



Black Youth and Politics Project

Hip Hop and Politics



Tanji Gilliam, University of Chicago

A review of the major theoretical arguments and important empirical findings relating to the influence of hip hop on the development of youth politics, particularly among U.S. African American communities.

Hip Hop and the Media

Introduction

Almost every text on hip hop culture begins with a narrative of origin. These histories typically announce that hip hop started in the late 1970s in the South Bronx, New York. Commercial recording information generally follows, with the 1979 single “Rappers Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang proclaimed as the first hip hop release.¹ Finally, some statement of impact or importance commences the author’s study.

This paper seeks to identify the political ideas in hip hop broadly and in rap music in particular. The aforementioned “biographical” information for hip hop is relevant if only for its sheer irrelevance to hip hop’s contemporary existence. First, it is important to note that 2004 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of commercial hip hop. Therefore it is necessary to contextualize hip hop’s various shifts and transmutations to the present day. Instrumental in this effort is an understanding that hip hop is no longer *exclusively* a culture of “the streets.” Therefore any serious study of the impact of today’s hip hop culture must take into account its presence as a national, mass-mediated and multimediated entity.

¹ Although Nelson George identifies “King Tim III (The Personality Jock)” by The Fatback Band as the first rap record. George, Nelson. 2001. *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, & Bohos: Notes on A Post-Soul Black Culture*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 16.

Hip hop's influence can be measured within the following five major outlets: television, film, radio, magazines, and the Internet.² While much of the research on hip hop focuses on rap music and, increasingly, music video and therefore limits its scope to analyses of rap recordings and television programming, each of these five forms of media are in fact central. Hip hop magazines such as *The Source*, *Vibe*, and *XXL* are equally important to understanding how the culture affects young audiences as are television programs such as BET's *Rap City* and *Uncut* or MTV's *Total Request Live*. In addition, youth tune into hip hop on a daily basis in a variety of ways, not just by watching television. How much radio and what specific radio programs do youth listen to? This is an important question given the predominance of "urban" radio formats in major cities and surrounding suburbs across the nation. And last, given that we know today's generation is increasingly attracted to the Internet, what specific Web sites are youth browsing? At what frequency are hip hop Web sites such as Ohhla.com or Okayplayer.com being surfed?

Once we begin to understand what black youth are "tuning into," we can better evaluate why these same youth are attracted to the specific media. These questions bear

² By attending to these five media we will also address a sample of hip hop advertising that includes print ads, commercials, radio spots, Internet pop-up ads, etc. While this leaves out "street" advertisements such as bus banners (which have recently been an important locus of attention with the Akademicks clothing line "Read Books, Get Brain" campaign) and billboards (which alcohol companies, as is evidenced by Hennessy's Rakim advertisements, have traditionally used to target inner city neighborhoods with hip hop-themed advertisements), many of these same advertisements are reproduced in print ads within hip hop publications (as has been the case with the Akademicks and Hennessy ads in the December 2004 issue of *Vibe*). *Vibe* (December 2004), 63, 35.

an important relationship to how and why black youth in particular form their political attitudes and exercise their political behaviors.

This paper is divided between analyses of critical theoretical and empirical studies of hip hop culture and black youth politics. The theoretical section examines principally academic works, written chiefly by humanities scholars, that have developed inside of an emerging “hip hop studies” field, a subfield of black contemporary studies. Some more popular works by “hip hop journalists” also are referenced. The empirical literature stems principally from media studies written by communications scholars, political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists.

Major Theoretical Arguments in Hip Hop Studies

Research on hip hop and politics typically centers around three themes: political or “message rap” music, associations between hip hop and black (particularly male) criminality and violence, and the impact of rap music and music videos on the sexual norms and behaviors of black youth. Sociolinguist and director of Stanford University’s Hiphop Archive, Marcyliena Morgan, argues that “urban youth recognize that their voices are routinely marginalized and their language ideology assumes that agency and

power reside in the form of language use itself.”³ In rap music, as well as in music videos, chat rooms, letters to the editor, and radio “check ins,” black youth sound off on political themes as diverse as black nationalism, nihilism, and rape.

Originally authored by rap groups such as Public Enemy, Poor Righteous Teachers, and N.W.A., political rap is traditionally said to encompass three subthemes: cultural nationalist rap, Islamic nationalist rap, and gangsta rap.⁴ Today, political rap has resurged among artists such as Mos Def, Nas, Dead Prez, and Common and among less mainstream rappers such as Ms. Dynamite, Immortal Technique, and Medusa. In addition, “neo-soul” artists with transaffiliations in hip hop culture such as Erykah Badu and Jill Scott also assume the responsibility of recycling political messages back onto hip hop audiences.

Cultural nationalist rappers engage themes of pan-Africanism and black militancy that are direct holdovers from 1960s political and cultural arts movements, 1970s Blaxploitation and independent film, and specific African American icons such as Malcolm X and to a lesser, but still significant, extent Martin Luther King, Jr. Islamic nationalist rappers include Orthodox Muslims, members of the Nation of Islam, and

³ Morgan, Marcyliena. 2002. *Language, Discourse and Power in African American Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 113.

⁴ See Allen, Ernest Jr. 1996. Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap. In *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, edited by William Eric Perkins, Jr. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 159–191.

individuals identifying with The Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths.⁵ And although “gangsta rappers” is a dated term within the hip hop industry as of late, one might still connect the street crime narratives and sharp critiques of the criminal justice system that Ice T and Boogie Down Productions initiated to more contemporary rappers such as Scarface or The Game.

