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A Critical Approach to Rap Music

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Abstract

People have used music to tell stories and share ideas for ages, making it an influential means of communication (Delaney, 2007). Rap music in particular came on the scenes in the late twentieth century in New York and continues to be a popular form of expression into the 21st century (Blanchard, 1999). However, many remain divided on whether rap music should have a place in society. Some claim rap is harmful and promoting of violent lifestyles (Richardson & Scott, 2002). Others, however, believe rap is useful in education and counseling settings for promoting discussion about life choices (Silvera, 2015). These conflicting opinions will be examined in depth in this thesis leading into a more specific look at these viewpoints in the context of critical theory. Many critical theorists reject rap music, seeing it as demeaning and harmful while others have praised it for being a way to undermine society's mistaken perceptions on sex and personhood (Mendoza, 2016). Research concludes that rap music has both positive and negative effects on society, making it important to understand both sides.

Thesis Outline

- I. Critical Approach to Rap Music
- II. Communication and Music History
- III. History of Rap Music
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Critical Approach to Rap Music

Rap music in 21st century America is a popular form of entertainment. In order to understand its significance, music as a means of communication will first be examined, leading to a more specific look at the history of rap music up to the 21st century. Typically, one of two stances is taken on whether rap music should have a place in society. Those who find it offensive and harmful frequently base their beliefs on the violent messages presented in the lyrics (Campbell, 2016). The other side of the argument claims that, while rap lyrics tend to be violent, rap can be used for educational purposes or as a means of self-expression (Andoh, 2014). Critical theorists in particular have varying opinions on rap music that reflect these two conflicting interpretations. This thesis will argue that rap music has both positive and negative effects on society and that it is important to be aware of and respect both sides.

Communication and Music Introduction

Communication involves two or more people, or communication devices, transmitting and receiving information and is vital to the formation and spread of worldviews to nations around the world (Stainton & Ezcurdia, 2013). One prime example of communication is music and the composition of lyrics, allowing the earliest societies a means of communicating stories. Beliefs, values, and worldviews were and still are expressed in music (Mandal, 2016). Since the beginning of recorded history, mankind has utilized music as a form of self-expression, storytelling and communication (Mandal, 2016). The earliest known song dates back almost four thousand years to the ancient northern Syrian settlement of Ugarit- or Canaan as it is also known- that had known inhabitants since the early Neolithic age. The musical work is known as the Hurrian Song and was sung as a hymn to their goddess Nikkal, who was believed to be the divine keeper of their gardens (Mandal, 2016). Similarly, the earliest known song in the Bible,

located in Exodus, dates back to 1440 B.C. This song, composed by Moses, records his worship of God at the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt. Similar to the Hurrian Song, the Song of Moses expresses a worldview shared by the composer and the society of origin. It describes the god of the Bible as a mighty God of the nations, One whom all should fear and as a deity that reigns supreme forever more. This song reflects the events of the time and serves as a record of Moses' beliefs about God. In fact, the song of Moses was so significant to its era that the lyrics are repeated in books such as the Psalms and more specific passages such as Revelation chapter 15 in which the author records his vision of the heavenly beings singing the Song of Moses.

Music, songs, and lyrics have a way of communicating to a culture unlike any other form of expression. As music has increased in popularity in the daily lives of people, research has been conducted examining ways music shapes the listener (Timmerman et al., 2008). One 2011 study conducted by researchers connected with the Biomedical Department at the University of Porto in Portugal tested the activity of the limbic system of test subjects' brains when exposed to a familiar stimuli: music (Pereira et al., 2011). Given that the limbic system controls the reward center of the brain, the researchers sought to determine if familiar aesthetic melodies affected the emotional involvement of the listener. In the study, participants were divided into groups based on how accustomed they were to popular music. Images of the brain during the multiple tests were taken using an MRI machine to monitor brain activity. The study found that several activations took place in the limbic system as well as the frontal lobe and blood flow increased to key parts of the brain when exposed to the stimuli. In fact, according to this study, it only took one second for basic emotions such as "happy or sad" to be recognized in the research participants based on the brain activity. The activations that occurred in the reward center alone indicated that listening to familiar music is a pleasurable experience, particularly in the group

who were found to be music enthusiasts (Pereira et al., 2011). However, those who did not find the music to be familiar still experienced increased activity, leading researchers to conclude that music is powerful in affecting the emotional wellbeing by increasing brain activity (Pereira et al., 2011).

