rap and whites' racial attitudes. That is, whites may be informed about racial disparities that impede blacks through rap lyrics, which may lead them to empathize with blacks. Empathy has been shown to reduce prejudice (see Stephan & Finlay, 1999) and may explain observations by the media that white rap listeners seem less racist, engage in more interracial contact, and appear to be liberals. Research suggests that there is some merit to this claim. Zillman and colleagues (1995) found support for a causal relationship between exposure to rap and liberal attitudes and behaviors. They found that white and black students exposed to rap that highlighted racial disparities (i.e., political rap), were more likely to vote for liberal candidates in a mock election, suggesting that rap may impact persons' ideological worldviews and political behaviors. In addition, whites that listened to violent rap music in McKenzie's (unpublished) qualitative research reported having more black friends and were more critical of race relations in this country. One respondent stated, "I do agree with the political messages expressed in rap. I've heard like police officers whether they be black or white, tend to treat the black suspect more harshly than the white suspect […] I think that should be dealt with." These bodies of research offer support for the theory that rap may elicit empathy in whites, leading them to be less prejudiced and endorse more liberal political orientations.

Impact of Racial Attitudes on Perceptions of and Affect Towards Rap

While the previously described research refers to the impact of rap on racial attitudes, other research suggests that musical taste can serve as a symbol of social boundaries between groups (Bryson, 1996). Because rap music almost entirely refers to the experiences of poor urban blacks (Rose, 1991; Quinn, 1996), for liberals and less prejudiced persons, espousing positive views of rap may symbolize a tolerance of blacks or diversity in general. Whites that are less racist and more liberal may also listen to and/or view rap positively because it offers a more realistic view of American society, in that rap informs them about the black community. Thus, whites' positive outgroup attitudes may be indicated by expressing positive attitudes towards rap, even in persons that do not listen to rap, as they feel that what they say about rap is indicative of their general attitudes towards blacks and other outgroups.

Empirical research offers some evidence for theories that suggest that a relationship between rap and racial attitudes exists. Dixon (1997) found that whites who appreciate black humor and storytelling view rap favorably, supporting the idea that tolerance of diversity (i.e., black cultural differences) is related to positive perceptions of rap. Similarly, findings from the 1993 General Social Survey revealed that persons who were willing to allow their children to go to racially integrated schools liked rap more (Lynxwiler & Gay, 2000) and that persons that reported being less racist and identified themselves as liberal Democrats tended to like black music (i.e., rap, reggae, gospel) more (Bryson, 1996).

Our (Thompson & Brown, in preparation) research further contributes to work on whites' racial attitudes and their exposure to rap music. We found that white college students that were racially tolerant (i.e., willing to date interracially and held less racist attitudes toward blacks) tended to enjoy rap more, were less likely to believe that rap is destructive to American society, and were more likely to believe that rap is an important source of information about the black community than less racially tolerant blacks. It was also found that whites that espoused more Democratic/liberal ideals tended to believe that rap is informative about the black community. These findings are similar to the other research presented here that suggests that more racially tolerant and liberally thinking whites tend to appreciate rap more.

While racially tolerant whites tend to like and have more positive perceptions of rap, our findings offer a limited intuitive understanding of how whites' racial attitudes are associated with their perceptions of rap music. Further analyses of our data reveal apparent discrepancies in whites' racial attitudes and perceptions of rap. For instance, racially intolerant whites believe that rap is not at all informative about the black community, but are just as likely to agree as to disagree with the perception that rap is destructive to American society. Similarly, racially tolerant whites do not believe that rap music is destructive to American society, but are just as likely to say that rap is informative about the black community as they are to say it is not informative. These findings are discrepant because media observations and the research presented in this paper indicate that racially tolerant and intolerant whites should have consistent beliefs about rap – i.e., racially intolerant whites should perceive rap negatively and vice versa for racially tolerant whites. Instead, it seems that racially intolerant whites have clear views on how informative rap is, but not on its destructiveness, whereas the opposite is true for racially tolerant whites.

