"From the Streets": A content analysis of Hip-hop music lyrics

Chase Miller

SOCI 4309 – Qualitative Research Methods

Final Research Paper: Unobtrusive Method/ Content Analysis

Dr. Rachel Romero

A04042764

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, it is estimated that the rap industry as a whole grosses over $10 billion in record sales and has a sizable force of consumers at about 45 million listeners (Watson 2004). Behind the success, lies a music genre which evolved from very real issues such as poverty, violence, and social injustices experienced in the American ghetto. This study aims to analyze how urban social decay is portrayed in hip-hop music through common themes in its lyrical content.

Hip-Hop is generally known as a music genre in its roots, but also represents a culture which has been developed by entrepreneurs into a massive empire, spanning across industry boundaries. Various hip-hop moguls have done this by "dipping their fingers", so to speak, into clothing, headphones, cellphones, videogames, radio shows, and TV advertisements (Watson 2004). At first big business wanted nothing to do with hip-hop and was "put off by the violence and the controversy associated with the music", but upon discovery that the exploitation of these themes has the potential to be incredibly profitable, it's all fair game (Watson 2004).

The role of big business has put hip-hop in a highly influential position within the media; which advertises an attitude, image, and way of life reflecting the themes portrayed in the music lyrics. This essentially means that hip-hop as an industry has the potential to define generations from things like identity formation, to consumption habits, and even violence and criminal activity. Considering the overreaching influence of hip-hop, the popularity of the genre, and the corresponding culture; it is imperative to analyze and interpret the origin of themes portrayed in hip-hop. The primary themes that will be analyzed, include: the glorification of criminal activity; the duality of status and authenticity negotiation, and the sexual objectification of women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing popularity of hip-hop in the early 1990's, with its heavily misogynistic, violent, and vulgar lyrics caught the attention of sociologists who felt the need to study how these lyrics reflect an element of social decay behind the scenes. In my analysis, the results composed by various studies on the matter all agree there is a counter-cultural presence in the lyrical content of rap due to perceptions of oppression and social injustice in urban black communities. The only place where the studies seem to differ is the methods of research and the angle at which they are trying to tackle the issue. Although, what they all seem to ignore is the cause, and would rather focus on the effects of hip-hop on the young generations. There is an overall lack of attention to the fact that the incredible rise of a music genre, conceived in the minds of oppressed inner city youth, should speak volumes about hip-hop as a big picture depiction of urban social decay over all other possible implications. The following discussion will address how the research connects and discuss the conclusions that can be drawn with respect to the question of how urban social decay is depicted in rap music.

First we take a look at the hip-hop industry itself and the nature of the music it has come to popularize. In the first piece of research I examined called *Rap and the Recording Industry,* it sheds a little light on the severe social issues, which the industry exploits for a heavy marginal profit. It describes the real culprits behind the socially disjunctive genre as things like "poverty, racism, and police brutality"; "as one rapper put it, 'Hip-hop is sick because America is sick'" (Beaver 2010). Rap has even come to exaggerate these themes in its lyrics because of the industry. This is evident in a corporate reputation review, which reports that the reasons behind the perpetuation of lyrics which show violence and social turmoil in the streets is not just embellishments on personal experiences growing up in the ghetto, but is also sometimes

fictionalized for increased profitability. This translates into deviant behaviors being "preferred approaches because experience has shown that negative deviance gains recognition because of the 'shock effect'" (Lucas, Hough, and Fisher 2011). The fact is that these lyrics sell and whether or not they are authentic, they remain a representation of the already existent social degradation of urban American society.

