

The Life and Times of H. Hop: Volume 1

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Meg Messing mmessing@gmu.edu

Alicia Wal awal@gmu.edu

La'Quisha Martin lmartin@gmu.edu

Luan Nguyen lnguyen@gmu.edu

Brandon Martinez thisisnotbrandon@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Background

Without most of the country realizing it, Hip Hop has become one of the fastest growing cultures in America. However, there are several questions still up in the air surrounding its existence. These questions include its diversity, its effects on younger and older generations, its ability to influence actions, and its portrayal of women. To answer these questions, research was completed by interviewing forty subjects, using information from the George Mason University NCLC-275 online survey, which posed various questions regarding people and their relationship to Hip Hop, as well as many diverse texts. From this research, the group established five hypotheses to base the further study on. They are:

- The majority of black people say that hip-hop is a black thing.
- Music influences today's youth.
- The majority of people, regardless of their age/race will see hip –hop and rap music as the same.
- Those between the ages of ten and twenty will say that rap music does not incite violence.
- Women will say that they are objectified in rap music and rap videos. Men will disagree.

Next, the group decided on a list of questions to obtain a personal perspective on the hypotheses. The purpose of this was to gain more extensive knowledge of hip-hop through the eyes of society. The online survey, conducted by NCLC 275, Beats, Rhyme and Culture, garnered numerical results but lacked the individual point of view given by each interviewee. The information found through organized research including texts, credible Internet sources, articles and scholarly journals either reinforced or disproved our hypotheses. All of these research components combined, form an overall understanding of the music and culture.

Hypotheses

Is Hip Hop a black thing?

The majority of people think that Hip Hop began as an outset of Black culture. Black people within this culture suffer from xenophobia, fear of outsiders. This led to the belief that contemporary black society would view Hip Hop as a black phenomenon.

Most often, people mistake Hip hop as being purely a Black culture. This is because the majority of rap artists are black, and the prevalent faces of the culture are the same. Though this is not ingenuous, it is understandable why people would see Hip Hop as a black entity. As said by Adissa, “anyone to even try to insinuate that Hip Hop is not of a complete and unique African/African American tradition is an insult to everyone who truly loves the art.”¹ Though he agrees that all people now enjoy the music, he maintains that rap music came from African oral poetry.

Caucasians have been involved in Hip Hop since its beginnings. Graffiti, the first element of Hip Hop culture, which started in the 1960’s, had a large number of white writers.² According to NyceStylez, Hip Hop did not start out as a black culture; it has always been a culture of its own. The original break-dancers were black and Hispanic, the first graffiti writer, Taki, was Greek, and today there are white emcees including Eminem and the Beastie Boys.³ This demonstrates that there is presently no color to the Hip Hop culture. “I don’t feel that Hip Hop is a black thing because it’s something you feel in your heart and everybody has heart regardless of who you are and why.” Afrika Bambaataa claims that Hip Hop itself is colorless, “it’s taken from all different types of music that make the beat and that funk, it’s what you put on top as your lyrics that make it for black people, white people or universal people.”⁴

The most common artists thought about when trying to consider if Hip Hop is a black thing are the white rappers. Successful white rappers are seemingly new to the scene considering the rise and tragic fall of artists such as Vanilla Ice and Marky Mark. As noted previously Eminem and the Beastie Boys are two of the few white rap artists that have been successful in this black dominated

industry. This is due mainly to the fact that urban society doesn't feel as if a white rapper can understand the fears and struggles of living in the ghetto, in poverty. "Hip Hop was formed due to the unique conditions Black and Latino ghetto youth face. It is the hopes, creativity, fears, and struggles American Black and Latinos face, and as such, it contains elements and an energy that vast majority of whites cannot possibly ever understand," J.D., Rok Bottom.⁵

It is true that hip-hop did rise from black culture and that black artists are the noticeable face of Hip Hop. But, is Hip Hop a black thing? No, it definitely is not. "Hip-hop is its own culture, a people thing, a freedom of speech, expression, freedom of life. To me Hip Hop is people expressing themselves to the fullest in any applicable creative form, building skill," Jay Meer.⁶ As a diverse society we need to erase color lines and start looking at talent instead of skin tones.

How does Hip Hop affect children?

When conducting research and interviews the findings were that most individuals thought listening to rap music, as a child was okay with the proper supervision. The approval of listening to rap music was only when the parents would take the responsibility to discuss the lyrics with their children to clear up any misconceptions.

