

Hip-Hop as a Form of Education

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Abstract

Music serves as a form of communication and can provide healing to listeners depending on the message portrayed. This allows for youth to cope with their problems by being able to identify with the artist has to say in their lyrics. This helps them realize and understand that they are not the only ones that go through similar social problems. As of recent years, rap music has been increasingly used as a form of pedagogy for high school and college students to learn from. This study is to take it a step further, by understanding if artists use their music to educate their listeners and if they refrain from promoting violence. A qualitative study was done on hip-hop artists using the grounded theory approach for data analysis by observing common responses among participants.

Keywords: Urban Education, Hip-Hop Culture, Social Identity

Introduction

Hip-Hop has made a significant impact on today's culture from starting in the late 1970's in New York to influencing people worldwide. There are many elements of hip-hop that one can pursue such as break dancing, DJ-ing (disc jockeying), graffiti art, beat producing, street fashion and emceeing or rapping. According to Rapper Krs-One, "Rap is something you do, Hip-Hop is something you live" (Lawrence 1993). In hip-hop, the person tells a story and is considered to be lyrically gifted and to speak with quickness (Smitherman 1997). However, music in general can be negative or positive. Rap lyrics can speak of misogyny and violence or the lyrics can speak of economic segregation or racial oppression in their communities. Emcees, rappers or lyricists can report in their music the social problems that are occurring in the neighborhood. This could be a story about them that affects them personally or someone that they know. The message that emcees convey serves as a connection for their listeners to relate to and can help listeners identify with the rapper. Since rappers have the ability to connect with many listeners, this study conducts interviews with artists in the hip-hop industry to determine the type of messages they portray and if they use this opportunity to educate their listeners on social issues.

Rap music has been criticized by politicians, religious groups and some women's groups for the negative messages that have been portrayed (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2002). As per Reyna, Brandt and Vicki (2009) they note, "Rap music has been blamed for youth violence, the rise of gangs and gang related crime, drug use, and violence against women" (362). However, another perspective is that rap music does not promote violence and represents the true realities of the urban lifestyle. Rap music can provide a voice for youth depicting the social problems they encounter. For example, in Notorious B.I.G's song *Juicy*, he states that he "went from negative to positive" talking about the struggle of living in poverty and being able to make it out of the neighborhood from selling drugs to establishing a successful rap career. Notorious B.I.G isn't the only successful rapper to make it out the hood. Ice Cube and Ice T are also perfect examples of how former gang affiliated rappers have now transitioned into successful careers as actors on film and T.V.

Music serves as a form of communication and can provide healing to listeners depending on the message portrayed (Berk 2008). This allows for youth to cope with their problems by being able to identify with the artist has to say in their lyrics. This helps them realize and understand that they are not the only ones that go through similar problems.

This connection encourages youth to engage in the hip-hop culture whether it is developing their own lyrics by engaging in writing poetry, making music by producing beats, dancing, and/or style of dress. As of recent years, rap music has been increasingly used as a form of pedagogy for high school and college students to learn from. According to Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) teachers use hip-hop in their curriculum to build relationships and connect with students in urban communities. According to Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) hip-hop helps young people to express their pain, anger and frustration using songs and poetry. Furthermore, hip-hop can be used to create productive citizens. Clay (2006) indicates that hip-hop has helped youth gain political awareness and encourages them to engage in democracy. The research has shown rap music can be extremely beneficial for academia. This study is to take it a step further, by exploring the perspectives of the hip-hop artists and how they use their music to educate their audience and if they refrain from promoting violence. The purpose of this study is to present the perspectives of hip-hop artists and how they use their music to benefit their audience.

Social Identity through Music Awareness

According to Abrams (2009) young people use music to identify themselves to others. Individuals may adopt a musical style because of their social environment. Individuals that communicate their musical preferences to others are suggesting that they adapt to the personalities and values of a particular genre of music (Rentfrow, McDonald and Oldmeadow 2009). For instance, individuals' living in an urban community may adopt hip-hop for their musical preference and in addition adapt to its culture such as clothing and use of hip-hop slang. As Clay (2006) states, "hip-hop speaks to youth who find representation of themselves and their community within their lyrics, styles and presentation of culture" (107). Depending on how strong the connection is to the musical preference, one may choose a career that supports their passion for hip-hop music. Abrams (2009) finds that music serves a positive vehicle for identity forming in young people. This helps youth to build positive social relationships where educators can use this influence to motivate youth to learn through music.

