

The Connection Between Rap Music and Emotional Well-being

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Abstract

Rap music has carried a negative stigma around for the past three decades. The genre originally started gaining popularity in the mid-1980's when gangsta rap was at the forefront of the rap movement. The lyrical themes contained in gangsta rap included crime, gang activity, drug abuse, and the objectification of women. The genre has since evolved into a state where rappers can freely express themselves with the new developments in music technology. Many rappers of today's age choose to focus their music around the problems of an everyday individual. This has allowed rap music to grow immensely in popularity due to the fact that it resonates with more people. This resonance induces positive experiences with the genre which in turn improve overall mental health. This study observes the connection between rap music and mental health as high school students report their experience with rap music and data is gathered from an interview with an industry professional.

Introduction

Rap music, used interchangeably with the term “hip hop,” has been viewed negatively in popular culture for years with a stigma of bad influence around its name. It is caused by people’s original view of rap music and the way it is portrayed to them by other people. There is a high probability that they will turn the music off due to the fact that it has themes of misogyny, substance abuse, and law breaking in almost every stanza of the song. While this was seen in many rap songs when the genre was first starting to grow, the genre quickly evolved into something almost completely different from what it started as. However, as people saw the genre steadily growing in popularity, they refused to take a second listen to any given song and dismissed the genre as ignorant music that unintelligent people made popular. Despite this stereotype, rap has become the most popular genre of the current year and still continues to rise in popularity. What makes the genre so popular mainly, are the popular songs used in clubs and at parties, typical outings for 18-25 year olds, which stream the most music per year. However, if you look deeper beneath the surface of the genre, you will see the prominent social themes present in a lot of songs that are released by prominent artists of today’s hip hop and rap music. Kendrick Lamar, for example, an artist hailing from Compton, California, has won five Grammy Awards for his persistent and catchy radio hits, yet is often cited as the “greatest emcee,” emcee being a term that describes a rapper skilled in his craft, for his socially aware ballads and political undertones present in his albums. There, just at the tip of the iceberg of one popular rapper of today’s mainstream focus, is where one can start to learn of the socially-aware rap that has been growing in popularity since the dawn of the genre.

Rap finds its roots as early as the 1970s but really only started to gain popularity and prestige by the 80s with the appearance of hits from groups like Sugar Hill Gang and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. The artists, producers, mixers, and managers of these groups would skyrocket hip hop music into the public light that allowed for the genre to no longer be ignored. However, as the genre grew, it began to extend to artists who were not only focused on getting their songs onto the radio. They focused on the depiction of their own lives in the songs that they made and this was, for most hip hop artists, tough lives in the streets of cities and other urban locations. Common themes of the time included hearing gunshots outside in the middle of the night, older brothers coming home and stashing their drug money before their mom can see it, and other non-role model-like behaviors. While this was viewed as a nuisance for many parents to keep their children away from, it was real life for many other families. Kids growing up in poor urban areas used the music as a way to cope with the constant struggle in their lives and found solace in the fact that someone else was out there struggling with them. To an outsider, the music was littered with bad influences, but it gave a voice to the people who lived that life everyday.

This era of rap that some experts label “gangsta rap” continued on through the decade and into the mid-nineties. At around 1995, there were still prominent “gangsta rap” artists such as Wu-Tang Clan, Mobb Deep, and Bone-Thugs-N-Harmony creating albums that can now be certified as classics, but a shift was starting to occur in rap music where artists made music that would be played on the radio, as the genre had been continuing to build up followers. This allowed more people to hear rap music, and see it as a growing form of pop music. However, this did not change the public’s general opinion on hip hop. The consensus was still that the genre

was created by people who wanted to encourage young people to get into trouble and the negative behaviors described in many of the songs.

A full transition era occurred however, in 2004 when Kanye West released his debut album, *The College Dropout*. The album has reached critical acclaim, but it serves a far more important purpose than just skyrocketing Kanye to stardom and wealth. It served as a template and main source of inspiration for artists of the past decade and most recent ones. It brought a consciousness, sense of social awareness, and vulnerability that no other artist had conveyed before. It made a lasting mark on the genre that would pave the way for more artists to have a direct focus on the awareness and improvement of their own mental health.

