“RAP IS NOT POP, IF YOU CALL IT THAT THEN STOP:” A CONTENT AND INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHANGING THEMES IN HIP-HOP THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

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Kevin Easley

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Department of Sociology
Abstract

“RAP IS NOT POP, IF YOU CALL IT THAT THEN STOP:” A CONTENT AND INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHANGING THEMES IN HIP-HOP THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

by

Kevin Easley

Hip-Hop is an art form born in the streets of the Bronx, New York in the 1970s under very harsh conditions. Rapping ultimately became the chief aspect of the elements of hip-hop, and rap music rose to prominence. Its expressive form lied in-between its roots and what rap is considered today. As rap gained popularity, big recording labels seeking profit brought rappers into the mainstream. This study conducts a content analysis of the changes in lyrical content of the top rap music from 1990 to 2013, and an Intersectionality framework is used to identify and understand the emergent themes. The study indicated that themes of opulence and decadence increase within mainstream rap music over the 23-year period of this study. Sexually explicit themes increase as well over time and as opulence and sexually explicit lyrical content increases, the diversity of the content within mainstream rap decreases as political/pro-Black references were no longer observed after 1995.
DEDICATION

I want to dedicate my work to my ancestors who have endured struggle and their survival is the reason why I live and breathe. As I have the honor and the privilege of attending graduate school, I think about the lack of opportunity my foremothers and fathers had. Although I live in a time where I can be a target of police violence, I know my ancestors had it worse and I want to help build a better tomorrow for my descendants.

My twin Brother Kevon Easley and my maternal grandmother Ruby Buckley. We have supported one another since my mother passed. To my family and friends: Armoni, Kenneth, Chanteley, Rochel, Eric, Edward, Javis, Jayvinay, Javon, Lonniko, Kianti, K.C. Uncle James (RIP), Aunt Pappy (RIP), James, B.B., Man Man, Wyshanda, Kuana, Tayvon, Lovell, Jonathan, Vilay, Nick, Glen, Erjude (RIP), Jimmy, BJ, Vern, Roger, Gerson, Joe, Lee, Mario, Israel, Rob Boyd, Jose Huerta, Tashaka, and everyone else. To the cities of Oakland and Richmond CA, particularly North Oakland and Central Richmond, the 415 and 510 area codes will always be home. Rest in peace to everyone who has lost their lives to drugs and violence back home.

Lastly, I want to dedicate this work to my deceased parents. Kevin Easley, we share the same name and facial features, but we lived different lives and we are different people. I did not get to know you well as you were taken from us at a young age; you are loved and missed by all. In addition, to my mother Marchel McGowen, the women who gave my twin brother and me life, she was everything to me and I have been lost without her all these years. All I can try to do is pick up the pieces and make you proud.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Hip-hop culture is an art form that started in urban environments where people of color, particularly African Americans, reside. However, it has become a dominant force in entertainment and popular culture among people of all walks of life. Hip-hop lives in nearly every populated space in the world with its own interpretations. The majority of consumers of rap differ in background from the typical rapper who is generally Black and working class to White suburban youth. As hip-hop became a mainstream form of entertainment, rap music’s underground roots of simple party music seem to have disappeared. This new form of expression often has lyrics that glorify violence and celebrate material excess. This thesis explores the changing themes of rap music over time as the mainstream media commercialized it.

The significance of my study is multifold. In subsequent chapters, I will show how the intersection of race, class, and gender factors within rap music reinforces and perpetuates societal views and actions that are reflective of U.S. culture. Although rap conforms to many social conventions such as materialism, there are elements of hip-hop culture that are considered oppositional to society’s values, though similar to past counter-culture movements in the United States such as the Civil Rights and Free Speech Movement. This thesis will explore the dichotomy of hip-hop’s conformity as well as its oppositional culture.

Hip-hop culture is very popular in youth culture in every continent in the world. It has also been legitimized by mainstream culture, as the music has and is still utilized in
advertisements and renowned rappers are used as spokespersons for many products to appeal to an “urban” demographic. However, critics scapegoat the music as the cause of many society’s problems. The predominant criticisms of rap are directed to the misogynistic lyrical content, violent rhetoric and crass materialism. (Crenshaw 1993, Crouch 1999) Although rap music speaks to a diversity of subjects, the negative aspects are often the focal point of critics as well as mass marketed by the major recording labels and played on the radio ad nauseam.

Many suburban Whites have adopted the hip-hop culture as their form of self-expression. The majority of the rap CD’s are purchased by Whites (Yousman 2003). Rap music is often seen as synonymous with Black, urban culture; and so White appreciation of the genre is interesting. Rap music often presents life from the perspective of people of color in urban settings, and Whites, who are residentially removed from African Americans, either may consciously or subconsciously receive their impression of Black people through the music. This reality could be understood in a couple of different ways. Whites may gain a deeper understanding of the struggle of people of color and the poor. Rappers like Chuck D from the rap group Public Enemy often raps about the harsh realities of being Black in the United States. In a best-case scenario, Whites may become aware of lived experiences in the intercity (Campbell 2007), and become sympathetic and want to help make positive change. In this favorable scenario, both Black and White youth as well as people of all races can enjoy the music and participate in the culture, making hip-hop a unifying force. In a second alternative view, the White audience may become desensitized to the violence committed in rhymes from Black rappers (Dyson
2007). They may also equate lyrical violence to real life violence, thereby becoming insensitive to the violence that occurs in urban spaces (Sterheimer 2009). Suburban Whites often hear lyrics of senseless violence with no real context because many mainstream rappers do not elaborate on systematic and structural oppression that leads to violence. Whites by then may lose any sympathy and dismiss the plight of Black people as just the way ‘those people’ live (Sterheimer 2009). Critics such as Wynton Marsalis and Stanly Crouch even go as far to claim that Whites are laughing at the antics of these rappers as if rap music is a minstrel show, but with a handful of Blacks making money by exploiting themselves (Crouch 1999; Dyson 2007).

Whites are not just observers. They are also active participants in the culture. Although a numeric minority in participation, Whites have also contributed to rap since its early days with rappers like the Beasty Boys and 3rd Base. Whites have played an integral part in rap music behind the scenes as well. The top tier record labels are owned and operated by Whites, with a handful profiting immensely from the hip-hop culture.

