

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF RAP MUSIC: A CONTENT ANALYSIS ON RAP LYRICS (1476 words)

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1. Introduction

Rap is one of the most prominent music genres of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The genre has attracted the youngest demographic group in the US and has been regarded as a favorite by most young Americans aged 16 to 24, regardless of socioeconomic status and ethnicity [1]. It is significant because US youth listen to music almost 40 hours a week and listening time has increased 36.6% since 2015 [2]. Furthermore, rappers have been found to serve as role models for young audiences, influencing their identity development.

But it has also been at the center of concern for the potential harm caused by violent media on young people's social behavior. There is a problem with lyrical content in rap music and music in general in recent years, and youth are being influenced by this music. For years, music has constantly mentioned drugs, violence, sex, and money, but the internet and new music platforms have given artists the opportunity to reach a global audience in seconds. In addition to the new wave of rapping about pill addiction, about killing and beating people, and the fact that anyone can record a song nowadays, this has created a generation of drug-addicted, violent youth [4].

The aim of this study is to investigate the changing images of violence and substance abuse in rap music lyrics and to check whether these references have increased over time.

2. Background

Various content analyses have been conducted on rap music to study various themes like misogyny, violence, mental health, gender display, etc., but limited studies have been identified with a sample as this study i.e., top 3 popular rap songs over years, from 2000 to 2021. I considered this time frame as 1998 is the first year rap music outsold the former top-selling genre in the US, country music [1].

According to a study conducted on popular music for tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use, it was seen that 33.3%, or 93 of the 279 song sample portrayed substance use. This study also distinguished two groups when analyzing rap songs and R&B/Hip-hop songs. A striking 48 of 62 rap songs referenced substance use, compared to only 11 of 55 R&B/Hip-hop songs (Primack, Dalton, et al., 2008) [6]. When it comes to substance use in popular music, this was by far the highest percentage. Even though these references can be found in virtually all genres of music, rap has the highest number of references, according to these studies.

While rap's messaging has not been extensively studied, there has been research conducted on the topic, some of which is similar to the current study. A study examined the messages in rap and hip hop lyrics with respect to poverty, drug abuse and sexual harassment, while also trying to

understand how these themes are introduced with the use of explicit words and terms related to violence. This study showed that there is an increase by 42% from 29% in references to violent homicides and how this allows normalizing this type of behavior (Krohn and Suazo, 1995) [7].

When it comes to mainstream media and cultural movements, rap music is relatively new, but its importance cannot be undermined. According to various sources, rap has changed over time in terms of production, consumption, marketing, and creation. This may be due to the fact that United States' music industry at large may have undergone changes due to technological advances and cultural shifts.

3. Research Question

As rap music is becoming more mainstream and attracting younger audience these days, it is important to analyze and understand the kind of language and messages being used in the music. The aim of this study is to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What kind of themes pertaining to violence and substance abuse does rap music contain?
- 2) How have these references changed in rap music over time?

4. Methodology

4.1 Data

To conduct the content analysis, I have considered the data of 67 popular rap songs sampled across decades from 2000 to 2021. I obtained this information from Chart & Data Development department of Billboard, which consists of a chart called 'Billboard hot rap songs' that identifies highest ranked rap songs for these years. A song's popularity in the US for a given year is reflected in its ranking. I have selected top 3 songs per year, at the end of each year. The lyrics for all of these songs were taken from a song lyrics website called 'Genius'.

This study analyzes the most popular songs (top 3) on Billboard rap charts, as this can be a good source to identify the most popular songs in the country due to their consumption by millions of people via various forms of media. Out of all the 67 songs, 53 songs (79%) featured a Black/African American male as a primary artist. The variables I have considered for this analysis are artists, years, race, country of origin and song lyrics.

4.2 Analysis

In order to understand the content of these lyrics about violence and substance abuse, I have coded the lyrics for multiple variables – Violence, Self-harm, Alcohol abuse, Drug abuse and Explicit language.

- i. Violence – do the lyrics mention anything about use of physical force or power resulting in an injury, death or psychological harm?
- ii. Self-harm – do they mention anything about intentional behavior that maybe harmful to oneself?
- iii. Alcohol abuse – do they mention anything regarding consumption of alcohol?

- iv. Drug abuse – do they mention anything regarding consumption of any kinds of drugs?
- v. Explicit language – Is there any usage of explicit words?

I have designed this codebook by myself with the help of some research as mentioned above. I have conducted the content analysis in excel. I have manually analyzed the lyrics to identify the above mentioned themes and observed how they changed over time.

5. Results

Throughout the study, one major finding is that explicit language is very common across songs over years. Out of the sample of 63 songs, only 6% songs (n=4) did not have explicit words. For example, the usage of n-word is often associated with rap lyrics. This is because it has been described as a way for African Americans taking back a slur and making it something they have control over rather than the inverse.

Violence was also found to be a crucial theme in the data. Nearly 75% of the sample (n=47) contain various factors that can be attributed to violence. There are mentions of terms like ‘I’m gon’ shoot you’, ‘Glock’, ‘Knock you out’, etc., Only 25% of the sample (n=16) had no reference to violence of any kind. Only few of the songs, 17% of the sample (n=11), have references to self-harm.

