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Thematic Analysis of Mainstream Rap Music - Considerations for Culturally Responsive Sexual Consent Education in High School

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Background

Sexual consent is defined the willingness to engage in sexual activities by communication of interest.¹ Unfortunately, miscommunication due to a variety of factors frequently complicates the process of sexual consent and increases the likelihood for sexual coercion and unwanted sexual activity.²⁻³ Much of the research literature on sexual consent and sexual consent education has been focused on college students,⁴ providing a significant gap in our understanding of high school students, especially ethnic minority youth, who are at greatest risk for unwanted sexual contact and sexual activity. Consent related sexual risk behaviors among sexually active high schools students in the United States reveal that 1 in 10 report being victims of sexual dating violence and 1 in 5 students report having sex under the influence of alcohol at last sex.⁵ African-American sexually active high school students are more likely to report being forced to have sex against their will and having sex before the age of 13.⁵

Studies show that an adolescent's exposure to rap music is associated with engagement of sexual risk behavior⁶⁻⁸ and the endorsement of misogynistic views and sexualized stereotypes⁹⁻¹¹ primarily due to the amount of sexually suggestive lyrics and themes present.⁸ In mainstream rap music videos, alcohol and drug use is depicted more than any other genre and this portrayal of substance use is often accompanied with sexual imagery.¹² Furthermore, recent research suggests that music with sexually suggestive and misogynistic themes influence sexual communication and consenting behaviors. Recent research shows that females who endorse sexual stereotypes and misogynist themes in music, were less likely to communicate with their partner and negotiate sexual consent.¹³ This effect on sexual communication and consent negotiation requires an in-depth analysis of the major themes in mainstream rap music to better understand how the development and adaptation of sex education programs could be more culturally responsive and incorporate these themes for dissection and reflection.

Hip-Hop & Culturally Responsive Sex Education

Rap music, a component of Hip-Hop culture, began in the post-civil rights era as an artful expression of the social, political, and economic realities experienced by urban adolescents¹⁰ and has now become a global phenomenon. Unfortunately over the past twenty years rap music has experienced a mainstream shift resulting in increased sexual content.^{9,13} Rap music is a form of entertainment for people of all ages; however, for youth living in distressed environments, rap music is a medium for identity construction.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ It is this dual existence of rap music that garners constant

critique and examination.

Due to its behavioral influence, cultural prominence and commercial appeal, rap music could be potentially critical in developing culturally responsive sex education and relevant programming for youth who find connection and meaning to the music. Educational scholars have realized the significant influence of rap music or hip hop on student learning and have developed hip hop education (#HipHopEd) as a viable strategy for culturally responsive education in math, science and technology subjects.¹⁶ Culturally responsive education is based on the understanding that students come to school with skills, knowledge and attitudes developed by their culture, and that respecting the history, reality and perspectives of a student's culture humanizes education and fosters a meaningful learning environment.¹⁷ The limited focus on sexual consent in sex education programming could be aided by the integration of #HipHopEd; however, themes in mainstream rap music must be examined closely to understand how best #HipHopEd could be used to advance the current state of sex education while centering youth culture. Further research is also needed to understand how to best use rap music considered sexually explicit to help students analyze, critique and develop a deeper understanding of sexual decision making without alienating a critical cultural source.

Theoretical Application and Study Purpose

Several content analyses of rap music have been performed^{8,18-19} however, these studies only provide counts of explicit language use without providing a critical context regarding sexual expectations, behavior and interactions. A content analysis of rap music songs from 1984–2000 found that as rap music became more commercialized, sexually explicit themes increased.¹³ Although this analysis sampled rap songs across a span of sixteen years, songs produced after the year 2000 were not included. In addition to this limitation, this study included songs that were not rated by Billboard; therefore, they did not receive the most radio exposure, airplay, and sales.¹³ An analysis of rap music produced after the year 2000 is necessary to identify themes that may influence sexual communication among youth.