On a more micro level, the second set of research takes a look at various depictions of violence, crime, and social inequity and how they create corresponding identities among listeners. In the research study conducted by Tanner, Asbridge, and Wortly (2009) they took a look at high school students in Toronto, Canada and collected information regarding their race, musical preferences, and whether or not they were involved in deviant activities while simultaneously trying to find connections between the three. What they subsequently found was that rap listeners are different than listeners of other genres, especially in the sense that "they are more inclined to crime and delinquency and more likely to subscribe to resistant attitudes and beliefs" (Tanner 2009). Although, they admit that there cannot be any certainty what came first, the interest in rap music or delinquent behavior. The second study by Durgin (2010) discusses in a less quantitative sense, any potential correlations between rap music and the likelihood of adolescent listeners developing violent identities. The general claim in this study is that rap is especially relevant to sociological research in how social identities are formed and how "race, socioeconomic status, culture, and violence are factors in this formation" (Durgin 2010). More concerning than this, Durgin said, is the implications this has for society as a whole. Delving more into the lyrics, Hunnicutt and Andrews study explores the theme of homicide in rap lyrics and how it is presented to the audience. It was especially interesting in this study that homicide was most often displayed in rap music, "as a tool to protect male honor, constitute power

relations and establish gender hierarchies" (Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009). This implies that men are generally more often seen as the perpetrators of the more serious crimes depicted in rap music, and therefore seem to play the most active role in the gang cultures that rule the streets. Overall this research tends to describe the role of the message rap conveys to its listeners, but also focuses on the meanings behind the message itself.

As we move down the ladder of research and get closer to the youth that actually listen to hip-hop music we see a pervasive trend that the youth are identifying with and internalizing the lyrics. In this specific article, it describes two teachers' thoughts on how rap has changed its message, from protest against injustice, to the perpetuation of harmful and oppressive messages and this is now being reflected in the student population. As it was stated, this new "off-culture" hip-hop "does not focus on political protest, peace, prosperity, and social justice as it does on creating injustices through ugly images of capitalistic, materialistic, and misogynistic ideals of masculinity and femininity" (Jackson and Anderson 2009). It also claims that this "off-culture" hip-hop has been "associated with an increase in crime, violence, drugs, and a gangster persona" (Jackson and Anderson 2009). Although, what can be drawn from their research is that there has not necessarily been an increase in these behaviors but rather a flip in the music genre where such activity was once discouraged in favor of overcoming the oppression of the ghetto, to now celebrating and glorifying violence, drugs, and gang affiliation, which is often times associated with it.

In summation, although the themes portrayed in hip-hop music seems to have a gained a lack of attention compared to general studies on violence in the media, the larger issue is the gap within the research itself. It is important for researchers to recognize that severe social problems are the reasons for hip-hop becoming such a violent, crime-promoting, and misogynistic genre,

regardless of the corporate push to perpetuate these themes. This deserves as much if not more attention than research trying to find a causal relationship between crime, violence, and rap music because, if we look at the order of events, the crime and violence in the ghetto came first and not the other way around. Thus it is critical to explore the depictions of urban social decay through the content analysis of lyrical themes portrayed in the hip-hop music genre.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes unobtrusive methods to analyze how urban social decay is portrayed in hip-hop music through common themes in its lyrical content. In gathering the data, I used content analysis, which is an examination of non-interactive data that exists independent of the research (Hessey-Biber and Levy, 2011:228). I conducted the analysis on a collection of thirty hip-hop song lyrics; three for each year in the time frame of 2005 to 2015. For the purpose of this study, I used only the most popular rap songs for each year according to the *Billboard* music charts, and obtained the lyrics for each song through the internet resource, *A-Z Lyrics.*

Billboard is the most reliable chart ratings producer in the world of music today, and offers a wide range of statistics for each genre as well as the music industry as a whole. When you hear about a song "topping the charts", it is usually in reference to the charts published by *Billboard.* Because of this, it was chosen as the primary resource in providing the songs that were most influential in each year, and therefore, which songs would be the most important to analyze.

A-Z Lyrics was my secondary resource, which was used as an intermediary through which I could take my selected songs from *Billboard* and receive a legal and reliable

transcription of the lyrical content. This allowed me to document the lyrical transcription of the entire dataset; the basis upon which a thorough content analysis could be conducted.