Hip-hop in Education

Educators that are looking for creative ways to teaching to a young population can use hip-hop music to gain their attention. The use of hip-hop music in the classroom can encourage critical teaching and critical thinking (Stovall 2006). Shor (1980) suggests critical learning as a form of pedagogical practices for high school students which centers on critical issues and concerns of students. Stovall (2006) extended this concept by conducting a study on urban city African and Latino youth in Chicago, Illinois to use hip-hop as an approach to understanding subject matter and the connection to their daily lives. Through the use of hip-hop lyrics, students began to understand the concepts that surround their daily lives. The use of hip-hop was implemented in social studies curriculum, whereas students initially make a connection to the beat of a song, then the lyrics. The hip-hop lyrics would help students formulate new ideas and concepts enhancing their critical learning and critical thinking.

The Miseducation of Rap

The misconception of hip-hop music is that the lyrics are mostly infused with misogyny, violence and promoting the use of illicit drugs. As McWhorter (2003) stated, "Hip-hop creates nothing." Yes, there are hip-hop songs that discuss violence, but it doesn't create nothing it adds value to a curriculum. According to Holmes (2000) there are English departments at colleges that capitalize on creating assignments on popular culture. For example, understanding violence in the community and how it is reflected in the lyrics of hip-hop song. This helps students to learn more about the issue, about themselves and about the world.

I argue that not all hip-hop music is negative. According to Smitherman (1997) hip-hop lyrics depict storytelling. As Smitherman stated, "The toast-teller projects himself (or herself usually himself) as a powerful, all knowing, omnipotent hero, able to overcome all odds" (13). Hip-hop artists use music as an expression of their social environments similar to story-telling of what they encounter in their daily lives. A listener living in an urban community can connect to the economic struggles that an artist conveys in its lyrics because they can identify themselves to the artist. In addition, a listener from a suburban community may not resonate with the economic struggle that an artist is depicting in his or her lyrics, but it gives the listener the opportunity to understand social issues.

Rapping about the negative circumstances that they have overcome such as violence can be used as a healing measure for artists to pursue other positive ventures. For example, rapper Ice Cube has been successful in the film industry. In 2008, rapper and producer Dr. Dre co-founded Beats Electronic, which provides premium sound entertainment. Six years later, it was sold to Apple for \$3 billion dollars (Solomon 2014). There are many other artists that have been able to launch into successful enterprises using hip-hop as their foundation.

This study draws on the literature of social identity and hip-hop music as a pedagogy to taking an exploratory approach on understanding how hip-hop artists use their music for education. This study explores if hip-hop artists use their music as an opportunity to educate their audience on social issues. Since there are countless misconceptions of the negativity that is associated with hip-hop music this study determines if hip-hop artists advocate for violence in their music.

Research Methods

A qualitative study using primary research was conducted by contacting a hip-hop blogger who operates The Bee Shine based in New York City. The Bee Shine is dedicated to preserving the hip-hop culture and focuses on in-person video-taped interviews with hip-hop artists. I contacted the Bee Shine for this study and provided him with interview questions to ask the hip-hop artists he encountered. A convenience sample was conducted using informal interviews that were conducted in fall of 2013. There were a total of 10 hip-hop artists that participated in this study. The sample of hip-hop artists range from artists that are new to the music industry to artists that are seasoned veterans. All artists interviewed were male and ranged from ages 24 to 45 years old. This sample differs from the ideal sample since the majority of the artists that were interviewed were in the New York area. Different regions of the U.S. can have different themes, accents and rhyme patterns (Grem 2006). Hip-hop has various styles that differ in lyrics and sound when comparing New York (East Coast) to California (West Coast). In addition, other cities such as Chicago (Midwest) and Atlanta (Dirty South) all have different sounds. These different regions can represent different social environments, which can influence the social identities of youth.

The Bee Shine provided me with copies of the video-taped interviews on DVD and I transcribed the interviews using MS Word. The aim of this study is to understand to what extent do hip-hop artists educate their listeners on social awareness than discussing violence in their music lyrics? There are numerous research studies that use hip-hop as pedagogy for classroom learning, but there is a lack of research that depicts the perspectives from hip-hop artists and their use of lyrics. The grounded theory approach was used for data analysis by observing common responses among participants. Open coding was used for the analysis to group similar themes that were repetitive. The information was categorized into two different themes. The two category headings generated from the data were: 1) educating listeners and 2) promoting non-violence. In addition, excerpts from the interviews are included in these sections that are designed to represent key themes that emerged.