For adolescents seeking guidance and understanding of their sexual feelings, attitudes and behavior, sexual themes in mainstream rap music may serve as guidelines or rules for behavior. In the current study, Sexual Script Theory was used to identify themes in rap music related to sexual interactions. Sexual scripts are the learned interactions that occur prior to sexual encounters.²⁰ Adolescents learn scripts from a variety of sources including parents, religion, peers and media.²¹ Rap music, specifically due its cultural relevance and standing in the lives of some adolescents, is a

dominant source for sexual scripting. Using thematic content analysis, the purpose of this study is to identify themes related to sexual interactions in mainstream rap music lyrics to provide greater insight into current social norms that may influence adolescent sexual behavior, specifically sexual consent and communication. Sexual script theory guided the analysis of cultural scenarios regarding sexual interactions and gender-based expectations.

Methods

Study Design A thematic analysis was conducted to examine the lyrics of mainstream rap music songs. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterned themes within data.²² This study design allows for a more comprehensive analysis of sexual content by identifying themes related to sexual script theory, rather than confirming the existence of sexual content in rap music, as done in previous content analysis approaches.

Data and Sample Songs from the Billboard Hot Rap Singles Year-End Charts for the years 2001 through 2011 served as the data corpus for thematic analysis.²² Songs were obtained from the Billboard Hot Rap Singles Year-End Charts that list top rap songs annually. Top songs on the Billboard Year-End Charts are determined using an algorithm that integrates consumer and airplay data in a given year to determine the songs with the broadest influence according to exposure and record sales. Record sales data include internet sales, MP3 downloads, and music store sales. Exposure data are comprised of airplay data from over 100 commercial markets in the United States. Inclusion criteria for analysis are songs containing sexual content. Lyrics were obtained from MetroLyrics, a lyrics website that partners with Billboard, AOL music, and MTV. It is one of the largest legal databases of lyrics worldwide and contains over one million songs. All song lyrics were reviewed for references to sexual encounters, interactions, and expectations. Songs with any sexual references were selected as part of the subsample of songs for thematic analysis. Songs without any sexual references were excluded from this study.

Analysis Thematic analysis for this study employed theoretical concepts from Sexual Script Theory. The analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke,²² which includes four phases to guide a systematic thematic analysis, was used. The four phases include: (1) immersion, (2) code generation, (3) theme identification, and (4) theme confirmation.²² Phase 1 involved the researcher becoming familiar with the data through the review

of song lyrics and documenting preliminary notes of interest. Phase 2 involved the development of codes and data coding. Song lyrics were read, re-read and coded using the initial list of codes. References to sexual situations, encounters, and gender-based expectations were coded. Coded data were organized and collated for theme development. In phase 3, the researcher refined codes and merged codes and began the development of themes. Relationships between codes were reviewed and similar repetitive codes were categorized into major themes. Codes that were unrelated to other codes were categorized into miscellaneous themes to refrain from discarding coded data. In phase 4, themes were reviewed, confirmed and defined. Clear and distinct definitions for each theme were developed and relevant examples from analyzed lyrics were selected.

Results

The final database of Billboard's Top 25 Rap Music hits from 2001 - 2011 resulted in 244 songs - 6 songs were included on multiple charts and were not counted twice. Each year, an average of 18 songs in the top 25 rap music hits included some level of sexual content. Overall, approximately 74% of the 244 songs made references to sex, sexual expectations and/or relationships. A total of 181 songs were used in the final qualitative analysis. Sexual content was prevalent throughout the sample of songs. Lyrics were coded using the concept of cultural scenarios from the Sexual Script Theory. Three major themes emerged from analysis: (1) It's Really About Sex or Nothing At All, (2) Substances as the Precursor/Enhancer, and (3) Performance, Parts & Brand. Table 1 presents a description of each major theme.

Table 1. Major Themes Related to Sexual Consent & Communication in Billboard Top Rap Music Hits, 2001 – 2011

Major Themes	Description
It's Really About Sex or Nothing At All	Sex is the only goal of male and female interaction. If sex does not occur, the interaction stops. It also includes rules for this interaction, such as not being able to change your mind once a decision about sex has been made.
Substances as the Precursor/Enhancer	Alcohol and/or drugs are used in abundance for the goal of sex.