Gangsta rap also represents part of a larger focus on hip hop and politics that is popular within the media and among scholarly research. Most likely, the prominence of gangsta rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s prompted the association between hip hop and violence that contemporary social scientists theorize. (See section entitled “Important Empirical Research in Hip Hop Studies.”) Hip hop is often represented as encouraging violence among young African Americans, particularly males.⁶ Specific incidents of violence, such as the 1989 Central Park rape case in New York, are said to be motivated by particular rap lyrics. As scholar Houston A. Baker, Jr., notes in his book *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy*, the New York press conflated the black male teenage suspects’ enjoyment of the rap song “Wild Thing” by Tone Loc with the term “wilding,”

⁵ While Orthodox Muslims have been less prominent within hip hop, our post-9/11 media culture has made it a point to identify rappers both in the U.S. and overseas who identify as such. See The Associated Press, “Muslim Rappers Combine Beliefs With Hip Hop.” Msnbc.com, accessed November 24, 2004; and Marian Liu, “Hip-Hop’s Islamic Influence: Music Reflects Faith, But There’s A Struggle to Beat A Bad Rap.” *The Mercury News*, reprinted on Daveyd.com.

⁶ Baker, Houston A. Jr. 1993. *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press; “C. Deloris Tucker Crusades Against Gangsta Lyrics, Giving Record Companies A Bad Rap.” *People Weekly* December 25, 1995, 71–73; “C. Deloris Tucker Wants Time Warner to Pull the Plug on Some of Its Best Selling Rap Artists.” *People Weekly* June 26, 1995, 105–108; Cole, Johnnetta Betsch, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. 2003. *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African American Communities*. New York: One World.

which came to represent their alleged behavior in the news media.⁷ Likewise hip hop, more generally, carries a stigma of violence that socializes American society to vilify young black males.⁸ “The folklore of black popular culture,” Michael Eric Dyson notes, “glori[fies] guns, gangs, and the ghetto.”⁹ In turn, the American public projects the images that rappers (and characters from black “ghetto action” films) adopt back onto black urban adolescents and young adults.¹⁰

Additional analyses of violence in rap music and music videos involve discussions of sexual violence and cultures of patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny in hip hop. Referring specifically to gangsta rap, scholars Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall argue that the “resentment, hostility, and disdain that many young black men feel toward the police and ‘the System’ have been directed at black females.”¹¹ Most of the evidence that Cole and Guy-Sheftall cite comes from an analysis of lyrics such as 2 Live Crew’s “Me So Horny,” Buju Banton’s “Boom Bye Bye,” and Eazy E’s “One Less Bitch,” although they also establish “evidence” using events such as rapper Dr. Dre’s 1991 assault of media personality Dee Barnes, deceased rapper Tupac Shakur’s 1993 “alleged”

⁷ Baker, Houston A. Jr. 1993. *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 36–51.

⁸ Chuck D with Yusuf Jah. 1997. *Fight The Power: Rap, Race and Reality*; George, Nelson. 1998. *Hip Hop America*. New York: Viking; hooks, bell. 2004. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge: New York and London.

⁹ Dyson, Michael Eric. 2001. *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching For Tupac Shakur*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 142.

¹⁰ “Ghetto action film” is S. Craig Watkins’ term for the genre that includes works such as *Menace II Society*, *Boyz N the Hood*, and *Clockers*. See Watkins, S. Craig. 1998. The Ghetto-centric Imagination. In *Representin’: Hip Hop and the Production of Black Cinema*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 212–213.

¹¹ Cole, Johnnetta Betsch, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. 2003. *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African American Communities*. New York: One World, 186.

sexual assault, and R&B singer R. Kelley's currently pending child pornography charges.¹²

For empirical evidence on this type of violence, Cole and Guy-Sheftall cite Bruce Wade and Cynthia Thomas Gunnar's study on the effects of gangsta rap on college students' sexual attitudes.¹³ In this study they found that black male college students in particular accept rap's constructions of gender as "accurate." Furthermore, Wade and Gunnar found that the more "favorable" black men felt toward rap, the more likely they were to have "rape-prone" attitudes. The specific manifestations of sexual violence that have been identified in hip hop culture include objectification and derogatory labeling of women, black hypermasculinity, rampant homophobia, and support of aggressive and criminal sexual behaviors such as trains or gang rape. "Hip hop journalist" Kevin Powell asserts that Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*, also a gangsta rap recording, became the hip hop industry's "blueprint" for rap music. Powell identifies "senseless gunplay and violence, cursing ad nausea, the liberal use of self-hating terms like *nigga* and *bitch*, an insatiable appetite for marijuana, liquor, and sex, and an incredible disrespect and disregard for black women" among *The Chronic*'s dominant themes.¹⁴ The sexual attitudes and behaviors offered on *The Chronic* are especially interesting in light of the public

¹² This list of males includes an R&B singer and a reggae artist (Buju Banton) and artists who are not often categorized as "gangsta rappers" (2 Live Crew). However, Cole and Sheftall still decided to focus their critiques principally on that genre.

¹³ Wade, Bruce, and Cynthia Thomas-Gunner. 1993. Explicit Rap Music Lyrics and Attitudes Toward Rape: The Perceived Effects on African American College Student's Attitudes. *Challenge: A Journal on African American Men*, 58.