Literature Review

Music in general has many positive effects in students and young people's lives, including supplying help with emotional needs and providing assistance in dealing with problems that arise from mental health issues. Young people all over the world use music as a way to remedy their problems and it acts as an easy way to help out with the problems in their life. They often share the music that they discover as helpful with others. Many develop a "fascination for music in adolescence" and frequently lean toward "the formation of peer groups who share preference for specific musical styles" (Zillman and Gan, 1997). Music choices that adolescents make on their own are then used to join groups of peers who share similar interests and tastes, and form connections with these people (Zillman 2001). Research does find that role models can be found in music, however, very few studies conclusively prove what draws the individual towards a certain musical artist. These musical artists create an atmosphere that draws

people in to them in their music, however this has not been researched further to determine how exactly the artists help people with their problems. Many would assume that figures of authority that have made poor life choices such as turning to crime or drugs, also provide a template that shows how to not act which has been proven effective. “Positive role models can inspire one by illustrating an ideal, desired self, highlighting possible achievements that one can strive for, and demonstrating the route for achieving them; negative role models can inspire one by illustrating a feared, to-be-avoided self, pointing to possible future disasters, and highlighting mistakes that must be avoided so as to prevent them”(Lockwood, 2002). Goals formed by music listeners are either responses to positive role models or negative role models. The goals, positive in nature, are either the desire to follow in the positive role models’ footsteps or make the opposite life choices from the negative role model. “People may be especially likely to be inspired by positive role models, who represent a desired self, when they are bent on pursuing success, and by negative role models, who represent a feared self, when they are intent on avoiding failure” (Lockwood 2002). People generally use the positive role model aspect to help make themselves in the image of the said positive role model. This includes making decisions, dressing, and speaking in the same linguistic mannerisms that the role model provides. The negative role model aspect includes making opposite life choices, and making efforts to separate themselves from any aspects of life that the negative role model is attached to. “They also tend to show especially high motivation and persistence on tasks that are framed in terms of promotion” meaning that goal setting, planning, and working to achieve these goals all come with the continuous admiration or scorn of a role model (Lockwood 2002). While negative role models can be effective, positive role models generally have a more powerful effect as studies have

shown that people are more susceptible to the effects of positive role models than negative ones (Lockwood 2002).

Rap music remains hotly debated in America as themes of drug use, violence, and other crime have been present in the lyrics of the genre. The controversy came from the numerous rap artists whose music conveyed messages and values that were considered antisocial (Miranda 2013).

While there is little area of doubt that rap music has potential negative effects, results of these effects were not entirely conclusive. A study was conducted that determined that adolescents that listened to both rap music and heavy metal were statistically more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol at some point in their life. However, the study was merely a statistical report and could not demonstrate definitive proof that there is a link between substance abuse and music (Kopacz 2005). The correlation is theoretical as of now, and while further research does need to be completed to determine the actual link, rap music does not remain directly tied to substance abuse.

Rap music has been implemented effectively in classrooms as a tool for studying language. German rap music has been extremely effective in the classroom for teaching German as it tackles prominent social issues through the persona of a positive role model as well as efficient methods of teaching German. The material covered in the classrooms can vary from “short, simple” texts meant for beginners to “complex lyrics” for higher level students of the language, thus showing versatility in the educational value of rap. The genre mirrors aspects of the life and culture in German speaking countries and will give the student a better “understanding of popular culture, help improve reading and listening competencies, and

develop and improve other aspects of proficiency” (Elliot 1996). The genre is so beneficial because topics from fun and parties to racism and xenophobia emerge within the lyrical themes. While some studies do mention that rap has the potential of negatively influencing students, they could not fully confirm these findings as peer groups are also factors in the behavior of the students (Elliot 1996). Thus, rap music has been proven to be beneficial to the mindsets of impressionable students where rap has a chance to educate in the classroom.

While many people identify rap music as containing “controversial antisocial messages dealing with violence, sex and materialism that may be psychologically harmful to listeners,” this has been proven to be a stereotype of the past as newer rap lyrics have been proven to “promote positive messages including political awareness and community engagement” (Epps 2017). Rap has changed since its inception into an extremely diverse genre with many subgenres so that one cannot restrict it to a certain category or even a stereotype. Rap music has gained much popularity and notoriety across the world as a valid method of artistic expression. Thus, some artists have been proven to be beneficial in conveying a message which creates genre separation. According to a study done in Quebec, rap music genres can be differentiated: American rap, hardcore/gangsta rap, hip hop/soul, and French rap (Miranda 2004). Genres across the spectrum have been proven to be able to be used in effective ways.