A similar, earlier study conducted in 2007 by researchers and psychologists at the University of Nebraska took a phenomenological approach in discovering the effects of rap music by asking probing questions examining the lifestyle of the listeners involved in the study. The results of the study led researchers to conclude that all participants had at least some psychological and physiological responses to the music (Iwamoto, Creswell, & Caldwell 2007). Many found rap music to alleviate stress and allowed the participants an avenue to vent simple frustrations. The researchers noted that rap was used as a coping mechanism for alleviating negative moods. However, to what extent the rap music was used in this manner depended upon the level of identification the participants found with the rap artist and the message of the lyrics (Iwamoto et al., 2007). All participants to some degree noted negative messages and meanings behind the words but stated that they chose to focus on the positive qualities of the beat and the ability the music seemed to have in boosting their moods (Iwamoto et al., 2007).

Also, people tend to formulate their opinions about themselves, the world and society at large as influenced by media, whether it be a popular political television commentary, the impeccable model on the front cover of a fashion magazine, the convicting words of a self-help book, or the musical lyrics of the artists who seem to have it all (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). One 2009 study of music among adolescents conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) found that teens used music in their process of forming an identity (Fuld, Mulligan, Altmann, & Brown, 2009). In this study, researchers concluded that young females were more

likely than their male counterparts to use music to reflect their emotional states and process emotional experiences or turmoil. Males, on the other hand, were more likely to utilize music as a way of creating positive self-images and boosting their mood (Fuld et al., 2009). Adolescents and young adults typically listen to anywhere between two to four hours of music daily, according to the AAP (Fuld et al., 2009). As a result, researchers began to examine the types of messages communicated in music, particularly rap and hip-hop, noting the serious sexual and violent messages and indicating that these messages may influence listeners (Campbell, 2016).

History of Rap Music

Rap music itself obviously has a much later beginning than the Hurrian hymn and is said to be a combination of an outflow of the African American oral tradition and a common form of Medieval British rhyming (Archimède, 2017). The word “rap” began as a term utilized in fifteenth century Britain meaning “to hit or strike” and within a matter of years came to be defined as “flyting” (Johnson, 2008). Flyting often involved two or more parties reciting poems and rhyming back and forth with one another usually to settle some type of dispute. The losing party often admitted defeat by remaining silent, not continuing the rhyme (Johnson, 2007). One of the most famous examples of flyting was recorded in the 16th century when two poets hurled insults at one another in the form of poems and rhymes in the presence of King James IV. This has been named the Flyting of Kennedie and Dunbar by historians (Kinsley, 2017). Historian and University of New Mexico professor Ferenc Szasz claims the Medieval British period had a profound impact on the oral African American traditions in America (Johnson, 2008). Szasz stated in a 2008 interview that this popular medieval practice was brought to the United States as the Scottish in particular began to settle in the new land. Eventually, African American slaves, who modified it for their own use, adopted flyting and developed the first recognizable form of

rap. In fact, the first documented rap battle in the United States occurred in the November 9, 1861 issue of the New York *Vanity Fair* magazine and recognized as an American Civil War poem, according to professor Szasz (Johnson, 2008).

African American oral tradition was a common practice in African villages where members of the community created and played basic instruments to accompany their telling of stories that often centered on their families, beliefs, or community events. This tradition carried over into the states when Africans were brought over as slaves by westerners accustomed to the practice of *flyting* (Archimède, 2017). Typically, African American slaves substituted words with slang so that others outside of this circle would be unable to understand the message behind the songs. In a sense, African Americans at this time practically created their own language in the form of rhymes and song to communicate strategically what they experienced as slaves. In fact, in addition to gathering together to communicate stories of violence, the slaves frequently sang while in the fields, working together in groups to make time pass more quickly (Archimède, 2017).

In the 18th and 19th centuries African American spirituals came about on the plantations. Due to the fact that slaves were denied their humanity and unable to practice organized religion, they frequently gathered together to participate in spirituals, otherwise known as religious folk music, as a way to practice religion, according to the Library of Congress article “African American Spirituals.” Many of the spirituals were centered on biblical stories and the stories’ heroes that paralleled the lives of the African American slaves and served as a way to express their faith and sorrows (Library of Congress, n.d). Common stories of focus were Moses’ leading the Egyptians out of slavery, the life of King David, and others. These meetings, often informal

and involving clapping and loud shouting in unison, alarmed slave owners and were typically discouraged out of fear.