For each of the songs that I collected into my dataset, I began to read the lyrical content therein; deciphering the slang used and identifying general themes in the message to determine what specific patterns should be analyzed. Once I reached the extent of the initial analysis, I began the data reduction process of coding the information, and subsequently grouping my findings into descriptive codes. Descriptive codes are essentially a short description of the different themes, which eventually lead to key concepts and categories. The purpose of this was to find specific phrases in the lyrics, identify similar patterns, and combine the songs into specific categories according to the use of these phrases. Simultaneously, I went through the same process of grouping the material based on literal codes, which are specific words on the text that are expressed literally. In the final step, I took both the descriptive and literal codes and reduced them into three analytical codes. Analytical codes are themes that are not as tightly tied to the text, but are based on insight and determined at the discretion of the person conducting the research.

I chose this specific method of study for my research because of its importance in conducting a thorough analysis. When addressing a qualitative question about the content of a music genre, simply relying on the research of others is not nearly sufficient enough to obtain any true credibility on the topic. The only way to do so, is to first understand the body of research that is available on the subject, and then take it a step further into conducting ones' own analysis.

Although, in any research scenario, it is imperative that the researcher addresses any sort of limitations that may be present in the way data was collected. In the collection of this data,

there were only three songs that were collected from each year, which makes it a stretch to say that they are representative of rap music as a whole at that point in time. Secondly, *Billboard*'s charts are only based on actual sales and does not take into account the people who obtain their music through Spotify, Rhapsody, Pandora, and even illegal downloads, from which valuable data may be obtained. Lastly, this research could have been furthered through in-depth interviews and focus groups, which invariably leaves this study missing invaluable data. Given these limitations, content analysis remains sufficient enough to address the research question at hand.

ANALYSIS

Following the collection, coding, and analysis of the data, three major themes emerged: (1) The hip-hop songs in the sample either depict or glorify criminal activity of some form; (2) A majority of the songs collected bear a strong trend representing the duality of status and authenticity negotiation; (3) Hip-hop music depicts the sexual objectification of women. The following sections will outline the findings for each theme and connect them to various sociological concepts.

Theme 1: The hip-hop songs in the sample either depict or glorify criminal activity of some form.

The single trend that tended to permeate every single song in the sample was the depiction and glorification of criminal activity. This general category encompasses several subthemes: the glorification of gun violence, drug use, and gang affiliation. Based on the content analysis, crime is portrayed as a way of gaining respect, asserting male dominance, and a way of life in a way that is similar to the norms and values of gang culture.

The glorification of gun violence in the lyrics was found to be most often used as an outright display of male dominance. It is used as a display of a hardened gangster mentality, which garners respect and prestige within the counter-culture it appeals to. For example, in Snoop Dogg's 2005 hit, *Drop It Like It's Hot*, one of the verses states "you're family's crying, now you on the news/ they can't find you, and now they miss you/ must I remind you I'm only here to twist you/ pistol whip you, dip you then flip you". This statement is akin to a gangster mentality; which, according to Durkheim's theories, would derive from the anomic reality of poverty, combined with the pursuit of illegitimate means to achieve what is perceived to be success--the accumulation of money. Because of this violent culture, guns are commonly used as a symbol of toughness and dominance. One can see this trend reflected throughout many of the lyrics collected in the data sample in phrases such as; "so much hate I need an AK", "tryin' to make it to the top before your ass get popped", and "HKs, AK's, I need to join a gun club". In fact, this theme appears at least once in all thirty songs that were collected. It is clear that the emphasis placed on guns and gun violence in hip-hop is not only a pervasive concept, but exhibits evidence of a severe consequence of social inequity.

