

Connections Between Rap Music and Emotional Well-being

By Colin Burt

Introduction

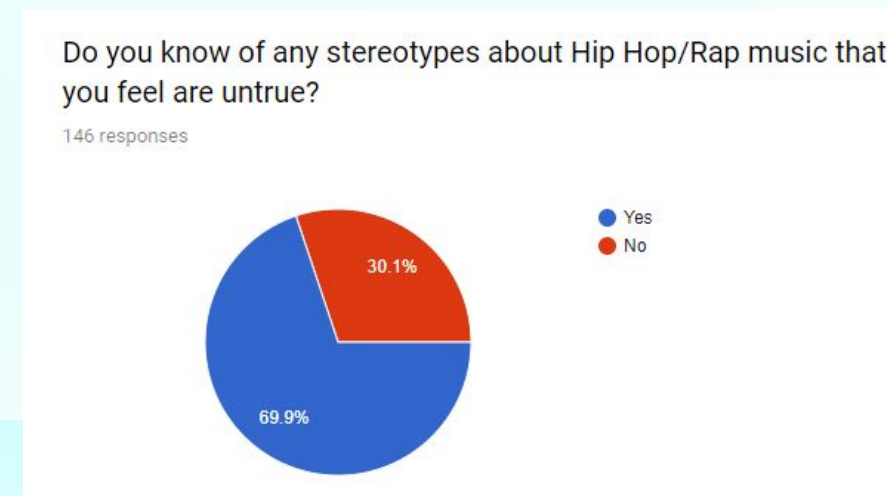
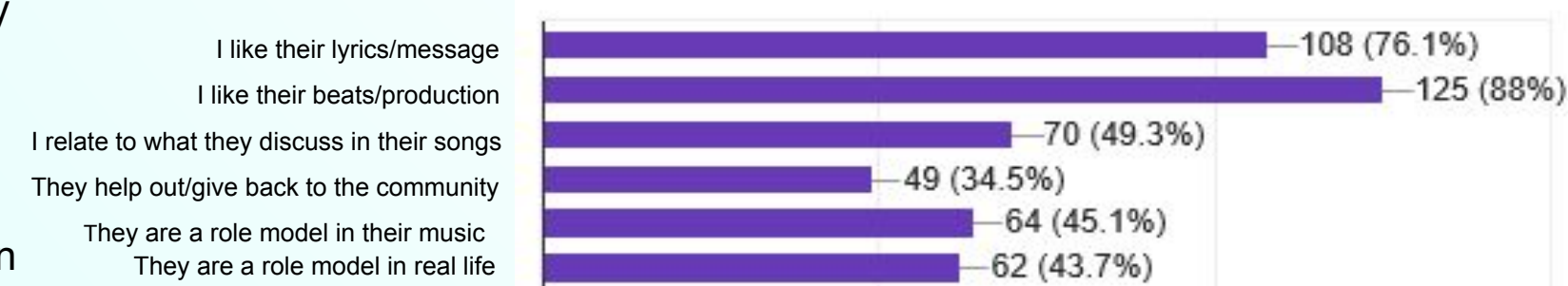
Rap music, used interchangeably with the term “hip hop,” has been viewed negatively in popular culture for years with a stigma of bad influence around its name. It is caused by people’s original view of rap music and the way it is portrayed to them by other people. There is a high probability that they 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. 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..

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). “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 desire to follow in the positive role models’ footsteps or make the opposite life choices from the negative role model. 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). 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

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. 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.



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 totaling 44.8%, and 95 of the 201 survey takers were in 11th grade totaling 47.3%, as well as 98 survey takers selected male totaling 48.8%, and 92 selected female totaling 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.

Results and Discussion Cont’d

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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

References

Epps, A. C., & Dixon, T. L. (2017). A Comparative Content Analysis of Anti- and Prosocial Rap Lyrical Themes Found on Traditional and New Media Outlets. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 61(2), 467-498. doi:10.1080/08838151.2017.1309411

Fried, C. B. (1996). Bad Rap for Rap: Bias in Reactions to Music Lyrics. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 26(23), 2135-2146. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.1996.tb01791.x

Travis, R. (2012). Rap Music and the Empowerment of Today’s Youth: Evidence in Everyday Music Listening, Music Therapy, and Commercial Rap Music. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 30(2), 139-167. doi:10.1007/s10560-012-0285-x

Acknowledgements

I’d like to give a special thanks to my teacher and mentor Dr. Krister Swanson for all of the support that he has given me on this project. I would also like to thank Mr. Andrew Surmani and Seven Bailey for providing me with the interview that greatly improved my project and allowed me to further improve my goals and focuses.