



An Analysis of Violent and Sexual Content in Hip Hop Music Videos

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Abstract A content analysis of hip hop music videos was conducted to determine the prevalence of violent and sexual content. Four prominent and popular hip hop songs from the website Vevo's most viewed videos of all-time were used to represent hip hop videos as a whole. Violent content included showing guns, theft, drugs, fighting, police violence, and gang activity. Sexual content included showing sexual encounters such as kissing and implied sex, the image of body parts such as the cleavage, buttocks, and pelvic region of women, and revealing clothing. The prevalence of violent and sexual content is analyzed and discussed.

Index Terms— hip hop, violence, sex, content, music, video

INTRODUCTION

Hip hop music has often been criticized for its violent and sexual content, particularly in its lyrics. However, little research has focused on the violence and sex portrayed in the music videos themselves. The concept of sex has shaped the view of hip hop as a male-dominated industry, where women are frequently seen in skimpy and suggestive clothing (Arganbright & Lee, 2007). "Young women serve to bolster males' masculinity as decorative objects and not empowered in their own right; sexuality becomes women's primary value" (Stephens, n.d., n.p.). Artists such as the group Niggas with Attitude (N.W.A.) increased the prevalence of violence in hip hop videos by presenting images of police brutality, discrimination, drugs, and sex, making the actions seem commonplace and acceptable (Baker, 2013). The question remains, however, whether these violent and sexual images influence the attitudes of their viewers or make this type of behavior more acceptable.

Evolution of hip hop

Hip hop music can be regarded as the most influential media genre to shape the African American culture. Often celebrated and sometimes controversial, hip hop began as a medium for expression (Alridge & Stewart, 2005; Chappell, 2005). The earliest hip hop pioneers such as Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five articulated their ideas about and responses to poverty, drugs, police brutality, and other racial and class inequalities (Chappell, 2005). These hip hop moguls, also known as socially and politically conscious rappers, represented a voice that would be heard for decades to come (Alridge, 2005).

Hip hop music represents a very specific African American youth experience that took place early in the 1980s mirroring their problems and disparities about their present lives and mysterious futures (Ransby & Matthews 1995; Smitherman, 1977; Williams, 1998). During the mid-1980s, hip hop broke out of the confines of black culture to enter the mainstream of the American music industry. Hip hop's popularity and audience grew considerably throughout the nineties (Ogbar, 1999), and the genre itself has expanded over time to make room for many technological and lyrical innovations (Rebollo-Gil &

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Moras, 2012). The genre became highly politicized, resulting in what some considered “the biggest social agenda in music since the 1960s’ urban folk movement” (Chappell, 2005). During this time, groups like Eric B. and Rakim, and Public Enemy, and songs like “Fight the Power” came to prominence.

“In conjunction with political rap came the introduction of gangsta rap, which depicted a lifestyle of sex, drugs, and violence in inner-city America” (Chappell, 2005). While the distinction between hip hop and rap is not always clear or universally agreed upon, one could describe hip hop as a culture and rap as a subculture. Rap is one of the expressions of hip hop. Rap is something that is done; hip hop is something that is lived. Hip hop tends to express hope for escaping the ghetto and how black people need to work together. Rap, gangster rap in particular, tends to emphasize having cars, money, and women.

While most hip hop and rap music videos featured the objectification and super-sexualization of women, the late 1980s saw the emergence of a counterpoint. Lana Michelle Moorer a.k.a. MC Lyte was the first solo female rapper to release a full album, *Lyte as a Rock*, in 1988. She was one of the first female rappers to point out the sexism and misogyny that often runs rampant in hip hop, often taking the subject head on lyrically in her songs. She also helped open the door for such future artists as Queen Latifah and Missy Elliott. Together, these women provided an antithetical presentation of women as they had been popularly portrayed in hip hop music. They also became outspoken advocates for women’s empowerment.