Frederick Douglass, former slave turned abolitionist, often wrote about his participation in spirituals as a slave and the messages in the lyrics (Library of Congress, n.d). In his 1855 book *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass says, "A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,' something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan" (Douglass & Smith, 1855, p. 215).

From the Civil War into the 20th century there has been an increased focus on this type of music. Popular slang used in rap such as “chick” for woman or “bad” to mean good originated in Chicago in the 1920s (Kubrin, n.d). The Roaring 20s was a decade of optimism characterized by increased crime rates and new entertainment that used slang words (Dalzell, 2010). Some terms that originated include “goon” (hired thug), “flapper” (hedonistic and fashionable dancing woman), “hooker” (prostitute) and “fink” (to report to the police). The first half of the 20th century witnessed musical fads such as swing dancing and the jitterbug. Men began wearing loose, baggy pants while beat boxing. In the 1930s after the Great Depression, the entertainment industry took off with the same enthusiasm as the flapper age of the 1920s. In fact, the word “swing” became associated with jazz music in the 1930s (Dalzell, 2010). This style of music and entertainment morphed into rhythm and blues (R&B) around 1945 at the end of World War II. Primary artists were African American, and their R&B music targeted others of the same race. Given the economic situation in the United States as a result of World War II, many African Americans moved from rural communities to industrialized cities for work, bringing with them

the influence of R&B, which directly influenced rock and roll among their Caucasian counterparts (Dalzell, 2010).

In New York in the 1970s the first true rap DJ, known as DJ Koolha, emerged from the genre of R&B (Blanchard, 1999). He and Clive Campbell, a Jamaican immigrant, frequently hosted rap parties where they and other DJs mixed the songs and sounds of R&B singers to create a new sound that appealed to a younger population. Many of the songs at this time were about the socioeconomic conditions of African American individuals in inner cities. Eventually, the Bronx of New York divided into competing rap territories, which led to friendly competitions that included dance offs and artful attempts to outdo one another with creative rap lyrics (Epstein, 2016). In 1979 The Sugarhill Gang, a musical group in Brooklyn, produced and released the hit single “Rapper’s Delight”. The song quickly topped the charts and brought rap music into the public eye and is often credited as the popularization of hip-hop and rap in America (Blanchard, 1999). During this time other groups began following suit, releasing and normalizing rap in the public eye. In fact, the 1970s and 1980s became a time for the rise of modern day hip-hop and rap, two concepts of modern day popular culture often used interchangeably, since both carry similar images of an “in your face” lifestyle and focus on the spoken word (Gourdine & Lemmons, 2011).

The 1980s ushered in a more intense style of rap and lyrics that reflected a culture of drugs, sex, violence, and racial tension. This time is dubbed the golden era of rap music (Reeves, 2009). Much of the lyrics were unlike anything heard previously. The music was unofficially branded as “Gangsta Rap,” which the *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* defines as the most controversial style of music because of the vivid use of language and highly explicit lyrics (Reeves, 2009). Many of the early and current rappers were, in fact, involved in gang activity,

violent crimes, prostitution, and drug activity, and rap only provided an outlet to discuss the lifestyle. To convey the idea of how explicit this music could be, in 1990 a Florida court ruled an album created by 2 Live Crew as legally obscene and banned the selling of their music from the album *Nasty As They Wanna Be*. In 1991 Ice-T released a song entitled “Cop-killer” that incited protests and boycotts against the producer of the album, Tim Warner (Reeves, 2009). Police and courts alike took note that criminals frequently referenced rap in their trials as a defense of their actions. Therefore, authorities began to link rap, particularly Gangsta Rap, with violent crimes. Critics noted that what once began as a response to perceived oppression in African American culture became a popular art form (Reeves, 2009).

In the midst of these trials and debates, two unsolved murders took the question of whether rap is harmful to society to a whole other level. Tupac Shakur was born in New York in 1971 to parents who were a part of the Black Panther Activist group (Stanford, 2010). This group was composed of African American activists who stood on Marxist ideas promoting equality and violently opposed those who oppressed any minority group. As an example to demonstrate the violence this group promoted, while pregnant with him, Tupac’s mother faced time in jail on bombing charges. The rapper never had contact with his biological father until his adult years. Tupac’s mother instilled in him during his childhood a strict view of socialist ideology and a life of violence (Stanford, 2010). The two frequently moved from place to place in the Bronx. Battling addictions, Tupac saw first hand from his mother a life of violence and drugs. As a teenager he attended Baltimore School of the Arts, where he took up dance and music. While there he discovered the art of rap music and began performing rap at local block parties and clubs. In the late 1980s, his family moved to the West Coast where his career in rap took off and he adopted the stage name 2Pac, selling millions of albums worldwide (Blanchard, 1999).