Drug use, the second identified subtheme under the glorification of crime, is also second in the amount of times it appeared in the sample. After separating out all the songs which exhibited the promotion of drug use, it was found that marijuana took the lead in its appearance, followed by prescription drugs, and cocaine. The promotion of drug use by the artists is exhibited in phrases such as: "I be smoking dope and you know backwoods what I roll"— referring to marijuana, "sipping that promethazeen"—referring to the recreational use of prescription drugs, and "I'm knee deep in the cane"—in reference to cocaine use. What is indicated here is that drug use has been normalized and encouraged amongst artists in the hip-

hop industry. This can be viewed as a symptom of severe social dysfunction, and leads one to the conclusion that this phenomena can be attributed to the environment from which hip-hop was conceived. As stated in the literature, rap lyrics "represent the struggle of disadvantaged Black youth in urban ghettos" (Durgin 2010). Given this, we can reasonably conclude that the promotion of drug use in rap music is another indicator of urban social decay.

Lastly, indications of gang affiliation are present within the lyrics as well, although not as prevalent as drug use or gun violence. Regardless, the implications this has for society makes it an important topic to be analyzed. Depictions within the sample range from outright affiliation to more discrete indicators. For example, one of the samples collected is as follows: "I keep a blue flag hanging out my backside/ But only on the left side, yeah that's the Crip side"; here the artist makes sure to make the listener aware of his affiliation with the Crips. On the other hand, there are examples which could be overlooked, such as: "that's word to my flag and my flag red", a "flag" here meaning a piece of cloth gang members sport to indicate their ties; blue for the Crips, red for the Bloods. This, as we are all aware, is a very real issue in most major cities; the Crips/Bloods rivalry being the most widespread and well known. As was stated earlier, the existence of gangs is correspondent with Durkheim's theory of anomie. Although, we can expand on this issue based upon Dubois' comprehensive ethnographic study called *The Philadelphia Negro*, in which he determined that the position of African Americans is the result of systematic institutional discrimination. Based on these theories, we can see that the normalcy in which gang affiliation is being depicted in rap is indicative of dysfunctional social institutions.

Theme 2: A majority of the songs collected bear a strong trend of the duality of status and authenticity negotiation.

Out of the thirty songs which were collected, a strong majority of them (24) exhibited depictions of wealth and success, while the artist is simultaneously negotiating authenticity. The negotiation of authenticity here refers to a theory presented by social scientist, Erving Goffman, in his book called *Stigma*, in which he coined the term "the negotiated self". This is the theory that we present ourselves as society expects us to, yet at the same time create and negotiate our status or self-image. In the context of the content analysis, this is shown in the way rap artists emphasize their wealth and success, while negotiating authenticity.

For example, in the song *Soul Survivor* by Young Jeezy (2006) he states "a hundred grand on my wrist, yeah life sucks/ fuck the club, dawg, I rather count a million bucks", then insists on his authenticity in the following verse, "if you lookin' for me I'll be on the block/ with my thang cocked possibly sittin' on a drop/ 'cuz I'm a rida/ I'm just a soul survivor". In another example, Lil Wayne's hit song *A Milli* features the artist bragging about his wealth-- "I'm a millionaire, I'm a young money millionaire…cause my seconds, minutes, hours go to the almighty dollar"; then proceeds to reinforce his authenticity by insisting that he still goes "by them goon (street) rules". In hip-hops' case, it is clear that being an authentic artist means placing emphasis on having overcome poverty, having gone through the struggles associated with it, and retaining some form of street credit in the process.

It is apparent from the sample, that street credit is highly important to an artist who wishes to remain authentic in the hip-hop industry. Street credit by definition, is seen as a level of respect one has gained within their community. Community, in this case, seems to mostly refer to the gang culture, which the artist either grew up around or was/is affiliated with. For example, in a gang, one would receive more street credit by performing various highly illegal activities. Referring back to the previously discussed theme, we saw illegal activities being held

with high regard in popular hip-hop music. In addition to this information, the study covered in the literature review, *Being Bad In Order to Do Well: Deviance Admiration in the Rap/Hip-Hop Music Industry*, showed that the relationship between hip-hop and the depiction of crime within the industry is perpetuated because, "experience has shown that negative deviance gains recognition because of the 'shock effect'" (Lucas, Hough, and Fisher 2011). Taking this information, we can see exactly what street credit is and its importance to authenticity in the hip-hop music industry.