¹⁴ Powell, Kevin. 2003. *Who's Gonna Take the Weight?: Manhood, Race and Power in America*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 140.

admonishment Dr. Dre often receives from black feminists such as Lisa Jones and Cole and Sheftall for his physical abuse of black female television host Dee Barnes.¹⁵

Ultimately, *The Chronic* and Dr. Dre himself are most interesting because together they represent the intense contradictions of hip hop culture. While the sexual politics of *The Chronic* are in fact misogynist, and the album certainly contains expressions of black-on-black homicide and other components of group nihilism, it is still a “political” album because of its biting social commentary and critique of law enforcement (one song in particular, “The Day the Niggaz Took Over,” champions the retribution enacted during the Los Angeles riots).

Most scholars on political rap, including Tricia Rose, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Mark Anthony Neal, argue that rap music is a form of “infrapolitics” where “oppositional transcripts, or the ‘unofficial truths,’ are developed, refined and rehearsed.”¹⁶ James Scott defines the “hidden transcript” as “off-stage” dialogue that exists outside of the scope of critique from “powerholders.”¹⁷ Although rap music obviously exists in a public forum, scholars celebrate the fact that most political rap is carefully coded so that its critiques are never recognized by the hegemonic forces it resists. As an example of this, Rose cites Queen Latifah and Monie Love’s “Ladies First,” a “statement for black female unity,

¹⁵ See Jones, Lisa. 1994. *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race Sex and Hair*. New York: Anchor Books, 216; and Cole and Sheftall, 197.

¹⁶ Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 99. See also Kelly, Robin D. G. 1996. Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: ‘Gangsta Rap’ and Postindustrial Los Angeles. *Race Rebels: Culture Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: The Free Press, , 1944; and Neal, Mark Anthony. 1999. Postindustrial Soul. *What The Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 134–135. The term “infrapolitics” originated in James Scott’s work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

independence and power.”¹⁸ Taking into account both the lyrics and the video for this single, Rose suggests that “Ladies First” historicizes the significance of black female activists such as Sojourner Truth, Winnie Mandela, and Angela Davis. In this way, “Ladies First” [rewrites] the contributions of black women in the history of black struggles “without referring to or attacking black men.” Similarly, Mark Anthony Neal cites songs such as Arrested Development’s “Tennessee,” which “counter[s] the impact of urbanization on the black community” while seemingly only celebrating black rural life.¹⁹

Examples of cultural, criminal, and sexual politics are further explored in empirical research on hip hop music and culture. Unfortunately, these two literatures are rarely in dialogue with one another. However, the investigations of black political themes in both are very similar.

Important Empirical Research in Hip Hop Studies

Empirical research on youth politics and hip hop culture is typically divided into studies on three relationships: media and sex/sexuality, media and racial attitudes, and media and substance abuse/violence.

Sex and Sexuality and Media Studies

17 Scott, 4.

18 Rose, 164.

19 Neal, 155.

Important findings in the area of youth and media studies at large reveal the following information. First, the average youth watches approximately three hours of television daily.²⁰ Second, a significant amount of TV watching on the part of youth and adolescents is music video programming.²¹ In a study that recorded videos on MTV, VHI, CMT (Country Music Television), and BET, Robert H. Durant and colleagues reported that these four networks rotate between four hundred and seven hundred videos daily.²² Third, it has been reported that more than 70% of rap music sales are to white audiences.²³

The Motivational Educational Entertainment Corporation (MEE) conducted a study specifically geared toward young urban African Americans in the “hip hop generation.” MEE defined the hip hop generation as including, although not necessarily limited to, young, urban, at-risk youth. Their study sought to engage these youth in a way that privileged “their voice” about issues of sex and sexuality. MEE’s research was motivated in large part by the influence the media has on young people both with respect to the failure of abstinence education programs to appeal to the interests of youth and with the

²⁰ “Study Links TV to Teen Sexual Activity.” *CNN*, 07 September 2004, available at <http://www.cnn.com>.

²¹ Barongan and Hall’s subjects reported fourteen and sixteen hours a week of music video watching at different points in their study. See Barongan, Christy, and Gordon C. Nagayama Hall. 1995. The Influence of Misogynous Rap Music on Sexual Aggression Against Women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 19:195–207. And Greeson and Williams reported that 75% of their subjects reported watching music videos at least twice weekly. See Greeson, Larry, and Rose Ann Williams. Social Implications of Music Videos for Youth: An Analysis of the Content and Effects of MTV. *Youth and Society* 18(2):177–189. The Greeson and Williams study enabled video-watching focus groups with thirty-four tenth graders and thirty seventh graders ages 13 to 16, males and females of middle-income, working-class backgrounds.

²² Durant, Robert H., Ellen S. Rome, Michael Rich, Elizabeth Allred, Jean Evans, and Elizabeth R. Woods. 1997. Tobacco and Alcohol Use Behaviors Portrayed in Music Videos: A Content Analysis. *American Journal of Public Health* 87(7):1131–1135.

²³ Thompson, Mischa E., and R. Khari Brown. Whites and Rap Music: Is It Really All Bad? *Perspectives* 97–105.

inability of these and similar programs to provide youth with the information they need to protect their sexual health.