Rap has been and is currently used in advertisements for a multitude of products. Rapper Sean (Jay-Z) Carter’s notoriety was utilized by the Obama administration in Ohio, a crucial battleground state in the Presidents’ bid for re-election in 2012. With rap recognized as a profitable business, many argue that rap music is now beholden to major corporations who watered down and co-opted the substance from the music (Asante 2008). As profit is a primary motive, mainstream record labels only seek rappers who can adequately reproduce the same material that is already been proven successful, which includes materialism, sexism and violence. This attitude is a departure from the early
days when hip-hop was looked at as a passing fad. Analyzing rap music from a longitudinal framework can show whether rappers have “sold out” or in other words accommodated to hegemonic American culture.

Rap was originally an “underground” sensation that played at park parties in New York City. Rap was eventually acknowledged as profitable when acts like Run DMC and LL Cool J made music that was accepted by the masses. This success led major corporations in taking an interest in the music genre. Rap music however has traditionally had many elements of it that are anti-establishment. Gangsta rap and conscious/political/Black Nationalism rap criticizes the status quo and goes against what conservatives see as “mainstream American values.” There have been many rappers with anti-establishment views like NWA’s hyper-violent (for the time) lyrics and Sister Souljah, (who has even been addressed by Bill Clinton in 1992 on her “extreme” views) that were signed to major recording labels. However, rap music now does not seem to have the lyrical diversity that it once had.

Rappers and fans alike have noticed the coopting of the culture. There have been complaints levelled against radio stations across many regions in the United States playing the same few songs ad nauseam, and that they do not support local, unsigned, artists. Also, diversity in rap lyrics appears to have declined as compared to the past when there were pro-Black rappers like Brand Nubian, as well as gangsta rappers like Ice Cube. Both were heard together on the radio and seen on MTV; back when MTV was in the business of showing music videos. This thesis explores whether the
commercialization of rap music has led to less creativity and more conformity within mainstream music.

If there is coopting of the music, the appropriation should be apparent in the lyrics. Since rap music seems to be less diverse in lyrical content compared to the past in mainstream music, one might expect that there will be more homogeneity in the lyrics if one does a content analysis of songs and themes. If such were the case, what entity would stifle rap’s creativity yet at the same time elevate it to new heights? Corporate power and profit interests are critical factors. Rap music was able to break out from the underground even though there were people who thought of rap as a passing fad. The main downside of becoming popular enough to gain recognition from major labels is that artists generally do not retain their masters (the original recording of the song) and ultimately do not have the rights to their music. Secondly, the major recording labels are corporations that invest capital in a rapper, but they will want a return on their investment by getting the artist to sell as many units as possible. Record labels do not care about social commentary or a positive contribution to society. Record labels also do not care about creativity. In fact, an artist who may want to be creative and different is seen as risky to making money. The label may want to avoid an experimental artist in lieu of someone that is more likely to sell with a proven style.

A final reason for the significance of my study is that hip-hop culture and rap music, despite its criticisms, have been part of the dominant youth culture for multiple generations. If the music represents the audio of the youth, surely the music video represents the visuals. Rappers set trends, from the clothing worn and the way it is worn
to the type of cars that are seen as desirable. One of the major contributions rappers bring is an altering of the English language. Many different slang words form various regions have been introduced to the masses. The term blingbling, for example, means flashy jewelry, and crunk, a name for an aggressive southern style of rap music that is recognized in the popular U.S. Merriam-Webster dictionary (http://www.merriam-webster.com). Rappers who sign to a major label will have a greater opportunity to get their music heard with the labels’ corporate dollars backing them. Media plays a huge part in socializing the youth. What messages are we sending to our youth through rap music?

As rap music is as important to the youth and the youth is important to the future of humanity, it is crucial to examine what the youth are interested in and what they stand for. Music is a very important aspect of many people’s lives. What and why someone listens to the music that they do can vary. My analysis of rap music over time will not only show what the youth valued in the past and compare it to the present (or what the youth are being pushed to value) but also document the changes that have occurred over time.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Hip-hop and the Black urban community have a symbiotic relationship (Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009). Although it is one of the many genres of music developed by Black people, it is not the first or only American music genre conceived by African Americans. Rap music now is closely associated with Black culture and specifically with the Black urban youth than past genres like rock and roll and jazz (Henderson 1996). For many the music is a voice for poor Blacks and Brown people who lived in poverty. After years of steady gains into the popular culture, rap has become a multi-million dollar enterprise sold by multi-national corporations. Rap has become a mainstream music genre that can be seen all over American and even foreign media; and it did not get to this place without the support of dominate White mainstream society, particularly the youth. Rap music has evolved as its popularity reached to new heights. This study examines how rap’s messages and themes have been affected by becoming mainstream.

This literature review provides a synopsis of the African American experience and the social structural and environmental disadvantage in which hip-hop was born. Then I will discuss the current state of knowledge of hip-hop. This paper will explain the controversial genre of “gangsta” rap as well as political or Black Nationalism rap and criticisms of both. From there, I will analyze claims of the cooption of rap music by examining the structure of mainstream rap and what the capitalist market has done to the music. I will also present the issue of authenticity in rap music and its importance as well as the controversy associated with “keeping it real.”
Black and Hip Hop Culture

Black people have been historically rejected from full participation and acceptance in the United States and before that, the British colonies. Subjugated by a racist structure built from the ideology of White supremacy, Africans were enslaved for hundreds of years before emancipation and for nearly a century after they formally segregated from whites in every aspect of life in the United States. After many struggles and legal protections from discrimination, Blacks still face systematic racism that though illegal, persists as evidenced in housing, employment, school, among other social spaces. (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Asante 2008; Massey and Denton 1993; Desmond and Emirbayer 2010). Many Black people have internalized the racism and prejudice and project racial self-hate to themselves and others who may have darker skin (Fanon 1967; Nakano 2009), or try to gain acceptance by identifying with the dominant group. However, African Americans in general have found full assimilation not viable or desirable. Denied full membership and acceptance to the dominant culture, Blacks have made their own culture that speaks to their own experiences and to their own images and values (Collins 2000). These include subcultures affirming ethnic pride, strengthening self-esteem, as well as recognizing the survival of their history and self-expression (Collins 2000).