There definitely is, however, a great impact of listening to rap music, especially for children. Children are not cognitively developed to understand, interpret, and differentiate what is real and what is false. Researchers note that there is a negative message in music today that our children are listening to. "There's definitely more sex and bad language [in music] today," says Phillip G. Morgan, associate professor of music at Lebanon Valley College, Annville.⁷ Some examples of these explicit lyrics are from DMX's song "Get at Me Dog" and Snoop Dogg's song "Gin and Juice."

DMX:

What must I go through to show shit is real? /
And I never really gave a fuck how niggas feel.

Snoop Dogg:

I got the bitches in the living room getting' it on/
and they ain't leaving till six in the morning... I
got a pocket full of rubbers and my home boys do too/
So turn off the lights and close the door/ But for what,
we don't love you hoes/ Yeah so we gonna smoke an
ounce to this/ G's up hoes down while ya motherfuckas
bounce to this.

These are just two examples of what children today are exposed to in rap music. The assumption is that the more they listen to this type of music and these negative tones the higher risk it puts them in for a more permissive environment.⁸

Below is one of the interviews from the research group of a three year old. This shows the affect that music today has on children. Without the proper guidance from adults and parents, children are left with many misconceptions.

India Martin Age: 3, Race: biracial (black and white)

Musical Interests: Jennifer Lopez, B2K, 50 Cent, Nelly, etc. Thinks 50 Cent is “gangsta.”

Song of the moment: B2K “Bump, bump, bump”

Most memorable thing she has said: “Mommy can I go put on my bathing suit so I can dance like the girls in the video”

A Lyricist? Can sing the hooks to “In Da Club,” “Bump, Bump, Bump,” “Hot in Heere,” any J.Lo song, and a lot of the Murder Inc. crew songs.

Are Hip Hop and rap music the same?

In order to have rap, it is regarded by many that you must have Hip Hop. The two of these ideas coexist and one cannot fully exist without the other. This is because there are other elements in the culture of Hip Hop that make up the main pillars of Hip Hop, “rap” not being one of them.⁹ In order to answer the

questions *what is Hip Hop; what rap music is; and the difference between the two*; one must not only look to texts on the subject, but must also ask the common man. In several random sample interviews it was concluded that the general public, no matter the color of skin, saw that Hip Hop and rap music were one and the same. Although the interviews yielded these questions, in an online survey, it was concluded that Hip Hop is a culture. Eighty percent of those who took the online survey found Hip Hop to be a culture as opposed to not being a culture. Thus leading to the question of, if rap and Hip Hop were two terms for the same thing, then how could Hip Hop be considered a culture if not rap?

Rap music, because it is not one of the four main pillars to the Hip Hop culture is often skewed in its definition because it is the most marked item in the world of Hip Hop. The music is what Tipper Gore tried to ban, but instead was able to get “Parental Advisory” stickers on every rap album with curse words or acts of violence portrayed in the music.¹⁰ The music was what was concentrated on in the Ice-T track, “Cop Killer”. The music was what was blamed for in the act of taking rap artist Ludacris off of television Pepsi advertisements. Many common people not into the Hip Hop culture see and hear what the media is feeding them, which mainly consists of negative statements and actions and almost never anything positive. As a result, rap music, more specifically Hip Hop culture, is frowned upon as only a fad and detrimental to the youth of the nation.

Rap music is in fact an amalgamation of two of the pillars of Hip Hop culture, the art of the deejay and the skills of the emcee. Combined, these two elements make up what is referred to as rap music. It takes the musical element of the deejay and his plethora of records and the lyrical skills of emcees to produce a rap song. This definition is more skewed today than ever before with the dismissal of the deejay. This shows why many people today see Hip-hop and rap music as one and the same. Conducted research shows that overall the general consensus is that both Hip-hop and rap are the same. It was found that the younger generation knew more about Hip Hop culture and could therefore give a more definite answer as to what is Hip Hop, what is rap music, and what is

the difference between the two. Bach Nguyen, a fourteen-year-old Asian American stated:

“Rap music is kinda similar to Hip Hop... But rap music has an emcee and a deejay... Hip Hop is an emcee, a deejay, graffiti, and breaking.”

When asked of the difference between the two ideas, Bach states:

“Hip Hop has the elements.”

These answers were typical of the responses from the younger age groups sampled in the survey and interviews, proving that the younger generations in the nation, those who grew up with Hip-hop in their everyday lives, knew more about the culture than the older generations. There were some who gave specific examples of what was rap music, mainly defined as songs portraying acts of violence and/or bragging about extravagant lifestyles. These people also gave examples of what was Hip Hop, mainly drawing upon the four pillars of Hip Hop: deejaying, emceeing, graffiti and break-dancing.