The glorification of crime, violence, misogyny, or greed in hip hop music, especially gangsta rap, has become a determining factor for critics (Wahl, 1999). Groups like N.W.A (Niggas with Attitude) raised the level of obscenity, violence, and misogyny in their lyrics and the images they portray. The violent content is a confrontational response to privileged America, to bring awareness to the brutality and suffering that takes place in the African American community (Jones-Thomas et al., 2012). Although the message is the same as earlier forms of hip hop, gangsta rap took a different approach than political rap in projecting the artists’ drug abuse, misogyny, and self-hate of their own generation.

Hip hop and violence

Violence in the lyrics of hip hop music, along with the idea that these lyrics represent genuine life experiences of black men, attract more young African American men than any other media form (Wahl, 1999). Violence and violent messages in hip hop music videos may be a significant

contributor to violent and anti-social behaviors. Violence is prevalent in the African American community and the stimulus and factors that introduce African Americans to violence may not be the same factors that initiate violent behavior in whites (Tuma, Loeber, & Lochman, 2006). Social scientists have demonstrated that racial segregation, racism, social isolation, drug and alcohol consumption, and media violence all contribute to the likelihood of aggressive, violent behavior (Chipman, 1998).

Adolescents who had greater exposure to rap videos were three times more likely to hit a teacher, two-and-a-half times more likely to have been arrested, two times more likely to have multiple sexual partners, and over one-and-a-half times more likely to have acquired a sexually transmitted disease or to use drugs and alcohol within a 12-month period (Wingood et al., 2003). In 2000, homicide was the second leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds and the fourth leading cause of death in children up to 14 years old (Tuma, Loeber, & Lochman, 2006). African Americans, and particularly African American males, living in urban, low-income communities are exposed to violence more often than any other demographic (Aisenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008; Ceballo, Dahl, Aretakis, & Ramirez, 2001; Fowler et al., 2009; Garbarino, Hammond, Mercy & Yung, 2004; Stein et al., 2003; Weist, Acosta, & Youngstrom, 2001). Despite this heightened exposure to real-world violence, viewing violence in the media appears to have no direct causal relationship with youth violence. There seems to be a greater effect on younger children who cannot tell the difference between fantasy and reality. It also appears that when media violence is coupled with an attractive movie star and combined with sexuality, the impact appears to be stronger (Beresin & Schlozman, 2012).

Hip hop and sex

Hip hop is a mixture of creativity and expression (Chuck, 2001). Those familiar with hip hop culture know that it is characterized by diverse cultural expressions and language, both verbal and nonverbal, and unique clothing styles (e.g. Frith, 1996). Through flashy clothing and visual images, women in hip hop videos are portrayed with heightened and exaggerated sexuality (Brown, 2000; Roberts, 1996; Stephens & Few, 2007). Stephens and Phillips (2003) describe how African American preadolescents develop their understandings about sexuality through a screening of sexual scripts. Sexual scripts are charts used to categorize norms regarding appropriate sexual beliefs and behaviors (Stephens & Few, 2007). The scripts include: the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke,



Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama. Stephens and Few (2007) argue that the scripts are real and that they reveal ways in which African American preadolescents give sense and value to female sexuality. Stephens and Phillips (2007) claim that the scripts are influential in African American pre-adolescent decision-making regarding their own sexual activity and behaviors.

Music video producers rely heavily on special camera techniques and special effects when creating music videos. Music videos of every genre except gospel stress sexual and violent content. Music videos often rely on insinuation through clothing, suggestiveness, and light physical contact and symbolized violence rather than more explicit behaviors. Sexuality or sexual acts appeared in about 53% of music videos between 1985 and 1996 (Turner, 2005). Sherman and Dominick (1986) found the highest percentage (75%) of sexual activity in popular music videos. Women in hip hop videos are often portrayed as sex-crazed objects willing and ready to do anything for money or the attention of a man, while men are power figures who use violence to gain power (Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013). Femininity and masculinity are defined, in part, by images of each that are portrayed in the media. Because of these images, boys and girls are taught to act in certain ways if they want to be accepted in society (Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013).

