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Rap Music Lyrics and the Construction of Violent Identities

Among Adolescents

Rachel Durgin
Sociological Analysis
599
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Rap Music Lyrics and the Construction of Violent Identities Among Adolescents

This paper explores the relationship between lyrical rap music content and the construction of an adolescent's social identity. The lyrical content of rap music is one form of violence in the mainstream media. I will give a background of rap music content, the origins and messages behind the lyrics, then evidence to show how these lyrics affect an adolescent identity formation. Finally I will show evidence in which these lyrics affect adolescents of different races. My thesis is that the lyrics in rap music are a reflection of an oppositional culture and can therefore aid in shaping an adolescent's violent social identity.

Background

Hip-hop music stemmed from a resistance movement in the 1970s. Rap music, one form of hip-hop, became more mainstream in the late 1980s and early 1990's. Historically, this form of hip hop was used to voice extreme opposition of dominant culture and represent the struggle of disadvantaged Black youth in urban ghettos of the South Bronx, and later South Central Los Angeles. Rap music lyrics have been proven to be extensions of a constant struggle between a dominant White society and the struggle of disadvantaged minorities (mostly Black), to obtain social capital (Martinez 1997). This resistance to mainstream society has created an oppositional culture. According to Martinez (1997), the Race Relations theory states that oppositional culture consists of

subordinate groups, who use parts of their own culture such as values and resources, to oppose the majority or dominant society in order to survive. Black youth (specifically adolescent males) have formed an oppositional culture because of the disadvantages in their communities, labeled, “urban neglect” (Martinez 1997). This created a resistance that is shown through messages in rap music. Many messages that are portrayed in rap music are often violent in nature, because the artists are speaking about their own communities, where “the despair is pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture, that of ‘the streets’, whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society” (Anderson 1994: 82).

Violence is so much a part of these disadvantaged communities that a set of informal rules, which polices personal and group behaviors, has been established and many of the lyrics in rap music reflect a code of the street (Elijah Anderson 1994). According to Elijah Anderson (1994), author of the “Code of the Streets,” throughout all the problems that poor, disadvantaged black communities face, violence is the most harmful. For a black youth in this type of disadvantaged community, Anderson (1994) claims that just living in an environment like this can sculpt a violent identity.

Unfortunately these Black youth have no choice but to live by these rules, and accept the amount of violence and crime as a norm that is in their communities. This paper aims to find a relationship between a subculture of black youth and rap music and the aspects of these two factors could affect how a violent social identity might be formed in adolescents.

Violence and Media

Although rap music embodies a “well-established” culture of violence (Richardson and Scott 2002), violence in the media isn’t only reserved to rap music. Violent media has been proven to be associated with involvement in violent behavior (Richardson and Scott 2002). Because youth, especially adolescents look to find people as role models, they often subsequently are choosing those rap artists who speak about oppositional culture and violence. Anderson and Cavallaro (2002) found that a part of the way teens identify with lyrics is shown in the aspects of youth (adolescent) identity development.

But teen identification isn’t just shaped or influenced by rap music lyrics. According to the Commission for the Prevention of Youth Violence, by age 18, the average American youth will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence through different media forms (Richardson and Scott 2002). Additionally, a study done by Boxer et al. (2009), tested a diverse group of youth, from a juvenile detention center and an average high school and found that simply a preference for violent media was predictive of personal violence and aggression. They found that even when an individual originally has low aggression, they are still in some way affected by violence in media (Boxer et. al. 2009).

Violence in Rap

Rap music content however, contains a large amount of violence in comparison with other media outlets. In a study done by Charis E. Kubrin (2005), he found many rap

lyrics actually provide justification for violence on the street and a direct link to willingness to use violence to protect or defend identity and reputation. About 65% of all rap songs in his sample referenced a violent theme and violent retaliation was found in 58% of the sample (Kubrin 2005). Kubrin also found that listeners hold the street code as a normal order to life and that rap lyrics are actual “reproductions of the code that describe black urban street life” (Kubrin 2005:375). He argues it is important to realize that rap is a characterization of urban life. It is clear that as conditions in the inner city have gotten worse in the last 10 years, the prevalence of street code has risen (Anderson 1994). Kubrin states that these conditions have “defined the context in which rap has emerged” (Kubrin 2005:365).

Thus, since violence is extremely prevalent in rap music lyrics, and held highly by those who can identify most with it, perhaps it could have a significant influence on adolescent rap fans of different races.