Rap music and hip-hop culture represent a dialectical reality, i.e., Eurocentric, capitalistic, and patriarchal hegemony and resistance to those intersecting systems (Martinez 1997). The outcome of this reality reflects both opposition as well as conformity to White dominant culture. Many of the materialistic, violent and sexist rhetoric, which makes rap notorious, actually reflect American culture (Dyson 2007).
Violence, sexism and materialism in the United States as well as other nations predate the relatively young music genre of rap music. Other forms of media such as movies, video games and even cartoons popularize violence. Furthermore, many other music genres contain violent lyrics from folk to rock and roll (Richardson and Scott 2002). Rock music has also faced similar criticisms and has been blamed for numerous acts of violence. The 1999 Columbine high school shooting left many people looking for someone to blame for such senseless violence. The primary target was a rock musician by the name of Marilyn Manson. The culprits and their social group dressed in black, wore trench coats, and were called “the trench coat mafia.” The Associated Press assumed that they were fans of Manson’s music because Manson wore black. It turned out that they disliked his particular brand of music (Wright 2000). There is a history of Black people and controversial themes. Toasting, an old Black tradition prior to rap, consisted of sexist and violent poems told by comedians and actors (Canton 2006). Comedians and Black exploitation films often incorporated violence and sexism.

Hip-hop culture derives from the urban landscape. This environment shapes rap music, particularly more modern rap music with the integration of jail culture (Canton 2006; Dyson 2007) and street culture (Kubrin 2005). Respect is a central element of living in poor neighborhoods as well in many hip-hop lyric. Disrespect can lead to violent retaliation (Kubrin 2005; Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009). Rappers often have conflict with each other that can lead to songs in which both parties disrespect each other or lead straight to violence. In addition to the societal norm or violence, rappers’ materialism also reflects conforming to American culture, though there are particularities to hip-hop
and the streets. Expensive cars, jewelry and clothes are desired and sought after by the residents of poor neighborhoods. The fact that someone in a poor environment would possess expensive items goes to the matter of respect. There is a certain level of respect needed to be able to get away with possessing luxurious possessions in an area where many people are struggling. In an impoverished area, theft is common. Those with sought after high-end material have to be prepared to defend those possessions, even with their life.

Patriarchy also intersects with rap’s capitalistic inclinations. Women also are considered objects. The sexual conquest of women is a status symbol for men (Kubrin 2005). Men often use women as a means of self-esteem to compensate for not being able to attain manhood in other ways, because many avenues associated with manhood such as owning a home, having a well-paying job, and attaining other measures of manhood in the dominant culture is often closed off to them (Martinez 1997).

An aspect of hip-hop as an oppositional culture is an extension to Black and other marginalized groups’ oppositional culture. Oppressed groups draw from their own cultural resources to resist internal colonialism (Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009; Martinez 1997). From the days of slavery, kidnapped Africans engaged in opposition to the unfair treatment. Many of the oppositional tactics were covert to not arouse much suspicion. Oppressed people used music dance and language to preserve many African traditions in disguise, as well as to mock, show anger and use fantasies of subversion against those in power (Rose 1994). Rap continues the tradition or opposition by giving voice to a
disenfranchised Black youth and in political rap, airing grievances against a White culture dominant system (Martinez 1997).

Black people have often done the best that they could under harsh circumstances, producing innovations that have been necessary for their existence or for a dignified identity (Fanon 1967). This has been done in the United States as well as all over Southern America and the Caribbean. Black people have maintained a sense of African roots at the same time as taking in their colonizer’s culture. One example is language. There is a group of Black people in South Carolina known as the Gullah people who speak distinctly part English and part African vernacular (Wilkerson 1933). People in the Caribbean Islands like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tabago speak Patwa, a fast and difficult to understand version of mixed English to the untrained ear.

Hip-hop was a way of innovation for entertainment that is a way of survival in the harsh urban environment. As I will elaborate further, hip-hop was a cheap way for the poor to peacefully occupy their time. Hip-hop and rap come from humble beginnings, and with years of innovation and youth dominated coolness, it remains a dominant American and worldwide subculture.

**Hip Hop’s Beginnings**

To understand hip-hop culture, you have to understand its beginnings and the environment in which it comes from. Hip-hop started in the early to mid-1970 in the New York City borough of the Bronx. The Bronx at that time was a dilapidated area with high crime rates. Gangs roamed the area, and one of them was known as the Black Spades. Their leader eventually became Afrika Bambaataa, a pioneer of the culture (Rose 1991).
Hip-hop culture encompasses urban pastimes like graffiti, break dancing, but the music is the centerpiece. It was pioneered by a Disc Jockey named DJ Kool Herc. Hip-hop was a party environment where Disc Jockeys like Grandmaster Flash and Grandmaster Theodore were the main attractions. The DJ made the turntable into an instrument blending records together and invented scratching. Theodore is said to have first done it, but Flash is better known for it (Martinez 1997; Rose 1991). MC’s would later become the central focus in hip-hop. Hip-hop started as an inexpensive party oriented activity and became more serious when the lyrical content changed. In 1982, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released a vivid and descriptive song called “The Message” about how difficult it is to live in poverty: “Don’t push me cause I’m close to the edge… I’m trying not to lose my head… It’s like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.” This song is one of the earliest songs to delve into issues that concerned many poor people in dangerous urban environments (Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009). Lyrics slowly became more salient to the culture and other serious issues started to be rapped about.

During the infancy of hip-hop, many urban areas around the United States were experiencing similar problems with deindustrialization and the concentration of poverty, particularly in Black regions (Massey and Denton. 1993; Desmond and Emirbayer 2010). Globalization in the 1970s lead to the restructuring of the economy from a manufacture-based one to a service-based economy where jobs were scarce and part-time/temporary with low wages that were not enough to sustain living in an urban setting (Collins 2000; Kubrin 2005). In this political-economic context, the informal economy rises, where the
formal one does not offer many opportunities to a largely impoverished and under-educated population. Drug dealing becomes a viable option to make a great deal of money quickly, especially for many young people who do not see better options and see much despair in their neighborhoods as the Black middle class follow the White flight out of the city (Massey and Denton 1993; Desmond and Emirbayer 2005). These trends coincided with more punitive laws and police profiling sending many young minorities to prison for extended sentences. Baggy pants and gang signs are some creations of prison culture that were introduced to and adopted by many non-convicts, who share the same environment as released prisoners.