Performance, Parts & Brand	Expectations for a female's participation in sexual activity that are based solely on visual characteristics and non-verbal standards.
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Theme 1: It's Really about Sex or Nothing At All

This first theme was the most prevalent in the sample of top rap music songs. This theme, as described in Table 1, involves clear rules for sexual interactions between males and females. The context of this theme most often occurs inside a club or party. In the majority of instances the female has to decide to participate in sex at the moment of meeting and almost always indicates a missed opportunity if a decision is not made at this moment.

I got a few hours left 'til I jet
And I'm hopin' that it's you that I get

2002, #13

Bottom of the ninth and a nigga gotta score
If not I gotta move on to the next whore

2004, #4

If that girl don't participate well then I'm a take her friend
Well if mami is with it then, mami can get it then

2004, #14

Additionally, the decision to leave and/or engage in sex is considered ultimate, leaving little room to make another decision or to have a change of attitude.

Cause once you get inside, you can't change your mind
Don't mean to sound impatient, but you gotta promise

2005, #1

You wanna go, then she can go
She get in my car, I ain't playin' no mo'

2006, #24

Please believe, you leave with me
We'd be freakin' all night like we was on E (ectasy)

You need to trust the God and jump in the car

2002, #4

Theme 2: Substances as the Precursor/Enhancer

The second most prevalent theme was *Substances as the Precursor/Enhancer*. In the first examples below, alcohol (Patron) and illegal drugs (ecstasy) are introduced and encouraged as a normal part of male and female interaction for sexual activity.

Take a shot of this here Patron and it's gon' be on

2005, #1

*Look mami, I got the X if you into takin' drugs
I'm into havin' sex, I ain't into makin' love*

2003 #1

Here, alcohol and drugs are offered as a way to relieve possible anxiety and discomfort. It also acknowledges that substances make it harder to resist or negotiate unwanted sexual activity.

*Don't be scurred, show another part of ya life
The more drinks in ya system, the harder to fight*

2003 #14

*Pass that, give shorty a shot
True enough we gon' see if she naughty or not
I'm on E feelin' ready and hot*

2002, #15

Other lyrics associated with this theme describe how increased consumption of alcohol may influence sexual attraction and ultimately the chance of sex happening.

She even look better by the end my glass

2011, #5

*If I take one more drink
I'm gon' end up f***' you
Is that what you wanna do shawty?*

*If I take one more drink
I'm gon' end up f**** you*

2009, #17

Theme 3: Performance, Parts & Brand

The last and final major theme, Performance, Parts & Brand is related to sexual expectations of females based on their appearance, body movements (i.e. dancing, walking, flirting) or previous sexual experience alone. In the majority of songs with sexual content, the female is only described in sexualized terms.

The first example is performance based and details how at a simple request a female can sexually please him.

*I call her "my lil' bust it baby" 'cause she keep it tight
Whenever I tell her to bust, ain't gotta tell her twice
Whenever I wanna get off she know how to get me right*

2007, #2

From a female's physical appearance to how they dance, this theme also places emphasis on a particular body type or certain body parts that a female should have in order to engage in sexual intercourse or attract males.

*Look at her hips
Look at her legs, ain't she stacked?
I sure wouldn't mind hittin' that from the back*

2003, #3

*You know we ain't f**king if you not thick*

2008, #7

*Oh, you a freak, I knew it from the first time I saw you
The way you played with your tongue, I knew right then I would call you*

2005, #11

Artists describe what can be considered the ideal females. Artists routinely rap about the type of female they are attracted to and the type of women that are fitting for a sexual relationship. This female has a certain body proportion, usually of light complexion with long hair. This theme is

more apparent in rap music videos; however, several rap music lyrics make references to this particular type of female.

*Take a bad yellow b***, make her drop them draws*
2007, #14

*I like a long haired thick red bone
Open up her legs then filet mignon*
2009, #5

*Yellow model chick, yellow bottle sipping
Yellow Lamborghini, yellow top missing*
2011, #1

A major component of this theme is the context in which females are described as strippers or compared to the performance of strippers. This reveals an unequal power dynamic over women to perform sexual acts for money/alcohol or status. Only prominent after 2006, these examples reflect the introduction of songs related to the strip club scene and culture.