MEE was a ten-city (Baltimore; New York; Los Angeles and Long Beach, Oakland, and Richmond, CA; Chicago; New Orleans, LA; Detroit; Philadelphia; and Atlanta) study of black youth ages 16 to 20 from households of \$25,000 or less total income. The study involved a literature review, expert interviews, more than forty focus groups, and a “media consumptions and lifestyles survey” of two thousand young people.

The MEE study investigated media as one example of an “environmental influence” on youth sexuality. They illustrated that there is a “war” between mainstream media and parents and other adults in urban environments across the nation. And the media is, according to MEE, “winning.” They identify urban youth as the largest consumers of television, music videos, and movies as compared to all other youth demographic groups. MEE research produced the following results.²⁴ The survey indicated that black teens see two or more movies monthly, buy two to three rap CDs monthly, and watch three or more hours of television daily. Furthermore, two out of every five youth they surveyed watch more than four hours of television daily, with much of this viewing including DVD and VHS movie rentals.

Three out of every ten black youth listen to the radio more than four hours daily. An additional 17% listen to the radio for more than three hours. Seventy-six percent of the youth that MEE surveyed indicated that BET was their favorite music video channel,

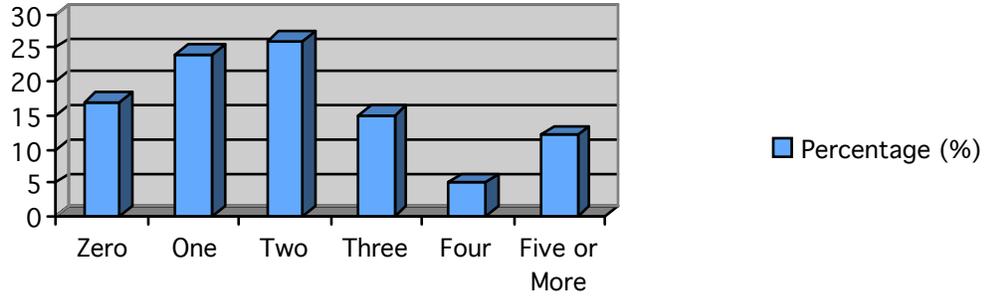
²⁴ Motivational Educational Entertainment Corporation. 2004. *This Is My Reality: The Price of Sex, An Inside Look at Black Urban Youth Sexuality and the Role of Media*. Philadelphia: MEE Productions.

versus 10% of the respondents who reported that it was MTV. Forty-one percent of the youth expressed that UPN was their favorite network channel, followed by FOX (24%) and the WB (19%). Thirty-two percent of youth surveyed indicated that HBO was their favorite “nonmusic video” cable channel. Last, 80% of the participants indicated that they had a TV at home, and 95% reported that they had a DVD/VCR as well.²⁵

²⁵ The percentage reported for the participants who indicated having a TV in their home is likely erroneous. Not only does it not make sense that 95% of the participants have a DVD/VCR but only 80% have a TV, but Nielson Media Research has indicated that 98% of homes have TV sets. See Sarsoli, C. Lynn, Michelle V. Porsche, and Deborah L. Tolman. ‘He Left Her for the Alien’: Girls, Television and Sex. Unpublished.

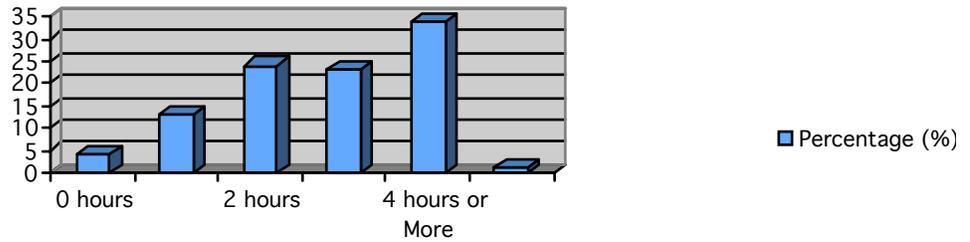
African American Youth and Music

How many times a month do you purchase CDs or cassettes?



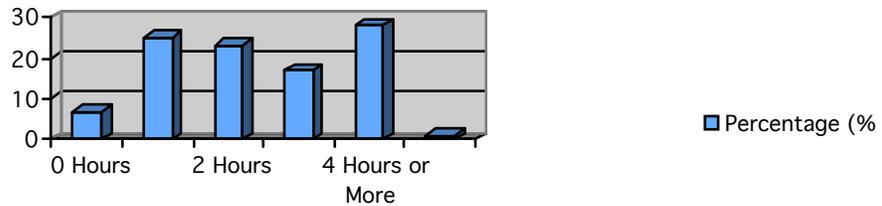
African American Youth and Television

How many hours of television do you watch per day?



African American Youth and Radio

How many hours of radio do you listen to each day?



Reprinted from Motivational Educational Entertainment. 2004. *This Is My Reality: The Price of Sex, An Inside Look at Black Urban Youth Sexuality and the Role of Media*. Philadelphia: MEE Productions.

When probed, MEE survey respondents, both males and females, agree that high sexual content, including “explicit sex,” dominates broadcast and cable TV and music videos. These youth indicate awareness of homosexuality and “other alternate lifestyles” on HBO or MTV. In addition, the MEE survey found that “pornographic images” are introduced to youth, especially males, as early as 10 years of age. Young black males in particular were shown to watch large amounts of programming with sexual content.