Though racially tolerant and intolerant whites' perceptions of rap seem contradictory, these inconsistencies actually offer further support for rap serving as a symbol of whites' social group boundaries and views of non-whites. It is arguable that racially intolerant whites believe that rap offers no information about the black community because they are unlikely to listen to rap or interact with blacks. This being the case, their opinions may be based upon negative stereotypes of blacks and the music they produce. Additionally, their inability to reach a consensus on how destructive they believe rap to be may result from the fact that they do not actually listen to rap, and therefore may not have a clear conception of, nor care about the broad societal impact that rap music has. Conversely, racially tolerant whites may not believe that rap music is a destructive force because they actually listen to rap and therefore understand that it is not completely damning. Thus, not reaching a consensus on how informative they believe rap to be may convey their greater knowledge of blacks that they have gained through interracial interactions. Thus, for racially tolerant whites, rap presents a picture of blacks that is more stereotypical and less heterogeneous than

their actual experiences with blacks. As such, they may be less likely than racially intolerant whites to believe that there are as many "pimps, killa's, and one-hundred dollar billa's" in black communities as mainstream rap suggests.

Taken together, our findings and those of Dixon (1997), Lynxwiler and Gay (1999), and Bryson (1996) indicate that a relationship between whites' racial attitudes and rap exist. Further, in addition to whether whites like and/or listen to rap, their perceptions of rap appear to also be indicative of their racial attitudes. It seems then that both perceptions of and affect towards (i.e., enjoying) rap carry information about whites' group boundaries and general perceptions of outgroups (e.g., beliefs in black stereotypes, and knowledge of blacks in general.)

Conclusion

The reviewed studies' findings of the association between rap music and racial and political attitudes and behaviors gives added credibility to the argument that white rap music listeners tend to be more racially tolerant and politically liberal than non-listeners. Though more research is needed in this area, these findings suggest that rap may impact society in a number of ways. For instance, the impact of rap music on whites' racial attitudes may have a future impact on their support for race-based policies such as Affirmative Action, as these young white rap listeners grow older and become more politically vocal. Additionally, to the extent that rap helps to foster interracial relationships, cross-racial social networks resulting from rap may extend to employment networks, increasing employment opportunities for blacks and other non-whites.

However, because much of the empirical work on racial attitudes and rap music has been cross-sectional, it is plausible that over time the relationship between whites' opinions of rap music and racial attitudes may change. It is plausible that as the average young adult white rap consumer ages, forms a family, and begins their career, the relationship between their opinions of rap music and their perceptions of blacks and espousal of liberal values may grow weaker. Additionally, aside from Zillman and colleagues' (1995) research, other studies on relationships between racial attitudes and rap have problems in claiming causality. That is, it is not empirically known if rap leads to more racially tolerant attitudes or if more racially tolerant whites tend to listen to rap music. If more liberal and racially tolerant persons are more likely to listen to rap music, rap may not lead to the transformation in values that media pundits have claimed, but rather, may only serve as an indicator of the type of persons that listen to and appreciate rap.

Clearly more research is needed to investigate the relationship between racial attitudes and perceptions of and exposure to rap music. Gaining a more complete picture

of this relationship among whites is particularly important given that they are the largest consumer of rap music and that white public opinion has a large impact on policy developments and the framing of potentially divisive racial issues (Sidanius, Pratto & Bobo, 1996). In order to get a more complete understanding of the relationship between rap music and white listeners' attitudes and behaviors, future studies must longitudinally investigate the relationship between rap and whites' social and racial attitudes so to determine how these relationships fare over time. Additionally, future studies must develop more sophisticated constructs of racial attitudes, stereotypical beliefs, policy that is explicitly racial by implication (e.g., Affirmative Action), and policy that is implicitly race-related (e.g., social welfare policies). Only then will it be clear if being a white fan of rap means "accept[ing] the criticism of the American system…" (see Ledbetter, 1992).

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