*I'm gettin' it in, letting these bills fall
All over your skin*
2010, #12

*Girl drop it to the flo'
I love the way yo booty go
All I want to do is sit back and watch you move
And I'll proceed to throw this cash*
2011, #3

*So sexual, she was flexible
Professional, drinkin' X and ooo..
Work the pole, I got the bank roll...*
2008, #2

*She bad as hell and she swoll
I'm tryna play in her hole....I want her naked, no clothes
I'm in the private shows*

No limit, anything goes

2008, #17

Conclusion

Results of this thematic analysis confirm well documented content analyses of rap music lyrics.⁸ However, our study provides a deeper understanding of sexual consent and communication. The major themes found here highlight the prevalence of norms that perpetuate non-consensual sex and non-verbal sexual communication in a dominant musical genre. In regards to the theme *It's Really About Sex or Nothing At All*, the decision of engaging in sex seems to lie solely with the female, absolving male responsibility for sexual communication or sexual negotiation. The added pressure of making a split decision with no room for sexual negotiation creates difficulty in communication. Sexual communication is critical in ensuring sexual consent prior to sexual activity,²³ unfortunately, nonverbal communication is the preferred choice of both males and females²⁴ which creates difficulty and leads to manipulation, sexual coercion and sexual assault.²⁵ The decision to engage in sexual activity is further complicated if substance use is involved. As seen in Theme 2, *Substances as the Enhancer/Precursor*, alcohol and drug use is not only seen as a way to lessen anxiety around sex, it is also viewed as a necessary for sex especially when there is fear of rejection or denial.²⁵ In Theme 3: *Performance, Parts & Brand*, sex is an expectation based on a female's body shape, and body movements. This presents another opportunity to assess rap music's influence on sexual consent and communication behavior among high school students, especially since here non-verbal cues are considered precursors to sex. For college students, both males and females mistake non-verbal cues for consent to sex² and men perceive more sexualized intentions than women intended to communicate.³

Each theme presented in this study represents rules and expectations related to sexual interaction that could influence an adolescent's view of sexual communication and consent. Adolescents' use of non-verbal communication to interest in sex includes arranging to be alone, showing a condom and sexting.²⁶⁻²⁷ The findings here suggest more attention should focus on adolescents' perception of sexual norms surrounding sexual consent and communication as that may extend beyond typical non-verbal communication behaviors.

Results here should be further examined to identify how adolescents may perceive them and resonate with their meanings. This is especially true for a new generation of sex education programming that has begun to include content on sexual consent and sexual communication. Because rap

music and hip hop culture in general has been credited as an empowering and healing medium for youth,²⁸ #HipHopEd could help advance the cultural relevance of current sex education strategies by allowing students to critically analyze rap music themes and establish decision making-skills. In #HipHopEd, educators recognize the role of hip-hop in student's lives and use artifacts (e.g., rap music lyrics) to develop curriculum materials and instructional strategies for school-aged youth.²⁹ As programs are being adapted to be culturally responsive, incorporating mainstream rap music as a tool to help students critically analyze and challenge negative sexual norms is important. Although not as prominent as the sexually explicit content, rap music also contains messages that promote healthy relationships and communication. Educators could allow students to identify music that promotes healthy messages in an effort to promote alternative norms.

These findings leave several questions for future research. First, research must investigate how adolescents who consume rap music identify with and perceive messages regarding sexual consent and communication. How do males and females perceive certain messages over others and how do these messages influence their view of relationships and dating? Understanding the cultural meanings adolescents attach to rap music themes and how they weigh in comparison to other sources of identity development (parents, religion and peers) will help interventionists better engage youth on sexual health issues, especially those youth who are more likely to identify with rap music culture.

Rap music has been and will continue to be a prominent cultural influence for adolescents. Most importantly, the sexual themes presented here are not exclusive to rap music alone but belong to the larger American cultural view of sex and sexuality. Rap music is as uniquely American as any other cultural phenomena born under the American value system of sex, gender and ethnicity. American culture has cultivated the messages and stereotypes that exist in rap music. More research is needed to understand how adolescents perceive, interpret, accept and reject norms related to sexual communication and consent. This understanding would provide those working in the field of adolescent sexual health expanded opportunities to target specific norms related to sexual consent and communication sometimes overlooked in sexual health programs.

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