The over-sexualized stereotype of African American women portrayed in the media shape the perception of African American women's and girls' sexuality. These images influence the way African American women view themselves and how others value and interact with them. African American girls are one of the fastest growing groups to contract HIV, and the rates for African American boys are exceeding those (Aronowitz, Rennells, & Todd, 2006). African American female adolescents who had greater exposure to hip hop videos with high levels of sexual content were twice as likely to have multiple sexual partners, 60% more likely to contract a sexually transmitted disease, and 60% more likely to use alcohol and drugs (Amber, 2005; Wingood et al., 2003). Across pre-adolescent and adolescent female populations, African Americans experience the highest rates of HIV/AIDS transmission, gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, multiple partners, unplanned pregnancy, non-voluntary intercourse, sexual abuse, and early sexual onset (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2000). In 2010, over 65% of African American high school students report having had sexual intercourse and 15% had sexual intercourse before their teen years. Nearly one-third (29%) had sex with more than four people, and 38% did not use a condom at their last reported intercourse (CDC, 2010). These sexually risky behaviors

increase the chances of contracting HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases (Martin et al., 2009; Weinstock, 2004).

This study explores the frequency of violent and sexual content in popular hip hop music videos. Understanding the prevalence of violent and sexual content in these videos may provide a useful snapshot of the role music videos currently play in perpetuating and promoting certain kinds of behavior.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Answers to the research questions were derived from analyzing the content of popular hip hop music videos. Focus groups were conducted to assess how others interpret the amount of sex and violence in hip hop music videos.

Sample – videos

Hip hop songs from Vevo website's most viewed videos of all-time were used to represent hip hop videos as a whole. See Figure. This website is an independent syndicated video hosting service that is used by other websites such as YouTube. Vevo shows the official videos, without parody, of popular artists. Videos were selected based on artists with the largest popularity and fan base defined here as video views. Two videos by male artists and two by female artists were randomly selected from the top viewed video list. Thus, four music videos were chosen each of which had 150 million views or more. The videos used for analysis were: Eminem's *Love the Way You Lie*, Nicki Minaj's *Anaconda*, Rihanna's *Pour It Up*, and Lil Wayne's *Drop the World*. Behavior in the videos was analyzed and not the lyrics of the songs.

Sample – focus groups

Two focus groups were assembled to view and provide feedback on the four selected hip hop music videos. Voluntary participants aged 19-27 were randomly chosen from among students at a historically black college/university in the southeastern U.S. Each focus group was composed of 10 males and 10 females. Questions focused on overall perception of the videos and their message. Participants were asked and responded orally and/or with a show of hands indicating agreement. The purpose of the focus groups and the questions was to gauge their overall reactions to and perceptions of the video content.

Procedures



A content analysis was conducted to analyze the frequency of violent and sexual content in hip hop music videos. Two coding scheme charts were used to record the number of occurrences of violent and sexual content in selected hip hop videos. The tallies reveal the frequency of violent and sexual content found. Different charts were used for violent content and sexual content because violence and sex differ in nature and it is important to distinguish between the two. To assess violent content, each time guns, theft, drugs, fighting, police violence, and gang activities were seen they were tallied. Gang activity can be described as the presence of bandanas, wearing the same color clothing, and hand signs. To assess sexual content, the number of sexual encounters such as kissing and implied sex, the image of body parts such as cleavage, buttocks, and the pelvic region of women, and revealing clothing in both men and women were tallied. Inter-rater reliability exceeded 95%.

RESULTS

Eminem's *Love the Way You Lie* video (copyright 2010 Interscope Records) has nearly 860 million views. It is by far the most viewed of the four videos analyzed here.