Studies on the relationship between media and sexual attitudes and behaviors that focus their attention specifically on black youth are relatively nonexistent. The numbers of black subjects, and other persons of color, participating in most media empirical research studies are so small that they do not often allow for race to be included as a variable for analysis. The MEE study is a rare example. Another much smaller study, however, was conducted by Gina Wingood and colleagues. This study surveyed 522 female teenagers aged 14 to 18, all African American, “nonurban,” and lower class. The teens had all been sexually active in the previous six months. These teens were selected from both high school health classes and county health department clinics as participants in an HIV prevention program. In the preliminary findings, Wingood noticed that increased music video exposure among black female adolescents had been proven to impact sexual health decisions. Adolescents with more exposure to rap music videos

were found to be more likely to have multiple sex partners and more likely to acquire STDs as well.²⁶

The black female teens that participated in Wingood's study were asked the number of hours they watched videos daily and where and with whom they watched videos. Health risk behaviors including predisposition to multiple sex partners and condom usage were assessed, and the young women were also tested for chlamydia, trichomoniasis, and gonorrhea.

Media exposure to rap videos was fourteen hours a week at baseline, fourteen hours a week at a six-month follow-up, and twelve hours a week at a twelve-month follow-up. During the twelve months the young women were studied, 37.6% acquired a new STD and 14.8% had sex with a "nonsteady" partner. Adolescents with more exposure to rap videos were two times as likely to have multiple sex partners and nearly two times as likely to have acquired a new STD.

²⁶ Wingood, Gina M., Ralph J. DiClemente, Jay M. Berhardt, Kathy Harrington, Susan L. Davies, Alyssa Robillard, and Edward W. Hook, III. 2003 A Prospective Study of Exposure to Rap Music Videos and African American Female Adolescents' Health, *American Journal of Public Health*, 93 (3):437-440.

Table 2. Unadjusted and Adjusted Analyses Measuring the Association between Exposure to Rap Music Videos and Adolescent’s Health at Twelve-Month Follow-Up: Birmingham, Ala., 1999–2000.

Adolescents’ Health ^a	Bivariate Analyses		Multivariate Analyses			
	High Exposure	Low Exposure	PR ^b (90% CI)	P	OR ^c (90% CI)	P
Sexual Behavior						
Had multiple sexual partners	19.3	11.0	1.8 (1.1, 2.8)	.02	2.0 (1.1, 3.4)	.02
Never used condoms	14.8	13.7	1.1 (1.0, 1.3)	.74	1.4 (0.7, 1.8)	.80
STD						
Acquired a new STD	41.9	33.0	1.3 (1.0, 1.7)	.08	1.6 (1.1, 2.3)	.04

Note. PR: Prevalence Ratio, CI: Confidence Ratio, OR: Odds Ratio, STD: Sexually Transmitted Disease.

^aAdolescent health behaviors and STD incidence were assessed during a twelve-month follow-up period.

^bAdolescents having less exposure to rap music videos were the referent for computing PRs.

^cORs are adjusted by parental monitoring and adolescents’ employment status.

Reprinted from Wingood, Gina M., Ralph J. DiClemente, Jay M. Berhardt, Kathy Harrington, Susan L. Davies, Alyssa Robillard, and Edward W. Hook, III. 2003 A Prospective Study of Exposure to Rap Music Videos and African American Female Adolescents’ Health. *American Journal of Public Health* 93(3):438.

More frequently, research has linked the media, and in some cases rap specifically, with increased sexual activity in young white students, however. The RAND Corporation found that youth who watch programming with a high sexual content are more likely than their peers to engage in oral sex and other sexual activities short of intercourse.²⁷ The study also found that shows in which sex was discussed but not shown had an equal impact on youth as the more explicit shows in which sex is actually depicted. These findings are especially significant given that two-thirds of the programs on television contain sexual content, from milder forms such as jokes and innuendos to displaying intercourse and other sexual activity.

Studies measuring video exposure among high school and college students are inconsistent, and they produce at least an equal amount of “null results” as often as they indicate experimental effects.²⁸ Another deficiency of television literature is that it is overwhelmingly focused on the amount of TV that is watched, as opposed to the types of TV watched. However, as L. Monique Ward insists, “Viewing amounts are only one avenue through which TV’s influence is manifested.” More attention must be necessarily directed toward various aspects of viewer participation.

Ward conducted a study with 259 undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 22. The students were 68% white, 15% Asian American or Middle Eastern, 10% African American, and 6% Latino. Thirty-seven percent of the students reported to be virgins,

²⁷ “Study Links TV to Teen Sexual Activity.” *CNN*, 07 September 2004, available on <http://www.cnn.com>. This study surveyed 1,792 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 twice (one year apart).

²⁸ Ward, L. Monique. 2002. Does Television Exposure Affect Emerging Adults’ Attitudes and Assumptions About Sexual Relationships? Correlational and Experimental Confirmation. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 31(1):1.

while 29% stated that they had had one sexual relationship. Twenty-two motivations for watching TV were assessed on a 6-point Likert scale, with the two categories of these motivations being watching for “learning” and watching for “entertainment.” These motivations included items such as “because they help me learn about myself and others,” “to help me understand the world” and “because they are exciting for me to watch.” Ward also used a 24-item instrument that she created to assess “selectivity in seeking specific TV programming,” “involvement during exposure,” and “post-exposure use.” Sample items in this instrument included, “I often plan my day around the TV shows I like to watch” and “I frequently talk to others about what I have recently seen on TV.”

