

World Music Final Project:  
Rap and Hip Hop Music

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Rap and Hip-hop Music has been around the United States beginning in the 1970's on the blocks of New York City and has taken on a life of its own since then. From the early prominent figures such as DMX, to the modern stars such as Drake and Kanye West, rap has been transformed into a way of life for many Americans and now dominates the Billboard charts year after year. In this paper I will discuss rap culture, the effect it has on the political scene, as well as how it has played and currently is still playing a huge role in the race issues in this country. Because Rap and hip-hop music has been a cornerstone of African-American culture since its creation, there have been many unique and different perspectives taken on the lyrics and content of the songs, as well as how the rappers portray themselves.

With the easy accessibility due to cheap streaming services in this day and age, rap has been able to take over the internet and almost every popular social media application used today. For example, when a rapper such as Polo G has an album release on the way, he's able to get the word out to his 8 million Instagram followers with one click of a button. Then when the album releases, the few "hit" songs from the album will become viral on Tik Tok and the ratings will shoot to the stars. Even on the television the rap industry dominates the rest of the field just by sitting courtside at sporting events with large viewership such as the NBA finals or the Super Bowl. On many commercials, stars can be found with their music playing in the background of commercials or a part of endorsements, such as Travis Scott and the McDonald's partnership, or Drake and the Nike partnership. These independent deals allow the reach of these artists to skyrocket, assuming millions of people see their commercials every time they air. Rap has come such a long way and developed into so many different styles throughout the years. These styles include Gangsta rap, Gospel rap, Emo rap, Mumble rap, and many others.

Rap and Hip-hop music as a culture has for a long time been surrounded by violence, drug use and other generally negative terms. Because of this, there are many who criticize the genre for spreading these seemingly hateful and disgusting lyrics. "The concern over hip hop and violence peaked in the early to mid 1990s when groups like N.W.A from L.A found significant commercial success" ("The Hip-Hop Wars", 34). Especially in the early 1990's before there were any rap artists who had been at the forefront of the music industry, a lot of white america was opposed and didn't want to support the success of the new Hip-hop stars. Many make the claims that the lyrics defame and demean women, while others just hate the spread of violence. While it may seem true if someone just reads the lyrics of a song that calls women b\*tches and h\*es, this

is not exactly what they are doing and it is generally not under a negative connotation. “Taking a brash attitude in defense of these exploitative terms most defenders of this trend in hip hop rely on the idea that they are talking about a reality of life and dare people to deny it” (“Hip-Hop Wars”, 168). It is a part of real life whether people like it or not, there will be pimps and there will be women in the sex trade. Some famous quotes defending the language over the years have been “Men are hoes, too”, “There are bitches and Hoes”, and “We’re not talking about all black women”. In the end, sexism is the ultimate problem at hand here, which 50 Cent refers to in an interview when he says “There are more important things to talk about”. Hip hop referring to all these bad lyrics is cementing the point that this country needs to start at the top if anything needs to be changed, they just rap about how it is.

Even though the United States has such a large population of African-Americans, rap has always had a connotation that the artists are “destroying America’s values” with their lyrics. “Social psychologist Carrie B. Fried studied this issue and concluded that the perception of violence in rap music is affected by larger societal perceptions and stereotypes of African-Americans” (“The Hip-Hop Wars”, 37). How can a country with such a large population of black people say that America’s values are being destroyed from this black music culture? Well the simple answer here is racism. Racism in the United States has been prevalent since the start of the country as a whole in 1776 and still very much exists today, systematically and individually. Older Hip-Hop stars have mentioned the systematic and blatant mistreatment black Americans have had throughout the years and paved the way for modern rappers and athletes who have been able to use their large platforms to push for change. Because they have millions upon millions of fans and supporters around the world and have personally lived through it, they are the perfect group to step up to the task of ending and spreading awareness about racism and police brutality. In my Rap/Hip-Hop collage made for the World Music final exam, a song by Lil Baby called “The Bigger Picture” that was released right after the George Floyd killing is included. This song has become a symbol for the Black Lives Matter movement along with a few other popular songs. Lyrics such as “I can’t breathe” and “Been going on for too long to get even, throw us in cages like dogs and hyenas” stand out and have helped send the song to the top, and become one of Lil Baby’s biggest. Rappers will continue to give their voice and be leaders when it comes to racism and making political statements through their music. This will be essential to the continuation of eradicating racism from American culture and society today.