Methods and Limitations

The main methods I have used for collecting and analyzing my data were conducting a survey of students at Thousand Oaks High School (see Appendix), specifically 11th and 12th graders, as they have the most pressure and workload, and an interview with a professional producer and engineer, Seven Bailey, who has worked with Kendrick Lamar, a prominent figure in the socially conscious hip hop world. I determined that these students had the highest levels of stress from their workload due to the outstanding amounts of standardized tests, including the SAT, ACT, and AP tests, and college applications that are completed in the junior and senior years of high school. The interview with Seven Bailey provided lots of insightful information on the shift of rap overtime and the benefits growing up in an area where its influences were so prominent.

The survey consisted of questions about basic identifying information, followed by the amount of time the survey taker listens to music in hours per day, genres listened to, and reasons for listening to said genres. If the survey taker answered “Rap/Hip Hop” as one of the genres that they listened to, the survey continued with more questions about what reasons do they specifically listen to rap for, what artists they listen to and why those specific artists, and any stereotypes that they think people may or may not have formed about the “Rap/Hip Hop” genre as a whole. If the survey taker answered “Yes” to stereotypes about the genre existing, then they provided information including, but not limited to, what stereotype they thought existed and why it was incorrect. The responses included 98 out of the overall 102 participants who answered “Yes” when asked if they believed a stereotype existed about rap music. The responses to the final question varied greatly, so many different opinions were represented in the answers. While

there were many similarities in the answers to the free response question, there were many diverging opinions showing that, overall, there are many stereotypes that exist that attempt to limit and unfairly judge rap music and its listeners.

The rap music listeners in my survey listed little to no negative effects or experiences with rap music despite many fears of having negative influences on adolescents who are most impressionable in their middle and high school ages. In fact, most of the stereotypes listed highlighted exact fears that many parents have for their children when listening to rap music. One survey taker stated that rap music, while “generally thought to be trashy & unintelligent” is actually a result of resentment “due to cultural differences and years of slander.” He or she cites that “rap and hip hop have for decades been a voice of criticism in society and government” which is why the genre receives so much public backlash, and “the stigma surrounding the genre only silences the dissent artists express,” causing an endless cycle of prejudice and oppression rooted at the prenotions of rap.

The paradigm shift of rap has been proven to be positive oriented with the new emergence of artists openly speaking about improving mental health conditions. They have created a freer, open space where they can express themselves with no longer a fear of judgment or criticism from the community for not carrying the “gangsta” image through their music. This has ultimately been beneficial to the genre.

As shown in my data, many high school students use the genre as a form of self-identity that carries over into their personal lives and has a huge role in modeling the individual after said artist. Constructing self-identities is actually a topic that many rappers even openly support.

Many rappers urge that people be unique in whatever they do, as well as constantly supporting organizations that deal with mental health issues.

Some limitations on my research were the amount of students I could procure to take the survey and the amount of students that would be specific to my research in the fact that they would essentially need to choose that they listened to rap music to be most effective for drawing my conclusions. However, this ended up not being an issue, as 135 out of the 201 responders chose rap as a genre which is allowed for an effective sample. Another large limitation on my research was the connections that it took to get interviews of people in the industry. While I emailed over eight different professionals and agents in the music industry, I was only able to secure one interview for the purposes of this project. While the interview was extremely beneficial to the project, establishing more connections and gathering more data would have also been beneficial. However, due to the close working proximity of my interviewee to the focus of study of the project, the interview was crucial.

Results and Discussion

My survey and interview results mainly supported the idea that rap music has helped many people deal with their emotions, keep them focused, and improve their overall well being. With the 201 responders given in my survey, 135 answered that they listened to rap music which is an overwhelming majority of the survey takers. Additionally, 102 of the rap listeners indicated that they were in some way knowledgeable about a specific stereotype about rap music. These responses included many various written responses from students that included simple to complex answers that provide lots of insight on where rap music is coming from and what it tries

to accomplish for each individual student. This simply disproves the stereotype that rap music is ineffective at accomplishing a positive mission. The mission has been identified by many students and really is very simple, whereas people who hate the genre for no reason have a hard time getting their head around. A majority of the population sampled, both suggested and cited the reasons they listen to music, and very few listed any negative reasons against rap music. However, much more correlation exists between students who use music for specific reasons versus other reasons such as background music for other activities.

