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**Understanding the Basic Elements of Hip-Hop Music**

Urban youth in America interpret Hip-Hop lyrics in many ways. The term “urban” in this

study means inner city such as New York City for example. Hip-Hop can also stand for rap.

There are many artists who fit this mold, but particularly I will be looking into the minds of Hip-

Hop legends such as Jay-Z, and Drake. There are many other artists who deserve to be talked

about but to keep my focus narrowed I will be focusing on the previously stated artists. I mainly

will be focusing on what these individual emcees have to say and how their material is

interpreted by the audience that hears them. The audience will be the students in Longwood

University and the surrounding Prince Edward County community. These two artists that have

been chosen to be deciphered have a few things in common. They both have earned huge

commercial success, they all hail from major cities in the United States such as New York City,

Toronto.

In this study “commercial success” can be justified by being household names in

America. Having had at least one number one album on the Hip-Hop charts according

to the Billboards, certified platinum albums and general relevancy, make these artists perfect for

studying. Jay-Z has to date 11 different platinum albums, he co-owns various entities such as the

New Jersey Nets basketball franchise, the 40/40 club, the clothing line *Rocawear,* former CEO

of *Def Jam Recordings* and *Rocafella Records* and is currently the sole founder of the label

*RocNation*. So in Jay-Z’s regard he is perfect for looking into. Drake’s case is different from Jay-

Z being that he is much younger however; he still has one certified platinum album “Thank Me

Later”. And in Jay-Z’s song titled “A Star is Born” on his 11th studio album titled “Blueprint 3”

he referenced Drake as being the next emcee to carry the torch for Hip-Hop music, “Drake's up

next, see what he do with it”. This means the world must sit back and watch and see what Drake

the artist has in store for the Hip-Hop community. These two artists deserve recognition and are

worthy of being talked about in my research.

Their music must be understood on the basis that what they shelve out. It will than be

understood differently by the youth that hears their music. When their music is heard many

different constructs are drawn about the way that the youth who hear them see the world.

Sometimes it is a negative effect and sometimes it is a positive effect. Such artists such as Drake

who in his verse on “Aston-Martin-Music” wrote “This aint the life that I’m used to, re-

introduced to people I been introduced to’. This is a simple statement but if you look at it and

break it down, you can see that it really has many meanings. First of all it has the most important

factor in that it rhymes. Second one must already know who Drake the recording artist is and

knowing that he is rich and Famous. However it wasn’t always like that for him. He became rich

and famous. So that statement really means that in his life he’s not used to the attention that he is

getting now from people who in the past previously merely met him. Now that he has made a

name for himself people pay attention to what he has to say and he is suddenly relevant all over

again. He isn’t used to be treating this way. The way he said it also indicates how shallow the

world really is. When people listen to music they must not passively listen. They must try to

understand exactly what is being said.

In Jay-Z’s case, the intro song off his first compilation album titled “The Dynasty Roc La

Familia” Jay-Z wrote “Never read the Qu'ran or Islamic scriptures Only psalms I read was on the

arms of my niggaz”. This verse is very detrimental to the minds of the youth that would hear it.

This verse glorifies the fact that not reading the Qu’ran or Islamic scriptures is okay. It is not

okay for a young man to look on the arm of another person where a scripture would be

permanently imprinted, and that be justification enough to not look further into what the verse

really means by not reading the original document it came from such as the Bible or the Quran.

Also these lyrics glorify the art of tattooing and the word “niggaz”. These two topics are very

controversial in society. So there always is a lesson that can be learned from what these emcees

are really saying in their music. Even at times I struggle with what rappers have to say and I’m

an avid Hip-Hop fan myself.

I feel that this communication phenomenon needs to be studied because Hip-Hop music

has been extremely prevalent since the late 1970's, and many people take a natural liking towards

the music. “The term ‘Hip-Hop’ refers to 4 key stylistic elements rapping, DeeJaying, sampling

and beat boxing, which originated in the South Bronx, of New York City during the late 1970’s.”

(Rose 1994)  The term rap means a distinct form of spoken word poetry that is performed to a

beat. The term “urban” in this study means inner city such those as the cities named above. Also

it has been proven that Hip-Hop artists have changed the way that people, especially the younger

youth that tend to look up to these artists, and try to live their lives based on what they see. I will

dig deeper into that statement as you continue to read.

The purpose of this study will be to understand how urban youth in America interpret the

lyrics that they hear in Hip-Hop music and how this potentially changes their views on the life

that they live. To narrow down my focus I will limit my research to the student’s at Longwood

University and the youth in the Prince Edward County of Virginia simply this is where I live.

**Theoretical Grounding**

In looking at the interpretation of Hip-Hop music and the possible effects that is has on the listener, it seems appropriate to ground this research effort in the theories of Symbolic Interactionism and the Narrative Paradigm. These theories will help to guide my work about the way that the youth that interpret interpret the lyrics of Jay-Z and Drake, and how these lyrics influence the life that they live.