Violent Identity and Adolescents of Different Races

A study done at Utrecht University, Netherlands, tested a gender and ethnically diverse sample of students about their music preference and externalizing problem behavior (H. J. Meeus et. al. 2008). They defined “externalizing problem behavior” as 23 minor offense such as shoplifting, vandalism and also indirect and direct aggression levels (Meeus et. al. 2008). The researchers concentrated on only heavy metal and rap music preferences. The results showed that preferences for hip-hop and heavy metal did predict externalizing problem behavior later in an adolescent career. However the reverse temporal order did not apply, where externalizing problems could later predict the

musical style preference. The same pattern was found in Dutch and ethnic minority adolescents, younger, older, lower and higher educated adolescents. Researchers also found that if adolescents have strong preferences for heavy metal and hip-hop, their consequent externalizing problems may also be shown through some modeling processes and trying to conform to certain group norms (Meeus et. al. 2008). Those group norms, as stated earlier, are related back to norms and values of an oppositional black subculture of which rap music originated from. Therefore, the violence within the oppositional culture shown through rap music may be one of the norms that these adolescents are adopting. This could very likely help to create a more violent social identity. One criticism about this study would be the lack of controlling for socio-economic levels. This variable could show a pattern of students with a certain S.E.S could be more or less likely to be fans of rap music and show externalizing problem behavior.

Involvement in crime and violence is the next step to actually adopting a violent social identity. A study done by Tanner (2003) at a large Toronto high school found that “urban music enthusiasts” (adolescents from the sample who preferred rap music) strongly connected to feelings of social injustices. About 57% of the Black youth in the sample were “urban music enthusiasts” (Tanner 2003). Asian and white students showed stronger connections to committing violent and property crimes, but Black students showed far less connection to committing those crimes. Researchers found that overall; individuals more involved in property crime and violent crime are more likely to be “urban music enthusiasts”. Consequently, Black teenagers were more likely to be urban music enthusiasts but less likely to externalize the “street” behavior they hear in rap music lyrics compared to the White and Asian students.

Most core White fans of rap music are outsiders to the black youth subculture and a street lifestyle they admire and want to imitate (Tanner 2003). Because these non-black youth weren't born into the culture they strive to be a part of, they try to sculpt their own identity the way it is shown through lyrics and other aspects of rap music culture. Tanner (2003) found that "in terms of identity construction and social consciousness, they have to master the art of being black" (Tanner 2003: 712), and to these adolescents, this includes adopting violent aspects of "the streets" as seen through the messages in rap music. According to Kubrin and Weitzer (2003), sub cultural theories argue that members of certain groups in society that are "conducive" to violence and crime, and also individuals that interact with those groups, are likely to adopt "crime-promoting" norms, attitudes and values of the group.

A reason behind a lower crime involvement within the "black music enthusiasts" could be that black youth are considerably more skeptical about "gangsta" raps claim to authenticity than are white youth. However, according to a study done by Sullivan (2003), Black teenagers were more likely than adolescents of other races to identify with the lyrical content of rap music. The messages are more "life affirming" than lyrics from other genres of music because the rap artists are speaking of problems within communities they actually live in (Mahari 2003).

Conclusion

Violence in rap music is proven to be pervasive and also, like other media outlets that contain a high amount of aggression and violent acts, it does affect how a youth identifies with it. Lyrics in rap music are a reflection of an oppositional culture and can

therefore aid in shaping an adolescent's violent social identity. Through the sharing of symbols, language, norms, many adolescents who aren't original members of oppositional culture, are adopting the social construction of reality, internalizing it, therefore affecting their social identity and consequently some are externalizing those learned behaviors. The relevance of this research lies with sociologists interested in how social identities are formed, and how variables such as race, socioeconomic status, culture, and violence are factors in this formation. It is also important to determine how a collective violent identity could affect society as a whole.

Future research & limitations

Most of the studies that were researched, including, Meeus et. al. 2008, compared either rap music and heavy metal music or just focused on rap music and hip-hop in general. In the study done by Meeus et. al. 2008, researchers determined that values and attitudes contained in hip-hop were adopted by both female and male students, but didn't conclude which gender was more likely to externalize problem behavior. Future research could concentrate on determining gender differences rap music preferences and violent identities. Another limitation was the lack of controlling for socioeconomic status in the Meeus et. al. study. This could show patterns of students externalizing problem behavior, of not only certain races, but of certain S.E.S. It would be interesting to explore the relationships between female adolescents and misogyny in rap music, not just violence since this is also a very popular theme in the genre.

Another idea for future research could be more of a comparison of rap music and other genres of music, and also lyrical content of White rappers. This kind of research

allows policy makers and people associated with media censorship to re-think what youth should be able to listen to and how not only the lyrics of rap but also other forms of media can affect identity and crime. The mainstream depiction of this oppositional culture is also important to lawmakers and other government outlets because it shines a very bright light on the inner city disadvantages of black youth and a poor black subculture. The messages within the lyrical content of rap music are many times exaggerated but also extremely representative of violence within these communities.

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