“Gangsta” and Political Rap

The urban street culture, particularly from the Los Angeles area, emerged from a group of rappers and producers founded by a Compton drug dealer turned rapper named Eric “Eazy-E” Wright. The group went under the name NWA, which stands for Niggaz with Attitudes. That was a strong statement “because boyz in the hood are always hard.” This is one of the first documented instances of Black people using what is now commonly known as the N-word, not in the derogatory way as intended by racists against African Americans. Many Blacks used the word behind closed doors (Canton 2006). Their lyrics were very violent and misogynistic but also rapped about police brutality and exposed some of the harsh realities of living in poverty in Los Angeles (Canton 2006). This emergent Gangsta rap became very successful despite being banned from many radio stations, including many that were Black owned (Canton 2006). Their style became replicated by other groups on the West Coast such as Compton’s Most Wanted and
groups from other regions adapted aspects of it. It ultimately became the most dominant subgenre of rap.

Gangsta rap was not without its critics. The media, politicians and even religious figures came out against the messages in the music. In 1989 Tipper Gore, wife of then Vice President of the United States Al Gore, started a group called Parents Music Choice to censor rap music as well as heavy metal rock music (Canton 2006). Rap concerts became difficult to insure because rap concerts had a bad reputation because the media sensationalized coverage of a couple of isolated incidents, among other reasons (Rose 1991; Crenshaw 1993). Violent and misogynist lyrics did not help the matter when it came to trying to get venues to allow rappers to perform. This may have affected rappers who do not incorporate the same type of content in their music. Rap is usually painted with a broad brush, and diversity of lyrical content is not appreciated (Rose 1991).

Around the same time gangsta rap was a subgenre that has not been as popular, but was very important to the genre i.e., political or Black nationalistic rap. Black Nationalism is the belief that Black people have a distinct culture and history, and Blacks should develop and defend institutions that advance their interests (Henderson 1996). Rappers like X Clan, Brand Nubian, and most notably Public Enemy’s (also known as P.E.) lyrical content proclaimed Black pride and denouncing racism and oppressive forces such as police brutality and racial profiling: “Fight the Power.” There have been rappers who have recited Black Nationalistic content in the past like Run DMC, as well as rappers who would not normally considered political rappers like Ice-T and Ice Cube
that have addressed issues like police in the ghetto among other issues that pertain to Black people.

When compared to gangsta rap, Henderson (1996) believes that even though rappers claim that their lyrics speak to the harsh realities of the streets, rappers should focus on trying to describe a better reality. Black nationalistic rhymes alone will not help people who are suffering. Henderson calls for rappers to be active in their communities helping the people. He acknowledges X Clan for their Blackwatch Movement organization and claims that X Clan pushed Public Enemy and other rappers to be more political. Henderson calls out rappers who he feels are not authentic, namely Ice-T and Cube. He said both rappers speak on social issues from the comfort of their mansions (Henderson 1996).

Commercialization and its Consequences

Although hip-hop culture started organically through parties in the South Bronx area of New York City, the music and culture has become a major influence to youth culture, not just in the inner city and with the minorities, but also in the suburbs with many White listeners. When rap music showed an ability to make a profit, major labels that were leery of producing rap music reconsidered their position knowing how successful it has/can be. This study focuses on what happens to the music when it becomes mass-produced. What happens to the messages? Does the listening audience still receive messages that come from the true lived experiences of Blacks in urban spaces, or does the original message become convoluted with stereotypical and exaggerated themes? What happens to the lyrics? Does the transition to the mainstream alter those as
well? Many believe that the answer is yes (Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009; Asante 2008). This study will use content analysis of rap to access this view.

As hip-hop gained popularity and sold out arenas, it can be argued that rap music has sold out figuratively as well. Rap music has had the ability to sell millions of records and sell out venues of all sizes depending on popularity of the rapper. However, whilst mainstream rap enjoys success, the content and messages that mainstream rap produces becomes unoriginal lacking diversity in concepts, beats, and lyrical content. Often the same small number of rappers dominates the radio airwaves, regardless of geographic location. Hip-hop is not the only subculture to face coopting. Rock music has Black roots, but many White musicians like Elvis Presley would record and perform songs originally done by Black artists because of the overt racism of the time. White rock groups have now dominated the genre with sub-genres, such as Death Metal have little resemblance to older Rock music. When cultures and subcultures become appealing to the masses, people and entities that were not involved in the creation of the culture will appropriate it. This appropriation may not be sinister in nature, but in many cases the elements of the culture are commoditized, and important aspects of the culture can be distorted when not appreciated or known about by corporations and posers (Desmond and Emirbayer 2005; Wehr 2009). An example would be having a Puma decorated Humvee at a bicycle messenger race where many in that community are environmentally conscious (Wehr 2009)

As far as Rap Music is concerned, the message and themes have changed dramatically since its inception (Asante 2008). As stated earlier, rap was a very
simplistic, party based lyrical content genre. Rap now has more complicated concepts and very diverse content, but within the mainstream, rap music themes often are considered violent and degrading to women as well as excessively materialist. If there are other rap artists with other points of view like Immortal Technique with a political revolutionary perspective, why are they not given an opportunity to thrive in the mainstream? The answer is that the rap music being presented in the mainstream sells and the record labels have a “if it isn’t broke, don’t fix” mentality with the music. This can and has led to the stagnation in the music, which is the case with other music genres, as well as many other areas in media.

The Frankfurt school of sociology often addressed popular culture decades before advent of rap, yet it applies to mainstream rap in its current form. In “One Dimensional Man,” Herbert Marcuse (1964) writes about how creative energy is often used to perpetuate the status quo instead of pursuing art for art’s sake. In addition, Marcuse (1964) asserted that consumerism was in a way, a form of social control. It was a way to keep the lower classes content, distracting and pacifying them (Marcuse 1964). Mainstream rap music contributed to this. Many of the rap songs and music videos are virtually commercials for a multitude of items; usually brands of alcohol, clothes, shoes and jewelry. Rappers often give free promotion to high-end European clothing brands like Gucci and Louis Vuitton. The more business savvy rappers are able to procure endorsement deals with the brand, receiving some monetary reward and free products for their services. Others like Sean “P Diddy” Combs have made their own clothes and liquor, pushing their products to the lower classes who can hardly afford these items, yet
many people find themselves compelled to want to buy these overpriced and opulent items anyways. That is not exclusive to the rap music listening population, but their advertisement for the “good life” seems more apparent.