**Symbolic Interaction**

The theory of *Symbolic Interaction* suggests that people are motivated to act based on the

meanings they assign to people, things, and events. Further, meaning is created in the language

that people use both with others and in private thought. Language allows people to develop a

sense of self and to interact with others in community. (Griffin 2008) This is a great theory to

base my studies off of because people draw their own conclusions from the certain music that

they hear. If a well respected rapper or hip hop artist is able to tell a story a certain way, and in

doing so has the ability to change the way people think is very powerful. Often times rappers use

their voice, language, and colloquialisms to tell their stories. It is then up to the listener to

determine if whether or not the story applies to them.

**Narrative Paradigm**

The *Narrative Paradigm* theory argues that humans are storytelling animals. Narrative logic, or

the logic of good reasons, suggests that people judge the credibility of speakers by whether their

stories hang together clearly The Narrative Paradigm allows for a democratic judgment of

speakers because no one has to be trained in oratory and persuasion to make judgments based on

coherence and fidelity. (Infante 2003) This is especially relevant to my topic of analyzing how

people interpret hip hop lyrics and how it makes them feel, and what comes to mind when they

hear their favorite songs. Listeners will only believe what a rapper or hip hop artist is talking

about if the emcee actually has lived through what they are saying in their music. The worst

thing an emcee can do is tell tales in their music about things that they have never done, nor have

what they have never witnessed before. Credibility is the one of the most important things an

emcee can live by.

**Generalized Other**

The *Generalized Other* theory is the “notion that a person has of the common expectations that

others have about actions and thoughts within a particular society.” (Ritzer 2008) This is great

for my study because it makes a case saying that people only gain a true sense of self by seeing

themselves from another person’s perspective. When this is achieved it is then easier to see their

self in the light that they deem acceptable because they see what other people see. In the case of

Hip-Hop music, the reason people conform to what they hear is because they believe it’s right

and their feeding into the mind of the emcee who has the ability to change the way a person

views the world based solely on the material in which they rap about.

**Literature Review**

**What rappers actually have to say?**

Many rappers have a stigmatism about them being that all they rap about is drugs, sex,

money and violence. The reason for this is because of the most famous groups of all-time if you

look back in history all started out rapping about those above topics. Also the rap group that

set the world on fire and put the West Coast and California rap scene on the map was NWA

(Niggas With Attitude). Franklin Krohn and Frances Suazo wrote about how these lyrics

changed the society that many urban kids in America viewed life, especially the black urban

youth on the West Coast. This was especially important because “at the time when NWA

garnered the most publicity was the same time in Los Angeles, California when Rodney King, a

black man who was beaten by the police who were predominantly white men and many believed

it was an act of racism. Due to the outbreak of the Rodney King scandal, it led to the 1992 Watts

riots. NWA used some of the most controversial lyrics the public had ever seen, and what

separated them was what they had to say, and it was actually played over regional, local, and

national radio stations throughout the country.” (Franklin, Krohn, Suazo 1995) This was unheard

of for a rap group up to that time. They came out with a song that went public, it was very

controversial, and very controversially titled “Fuck Da Police”. The opening line of the song

states “Fuck the Police I’m coming straight from the underground, a young nigga got it bad

because I’m brown, and not the other color so police think they have the right to kill a minority”.

It was unheard of before fir that type of music to be getting national coverage. Due to this music,

it certainly changed the way young black males in America viewed the police department in Los

Angeles. And not just Los Angeles but police departments across the country were now being

put under the microscope when it came to the treatment of the minority youth. That is one of the

biggest components of my paper on how the audience deals with what they hear and the

controversial topics of Hip-Hop change the society that we live in.

Eminem also is an artist that has received major criticism about his lyrics, and impact on

society. Lindsey Calhoun wrote about how “his appearance in the music industry has a major

influence in the Hip-Hop community that is clearly predominantly black and Latino. Not

centered so much on his lyrics as to the fact that just his impact on the game is so influential.”

(Calhoun 2005) The game in this context is Hip-Hop. It’s amazing how he is able to tap into the

fan base of minorities the way that he does. It is truly remarkable. His album that Calhoun

discussed “Slim Shady LP” is his most commercially successful album to date. And it came out

in the year 2000. However present day Eminem is as strong as ever 10 years later. He was voted

the hottest emcee of the decade and the year in 2010 by televised panels on BET and MTV2.

Somehow he manages to stay relevant in the minds of the audience that he attracts, much more

now than ever. So his impact if we look at it from a lyrical standpoint has to be huge because

people continuously listen to what he has to say.