Ward found it to be demonstrated that the more “active” and “involved” the viewer and the more strongly they “identify” with the portrayals, the more likely they are to be influenced by what they watch. This influence was also determined to be impacted by the “purposes” or “motives” the viewers had in mind and by the amount of “realism” they interpreted the media to have. Although her methods for determining her subjects’ perceptions of their motives for watching television or levels of “involvement” certainly can be critiqued, principally because her methods are so rare, the connection between perceived realism in media images and quality of the influence of that media is an interesting one.²⁹

More explicitly, Ward found more television exposure and “deeper viewer involvement” together to impact youth’s perception that men are “sex-driven creatures”

and women are sexual objects.³⁰ Likewise, frequent television viewing alone relates to an increased expectation that peers were “experienced” sexually. In her study, she showed four music video clips that she believed depicted males as “sex-driven creatures.” Four clips were selected demonstrating “dating as a game or recreational sport.” Finally, six clips were shown with “nonsexual” friendship, sibling, and coworker interactions.

Music video exposure in particular has been shown to have a significant impact on young people’s sexual politics. This is particularly important for our target demographic because sexual themes and content constitute more of a significant part of rap videos than any other music genre, and R&B and adult contemporary videos contain the most sexual themes.³¹ The more frequent the music video exposure among young women, the stronger their endorsement in the belief that women are sexual objects. With young men, the more videos they watch, the more conservative their gender politics are. In addition, frequent viewing of music videos also encouraged men to believe that dating was a recreational sport and to assume that their male peers had greater sexual experience.³²

Furthermore, with 76% of the youth in the MEE study indicating that BET is their favorite music video network, it is certainly significant that when compared with VHI, MTV, and CMT, BET was found to have the highest degree of sexual themes in the music videos they show.³³ As indicated by Durant and colleagues,

Role models such as musicians, actors, and athletes have a substantial influence on

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³⁰ Ward, 14.

³¹ Durant et al., 1133.

³² Ward, 12.

³³ Durant et al., 1133.

adolescents' narrative expectations about health risk and problem behaviors when they are observed engaging in these behaviors in the media, such as music videos. When viewed in the content of sexual or erotic scenes, these behaviors may be viewed by adolescents as desirable. (1131)

Empirical research on hip hop culture, and music videos more specifically, must begin to measure the impact that sexual “scripts” in music videos have on the ideas and behavior of youth, including in particular those scripts that they determine “desirable.” Durant’s study included 518 music videos from BET (n=182), MTV (n=152), VHI (n=83), and CMT (n=101). The videos were recorded during the times when adolescents would have the most opportunity to view them: 3 p.m. to 1 a.m. Friday and 10 a.m. to 12 a.m. Saturday and Sunday. The four networks were randomly assigned to morning, afternoon, and evening time slots and to days of the week by a random numbers table. The videos were rated for sexuality on a 4-point ordinal scale: (1) no references to sexuality, (2) present but minor references to sexuality, (3) moderate levels of sexuality, and (4) sexuality a major part of the video. Unfortunately, only eight students participated in the study, only two of which were African American. However, it would be interesting to see how such a content analysis would be performed by a larger amount of young people. In addition to BET being found to have the most videos with sexual content, when the videos were classified by genre (using *Billboard* magazine’s designations), R&B and adult contemporary videos contained the most sexuality and country music contained the least. It was not reported how rap music videos placed into this spectrum.

In another study conducted by Christy Barongan and Gordon C. Nagayama Hall, rap music was reported to have a demonstrated effect on sexual behaviors.³⁴ Fifty-four men participated in their study, only six of who were African American and two of who were Asian. The group was divided in half; twenty-seven participants were exposed to neutral rap music and the remaining twenty-seven listened to “misogynous rap.” The neutral rap songs included “Brothers Gonna Work It Out” and “Nightrain” by Public Enemy and “The Nations Anthem” and “Pure Poverty” by Poor Righteous Teachers. It is perhaps unfortunate that the researchers chose songs by strongly identified Black nationalist groups as “neutral” conditions. The “misogynist” rap songs included DJ Quik’s “Mo Pussy,” 2nd II None’s “Just Ain’t Me” and “One Less Bitch,” and “She Swallowed It” by N.W.A. These men were then given the choice, after listening to the music, of showing a sexually violent, “assaultive,” or neutral film vignette to a female confederate participant in the study. A significantly larger portion of the men who listened to the misogynist rap decided to show the sexually aggressive vignette to the confederate than did those who were in the neutral music group. Thirty percent in the misogynist group showed the assaultive vignette, seven percent in the neutral group showed the sexually violent vignette, and all remaining males showed the “neutral” vignette. From this experiment Barongan and Hall reported that misogynist music facilitates sexually aggressive behavior. The limitations of this experiment, of course, include its willingness to connect showing a film vignette in a controlled experiment to assumptions for how misogynist rap would influence the sexual behaviors of men in a “real world” environment.

³⁴ Barongan and Hall, 195–207.

However, I think it would be interesting to co-relate not just the amount of rap listened to, but again the type, or “subgenre” of rap listened to, with the reported sexual behaviors of youth outside of an experiment context.