Despite his fame, the rapper received condemnation over his lyrics, which told of violence, gangs, and sex. In addition to the explicit lyrics, Tupac appeared to be living out his violent persona by being arrested multiple times for violent offenses that included assaulting his director Allen Hughes. Later, Tupac faced jail charges after his conviction of sexual assault. His life seemingly became characterized by drugs and violence mixed with fame (Stanford, 2010).

In 1995 his album *Me Against the World* peaked in the charts just in time for him to be sentenced to four and a half years in prison. Many critics later noted that his songs carried messages of an early death, which almost served as a foreshadow of his own murder (Stanford, 2010). After being in prison close to a year, his bond was paid and he was released. Immediately the rapper returned to his life on the stage and in the streets. However, in 1996 Tupac became involved in a feud with other rappers from the Las Vegas area. He was shot that September, dying shortly after in a Las Vegas hospital at the age of 25. His killer was never caught.

In similar circumstances, rapper Notorious B.I.G. or Christopher Wallace, known as one of the most famous rappers of all time, was murdered at the age of 24 (Blanchard, 1999). Wallace reportedly dropped out of high school his freshman year and began selling drugs and free-styling rap at the age of 17. In 1993 he landed his first record deal. However, what made B.I.G. strikingly different from Tupac is that he sought to use his music as a way to tell stories and inspiring his audience. Some songs still carried the same messages of drugs, sex, and violence, but B.I.G lived his life differently from Tupac or other rappers at the time (Blanchard, 1999). Many in the music industry on some level admired him as an artist and for his lifestyle of promoting acceptance of all people. However, despite his goal of promoting love, the rapper was murdered in March 1997, only six months after Tupac. The two rappers had actually become friends and were subsequently murdered in the same way with neither death ever being solved,

leading many to believe the deaths might have been connected due to similar circumstances (Blanchard, 1999). While the murders remain unsolved, investigators believe members of the Crips, one of the deadliest and most notorious gangs in the United States, are most likely responsible for the death of the two rappers as a result of gang related run-ins and a life characterized by drugs and violence (Blanchard, 1999).

Much rap music is laced with messages of drugs, violence, and the plight of underrepresented minority groups (Cundiff, 2013). Many media critics argue that modern day rap, like its preliminary ancestor African oral tradition, is nothing more than an outflow of the struggles and desires that rappers, usually of minority status, and their communities face in everyday life (Rollins-Haynes, 2006). In other words, what first occurred in America during the time of slavery expanded into modern day rap but serves the same purpose of communicating a message. Unfortunately, much has to do with domestic violence, sexual exploits, drug and alcohol addictions, and death to escape a painful reality (Cundiff, 2013).

Rap music in the 21st century continues to reflect this idea but in slightly different ways as artists seek to use rap as a platform for real life issues. Two key rappers that have changed the outlook of rap for the 21st century for different reasons are Eminem and Kanye West (Calhoun, n.d). Eminem in particular is praised and regularly compared to Elvis Presley for making an impact as a white male in a traditionally African American dominated music genre (Hill, 2013). His goal, similar to Elvis, was the uniting of different groups under the umbrella of music. Prior to Eminem's appearance on the scene, rap, mainly Gansta Rap, spoke messages of drugs, violence, and oppression, glorifying a materialistic life. Eminem, on the other hand, chose to reject this style of music, thus rejecting the glorification of money and choosing instead to write songs based upon his life experiences (Hill, 2013). Common themes include growing up poor in

predominantly black neighborhoods in Detroit, drug abuse, and family relationships with his mother and daughter (Hill, 2013). His way with words and music is unlike any other and has gained him a considerable amount of attention in the music world from Caucasian and African American rappers alike (Hill, 2013). Missy Elliot, a prominent female, African American 1990's rapper, once stated, "I love him 'cos he's white and he knows he's white. He's just him and he raps about what he's going through. I ain't mad about that" (Hill, 2013). Eminem raps in such a way that he goes beyond the issue of race by discussing his own life events with the goal of speaking to the person's situation. He does this so well that a 2014 report by CNN stated that according to a study done by Musicxmatch, an online lyrics site, Eminem has the largest vocabulary in the music industry.