Another important aspect to look at is how Hip-Hop lyrics can make a person completely

live their lives through what they see on television, and hear on the radio. If their favorite artists

are portrayed in a certain light, they then think that is acceptable to them. Hip-Hop artists are no

longer just artists. They are now role models with many people looking up to them. Greg

Dimitriadis conducted a study on how middle school boys from the Midwest portrayed their

favorite Hip-Hop artists “*8Ball and MJG*”. What he found out was that “they being the middle

school boys portrayed themselves in what they heard in the music.” (Dimitriadis 2001) It was

easy for them to understand the lyrics by applying the generalized other theory without even

knowing they were doing so. The middle school boys looked at their own life and compared it to

what they heard from the recordings of *8ball and MJG* and then drew their own conclusions into

what they deemed as appropriate and hip.Now this can be a double edged sword depending on

what 8Ball and MJG represent. If they were negatively affecting them then everyone would have

a problem with them and then Hip-Hop would all of a sudden be bad for the urban youth. At the

same time if 8Ball and MJG were positive role models than Hip-Hop would be cast in a positive

light. The lyrics that they listen to play a major role in determining whether they are positive to

the youth who follow them or negative. That’s the power that lyrics can hold and that’s why it is

important we decipher just what it is that these emcees are really saying. The lyrics that we hear

are sometimes so deep that it is hard for people who are not Hip-Hop fans to understand.

A rapper can tell a story perfectly like the average person who would have a conversation

however they are able to get the point across by being able to rhyme the word. The great artists

such as those listed above can do this with sheer mastery.

**Lifestyle Changes?**

Scott Crosley gives some insight into what he believes to be the reason people living in

tough conditions (predominantly black and Latino races) would make references such as the crib,

the bricks, and the projects. Crosley breaks down these meanings behind hip-hop legend

Scarface in his song titled “My Block” on his seventh studio album titled “The Fix”. Crosley was

quoted as saying ‘Scarface uses the metaphor of the block to describe impoverished urban

African-American and Latino neighborhoods”. This is important information for my thesis

because the reader must know and understand why the rappers’ they listen to, rap the way they

do. Where rappers come from plays a big part in the type of music they will produce.

In the short documentary film by Brian Hurt about the hip hop life and everything that

was entailed about it. He found that men were forced to live a life that was much rougher than it

had to be because hip hop makes males especially in the urban community, tougher than

necessary. For some reason, whether it be through the lyrics that they hear or what they see on

television, males seek to become the alpha male. It’s all about power. And women at times can

be mistreated mentally and deemed as sexual objects for mans pleasure. This was all noticed and

observed during spring weekend down at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 2003. This information

sums up the fact that listening to them music truly changes a person’s lifestyle. If Jay-Z and

Drake were to rap about being the toughest individual they possibly could be than, that’s what

would be acceptable and due to the Generalized Other theory it would be okay and accepted. The

film was real life as it actually went to Florida and observed the behaviors of the individuals

around.

All the research that was gathered helps to understand the effects that Hip-Hop music has

on the listener but very broadly in terms of locality. My research that I will conduct will be based

solely in the NYC metropolitan area with a focus on finding exactly how the urban youth

interprets the music form Jay-Z, and Drake.

**Methodology**

I have decided to perform qualitative research over quantitative because I will be

analyzing the listener. I’m not coming up with any hypothesis’s simply seeing how the listener

feels about what they hear and how they carry out their lives based on what they’ve heard from

artists such as Jay-Z and Drake.

The question becomes if these artists named above say certain material in the songs, do

the youth who listen to them carry out what they hear? I believe they do, and do so a very high

rate, whether it be negatively or positively. The most important thing that I want to find out also

is if when the youth hear music do they really listen or merely hear it passively?

1. RQ1: How the youth between the ages of 14 to 21 in urban cities interpret the lyrical

content in the music that Drake, and Jay-Z make.

1. RQ2: If when the youth hear music do they really listen or merely hear it passively?

I chose these RQ/H’s because the information that I will gain about the audiences that

listen to the above material will be beneficial because the audiences is the main part of my paper.

The above artists that I mentioned have all gained major commercial success. I will focus my

communication analysis on the affects of the music that Drake, and Jay-Z make, and how youth

between the ages of 14 to 21 who live in New York City interpret what they hear by those artists.

I would be able to do this audience because I will be researching the youth in NYC. It’s also easy

for me because I live in the greater New York area so I would be able information from New

York City. When I listen to the music from the above mentioned artists I will honestly pay

attention, and listen to just what it is that they are saying, and how they interpret what they hear.

Such as Drakes debut album “Thank You Later”, and numerous albums from Jay-Z, will be

analyzed.

**Conclusion**

My analysis will prove beneficial because I feel it is important to understand that the

music of Hip-Hop is relevant to the urban youth based on the lyrics that they hear. The youth

should pay special attention to the lyrics that they hear because there’s always an underlying

meaning behind everything that goes on with Hip-Hop music.

The effect that Hip-Hop lyrics has on the urban youth is a topic that has been looked into

extensively already. However Hip-Hop is a revolving door with new faces coming and going. So

what other people have researched and broken down, is very different to the artists that I will be

breaking down myself so that the reader can understand just what it is he/she is listening to. All

of this I believe to be worthy material to be analyzed.

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