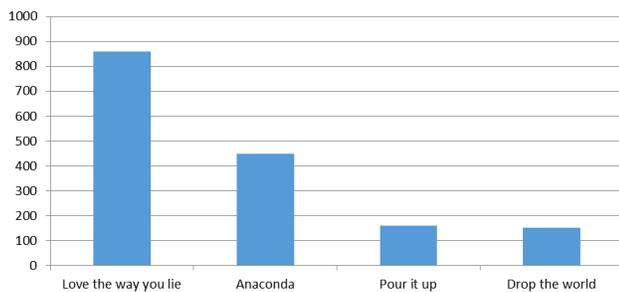


Figure. Number (in millions) of views of the four videos used in this study

This video has 78 instances of violent content most of which (count=68) is fighting between a mixed-sex couple (See Table). There are 119 instances of sexual content: revealing clothing (count=37), kissing (count=27), touching (count=21), cleavage (count=17), and implied sex (count=15). The *Love the Way You Lie* video is 266 seconds long. The run time was evenly split between violent and sexual content and non-violent and non-sexual content. This video has an average of less than one (0.74) instance of violent or sexual content per second.

Nicki Minaj's *Anaconda* video (copyright 2014 Young

Money, Cash Money Records, Inc.) has more than 449 million Vevo views as of May 1, 2015. The video has only 3 instances of violent content but 376 instances of sexual content (See Table). This video has more instances of sexual content than any of the other four videos. Most of the sexual content prominently displays the buttocks (count=163) followed by revealing clothing that exposes skin (count=60), cleavage (count=53), touching (count=48) and implied sex (count=34). The *Anaconda* video is 289 seconds long. Eighty-nine percent of that time (256 seconds) shows some kind of violent or sexual content, 11% (33 seconds) of the run time does not contain violent or sexual content. This video has an average of more than one (1.30) instance of sexual content per second.

Rihanna's *Pour It Up* video (copyright 2013 Island Def Jam/Roc Nation) has more than 159 million views. This video is listed as "explicit." The video has only 5 instances of violent content (drugs) in the form of smoking marijuana (See Table). There were 351 instances of sexual content in the form of revealing clothing (count=95), focus on the buttocks (count=93), cleavage (count=79), pelvic area (count=39), and touching (count=34). The *Pour It Up* video is 196 seconds long. Of that, 176 seconds—90% of the run time—displays some type of violent or sexual content and 20 seconds—10% of the run time—does not contain violent or sexual content. This video has an average of more than one (1.79) instance of sexual content per second.

Lil Wayne's *Drop the World* video (copyright 2010 Cash Money Records, Inc.) has more than 153 million views. This video has 214 instances of violent content, nearly two-and-a-half times more than the other three videos combined (See Table). Group fighting accounted for more than half (count=113) of the violent content. This video contains no sexual content. The *Drop the World* video is 271 seconds long. Of that, violent content fills 155 seconds or 57% of the run time, and 116 seconds or 43% of the run time does not contain violent content. This video has an average of less than one (0.89) instance of violent content per second.

No assumption is made here that only African Americans watch these hip hop videos or that adolescents are the primary audience. However, except for Eminem's *Love the Way You Lie*, the videos feature African American artists and, almost exclusively, African American performers. Eminem is a white male. Further, no assumption is made here that each view of each video represents a unique individual. That is, many people view these videos multiple times. Regardless, it is noteworthy that the number of views (more than 1.621 billion) currently garnered by these four hip hop music videos collectively is



36 times the current (as of July 1, 2013) African American population (45 million) in the United States (“African Americans by the Numbers,” n.d.).

Rihanna (*Pour It Up*) – as containing a high frequency of sexual content. Eminem’s *Love the Way You Lie* contained both violent and sexual content, and Lil Wayne’s *Drop the World* had various forms of violent content.