The audience tends to just accept what mainstream rap music offers. Horkheimer and Adorno (1913) suggest that for someone to enjoy a movie, a viewer needs to be able to suspend their ability to critique. That same applies to rap music. Many of the lyrics are unbelievable to say the least and the rap videos are often fantasies on film. Rap’s authenticity has been called to question on whether or not rap truly reflects the real life conditions of the marginalized as it once did as well as challenge social structures (Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009; Asante 2008; Hunter and Soto 2009; Hurd 2009). However, there have been rappers in the past and present that have managed to have success and sales and critical acclaim without the popularized violence, misogyny and materialism. In many cases, they are the exception and not the rule.

Keepin’ it Reel: Authenticity in Hip-Hop

Many rappers claim their music as “real.” For decades, rappers pride themselves in “keepin’ it real” and claim to be “real niggas.” This is usually associated with rappers whose lyrics contain ultra-violence and selling high quantities of drugs, but in reality, many rappers have not and would not presently engage in any of these activities, but do so to sell records (Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009). Rappers who do not claim to have lived a criminal past will then claim that they are representing the people in the region where they originate from as if everyone there engages in a criminal lifestyle. Often times gangsta rappers have been called out on whether or not they have really lived a criminal
lifestyle prior to becoming rappers, and many have been caught not being who they proclaim to be in their rhymes.

As for materialism and consumerism, the economy has been on the decline and compact disc sales for music has done the same. Rap was no exception. The economic stagnation and the easy access to illegally downloaded music have made rap music less profitable than in earlier times. Rappers still brag about living an opulent lifestyle despite not selling the number of records that they would need to live the lifestyle of which they rap. In rap videos, many of the cars and jewels are often rented, as well as the mansions that are used in the backdrop. It gives credence to an old adage, “fake it, to you make it.”

An issue brought up by M.K. Asante (2008) is the effects that rap have on Black people as a whole. As with many other aspects of media, rap may show a narrow, one-sided view of Black people as well as all people of color. In hip-hop, this is usually in a “ghetto” aspect. For Black people who do not live that type of lifestyle, there is often an identity crisis (Asante 2008). Blacks question their authenticity while Whites find it weird for a Black person to not speak or act “ghetto.” Blacks from higher socio-economic statuses often pretend to be from the ghetto to fit in. In rap, it is almost imperative that you come from the “streets.” The story of Russell Jones is an example of how having street credentials (or street cred for short) is important in the hip-hop community. He lied about growing up in the Fort Greene projects in Brooklyn, and under the name Ol’ Dirty Bastard of the Wu-Tang Clan, ended up living a reckless lifestyle and dying because of it (Asante 2008). Why lie about your upbringing one may ask? Jones’ mother responded: “he did it for the publicity” (Asante 2008:29).
Rap music’s content has an effect on the perceptions of urban youth, particularly those of color. Rap music and videos as well as other media often portray Black men and women (as well as Latinos) in a narrow view; men often as flashy and/or intimidating (Kubrin 2005) and women as sexual objects (Crenshaw 1993; Kubrin 2005; Hunter and Soto 2009; Adams and Fuller 2006; Dyson 2007; Sternheimer 2009). These narrow views have led to overgeneralizing people within the culture, a culture with a population which is already stereotyped (Sternheimer 2009; Cobb and Boettcher III 2007). It is conceivable that Caucasians with limited contact with diverse backgrounds may receive information of other cultures through the media. With such negative and narrow portrayals in rap as well as film and television, it is possible that many of them will internalize the images. Fears about rock and roll being a bad influence when Blacks still participated in large numbers has now transferred to rap music (Sternhiemer 2009). Now rap holds the distinction of being the most harmful music genre to the youth (Hunnicutt and Andrews 2009). Rap does have a strong influence on the youth in regards of dress, and language, and much of the youth, particularly people of color identify with hip-hop lifestyle but it would be shortsighted to blame rap music for many social problems. At worse, rap perpetuates violence, sexism, and materialism among other issues, but rap was not the catalyst for these issues as stated previously. Blaming rap music ignores the diversity within the genre, diversity that is harder to find in the mainstream than previously. As with the diversity within Black people, the diversity within rap music is often ignored (Sternheimer 2009). The narrow view of rap music is not the result of the lack of
diversity, but the lack of exposure to and/or inclusion of that diversity by the dominant society, particularly corporate elites in the media.

As I have found with critics of rap (Crouch 1999), I hope to not paint rap with one broad paint stroke; there are other types of rap music and rappers who do not produce sexist, violent, materialistic content. It seems that many of these rappers do not receive the same support from mainstream media. What can be done so that alternative perspectives are given an opportunity to receive mainstream support? The mainstream record labels are driven by profit. If the listeners demanded more socially responsible music, the labels would be left with little choice but to oblige. After all, rap music worked its way to its current level of popularity from the people who support hip-hop to begin with.

Rap Music is essentially a conduit for many poor, marginalized people to express themselves. The music often reveals many things that are uncomfortable for many people to hear. Its lyrics often depict dangerous aspects of street life, but even if rappers themselves do not really engage in these activities, and many rap in hyperbole, similar events do occur. And if these societal issues were addressed, there would be no need for such rap lyrics to be expressed and critiqued. Rap music has a “keep it real” ethos. Rappers claim to represent the “streets” and if the environment had more positive elements, Rappers would have no choice but to rap more lyrics that are positive.

Intersectionality

The theoretical framework that guides my study is intersectionality. Intersectionality a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw was developed and cultivated by
Black feminists. Intersectionality looks at multiple identities and lived experiences (Jones, Kim and Skendall 2012). Four characteristics of intersectionality include: 1) lives of individuals lived experience, particularly marginalized groups, 2) making identities more complex for individuals and groups, 3) exploring the importance of identity in both power and privilege and structures of inequality, and 4) promoting social change and justice.