Racial Attitudes and Media Studies

In the 1993–1994 National Black Politics Survey (NBPS; 1,206 African American respondents, age 18 or older), 52% of respondents reported having listened to rap within the last year.³⁵ NBPS also demonstrated that urban residents, males, and wealthier and more educated respondents were more likely to listen to rap music. Most important, young African Americans were found to be significantly more likely to listen to hip hop than older African Americans. Within the year prior to the NBPS study, 72% of their respondents reported having seen a black movie, 81% said they had read a black magazine, 78% said they had listened to a black news program on the radio, and 72% had watched a black TV program on cable. More than half of the NBPS respondents indicated exposure to black media; however, younger African Americans were more likely to be exposed to a diverse set of media.

Research studying the impact of media on racial attitudes has looked specifically at the effects of rap music on both white and black audiences. Findings indicate that whites

who listen to rap music have been found to be less racist and more liberal than other whites.³⁶ Although, as has been the case for their black peers, whites who listen to violent rap are reported to be more likely to stereotype and discriminate against blacks.³⁷ Whites who listen to rap, however, are generally found to be empathetic to black struggles, and some researchers conjecture that exposure to rap music among white audiences may one day push them to support race-based policies such as affirmative action and increased employment for blacks.³⁸ Also, it is found that these white audiences have developed a higher cynicism toward U.S. race relations and reportedly also have a greater amount of black associates.³⁹

Melissa Harris-Lacewell's *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* offers research findings that relate to the connection between media and racial attitudes, and she focuses specifically on African Americans and rap music.⁴⁰ Her studies were designed to assess "black media knowledge" and "hip hop knowledge." Furthermore, Harris-Lacewell related the level of "black media" and "hip hop

³⁵ Dawson, Michael, Ronald Brown and James S. Jackson. 1993. National Black Politics Study [Computer file]. ICPSR version. Chicago: University of Chicago/Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University/Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, [producers], 1994. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 1998. Rap music instruments included: F12), "Rap music provides an important source of information about what's going on in the black community. Or rap music is a destructive force in the black community" with answer options reading "both," "neither," "don't know," and "refused" and I16) "Have you in the past week? Listened to rap music," with answer options reading "yes," "no," "don't know," "refused/not applicable."

³⁶ Thompson and Brown, 97.

³⁷ See Ballard, Mary, and Steven Coates. 1995. The Immediate Effects of Homicidal, Suicidal and Nonviolent Heavy Metal and Rap Songs on the Moods of College Students. *Youth and Society* 27(2):148-168.

³⁸ Thompson and Brown, 101.

³⁹ Thompson and Brown, 99.

⁴⁰ Harris-Lacewell, Melissa Victoria. 2004. *Barbershops, Bibles and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

knowledge” to her primary interests in measuring feminist and conservative politics. High hip hop knowledge was measured with additive scales developed with the assistance of matching games. Subjects were asked to match hip hop artists with the “crews” they are associated with. Examples included female rapper Rah Digga who rhymes with the Flipmode Squad. Although Harris-Lacewell indicates in her findings that she was able to divide her subjects into those with “low,” “average,” and “high” hip-hop knowledge, she does not indicate the specific percentage of subjects that fit into each of these categories. Nevertheless, whereas black media knowledge prompted students to be more open to both feminist and conservative messages, high “hip hop knowledge” interacted with the respondents to reduce their levels of pro-feminism and to bolster anticonservatism. Finally, findings from the NBPS indicated that black media in general suggests a strong positive relationship with expressions of black-linked fate as well as sex-linked fate for both men and women.⁴¹ The only problem with taking out all these hyphens is that the authors use them. What do we do in that case? Here it applies to MVHL’s “hip-hop knowledge” and black-linked and sex-linked fate.

One study on the impact of both rap and heavy metal songs on the moods of college students evidenced an interesting connection between research on racial attitudes and media and work on violence and media.⁴² Mary Ballard and Steven Coates conducted a study of 175 students from Appalachian State University, including 82 males and 93

⁴¹ The concept of “linked fate” is used by political scientists in order to address a sensibility of common socioeconomical outcomes among groups formed on the basis of various identities including race and gender.

females. One-hundred and sixty-five subjects were white, six were African American, four were Asian American, and two were Native American. The mean age was 19.71 years, and upper-middle-class was the mean socioeconomic status. The study focused in particular on the relationship between lyrical content of heavy metal and rap music songs and mood. It looked specifically at rap and heavy metal songs with nonviolent, homicidal, and suicidal themes. One particular handicap of the experiment was that the rap songs used as prompts were selected by heavy metal and rap “fans;” therefore, no systematic method of choosing the prompts was used. This resulted in a particularly obscure selection of rap songs including “Sunny Meadowy” as the “nonviolent/control,” “Peel Their Caps Back” as the “homicidal” selection, and “Ever So Clear” as the “suicidal” song. However, Ballard and Coates tested these three songs on a pilot study of sixteen students in an effort to ensure that the singles were low in familiarity but high in coherence. One minute of each of the three songs was played for the study participants including parts of the chorus and verse. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of the three songs and to one of the two musical genres. The students were also asked to complete the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI), a 44-item instrument designed to measure how anger is experienced and expressed.

In this study, rap music was found to arouse anger. When compared to the heavy metal songs, the rap songs were related to higher STAXI scores. One proposed explanation for why rap aroused anger was because of its expressions of “dismay over

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⁴² See Ballard, Mary, and Steven Coates. 1995. The Immediate Effects of Homicidal, Suicidal and Nonviolent Heavy Metal and Rap Songs on the Moods of College Students. *Youth and Society* 27(2):148–
(footnote continued)

sociopolitical issues, due to the music's political salience." Likely because of the study's predominantly white participants, it is also conjectured that rap music may have exposed the subconscious racism of white audiences. The most unfortunate thing about this study is that six black participants are hardly enough to measure what sort of anger effects black participants would demonstrate under the same conditions. It is only safe for Ballard and Coates to conjecture that the anger aroused in this study stemmed in part from most of their subjects' subjectivities as white people because there is no significant, alternative racial subjectivity to compare it to.