Kanye West, on the other hand, is noted for taking nearly every opportunity presented to him to discuss racial issues, which has gained him quite a following. He views African Americans as underrepresented in society and that the white elite strive to portray them as gangsters and pimps (Barno, 2013). Critics often praise the rap artist for speaking up about social matters and voicing his views on current world issues, which he frequently expresses over Twitter (Biedenbarn, 2011). However, unlike Eminem, West frequently takes stands on and raps about issues of society in almost offensive ways, gaining him a reputation in the media for his outspokenness. However, his almost rude personality has caused trouble with other artists such as Taylor Swift when he made some offensive comments during her acceptance speech for winning the Best Female Video Award in the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards, influencing her to write a song of forgiveness and encouragement to West stating, "Who he is not what he said" (Biedenbarn, 2011). While West may be rude and pushy in his approaches, he is still praised for

taking a stand on current world issues and having a hand in numerous charities promoting a better society through his money and fame.

Violence in Rap

Studies show the rise of domestic violence, particularly towards women, may have connections to the world of rap music as many of the lyrics advocate violence (Anderson, 2003). Much of rap music condones themes of misogyny or the hatred of women. A close examination of popular rap lyrics reveals that many famous rappers often express that they expected submission from women and accepted male dominance as normal. Young adults between the ages of 16-30 have the highest percentage of rap music downloaded and researchers are finding that this age group, particularly the college age, are desensitized to violence and experience the greatest amount of physical and sexual violence in the name of masculinity. Researchers worry that these views and the popularity of this style of music will only further promote a philosophy of sexualizing women and violence towards one another, since culture has a profound impact of the beliefs of youth (Anderson, 2003).

To demonstrate how explicit rap music tends to be, a 2006 study that examined songs on the Billboard Hot 100 chart over the course of five years between 1998-2003 found that by far the most common theme was misogyny, or the hatred of women. A similar study conducted in 2011 examined rap, pop, rock, and country music videos to determine what percentage of music videos contained sexual references or imagery. Rap contained a startling 78% and around 92% of songs on the radio featured sexually explicit messages, according to *The Atlantic*. Many of the common themes found in the lyrics were messages of drug use, alcohol, violence, racism, and the glorification of sexually degrading women. As stated, multiple studies, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, have found that the majority of young adults pick and choose

their music based on their mood or as a coping mechanism for the stress of life. Researchers took this a step further and discovered that males in particular who listened to heavy metal with violent or sexual lyrics displayed a more negative attitude towards women than men who listened to primarily classic music (Allen et al., 2007). These men also tended to be much more aggressive with and had negative perceptions of women. The result of the study led researchers to conclude that there is an association between risky behavior and music choices, particularly with rap and the listener's views of women (Allen et al., 2007)

Careful analysis of rap music videos revealed high contents of sex and violence (Turner, 2010). Exposure to this type of content over a period of time has been shown to affect behaviors of viewers negatively, primarily young adults. Interestingly enough, a 2007 study discovered that middle school students who watched an increased amount of music videos and wrestling shows tended to express a greater acceptance of date rape and those who watched MTV were more accepting of premarital sex (Allen et al., 2007). This was further backed by the 2009 study released by The American Academy of Pediatrics that reported similar findings stating that around 75% of fourth to sixth graders watched music videos frequently (Fuld et al., 2009). Many of the videos they viewed were of rap and rock music, which features large amounts of violence and sexually explicit message. It is statistical research such as this that leads many experts in the area of social psychology to be concerned about the lyrical content of rap music (Fuld et al., 2009). Many fear the industry is promoting a society of drugs, sex, and violence as the older generation once feared about the now popular rock-and-roll (Allen et al., 2007). Given the research, they may be right.