Educating Listeners

Each of the interviewees was asked, “How do you educate your listeners?” This question was asked because there can be various ways that hip-hop artists can educate their listeners. The two common themes were 1) social awareness and 2) personal experience. The following four excerpts are representative of comments made by the interviewees:

The way I educate my listeners to my music, I definitely think is more social. It's like a social commentary. What I do is report what's going on in the neighborhoods, in the environment, in the—you know—in the conditions of where I'm from, and the conditions that a lot of people may not be aware of, that people in my community are going through.

Current events is what's really going on out here, you know. I watch the news, CNN, local news, it's really just, you know, hearing a different story—As a matter of fact, one of the first songs I did was around the time that the Columbine shootings had happened, and I spoke—I said something in that verse about Columbine and the reasons why certain people lash out and do crazy things, and you just gotta really stay and pay attention to what's going on in the world.

I mean, the best way that I could educate any listener is really to just talk about my experience, because, I mean, you know, I've done a lot of trial and error over the years, and I think the best way for me to really teach somebody anything is to let them know what good and bad stuff I've encountered and how to just get around it so they don't have to go through it.

I use it in a more day-to-day basis thing. I use stuff that I've been around and that I've seen, and I try to rap about those experiences and, you know, I try to put—let people—rap about both sides of an experience.

All interviewees agreed that they do educate their listeners (N=10). However, there are different styles of education that hip-hop artists convey to their listeners, some interviewees agreed on social awareness (N=4) and a few on personal experience (N=2). The other interviewees each had different themes of educating their audience.

One interviewee mentioned he educated based on passion (N=1), *“I’m talking about what I know right now, and it’s emotion! It’s based off of pure emotion.”* Another interviewee mentioned he educated his listeners about the music industry (N=1), *“I’m ready to go against the industry, especially the people in the industry that’s basically pumping all that negative stuff to the kids.”* One hip-hop artist who is a DJ indicated that he played music based on the skills of the lyrics being portrayed (N=1). The interviewee stated, *“For me, the first component of what I play has to be based on the skills.”* This suggests the quality of music the DJ wants to portray to his audience. Lastly, one interviewee suggested that he doesn’t fall into one theme of education he stated, *“I throw in a little bit of everything in there, politics, civil rights, but I don’t really watch TV as much as I used to.”* Overall the majority of the findings do fall into the category that hip-hop artists use social awareness to educate their listeners.

Promoting Non-Violence

Interviewees were asked, “Do you use your music to promote non-violence?” The majority of the respondents promote non-violence in their music (N=8). Each interviewee responded with a different theme on how they use their music to promote non-violence. The following eight excerpts are representative of comments made by the interviewees:

Kill them with kindness, keep it clean, and good vibes will come.

I’m actually doing a workshop now that teaches the correlation between music and regular subjects, and it’s called M.A.T.H., which is an acronym for Music Appreciation Time and Healing, and what it is basically giving a platform for kids to find their inner voice.

You know that I’m anti-violent. You know that. That’s not what music is about, that’s not what I’m about, and that’s not what everybody should be about-- Take that anger and put it into something positive, something productive—and you’ll be fine, bro. Trust me.

I’m not mad for real. I don’t promote violence. I’m not a violent guy.

No matter what field you’re in, whether you’re into music, entertainment or not, whatever you’re doing is about networking and being the best that you can be at whatever it is you’re trying to do in life.

Well, number one, I try not to use profanity in my music, you know?

Well, you know, people could see me, they just know I’m nonviolent, you know? Because you know, the energy. It’s about the energy. You know? I’m not the most lyrical—I could be, but when I’m onstage, and there’s energy, I’m just full of vibes, you know. Plus, you know, it’s always in my lyrics. Peace! Love! More unity!

I’ve learned to tone it down, make it a little less in that, because I didn’t want to really promote that any more, and I also—you know, you get a little bit older, and you just kind of mellow out a little bit, and I realized I need to just calm down.