Given the evidence and the information collected, there seems to be a trend of the importance popular hip-hop artists place on the depiction of their financial success and rise from poverty, while simultaneously negotiating this image of a hardened gangster. This image sells in the hip-hop industry, and when something sells, it is usually because the same values resonate within the society. Therefore, as mentioned in the literature, it all simply boils down to this conclusion: "hip-hop is sick because America is sick" (Beaver 2010).

Theme 3: Hip-hop music depicts the sexual objectification of women.

Upon analysis of the lyrics, the sexual objectification of women seems to be the most blatant main staple within the hip-hop industry. We can easily see that this occurs so often because hip-hop is a male dominated industry, but it takes a little more sociological insight to see exactly why this is happening.

Within the data, it was not difficult to find various crude phrases, which with no doubt can be seen as offensive to the female gender. For example, the data showed that most instances resembled phrases such as: "I'm attracted to her for her attractive ass", and "I hate to see her go, but I'd love to watch her leave". This illustrates an obvious indicator of female objectification,

but the lyrics would sometimes take an even more aggressive and graphic turn. For example, in the song *No Hands* by Waka Flaka, very explicitly he states: "tryna hit the hotel with two girls that swallow d**k/ take this d**k and swallow bay moscato got her freaky". In American society at large, a statement like this from a person in a position of influence would garner much backlash and criticism, although within the context of hip-hop music it is normalized.

Not only were women found to be spoken about in this way outside the context of the industry, but also in reference to their status within the industry. What is meant by this is, a woman's only way to gain entrance into the industry is to be treated as a sexual object. The main example seen was in the song *How Low* by Ludacris, which is as follows: "yeah, I think you a superstar, with an ass like that you gotta blow/ befo' you make it big, there's just one thing that I gotta know/ how low can you go". By saying "how low can you go", the artist is making a statement that they believe the obtainment of success for a female in the industry is dependent on what they are willing to do sexually to achieve it. This is a notion which is highly problematic and a symptom of serious social inequality, but yet again, it is normalized by the artists and has the potential to be internalized by its listeners.

The unusually high frequency the sexual objectification of women appears in rap music, when compared with other genres, leads one to question why this could be. As we discussed earlier, the inception of rap music was brought about as a result of social inequalities and the systematic discrimination of African Americans by various social institutions which led to the emergence of organized crime. Within the gang culture that began to rise to power in many underprivileged neighborhoods across America, there arose a very heavily male dominated power structure within it. In fact, according to the *National Gang Crime Research Center*, "gangs for the most part are chauvinistic in culture and if any ethos can be said to characterize

their gender relationships it would be an extreme form of hypermasculinity" (Knox 2008). Because of this, women who seek to get involved in a gang are often only given the choice "of a 'beat-in' or to be sexed in"; in which case, they often choose the ladder (Knox 2008). Here a "beat-in" refers to gaining entrance by taking a beating from every member of the gang. Being sexed in, on the other hand, is similar to this but with one obvious difference. This creates an extremely oppressive environment for women caught up in these underground subcultures, as well as an extreme sense male of dominance over women. Considering this information, as well as the gang ties with which hip-hop artists are often characterized, it is easy to see how this is ultimately reflected in the lyrical depictions of women.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to analyze how urban social decay is depicted in hip-hop music through its lyrical content. This was accomplished through the use of evidence in today's literature on the topic, as well as the coding and analysis of thirty songs produced over the last decade. From this research, three major themes presented themselves in the form of textual evidence found in the lyrics.