Julian Sher, an investigative journalist and best selling author, writes about one special form of brutality inflicted upon primarily women: human trafficking and enslavement. He states:

“Nowhere is the image of young black men as pimps who exploit prostitutes as in modern-day rap music. Pimp language, pimp dress, and pimp words that denigrate women are a recurring beat in many top song and music videos” (Sher, 2011, p. 97). Sher goes on in his book *Someone’s Daughter* to describe the way in which men who have chosen pimping and abusing women are glorified in today’s media. In Chicago in 1974 one of the most well known pimps or hustlers Bishop Don “Magic” Juan began hosting a yearly event known as the Player’s Ball, which gained a great deal of both positive and negative attention in the media (Sher, 2011). Juan once spoke on *The Daily Show* advertising his event as one that “brings people together to recognize that pimpin’ is hard work, despite what the public thinks” (Sher, 2011, p. 93).

Sher notes that for years this ball became one of the most glorified multi-million dollar events, thriving off the abuse and exploitation of American women at the hands of hustlers on both the streets and the stage. In Chicago in 2005 many religious leaders and organizations attempted to denounce the ball by picketing the event to show their anger over the misogyny so publically displayed. Instead of being met by approval from authorities, as the protesters had expected, police were dispatched to prevent the protesters from blocking the entrance to the event and provided extra security on the inside for all the party attendees (Sher, 2011).

Ice-T, popular actor and rap artist, was also a once well off pimp (Sher, 2011). In 2003 the rapper narrated in a movie called “Pimpin’ 101” which has been named one of the most popular hip-hop porn films ever made, opening with dancing, naked women performing various sex acts as the rapper sings, “See me in Vegas....Swing through Hunts Point. Throwing dollars at those hos and strippers.” At one point in his movie, Ice-T strives to teach a lesson on the dangers of street life by showing a scantily dressed women about to enter a car with two rough looking bikers who brutally beat the woman and then toss her out of the car. He comes onto the scene

and says, “[Those men are] the kind of cats that like to do wrong shit to a ho, but hey, pimpin’ ain’t easy and hoing ain’t hard” (Sher, 2011, p. 92). Ice-T sold over 10 million rap albums in the United States alone during his career as a rapper, despite his apparent approval of violence and sexualizing women (Sher, 2011).

Famed rapper Snoop Dogg in a 2013 interview opened up about his life as a pimp over ten years, claiming that he frequently sold girls to famous athletes, participated in Playboy tours, and followed sporting events in order to hang out with and sell women to the players. He stated: “As a child I dreamed of being a pimp. I dreamed of having cars, clothes, and bitches to match.” It seems as if he achieved his dream both off the stage and on at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards when he and 50 Cent performed a song called “P.I.M.P” that glorified 50 Cent as a pimp. Few performances in history have received as much critical disapproval as this (Sher, 2011). They rapped, “Bitch choose with me, I’ll have you stripping in the street. Put my other hoes down, you get your ass beat.” As the rappers performed, they too led scantily dressed women around the stage on leashes. In the midst of the performance Bishop Don “Magic” Juan joined them on stage. As if this was not degrading enough, comedian Chris Rock came on stage as the host of the show stating: “Today is the anniversary of Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a Dream’ Speech. Isn’t it nice to see his dream finally come true?” Rock’s mocking statement was sadly accurate in the sense that pimps were, through the use of rap music, attempting to promote the mistreatment of women as liberating (Sher, 2011, p. 98).

Rap as a Healthy Outlet

However, the other side of the argument states that rap is only perceived as violent due to a biased media. In other words, the so called violence and male domination expressed in rap have been present in society since the start of recorded history and what is happening today is old

news in reality (Shillenn, 2014). These critics credit rap as unifying the underprivileged and underrepresented minorities of society. Additionally, they credit rap music as actually existing to raise awareness of death, violence, and drugs (Andoh, 2014). Rap is viewed as a channel of free speech existing to connect its listeners to the great social and political issues of their time, similarly to the utilization of music in the times of slavery as a means to communication experiences. Rap music draws attention to the struggles of the lower class and the suppression they face (Andoh, 2014).

The American Psychology Association published an article in 2014 entitled “Hate Being Sober: Lessons from Rap Music to Address Substance Use among African American Teens.” It focuses on the rather explicit messages and lyrics of Chicago born and raised rapper Chief Keef’s song “Hate Being Sober” that became an internet sensation. The song clearly promotes a need to do drugs and drink constantly to forget about the issues of life. Critics have noted that this song and many others give an important look into the issues of drug use and function as a way to raise awareness (Andoh, 2014).