There were also many references to alcohol and drug usage. Around 56% (n=35) of the sample had references to various alcoholic substances. For example, references like ‘Pinot grigio’, ‘Liquor pourin’, ‘Pink Moscato’, etc., were identified. 40% of the sample (n=25) contained references to drugs like ‘Cocaine’, ‘Percocet’, ‘Poppin’ pillies’, etc.,

S.No	Theme	Yes	% Yes	No	% No
1	Violence	47	75%	16	25%
2	Self-harm	11	17%	52	83%
3	Alcohol abuse	35	56%	28	44%
4	Drug abuse	25	40%	38	60%
5	Explicit language	59	94%	4	6%

Table 1 – Distribution of themes across lyrics

We can observe that these themes have existed in rap music and are consistently present over the years (Refer Fig1). From my hypothesis, I expected that the presence of these themes will increase over time, but it seems to be consistent from 2000. This is because the sample size is small and increasing it will give more insight into these trends.

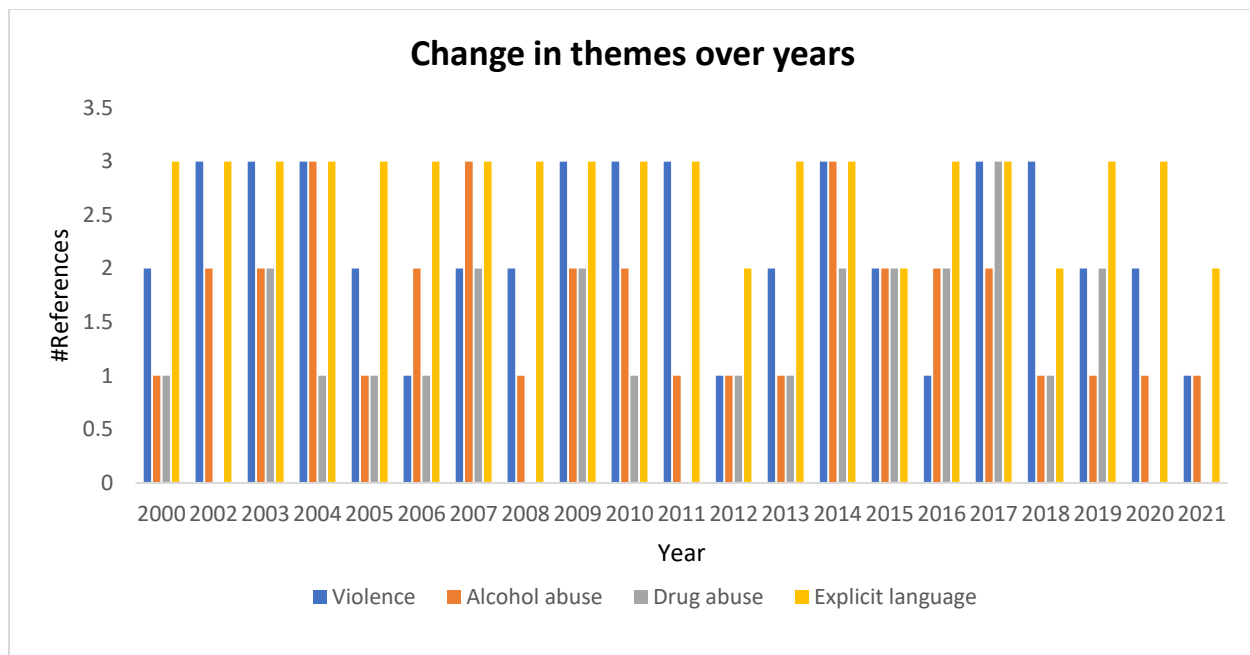


Fig 1 – Distribution of themes over years

6. Conclusions and Limitations

The purpose of this study is to identify certain themes that are prevalent across rap music, and it identifies and confirms these specific trends within rap music. Various themes like violence, alcohol abuse, explicit language were present consistently throughout the years. This may be due to the fact that these types of messages sell commercially in the United States, as well as the fact that corporations and companies feel comfortable releasing them. Although there are differences in aspects of the actual musicality of the songs, they are all very similar in terms of the lyrical content.

The present study is only limited to top 3 songs from Billboard's hot rap songs year-end charts from 2000 to 2021, which does not fully represent the population of rap music. Therefore, with this study we cannot address the discussion if these references have only existed in the most popular songs or even less popular songs. I couldn't find lyrics for some of the songs (Dansin Wit Wolvez, 2001; Ground Zero (In Our Hearts You Will Remain), 2001; Get Mo, 2001; Gangnam Style, 2012), so I ignored these songs for the analysis.

This study examined only a small number of variables and further research can be conducted to identify more and important themes like misogyny, gender portrayals, mental health, etc., By conducting these analysis, it can help us understand the messages that are most often conveyed by mainstream rap music and how it can impact its listeners.

7. References

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