In my survey, the participants first listed the amount of hours that they listened to music daily. The most popular answer was two to four hours a day with 98 responders selecting that option, or 48.8% of the participants in total. This was a surprising figure, while, as discussed in the studies above, many students do listen to music for different reasons such as entertainment or emotional regulation, two to four hours is a substantial amount of time especially for listening on a daily basis. The amounts of responses given for the length of time listened to music strengthens the study as most of my survey takers will have at least some knowledge and substantial experience with music in their everyday lives. The next two questions had to deal with the reasons for listening to music in general, regardless of genre, and the genres that the survey taker listens to on a daily basis. While there were eight survey options of genres with a ninth other option, seventeen major genres were reported showing that the survey takers had a wide range of experience with music, and were qualified to speak on such reasons that they listened to music. While the survey takers who did not listen to rap music did assist in the survey by listing the reasons they listened to music, I focused mainly on the listeners of rap and hip hop music as it pertains directly to my study. It is worth noting that my survey takers' gender and grade levels

that I was focusing on was fairly balanced as 90 of the 201 takers were in 12th grade totalling 44.8%, and 95 of the 201 survey takers were in 11th grade totalling 47.3%, as well as 98 survey takers selected male totalling 48.8%, and 92 selected female totalling 45.8%.

Hip hop has many artists that are at the forefront of popular music and radio consistently end up with the most rap song requests and concert venues almost always sell out when booking a popular rap artist. This popularity was shown in the results of my survey as 135 survey responders, or 67% of the total, checked that rap music was a genre they consistently listened to. The questions that the rap listeners answered were about their experience with rap music, the artists they listen to, and how they perceive that artist both in their music and as a celebrity in the real world. While the survey takers listed mostly positive reasons to listen to rap music, this applied to the role model aspect as well. Out of the 135 rap music listeners, 64 said that the artist was a role model through their music and 62 responders listed their favorite artists as a role model in real life, being 32% and 31% respectively. While rap holds a stereotype of carrying negative influences which has very little value, 32% of high school students list rap music artists as being positive role models. This almost verifies that rap has no place to be judged as negative for the entire genre. While some songs might carry negative messages, there is clearly a positive force within the genre growing in popularity with high school students.

My interview carried out with Seven Bailey was an insightful look at the state of rap music in the industry as well as the shift in rap music over time which has resulted in many subgenres and an entirely new culture surrounding rap since its beginnings. We first discussed the exact contact that Bailey has had with major artists in the industry. He has worked one on one with The Game, a rapper hailing from Compton, as well as working on numerous projects

with Kendrick Lamar. Kendrick Lamar was one of the most popular artists listed as a role model in the survey, as 30 people selected Kendrick Lamar as their favorite artist, while also selecting at least one of the two options about role models, whether it was a role model in their music or a role model in real life. While this may seem like a small number, the sample size for rap/hip hop listeners was 135 making this 22%, or almost a quarter of the population. Additionally, the listeners who marked that they listened to Kendrick Lamar reported no negative experiences with rap at all. While very little negative experiences were reported in the survey, the statistics of 22% rap consistent listeners with only positivity shows that Kendrick Lamar has been a benefit to many people. This is huge for one artist and his positive impacts are shown through numerous other responses of the listeners. This makes Bailey more than qualified to speak on the topic, as he has first hand experience of music creation that has formed the artist as a role model. While reporting an artist in the survey as having no negative experiences does not make them a rapper that serves to improve the mental health in their listeners necessarily, my survey allows the listeners to describe exactly how they feel. "Positive experiences" as defined by my survey are including one or more of the responses: "I listen to it to take away tension at the end of the day," "This genre of music helps me think," "This genre acts as an outlet of my frustrations," "I feel more energetic after listening," and "I listen to this genre for better connections in my friendships" as well as a write-in option that allowed survey responders to get more specific on how the music has impacted them. For the write-in option, all responders that chose Kendrick Lamar as one of their top three artists reported benefits from listening to him such as: relating to the "discussion of his personal life," "association with non-violence," and "serious discussions of important life choices." A response that was given to my survey that offered a lot of insight is as

follows: “Some people assume that rap music spreads bad morals and messages through the lyrics (sex, drugs, alcohol etc.) and they think this sets a bad example for the teenagers and young adults listening. Although this can sometimes be the case, identifying this stereotype with just rap music is incorrect, because you can find these messages in almost every genre of music. Also, having artists talk about these things can give information to the listener about things that maybe aren’t taught enough in school such as, racism and drug addiction. So instead of thinking about rap music as having a bad effect on today’s youth, think of it as teaching today’s youth about issues that they need to be exposed to, that aren’t taught enough in school.”