Rapper Keef spent much of his young adult years in and out of trouble with the law and was raised in one of the most impoverished as well as dangerous parts of Chicago, which critics have noted may explain his desire for judgment-clouding drugs (Andoh, 2014). Far too often, one critic notes, reporters will focus on how many murders occur in Chicago in a single day without investigating the prior events or motives. While rappers like Chief Keef often rap about harmful things such as staying drunk in order to get through the day, their songs provide insight into inner city life based on their experiences. Some critics have called rap a cultural “CNN” for the African American community to share ideas and messages just like in the times of American

slavery with African American oral tradition. In a sense, rap in the past and today is nothing other than a way for them to communicate (Andoh, 2014).

Researchers have also cited rap music as an important means of education and a valuable tool for therapy. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a rise in the interest of using rap music in group therapy as a way to promote group cohesion and generate discussion (Iwamoto et al., 2007). Many young adults participate in risky behaviors such as drug use and unsafe sex, struggling to relate to authority and often showed unwillingness to discuss their actions and consequences with adults in individual or group counseling sessions (Iwamoto et al., 2007). However, when more comfortable topics, such as music, were discussed it seemed to motivate adolescents to open up more about their own lives (Iwamoto et al., 2007). One therapist found that when discussing rap music and what can be learned from the messages, his African American clientele were far less likely to engage in risky behavior (Iwamoto et al., 2007). Overall, the discussion of rap music became a comfortable platform to discuss issues of drugs, violence, and social concerns with the goal of allowing listeners to cope with their own problems by identifying with the works of rap artists (Silvera, 2015).

Similarly, many researchers who view rap in a positive light also claim it can be an excellent educational tool. As with the therapy approach, rap music is useful in promoting awareness and educating listeners on cultural issues (Iwamoto et al., 2007). Many youth seem to be more comfortable discussing issues presented in rap music in place of discussing the same issues in their own lives. Some educators argue that rap music allows teachers to connect with students and promote political and cultural awareness in the classroom. This was backed by a 2009 study indicates students could benefit from using rap music to represent themselves in their culture and find ways to connect with others as a result of connecting with the issues presented in

the music (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). They argue there is value in exposing students to the moral issues presented in rap music to spur discussions about morality and enhance critical thinking about these issues in society (Silvera, 2015).

Critical Theory & Feminism

When it comes to the conversation about the positive and negative views of rap music, critical theorists are no strangers to the debate. Critical theory in communication developed in the 1930s from the teachings of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. The main idea behind critical theory is that tightly held ideologies cripple a society and, therefore, members should seek to change the norm by striving for even better. This involves a process of critiquing all invalid and insignificant ideologies popular to a society. According to critical theory, the goal is to generalize human existence and promote study of the sciences without recognizing individualism in a society (Riley, 2011). The rise in rap music seemed to some critical theorists to promote individualism and subcultures within society (Riley, 2011). Artists wrote songs about going against authority, often hinting at resisting the government along with its carefully formulated laws used for governance. As a result, many critical theorists labeled proponents of popular music as deviants for not adhering to cultural norms (Riley, 2011).

Critical theorists have criticized the way in which the subculture of popular culture rap music is succeeding in the music industry, a largely capitalistic system promoting individuality and competition (Barron, 2013). On the other hand, some critical theorists often praise rap for the way in which it can be used to further the critical theory Marxist agenda and speak out against economic oppression and class relations, the central focal point of critical theory Marxists. For example, the 1960s saw an influx in music laced with messages of protests, political criticism, advancements for the marginalized, and promotion of speaking one's mind in these areas

(Barron, 2013). Many of the songs and their artists focused upon the civil right movement of the time and contained Marxist ways of thinking. Alex Callinicos stated in 2003, in relation to the arts, that a Marxist way of thinking is one by which to imagine other worlds free from the hierarchal nature of capitalism. In essence, according to some critical theorists, rap music is a blend of “reality with fiction” in its outlook and response to oppression and violence (Barron, 2013).

Two groups known for promoting the idea of Karl Marx and critical theory within their music were The Coup and Immortal Technique. Encouraged by the words of the Marxist Black Panther Party, these groups, The Coup in particular, released popular albums such as *Kill My Landlord*, *Party Music*, and *Genocide and Juice* that promoted the struggles of lower-class America by focusing on the economic turmoil’s that put them there (Barron, 2013). The idea behind the lyrics was to promote the overthrow of the elite and the need for redistribution of wealth so that all can have an equal chance at success. The album *Party Music* went so far to feature an image of the twin towers in flames on 9/11 to promote the message of overthrowing the capitalist system present in America (Barron, 2013).