Substance Abuse/Violence and Media Research

Other research on the association between media and violence gets linked with substance abuse. According to Durant and colleagues, MTV was found to have the highest percentage of videos with smoking-related behaviors, followed by VH1, BET, and CMT, respectively. Rap music videos had the highest rate of smoking behaviors of any music genre. Last, the most videos with alcohol behaviors were found on BET and MTV.⁴³

Brendan I. Koerner, in "Rapper Raise Your Snifters," attributed the rising sales of Cognac liquor to the popularity of Busta Rhymes' single "Pass the Courvoisier" and other rap songs that promoted its use.⁴⁴ Cognac climbed 13.8% from 2001 to 2003, according to Adams Beverage Group. Findings like this reveal an interesting relationship

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⁴³ Durant et al. 1133.

between advertising and hip hop. Rappers often provide corporations with the opportunity to receive free publicity, and the impact that particular brand marketing may have on the youth behavior often goes unstudied. Unfortunately, the author of this and similar studies are only tracking the sales of products before and after the commercial release dates of particular rap recordings, and further empirical work has not been done to survey or interview large samples of people regarding the impact of specific rap records on their alcohol, tobacco, or other consumer purchasing decisions.

In addition to connections between rap music and substance abuse, rap is also linked with other “aggressive” behaviors. Exposure to rap music, which is associated with blacks and with violence, is said to cause aggressive thoughts.⁴⁵ Most of the research on media and violence focuses on television viewing more broadly. Television has been shown to produce a number of psychological effects on youth audiences, particularly violent television. Dixon and Brooks argue in a literature review that violent television “desensitizes” viewers to real incidents of violence and prompts them to learn aggressive behaviors and to have an increased fear of victimization.⁴⁶ They make suggestions for a two-prong research study that includes a long-term content analysis of rap lyrics and their impact on rap audiences, women in particular. They likewise call for a visual analysis of rap videos.

⁴⁴ Koerner, Brendan I. “Rappers Raise Your Snifters,” *The New York Times*, 29 August 2004.

⁴⁵ Dixon, Travis L., and TaKeshia Brooks. Rap Music and Rap Audiences: Controversial Themes, Psychological Effects and Political Resistance. *Perspectives* 106–116.

⁴⁶ Dixon and Brooks, 108.

One study that focused in part on the correlation between rap music and “aggressive thoughts” surveyed college undergraduates enrolled in a communications course at a large Midwestern university.⁴⁷ Approximately 70% of the students were 21 years old or younger, 52.7% of them were female, 85.2% were white, 10.3% were black, and 4.5% were “other.” The authors “operationalized *aggression* as assault or ‘physical violence against others’” and used an aggression subscale of the Buss Durkee Hostility Inventory with instruments such as: “Once in a while I cannot control my urge to harm others” and “I can’t think of a good reason for hitting anyone.” (I don’t think we should be rewriting the language of their questionnaires.) The authors correlated the scores from the Buss Durkee Hostility Inventory with music preferences.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, only 6.6% of the 243 students surveyed reported a rap music preference. However, rap music listeners exhibited greater aggressive tendencies than listeners of any other music preference genres reported.

More empirical work in the area of rap music and hip hop studies certainly needs to be done. While some studies have been completed that measure the impact of rap music and music videos on youth politics, very few of the subjects in these studies have been black youth. Furthermore, no empirical work has been done to measure the quality of participation in hip hop culture that youth of all races experience. In addition to measuring the frequency of participation—how many hours per week youth listen to rap

⁴⁷ Rubin, Alan M., Daniel V. West, and Wendy S. Mitchell. Differences in Aggression, Attitudes Towards Women, and Distrust As Reflected in Popular Music Preferences. *Media Psychology* 3:25–42.

music, for instance—it is necessary to begin to assess, empirically, what hip hop participation looks like beyond consumerism.

Conclusion

As the literature of hip hop studies continues to grow, theoretical works consistently outnumber empirical studies investigating rap music's impact on its audiences. Empirical work that investigates rap music's influence on black subjects is especially rare. Relationships between rap music and sexual and racial politics, as well as the relationship between rap music and violence, are significant themes of both qualitative and quantitative literature. This demonstrates rap's political identity and suggests a diverse set of political ideas/urgencies. According to scholar Imani Perry, "It is impossible to isolate, in any coherent fashion, a clear system of political critique with a traceable eschatology or teleology in hip hop."⁴⁹ Whereas the work that has been done empirically to measure the influence of rap music on black youth politics is an important commencement into the field of hip hop studies, so much more needs to be done. Rap music, and hip hop culture more broadly, represent new and significant political ideas that we must begin to formulate a dialogue to address.

⁴⁸ The items they used to measure music listening preferences included: "About how many hours a day do you listen to music" and "On a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (usually), how often do you listen to rap music?" The authors provided artist examples for rap music, selected from Billboard charts, that included Ice Cube, Queen Latifah, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Too Short, MC Ren, and Dr. Dre.

⁴⁹ Perry, Imani. 2004. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press, 47.