In the interview, Bailey states that today’s rap music industry revolves around a “microwave era” where music consumption is always at a state of high and insatiable consumption. The consumer only spends a short time being entertained with any average rap music artists’ music from the point of its release. This effect is snowballed by labels giving artists strict conditions on when to release albums and forcing the music out prematurely. However, many major players in the industry create music they feel will establish an impactful persona of themselves that will resonate with their audience. Artists like Kendrick Lamar fit this criteria as Bailey cites that Lamar “takes time to make the music he wants to hear” further explaining that he does not let the industry control what kind of music he puts out. The white-washed industry sound that is normal to many popular rappers does not apply to artists’ whose music carries impactfulness over time. Bailey also says that people are drawn to the conscious aspect of hip hop because there is a “genuineness that people can relate to.” He explains that while many rappers focus their song subjects on the amount of money that they have, very few people live the same lifestyles. The themes of depression, anxiety, financial

struggle, familial struggle and much more are more common themes in the audiences of the genre. Additionally, he identifies the shift in rap music due to the fact that producers were “getting bored” with the simple drums and samples that records provided. The digital audio workspaces (DAW) that developed over the past ten years accelerated the genre as these programs possessed “more creative sounds” that allowed “rappers more freedom to express themselves” in issues that a majority of the population can identify with.

Conclusion

With the shift in rap music in the last twenty years changing the genre so drastically, rap music has become entirely different from its inception, while still keeping few fundamental similarities. Even though a negative stigma has always existed around rap music, the genre continues expansion through subgenres and greater populations of target audiences. With these expansions comes a movement in rap music of consciousness and empathy. In turn this “conscious hip hop” movement has allowed many people to find solace and comfort in rappers who discuss people’s everyday life and problems. This focus of hip hop resonates within high school students as shown by the survey and interview conducted. While further research may need to be carried out to discover how artists are making attempts to create the genre of conscious hip hop, the influence and power of the leading artists of the genre is clearly demonstrated. High school students benefit from their experiences in rap music and the shift that has occurred in rap music has improved the genre’s powerfulness and longevity.

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Appendix

Uses of Rap Music in Everyday Life

This survey is about how often you listen to music, what kind of music you listen to, and your perception of Rap/Hip-Hop music if you listen to the genre. I ask that you complete as many questions as possible and even if you do not answer all of the questions, hit submit when you are finished. Thank you!

*** Required**

1. What grade are you in? *

Mark only one oval.

- 11th
- 12th
- Other: _____

2. What gender do you associate with? *

Mark only one oval.

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other: _____

3. How many hours a day do you listen to music? *

Mark only one oval.

- 0-1 hours
- 2-4
- more than 4 hours a day
- I only listen to music every so often
- I don't listen to music

4. Overall, what would you say your reason is for listening to music? *

Check all that apply.

- Intellectual satisfaction
- Emotional regulation (making you feel happier, less stressed etc.)
- Background sound for other activities
- Establishing self-identity
- Establishing interpersonal relationships (Listening, enjoying etc. in a group setting)
- Other: _____

5. What genres of music do you listen to? *

Check all that apply.

- Rock
- Hip Hop/Rap
- Pop
- Country
- Electronic
- Alternative
- Metal
- Classical
- Other: _____

6. If you answered Rap/Hip-Hop, what reasons do you listen to this genre? If you did not answer Rap/Hip-Hop above, then you may be finished with the survey.

Check all that apply.

- I listen to it when I'm feeling sad.
- I listen to it to take away tension at the end of the day.
- This genre of music helps me think.
- This genre acts as an outlet of my frustrations.
- I listen to this genre when I am feeling happy.
- I feel more energetic after listening.
- I listen to this genre with my friends for greater connections in my friendships.
- Other: _____

7. Which Hip Hop/Rap artists do you listen to the most? (List up to 3).

8. What reasons do you listen to Rap/Hip Hop artists for?

Check all that apply.

- I like their lyrics/message.
- I like their beats/production.
- I can relate to what they discuss in their songs.
- They help out/give back to the community.
- They are a role model through their persona in their music.
- They are a role model through their persona in real life.
- Other: _____

9. Do you know of any stereotypes about Hip Hop/Rap music that you feel are untrue?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

10. If you answered "Yes" to the last question, give a brief description of the stereotype and why it is incorrect (you don't have to use complete sentences).