The last excerpt from the interviewee was interesting because in the interview he mentioned that when he first started rapping, he did promote violence in his music. However, as he got older and matured he started to become more peaceful in his lyrics. The interviewee was in his early 30s. One interviewee mentioned that he did not promote non-violence (N=1), *“I wouldn’t say that I use my music to promote non-violence, but what I try to do is lead by example, and sometimes, violence is the only answer—or the only foreseeable answer.”* Another interviewee who is the hip-hop DJ indicated that he played music depending on the mood of the party (N=1). Here is his excerpt:

I don’t know if I actually promote non-violence. Not to say I promote violence either, but I don’t particularly play one angle. I think, again, like—music to me is like movies. It depends on what you’re in a mood to see. I think that there’s good music throw your guns in the air, as violent as that theme might sound to someone that’s maybe not just totally into hip-hop, I mean, that song is an incredible song, and it’s a classic within hip-hop culture.

Throw Ya Gunz in the air is a song that was released by the rap group ONYX in the early 1990s and is considered to be a classic. I had the opportunity to conduct a separate interview by phone with Rapper Fredo Starr who is one of the two members in ONYX to understand the message in the song. The following is an excerpt from the interview:

The song wasn't meant for violence. The song *Throw Ya Gunz in the air* is a reference to get the party started. Back in the days in New York when the party would start guys who had guns would throw their guns in the air. As a reference the party was dope or poppin.' The song wasn't meant to be positive or negative it was up to the listener to determine. It does have a lot of negative references though.

I found the additional interview to be informative to help understand the context of the song. Just by the title of the song *Throw Ya Gunz* can give a negative stereotype that the song depicts only gangs and gun violence. However, after having the opportunity to talk to the artist about his song, he was able to explain the rationale behind the theme.

Overall the majority of the interviewees indicated that they promote non-violence in their music. A few artists did verbally label themselves as non-violent, and other artists would describe examples of how they are non-violent in their music. Therefore, the research question upholds that hip-hop artists do promote social awareness than violence in their music.

Results of the Study

The results of the analysis indicate that the majority of hip-hop artists use the lyrics in their music on social awareness than promoting the use of violence. They depict what is going on in their communities or by personal experience. This allows the listener to make a conscious decision about certain issues. The personal experiences that the artists convey in their lyrics serves as a connection to their listeners, who may also be encountering similar circumstances. In the educational world, teachers can use hip-hop based education as a connection to their students to build rapport. In addition, students may find that hip-hop based assignments are more interesting and may be more willing to engage in learning and participation. This can help students on achieving their full potential in critical learning and critical thinking.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study, and the limitations are presented as follow:

1. This study is not generalizable to all hip-hop artists and does not uphold in the different regions where hip-hop music is made. For instance, California (West Coast), New York (East Coast), Atlanta (Dirty South) and Chicago (Mid-West) all these different styles have different sounds and can depict different messages. Rappers in the various regions would need to be interviewed to determine if the study upholds.
2. The hip-hop artists that were interviewed were all male independent rappers, including one DJ. Independent rappers are usually more positive in their lyrics than commercial rappers. Commercial rappers make commercial (mainstream) music that is usually played on top 40 radio stations and tend to have violent or misogynic lyrics (Callahan and Grantham 2012).
3. The sample size of only 10 interviewees from the New York area is also a limitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study is an exploratory approach to understanding if hip-hop artists use their music to educate their audience. Based on the findings, recommendations for future research is to extend the research study to other locations within the United States and increase the sample size to include both female and male independent hip-hop artists. This would determine if the research question continues to uphold with a larger sample size. Recommendations are to continue to interview independent artists than commercial artists since commercial artists have larger commitments on their time since they are financed by major record companies. Independent artists are more easily accessible and may be more willing to participate in the research study.

In addition, future research could also include studying both sides of the spectrum such as the hip-hop artist and the listener. For example, students that attend schools with hip-hop based education can be interviewed on their opinions on a hip-hop artist's song and if it motivates them to increase their learning. In addition, the hip-hop artist who created the song can be interviewed on the content of their lyrics and the message they are attempting to portray.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides an exploratory approach to understanding how hip-hop artists use their music to educate their listeners. Since hip-hop music has been increasingly used as pedagogy in education, the aim of this study was to take it a step further to begin to understand the perspectives of the hip-hop artists and the messages they convey in their music. This study was able to determine that hip-hop artists use their music as form of depicting social awareness than violence. Hip-hop has been criticized for influencing bad norms onto society, but this study has found that hip-hop artists tend not to promote violence. They use their music as a form of storytelling, which hip-hop has increasingly been used in education where students can learn from. This study is to shine light on the positive use of hip-hop and how it can benefit others.

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