Rap and Hip-Hop as a genre has truly erupted, and this fame brings about new looks and trends in the everyday world. Though deals, contracts, and selling C.D's is where they make their money, artists have changed the way people live and that is often an overlooked aspect of the industry. "Beyond its musical preeminence, Rap music and Hip-Hop also heavily influence language, clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, social interactions, and other forms of cultural identifications and expressions among a vast majority of contemporary youth, especially urban African-Americans, Latinos, and other ethnically diverse groups" ("Modern Rap Music: Mining the Melodies for Mental Health Resources", 2). The influence of rap culturally is comparable to the movies, professional sports, big time television, and quite possibly could be even more influential. Lebron James is the biggest household name from sports, and he will often post pictures on Instagram about new rap music or post clips of him singing new rap songs. Hip hop and rap have developed from a genre to a lifestyle, something not many other genres have done. The late great Juice Wrld, (first song in my World Music rap collage) would rap about his serious problems such as drug use, heartbreak, depression and anxiety. He could reach his fans and connect with them like no other artists. In many of his songs he would mention the number 999, and "nine nine nine sh\*t" is what he would often say. 999 represented turning a bad situation into a positive one, so after his death, this message has carried on through his millions of fans. They used his death to raise awareness for drug abuse and to help other people going through it. Juice Wrld is an example of a rap artist becoming a symbol, showing how strong of an impact this genre can have beyond just the music.

Drug use is undoubtedly one of the most mentioned topics in modern rap and hip-hop and is often a hot topic for discussion. As previously mentioned, this genre reaches people of all ages, largely including children and young adults who look up to these rappers as role models. It's the old saying; monkey see monkey do. A thirteen year old boy should not be listening to music about "sipping lean" or "popping perc's", and a large number of the kids who see their favorite rappers doing drugs will obviously want to try it one day. This is one of the main criticisms against rap music, and it's a very valid one. In reality, though, the problem does not lie with the artists using and rapping about these drugs, it is a problem with the entire world and the ongoing war on drugs. "(The rappers) are poets who speak their truths and the lyrics are a 'product of their experiences'"("The Hip-Hop Wars", 222). Their actions reflect the actions of those family members and friends who came before them, who also had a problem with drug use.

After Juice Wrld died of an overdose in an airport at 21, there has been a large shift in tone within the hip hop community. Now, when artists seem to be struggling with drug abuse, there is more awareness around it for others to speak up and get them help. As far as shielding kids from this world of drugs, there is no easy way to ensure that they stay away from it. Education and awareness is the only current strategy to combat this, and until the war on drugs is officially over, this will continue to be an issue.

Not all rap lyrics are bad, though, and the vast majority of them aren't. There are new and upcoming ways in which rap/hip hop songs can be used for good in ways they never have before. "While remaining vigilant about possible negative impacts of certain Rap songs, scholarly youth development advocates are expanding prosocial uses of selected modern Rap music and related Hip-Hop culture" ("Modern Rap Music: Mining the Melodies for Mental Health Resources", 3). Certain songs can be used to highlight and illustrate different aspects of life both positive and negative. There is not much research on this quite yet, but it's worth noting that there could be a bright future within the mental health field for hip hop.

Rap and hip hop is a genre with hundreds of millions of listeners each year, and will only continue to prosper. The ever evolving streaming platforms along with the advancement of producing capabilities, artists within the next 5 years will take the rap game to a whole new level. Up and coming teens will soar on to the scene like 17 year old Kid Laroi, and veteran rappers will solidify themselves as legends within the industry such as Young Thug and J. Cole. Big name artists need to keep the momentum they've gained within the political atmosphere and continue the fight to end racism. Given the array of artists, sounds, and subgenres within rap/hip hop, I expect the trend of great success to continue for many years to come.

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