In the first theme, it was suggested that hip-hop music depicts the glorification of crime, which included: gun violence, drug use, and gang affiliation. This general category was found to be the single theme that is common amongst all thirty of the songs in the sample. Rap music as a whole seemed to perpetuate these themes in a way which portrays crime as either cool, or a way of getting respect or showing dominance.

The second most pervasive theme in the content analysis was that the majority of the songs collected bore a strong trend of the duality of status and authenticity negotiation. This was

one of the more complex themes to put together, but it occurred often enough to make it important to address. What rappers essentially portray in their lyrics is this importance in showing that one has achieved success and overcome poverty, while simultaneously identifying with the norms of subcultures (gangs), in order to maintain an image of authenticity.

The last theme identified was the sexual objectification of women in hip-hop music. This theme was found to be unusually more blatant than any of the other themes identified in the study. It included the belittlement of women as mere sexual objects, and was also identified within the context of the industry itself.

Given the popularity of hip-hop music in America, the promotion of criminal activity is something which is potentially detrimental to a young audience in the critical phase of their identity development. Not only this, but it is indicative of already deeply rooted social issues which society has come to embrace as a way of life. The issue has been ignored and put on the back burners for so long that it has become something which has taken over an incredibly profitable and influential business.

Portraying authenticity as an artist in the rap industry was shown to be an important aspect in maintaining status, and encompassed norms and values often reflected within organized crime. The identification of this theme was potentially concerning, due to the fact that not only does this originate from the neglect of severe social issues, but also has the ability to perpetuate them.

The last theme analyzed was arguably the most important to be addressed, as it portrays an entire industry and widespread subculture built on the oppression of the female gender. Additionally, the depiction of this in popular hip-hop music only tends to further an image of

women as less than human and only for male enjoyment. This presents a major issue for society at large because, not only is there nothing being done about the already present problem, it is being promoted and perpetuated through the hip-hop industry. If there is anything which is more blatantly hindering the progression of the women's rights movement in America, it is this incredibly oppressive gang culture and its norms and values the hip-hop industry has carried with it.

REFERENCES

Beaver, William. 2010. "Rap And the Recording Industry." *Business and Society Review*
    115(1):107–20.

Durgin, R. 2010. "Rap Music Lyrics and the Construction of Violent Identities Among
    Adolescents." *Perspectives (University Of New Hampshire)*, 1-11.

Hesse-Biber, Sharlene Nagy and Patricia Leavy. 2011. The Practice of Qualitative Research.
    New York: Sage Publishing.

Hunnicutt, Gwen and Kristy Humble Andrews. 2009. "Tragic Narratives In Popular Culture:
    Depictions of Homicide in Rap Music." *Sociological Forum* 24(3):611–30.

Jackson, B. c., & Anderson, S. s. (2009). "Hip Hop Culture Around the Globe: Implications for
    Teaching." *Black History Bulletin* 72(1), 22-32.

Knox, George W. 2008. "Females And Gangs: Sexual Violence, Prostitution, and Exploitation."
    National Gang Crime Research Center. Retrieved April 26, 2016
    (http://www.ngcrc.com/ngcrc/proffem2.htm).

Lucas, Leyland M., Jill R. Hough, and Dan Fisher. 2011. "Being Bad In Order to Do Well:
    Deviance Admiration in the Rap/Hip-Hop Music Industry." *Corp Reputation Rev
    Corporate Reputation Review* 14(3):175–99.

Tanner, J., M. Asbridge, and S. Wortley. 2009. "Listening To Rap: Cultures of Crime, Cultures
    of Resistance." *Social Forces* 88(2):693–722.

Watson, Julie. 2004. "Rapper's Delight: A Billion-Dollar Industry." *Forbes*. Retrieved April 29,
    2016 (http://www.forbes.com/2004/02/18/cx_jw_0218hiphop.html).