Intersectionality challenges the notion of a singular narrative in regards to oppression (Ramirez 2014; Collins 2000). In other words, a Black or Latina woman does not have to choose between addressing issues of being a person of color over being a woman. Being a member of both of the aforementioned as well as others such as sexual orientation and having a physical or mental disability are simultaneously experienced and no one experience should be discounted. One oppression or identity does not outrank the other (Ramirez 2014; Collins 2000)

Intersectionality theory is central to this study. The intersection between class, race, and gender is paramount for reasons previously stated. Hip-hop’s roots are of working class people of color. Over time rap has become more diverse and multicultural, but rap music has maintained a perception of being Black music. Rap music’s fixation with “keeping it real” and its misguided definition of real (Asante 2008) may have kept rap music from diverging from the urban space by keeping rap music’s themes narrow, which is one of my hypotheses. As stated earlier, rappers who step outside the box may find a new niche for themselves, but may also face backlash for being “weird.”
Continuing with the concept of intersectionality is the power dynamics of the mainstream record label as well as the audience, which I have also explained. 

Mainstream rap music is Black music mass produced by White record labels for majority White audience. This can lead to interesting views on the motivation and reasons Whites also enjoy hip-hop as stated in my introduction. Intersectionality also takes into account how mainstream record label’s profit driven motives compare to hip-hop’s original motives including oppositional culture (Martinez 1997). The drive for profit is also salient among rappers who want to sign to a major recording label and improve their living situation. Rapping about high-end products is appealing to urban youth and inspiring when the rapper claims to come from the same humble beginnings. My research question of rap’s increase in opulent themes over time comes from the audience’s admiration for the rich in American culture.

Gender also plays a part in hip-hop, and intersects with race and class systems. Rap music is stereotyped as hyper-masculine art form as shown in media such as Byron Hurt’s *Hip Hop: Beyond Beat and Rhymes* (2006). Women have been involved with the hip-hop culture from its inception. As with men, while women also have very narrow depictions of themselves in mainstream rap music (Irving 1993), the difference is that women are often highly sexualized and degraded along racial and class lines. Hunter and Soto (2009) assert that rap music’s misogyny is more harmful to women of color. It confirms the jezebel, sapphire, and spicy Latina stereotypes. The depiction of women is not much different from women in porn. In fact, rappers such as Calvin “Snoop Dogg” Broadus and Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson III have been involved in the production and/or
hosting of pornography (Hunter and Soto 2009). Besides objectification, the second major theme observed by Hunter and Soto were using women voices, often R&B singers to sell their patriarchal ideology (Hunter and Soto 2009); having a female singer validate the men’s view to other women. The last theme is glorifying loyalty to a man from women. This negative framing places women at the service of men to the death and thus reinforces patriarchal ideology (Hunter and Soto 2009). The increase in sexual content in hip-hop mirrors American culture (Dyson 2007; Hunter and Soto 2009) and my hypothesis of increased sexual content in rap throughout time derives from that.

Research Questions

Intersectionality theory informs this study’s research questions:

Q1: Do current rap music lyrics convey more themes of decadence and opulence as time progresses?

Q2: Does current mainstream music have as diverse thematic content as rap from the past, including political and pro-Black content in particular.

Q3: Has rap music increased the explicit sexual content in the present era as compared to the past?
Chapter 3

Methods

Content Analysis

This research explored the aforementioned questions through content analysis of rap music lyrics in a 23-year time span (1990-2013) as to observe any difference in themes over time. The year 1990 is the first year that Billboard separated rap from R&B. Billboard criteria consist of record spins, sales, and recently digital downloads and steams. The recent changes did not take place until 2012. The year 1990 is a good starting point because rap music had notoriety, but not high sales at this point. Rap progresses greatly in the mid-to-late 1990s. Although I originally wanted to do an analysis on rap music videos, using lyrics was a more favorable method in terms of operationalization. It is easier to code words and themes as well as provide the lyrics for the reader instead of describing what the researcher saw. Lyrical analysis has been used in the past in examining themes within hip-hop, past studies serve as a template for this study.

Complications occur with understanding the lyrics in its true context. Rap music is very trendy and very regional. Over time, words meanings change, and words that were once common have been relegated to the era in which it was used. Rap music does this at an accelerated pace. Words like “fresh”, “dope” and “hype” are buzzwords of the 1980’s. In addition, “bad” in many instance meant good. In regards to regional slang, rappers often show regional affiliation and loyalty by using localized slang words to identify with their home. Misinterpreting the usage of the word could lead to misunderstanding of the rapper’s true intentions. It is imperative that one has prior understanding of hip-hop
culture to properly attempt to decipher lyrics. As an insider, I was born into the hip-hop culture.

I examined lyrics and common themes to songs in my sample. I wrote descriptions about the lyrics referring back to the literature review and the theory. In each song there is an overall theme as well as sub-themes. Sub-themes are themes within a song that is not the overall dominant theme. I anticipated seeing multiple themes in songs because not all rap songs have an overall narrative. This allowed a more thorough understanding of the songs. When reading lyrics I coded themes based on colors for organization purposes. I used highlighters to underline themes in songs represented by a color code scheme as follows:

Grey= references of street code themes/violence themes
Yellow= references of financial related themes
Royal Blue= references of love/relationship themes
Green= reference of drug and alcohol use themes
Light Blue= references of political/pro-Black themes
Orange= references to sexual themes

Data Collection

With the understanding that I wanted to show the impact of commercialization of rap music, I used a purposeful sample that focuses only on rap music that has been commercialized. This includes those that have made it to the top of the Billboard music weekly charts. The source of information was the official billboard website. I wanted to use the top 100 songs for the entire year and find rap songs within them, but Billboard did
not provide them for all years and rap songs often did not make the list for numerous years. I was able to find the weekly charts for hip-hop and R&B charts for 1988 on up, but again, R&B overshadowed rap in the earlier days to the point that rap hardly appeared on the charts in the first few years. I then found a rap chart, which started in 1990. I decided to use that particular chart and start from 1990 as to guarantee an ample sample of songs.

I defined rap music as a song where the artist is considered a rapper. I disqualified songs where a rapper is featured on the song if the song belongs to a non-rapper. It is technically not their song. I allowed rap songs, which features singers or any other type of artist as data as long as the rapper has top billing. I allowed songs where the Disc Jockey or DJ is top billing as long as there are more rappers on the track than singers. It was quite common once upon a time for many rap groups to have their DJ name ahead of theirs i.e. DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince and Eric B and Rakim. Even now there are DJ’s like DJ Khalid who gathers artist to do songs. Lastly, I include rap songs where the rapper sings on the track, however, I did not include R&B singers or any other artist if are rapping on a song but are not commonly identified as a rapper (e.g. R&B singer Chris Brown has rapped on numerous songs and Future and other rappers have sang on recordings).