Those who fell into older age groups and who did not grow up with varying aspects of Hip Hop of their everyday lives did not view rap music and Hip Hop as two different ideas. Those who fell in the older age groups, mainly older than the age of thirty found that rap and Hip Hop are the same thing. This statement does not cover everyone who is generally in the thirty and above age group. People such as Nelson George and Tricia Rose, two writers who have written texts on Hip Hop culture prove that there are those who do know about the culture. As a general statement however, the majority of Americans over the age of thirty do not differentiate between the two ideas. Kevin Sullivan, a forty-one-year old Caucasian male when asked about his opinion of white rappers, responded, “Like Christmas ‘wrappers’? Green wrappers...? Blue wrappers?” This makes it clear that he is not in touch with the Hip Hop culture. He goes on to state that one of the last CDs that he bought was the Will Smith CD featuring the song, “Just The Two of Us”, asking, “That’s Hip-hop, right?”

Although the range of the subjects was not as wide as intended, the concluding results which were found clearly pointed to two definite age groups

and their opinions of whether or not rap and Hip Hop were the same and whether or not Hip Hop was a certified culture within the United States.

Do the violent lyrics mean anything?

As mentioned above with Snoop Dogg and DMX, violent lyrics are abundant in mainstream Hip Hop. It has also been established that rap music has a profound affect on today's youth. The question at hand is whether or not these two concepts have a correlation. As a group, the clear answer was a resounding "yes!" However, research found that not everyone agrees with such an idea.

It has been reported that most music that bares the Parental Advisory sticker is from Black rap artists.¹¹ This is for its harsh language and glorifying of violent life in the ghetto. The First Amendment Center recently did a study which covers all ends of the spectrum on Media and Violence. One of the studies involved children watching violent cartoons, such as Road Runner and Coyote, and the treatment of a Bobo doll after viewing such programs. The study showed that the children beat up the doll after seeing the actions of the cartoon characters.¹² However, this phenomenon of acting on images from media is not limited to children. Davey D, a known Hip Hop critic, wrote an article about how after an Usher and Nas concert in Concord, California, a group of people looted a local gas station and another group stopped traffic on the highway and started a "sideshow."¹³

The class survey shows, however that more people saw no correlation between rap music and violence. Almost forty percent, compared to 33 percent said no. The highest chosen answer was right in the middle. The older people who responded to the survey had more no's, but the responses were consistent across the board.

The interviews showed even less correlation. A majority of people felt there is no correlation between rap music and violence. Most felt the music incites violence only "in weak minded people," as Edwin Fox, a twenty-six year old Black male stated. Alka Franceschi, a white twenty year old female, also said

the music incites violence only if a person has a preconscious violent or angry state of mind.

How are women portrayed within the music?

This hypothesis was chosen because it seems that the female gender is more concerned about the depiction of women in rap music and videos. Because it is common knowledge that sex sells, and given that men are responsible for starting and continuing this trend, it is involuntarily thought that they might support this vulgar depiction of women. Though many women artists, such as Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, also feed into this image by selling their bodies and appearance, it is more likely that they realize the destruction and devastation it is causing.

Turning the radio on or watching music videos may be doing more harm than good these days. The lyrical content in rap music and music videos give many people a negative perception of women, and seemingly, the right or privilege to treat them accordingly. According to Sabrina Strings, the representation of women in gangsta rap music is certainly one of the most alarming aspects of the genre. Speaking of women as commodities such as *bitches*, *hoes*, and *gold diggers* has been the status quo in popular gangsta rap music for a decade and the content is only becoming more demeaning.¹⁴ Frequently rap artists speak of loveless sex, one-night stands, affairs and relationships that are based only on sexual fantasies. Not only does this contribute to the negative perceptions of women, but also sends a dangerous message to both men and women alike.

Researchers have recorded an average of 18 instances of aggression each hour on MTV, 35% of which depict sexual violence against women. A study of 144 undergraduate males determined that after watching a considerable amount of violence or demeaning music videos, desensitization occurs which might foster an aggressive attitude toward women. Forty percent of these men indicated some possibility of committing rape if they could be guaranteed they would avoid punishment.¹⁵ These facts and statistics are alarming, especially

since the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared violence the number one health problem for women many years ago. Reflect on these further statistics:

- Domestic violence is the single major cause of injury to American women, exceeding muggings, gang violence, murders, and accidents.
- One in seven American women has been raped in her lifetime.
- One woman is raped every two minutes in the United States.
- Every nine seconds in America a woman is physically abused.
- Nearly one-third of American women (31%) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives.
- More than one-third of women in emergency rooms have suffered physical or sexual abuse; 37% of these women report being abused by an “intimate partner.”
- Thirty percent of women murdered in the U.S. are killed by their husbands, ex-husbands, or boyfriends.¹⁶

Could this extremely high rate of violent crimes against women be because of how they are portrayed in the media? Women are often depicted as the victims of violent acts, or as sexual objects used solely for the gratification of men.