Table. Violent and Sexual Content of Videos

Violent Content

Video	Guns	Theft	Fighting	Group fighting	Drugs	Hand Signs	Group theft	Bandanas	Same Color Clothing	TOTAL
<i>Love the way you lie</i>	0	5	68	0	5	0	0	0	0	78
<i>Anaconda</i>	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	3
<i>Pour it up</i>	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	5
<i>Drop the world</i>	0	1	14	113	8	8	1	1	68	214
Totals	0	1	14	113	16	8	1	1	68	222

Sexual Content

Video	Cleavage	Buttocks	Revealing Clothes/			Kissing	Implied Sex	Touching	TOTAL
			Showing Skin	Pelvic area					
<i>Love the way you lie</i>	17	0	37	2	27	15	21	119	
<i>Anaconda</i>	53	163	60	12	6	34	48	376	
<i>Pour it up</i>	79	93	95	39	1	10	34	351	
<i>Drop the world</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Totals	132	256	155	51	7	44	82	727	

Nicki Minaj’s *Anaconda* video included bananas as sexual innuendo, Minaj licking coconut milk, and women wearing scanty bikinis as workout attire. Female focus group members stated that this painted an unrealistic image of what defines sexy. Male participants viewed the sexual content as tongue-in-cheek comic relief whereby Minaj was merely expressing her personality and humor. The final minute of the video shows Minaj switching from jungle scenery to an empty room where she is giving a lap dance. Both male and female focus group members stated that this scene is completely unnecessary and that it unquestionably promotes sex.

For Rihanna’s *Pour It Up* video, male and female focus group participants stated that they felt like images such as pelvic thrusting, awkward caressing, and pole-dancing were both inappropriate and overly sexual. Participants expressed their belief that Rihanna utilized strippers and money to infer that sex automatically equates to financial prosperity promoting the old cliché, “sex sells.”

Participants expressed their view that Eminem’s *Love the Way You Lie* video rode a fine line between telling a story and promoting domestic violence and arson. Participants viewed Lil Wayne’s *Drop the World* video as extremely violent because it displayed rioting, arson, looting, and gun violence.

Overall, focus group participants described the videos by the female artists – Nicki Minaj (*Anaconda*) and

DISCUSSION

The artists who created the videos studied here are arguably “trend-setters.” The fact that the videos examined here have more than 1.5 billion views collectively suggests that they likely fulfill a trend-setting function. These videos include violent and sexual content. Nicki Minaj’s *Anaconda* and Rihanna’s *Pour It Up* were filled with explicit and erotic footage. Eminem’s *Love the Way You Lie* video displayed both passionate and enraged scenes. Lil Wayne’s *Drop the World* video showed multiple violent scenes that included riots, weapons, and fire. All videos were described as not suitable for adolescents. At the very least, these images serve to desensitize viewers to the kinds of behavior depicted. Desensitization leads to a perception of the behavior as being “normal.” The next step in its evolutionary impact is that it promotes the behavior as acceptable and desirable.

Both focus groups stated their collective belief that a rating system would be a reasonable solution to address the issue of under-aged children viewing inappropriate videos. A rating system has already been adopted for movies and television. The Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA) rates movies and the TV Parent Guidelines rates television shows and the content suitability for certain audiences. The MPAA includes five levels of movie rating: G- General Audience, PG- Parental Guidance, PG-13-



Parental Strongly Cautioned, R-Restricted, and NC-17 No one 17 and under admitted. The TV Parent Guidelines rating system includes: TV-G-general audience, TV-PG-Parental guidance suggested, TV-14 Parents Strongly Cautioned, and TV-MA- Mature Audience Only. Vevo could and should adopt a similar rating system so parents can know what is or is not appropriate for their children.

Conclusion

Violent and sexual content send a message. That same content viewed by millions of people sends millions of messages that this behavior is normal and even attractive and desirable. This has the potential to shape attitudes about violence and sex. These attitudes have the potential to influence behavior. Musical artists will continue to produce what is popular and lucrative. Their role and responsibility is not to act a social conscience. It falls on the music industry to protect and warn young eyes and ears that content may be unsuitable and why. Malcolm X once said: “the media’s the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and the guilty innocent” (as cited in King, 2010, p.199).

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