The song lyrics were found using rap genius website, which storing thousands of rap lyrics. The website reaches out to rap artist to verify meanings of lyrics. Once I found the lyrics to a song, I also listened to the songs while reading the lyrics to test the accuracy of the lyrics found. There was one song that rap genius did not have. So I found
them elsewhere. (www.lyricfreak.com) for Father MC’s “Treat Them They Want To Be Treated.”

I divided the 23 years into 5 sections, gathering 5 songs from each totaling to 25 songs. I made a spreadsheet of all the songs for organization purposes and to assign each song a number. From there I sectioned them off by years. The dates were 1990-1995, 1996-2000, 2001-2005, 2006-2010, and 2011-2013. I assigned numbers for each time period, wrote them in on a piece of paper and had four co-workers and my grandmother randomly select 5 numbers from each of the five time periods from a beanie.

Themes to Observe

Within a 23-year period, I examined changes in lyrical content over time. I gathered songs and placed them in categories based on their major theme. I made note of any sub-themes within the songs as well. Each theme is explained with examples from the songs placed within them as well as relating themes back to the literature and theory. Some themes were interconnected (i.e. street and financial) and in such a case their songs were placed in more than one category. I had broad categories so it was important to place context to lyric as well. I explained meanings to lyrics so as to not misconstrue the meaning of a song or particular lyrics within the song.
Chapter 4

Results

Figure 1  Total References of Each Theme

![Graph showing the Sum of Lyrical References of Each Rap Theme from 1990 to 2013](image)

- streetviolence
- financial
- loverelationship
- drugalc
- political
- sex
Street/Violent Themes

Street/violent themes was one of the least frequent in the case of dominant themes examined, though violent/street sub-themes in songs occurred at a higher frequency. As seen in figure 1 above, overall violent references decreased from the first period of (1990-1995) to the second (1996-2000), increased from 2001-2005, slightly decreased from 2005-2010 and decreased from 2011-2013. For the two songs that main theme was street/violent “Untouchable” by Above the Law and “Who Dat” by JT Money featuring Sole, both were labeled as such because of the amount of references in those particular songs outnumbered other themes within the songs. There were not any purely street/violent songs, as most songs in fact did not simply present one theme.

“Untouchable” was a song performed by a West Coast Gangsta Rap group called Above the Law. They signed to the aforementioned Eazy E’s Ruthless Records. Street/violent themes were unusual for them though they also released a rap song called “Murder Rap.” As stated earlier, being able to kill or die for respect is an important aspect of the street code. People who are considered “crazy” or a “killer” are highly respected in urban spaces. One of the rappers in the group by the name of 187 (code for murder) states: “187’s a killer, even iller.” This is a clear statement as to solidify his street credibility. “Iller” is used in context of being “crazy” or mentally ill. Other occurrences of street/violent themes were prison and law enforcement. 2 Pac in his 1995 song “Dear Mama” rapped:

“And who’d Think in elementary, hey
I’d see the penitentiary one day?”
And Jim Jones’s “We Fly High” Jones ends his first verse exposing his disdain for law enforcement.

“Got my pedal to the floor screaming fuck the cops”

The violet rhetoric in Above the Law’s lyrics may reflect the intersectional experiences of Black males living racially segregated and in poverty. Whether the group members were actually impoverished themselves or not, they represent of the experience of the criminal underworld in which many poor youth of color find themselves in when other legitimate avenues are closed off to them. However, it is important to note that African American youth do not commit more crimes than other racial-ethnic groups, though they are more likely to be subjected to unequal treatment by law enforcement as recent examples around the country have caught the nation’s attention.

Financial References

Financial themes and references increased substantially over time. In my sample, there were not any dominant financial themes until “Gold Digger” by Kanye West in 2004. Financial references increased significantly from 2001-2005 period and remained until the most recent period 2011-2013. Moreover, financial themes tied with sex for second most observed dominant themes. Interestingly, record sells have been on the decline and the overall economy left many people not able to relate to opulence. Nonetheless, the trend clearly reflects the Great Recession period, with possibly rappers worrying about financial status and fanaticizing about material and sexual dominance.

Another noteworthy observation was not only the increase of financial themes, but also the nature in which finances were mentioned in song. For example, financial
themes were framed in two major ways: opulence and struggle. The former appeared overwhelmingly more often than the latter. The sub theme of struggle only appeared in one song named “Dear Mama” by 2 Pac in 1995. He mentioned how hard it was for him and his sister to grow up poor, however, he marvels at how his mother was able to survive and raise two children,

“A single mother on welfare, tell me how you did it” and

“You just working with scraps you were giving
And mama made miracles every thanksgivin.”

2 Pac justifies selling drugs as a financial necessity by rapping:

“I moved out and started really hangin
’I needed money of my of my own so I started slangin
I ain’t guilty cause even though I sold rocks
It felt good putting money in my mail box
I love paying rent when the rents due
I hope you got the diamond necklace that I sent to you.”

Paying rent and buying your mother a necklace is different from the usage of opulent references in future songs.

Opulent themes were presented in interesting ways. Many of the songs in which the main theme was opulence had titles such as “Ballin Boy” by rap group No Good in 2001 and “Gold Digger” by Kanye West in 2005. These songs, as well as other songs, either have opulent themes or sub-themes references to material goods such as cars as in the song “Mercy” by Kanye West in 2012. Mercy was a play on the word Murcielago, a
type of Lamborghini. Combining opulence and sexual explicit lyrics, the hook of a somewhat slowed down vocals of an unnamed rapper states:

“Okay Lamborghini Mercy,

Yo Girl, she so thirsty

I’m in that 2 sear Lambo wit your girl

She tryna jerk me.”

The song has extreme opulent lyrics from all 4 rappers. Kanye West, Big Sean, Pusta T and 2 Chainz. Pusha T raps,

“All she wants is some heel money, all she needs is some bill money

He takes his time and counts it up, I weighs it up, thats real money.”

Pusha T raps about a woman would rather have high heel shoes over paying her bills, and he has enough money that he needs to weigh it. This can also be a reference to weighing drugs as his source of income being that Pusha T is a well-known drug rapper.