The late 20th and early 21st centuries saw an emergence of a new wave of critical theory known as radical feminism or third and fourth wave feminism. Third wave rose to power in the 90s with fourth wave making a more recent appearance (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2017). First wave feminism started in the early 20th century as a way for women to gain equal voting rights with their male counterparts, second wave came shortly after as a way to challenge and bring attention to gender norms, and third wave feminism has resulted more recently in response to current political and economic trends related to social and sexual equality, which includes opinions on rap music (Leavy, 2015). Proponents of third and fourth wave feminism focus upon

current issues of societal oppression and social movements. Feminists hold interesting views on rap music. At face value rap music goes against everything upheld by traditional feminist theology (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). On the other hand, more radical feminists claim rap music is empowering and a way to assert female dominance (Oware, 2009).

An article published in the *Huffington Post* in 2016 entitled “Rap and Feminism: An Adolescent’s Internal Struggle” highlights the struggle of feminism when it comes to rap music (Mendoza, 2016). Marie Mendoza, the article’s contributor, recognizes the overarching theme of sexualizing women but at the same time continued to listen, since the same messages are in almost all music and it promotes freethinking. She states if she were to protest this music for the explicit lyrics, then all music needs to be protested (Mendoza, 2016). It is therefore, in her mind, better just to enjoy it as a form of entertainment. Despite the rampant, explicit messages in other forms of music, many still criticize the sexual messages of rap music, especially directed towards women of color, feeling disgusted at the way they are overtly sexualized and portrayed as less valuable than men (Gourdine & Lemmons, 2011). Feminists often reject the messages of rap music for this very reason, claiming it further promotes an abusive, patriarchal society in which men are encouraged to degrade and view women as sexual objects and not as equals. They view current trends as hindering women in gaining sexual equality (Leavy, 2015). The *Journal of Black Studies* published an article in 2009 examining this interesting idea, calling feminists who support rap music “man’s woman,” claiming that in attempting to promote sexual freedom they further sexualize themselves, appearing subservient to men. While the lyrics may have empowering elements, they further promote the idea that women are second-class, hypersexual beings (Oware, 2009).

A contrasting view often held by more radical third and fourth wave feminists embraces rap music and the overt sexual tones as empowering and promoting of sexual freedom (Leavy, 2015). Numerous feminist female rappers have championed this idea as well. These include popular culture stars such as Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, Lauryn Hill, Queen Latifah, and Missy Elliot, to name a few. While women have been a part of the music industry from the beginning, they have only recently entered the rap scene and attempted to challenge the idea that women are mere sexual objects by promoting their own views of power through sexuality. These artists frequently use rap to discuss themes of domestic violence, sexual relationships, and sexism in ways that portray women as strong and independent (Oware, 2009). *The New York Times*, for example, published an article in 2012 entitled “A Singular Influence” on the accomplishments of Nicki Minaj as a female rapper in the primarily male dominated industry of rap music, making a large impact despite societal pressures to quiet her voice. Proponents of this view claim speaking about their sexuality in a degrading way actually reinforces the idea they are independent and in control of their sexuality (Oware, 2009).

Conclusion

Music, since the start of recorded history, has been used to create and communicate messages. Rap music first arrived in America in the form of rhymes in the times of slavery when the Western practice of flyting mixed with African oral tradition still practiced by slaves in America (Johnson, 2008). Through the 20th and 21st centuries this music has changed into what society recognizes rap music. Differing schools of thought exist around the issue of rap music and whether it is harmful or beneficial to society. Numerous researchers have found and argue that this music promotes unhealthy ideologies, causing them to raise concern about the popularity among youth (Anderson, 2003). Others have argued compelling reasons to allow rap

music to help young adults better understand themselves and their culture. Despite the explicit lyrics, they see value in rap as a tool for education and as a way to promote the struggles faced by minority groups (Iwamoto et al, 2007). Rap music contains messages of violence and sexism, causing many critical theorists in particular to weigh in on the issue. Some critical theorists embrace rap music under the notion that it promotes sexual equality and freethinking (Oware, 2009). However, others view it as harmful and demeaning to women in particular (Leavy, 2015). Despite the debate, both sides can agree that rap music is powerful in society and there are benefits from understanding the positives and negatives of exposure.

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