Through a study conducted on African American females between the ages of 14 and 18 it was found that greater exposure to rap music videos has a direct connection with getting in trouble with the law, taking drugs, and becoming infected with a sexually transmitted disease. Often the rap videos are crawling with images of sexy women and portray the world as a place chock-full of sex and violence. Through this study it is effortless to see that the media, including music and videos, affect the health, attitudes and behaviors of teens.¹⁷

A great deal was learned through the interviews conducted. Every person has his own thoughts and feelings about this touchy topic. The huge majority of interviewees, regardless of their gender, agree that women are objectified in both rap music and videos. Though a few believe that it is the woman’s choice to be portrayed in that manner, many think that women are objectified in life, and are not happy with that message. “It sends a raw message, a very primal kind of cave man message and that’s the way life really is and it’s pretty shitty. In

popular videos women are definitely objectified and people become desensitized to the stigmas of sex early. They might have less value on the role of women in society because they seem as expendable as jewelry and cars.”¹⁸ As the statistics show, the mainstream opinion is that women are objectified through rap music and videos.

Conclusion

Research found information that both agreed and disagreed with the hypotheses posed. Although Hip Hop started out as a movement of society of all races in New York, not many people realize this. However, now they do see Hip Hop as once again becoming universal. Hip Hop definitely affects today’s youth. Sadly, not many can recognize any difference between rap music and the Hip Hop culture, except for a difference in music. Most people, regardless of age, do not see rap music and its correlation to violence in America. Research, however, does agree. Finally, both men and women alike see women as objectified in rap music and the videos, even if it is their choice to do so.

Future Study

Hip Hop has come quite a distance since its beginnings in the late 1970’s. Nonetheless, it still has much further to go. Some say that Hip Hop is at a stalemate. Obviously, with such a profound affect on today’s culture, this cannot be true. More in depth research can be done to see when those who are not fans of the music made that decision. Perhaps their parents prohibited it or only listened to a certain type of music. A study could be done on relationships between parents, their children, and how rap music brings them together or even breaks them apart. Studies should also be done to what effect has Hip Hop had on the music industry executives. Who are they? How did they get to where they are? Where do they think the music is going? Finally, a study should also be done on how rap music has integrated with rock music and the other sub-genres of rap music.

¹ Adissa, A Response: Hip Hop is Indeed Black Culture, 2003 <<http://www.mrblunt.com/print.php>>

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- ² J.D., Rok Bottom. Culture: Whites and Hip Hop, 2003, <<http://www.mrblunt.com/?sec=culture&page=whitesandhiphop>>
- ³ NyceStylez, Black Culture & Hip-hop: One & the Same? <<http://www.daveyd.com/hiphopblackart.html>>
- ⁴ Majekodunmi, Fumi, Afrika Bambaataa: Warlocks, Witches, Aliens, & Microchips, April 25, <<http://www.fly.co.uk/afrika.htm>>
- ⁵ J.D., Rok Bottom. Culture: Whites and Hip Hop, 2003, <<http://www.mrblunt.com/?sec=culture&page=whitesandhiphop>>
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- ⁷ Maria Wydra. "Today's music – Love it or Leave it?" (2003). Central Penn Parent <<http://www.family.go.com/raisingkids>>
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- ¹¹ Dollarhide, Myra, "Music censorship: the beating goes on." <<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/documents.asp?documentID13870>>
- ¹² Heins, Marjorie, *Violence and the Media*, (First Amendment Center, 2001).
- ¹³ D, Davey, "Violence after rap show... Is Hip Hop to blame?" <<http://www.daveyd.com/blamehiphoparticle.html>>
- ¹⁴ "Violence, Women and the Media," Issue Brief Series (2000). Studio City, CA: Mediascope Press. <<http://www-mcnair.Berkeley.edu/2001journal/Sstrings.html>>
- ¹⁵ Violence, Women and the Media, March 7, 2000, <<http://www.mediascope.org/pubs/ibriefs/vwm.htm>>
- ¹⁶ "Violence, Women and the Media," Issue Brief Series (2000). Studio City, CA: Mediascope Press. <<http://www-mcnair.Berkeley.edu/2001journal/Sstrings.html>>
- ¹⁷ Hip Hop Commentary, Do Rap Videos Cause Black Girls To Engage In Crime, Drug Use And Sex? <<http://www.daveyd.com/commentaryrapvideosbadbehavior.html>>
- ¹⁸ Taken from a interview by Daniel Finnerty, April 20, 2003.