Another song that was interesting to observe was a song called “Independent” by Webbie, which features Lil Boosie and the deceased Lil Phat in 2008. These 3 Baton Rouge Louisiana rappers lauded being independent, but there definition of independent was materialistic in nature. The hook of the rap states,

“I-n-d-e-p-e-n-d-e-n-t do you know what that mean (repeated twice)

She got her own house

She got her own car

Two jobs, work hard you a bad broad.”
Lil Phat still sexualizes the independent woman calling her a “good freaka” and stating she pays. “Hit me on the phone she like to buy this dick.” The intersectionality of patriarchal domination and capitalistic consumerism/exploitation is reflected in the song. Three men defining independence for women as accumulating possessions can be seen as troubling in patriarchal materialistic sense.

Love/Relationship

Love was the most frequent dominant theme in all of the songs examined but overall references decline over the years, noticeably absent around the Great Recession period. Love references decreased as sexual references increased in the 2001-2005 period. Love was presented in two ways, familiar and romantics. Familiar love presented itself in two songs: the aforementioned “Dear Mama” by 2 Pac and “Just The Two Of Us” by Will Smith in 1998 (There are two songs by that name). As mentioned before, “Dear Mama” is a tribute to his mother where “Just the Two of Us” is a dedication to Will’s first son. In this song, which also features his son’s voice in the introduction and ending, he speaks directly to him explaining the day he was born and how the rapper felt about his new son,

“From the first time the doctor placed me in your arms
I knew I’d meet death before I’d let you meet harm
Although questions arose in my mind, would I be man enough?
Against wrong, choose right and be standing up”
He further goes into imagining what his son would be when he becomes an adult, and gives him advise on how to treat people and future relationship advise,

“One day a girl’s gonna break your heart
And ooh ain’t no pain like from the opposite sex
Gonna hurt bad but don’t take it out on your next, son”

Romantic relationship themes vary from someone looking for love such as ”Treat Them Like They Want to Be Treated” by Father MC in 1990, unrequited love, a toxic relationship such as “Love the Way You Lie” by Eminem in 2010 passion, and even a symbolic love/hate relationship with fame “Holy Grail” by Jay-Z in 2013. Love was rarely a subtheme and most often the central theme, where rappers stayed relatively on topic. There were intersecting themes in love and sex in “Hey Lover” and “Romeo and Juliet” as LL fantasizes about a woman he desired and Silk-E Fine rapped about explicit sex acts but pledging to be faithful to a man and wanting him to do the same.

“And only give my love to you
Because I’m loyal, escape with me.”

Drug/Alcohol References

Drug references were few and there were not any songs in which the dominant theme was about drugs and alcohol. Even a song titled “Drank In My Cup” by Houston rapper Kirko Bangz was more about sex and relationships. Drank is Codeine and Promethazine cough syrup often mixed with soda and candy for taste. Overall drug references fluctuate over time; however drug and alcohol references were on the upswing
References of drug and alcohol used primarily for two reasons: partying and bragging. 2 Chainz on “Mercy” rapped:

“Ok, now ketchup to my campaign, coupe color of mayonnaise
I’m drunk and high at the same time, drinkin’ champagne on the airplane (tell em!).”

T-Nasty, Group member of No Good in the Song “Ballin Boy” stated,

Cuz its sweet till ya see P, letcha girl watch while I pee-pee
Drank Henny, smoke trees, have her feeling like ecstasy.”

He later raps: “Trees for days, freaks to lay, M-I-A.”

2 Chainz raps of drinking on a plane for a clever play on words. When he uses the term high and drunk at the same time he means literally high in the air. T-Nasty brags about having relations with a woman involved with someone else and getting her high from Marijuana as well as drunk, he later raps about possessing a great quantity of Marijuana and women (freaks to play).

In terms of party references, Jim Jones (“We Fly High” 2007) and Big Sean (“My Last” 2010) both illustrate celebratory use. Jones raps:

“Flashbacks of last night of me balling out (Harlem)
1 a.m. we was at the club (What Happen?!)
2 a.m. ten bottles of bub (Money ain't a thing)
And about 3 something I was thinking about grub
So I stumbled to the car, threw the drinks and the drugs (Twisted).”

Jones references a past Jay-Z song when he runs through a timeline of events out on the town. Jones then raps about being so intoxicated that he vomits on his way back to his car. Big Sean along with R&B singer Chris Brown recorded “My Last,” a song about partying and living life with no regard as demonstrated by the lyrics Chris sings on the hook:

“And I’mma hit this drink up like its my Last”…

Big Sean’s first words in the song are:

“Ok, now where that alcohol? You ain’t even gotta ask
Cause I’mma drink it all like, like it’s my last.”

His first words in his second verse Sean states:

“Now I’mma fill this glass up like it’s my last”
I’mma blow this bag up like its my last.”

Blowing a bag is slang for smoking a bag of Marijuana.

The intersection of drugs and opulence are apparent. Many of the aforementioned rappers mention drugs and alcohol in abundance and in boasting about how much of drugs and alcohol they have to consume in a party scenario. Sexual references also intersect with drugs and alcohol ones, as when spending time with women as to enhance the experience as in “Slow Jamz” by Twista.

**Political References**

Political references were relatively non-existent. The limited times political references were rapped was in the 1990-1995 timeframe. There were not any songs with
a political theme, but political references were observed in 2 songs. “Dear Mama” briefly and Digible Planet’s Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like That) in 1993. After “Dear Mama in 1995, there were not a single political reference in any of other songs.

The three political references were pro-Black in Nature. 2Pac rapped;

“And even as a crack fiend, mama
You always was a Black queen mama.”

2 Pac’s mother was a Black Panther and he was known for his political views as well as his rowdy behavior.

Digible Planets had two references of Black pride. Doodlebug rapped:

“Me I got crew kids seven and a crescent.”

The number seven and a crescent moon is the symbol of the Five Percent Nation or Nation of Goods and Earths. A small New York City based religious sect, who broke away from the Nation of Islam. Many New York rappers are affiliated with this religious sect; some well-known rappers are various Wu Tang Clan members. Ladybug, the female member adds a pro-Black message in the end as she raps:

“I’m down like that
I’m Black like that.”

The lack of political and pro-Black references answers my second research question regarding the changes in diversity of lyrical content. Political references become non-existent from1990 to the present. Evidently, rap music becomes less diverse over time. As sex and financial themes increase in number, political references become non-
existent decrease. Sex and materialism dominate mainstream music production, and oppositional political lyrics lose representation during the period examined.

**Sex References**

Explicit sexual content had a dominant representation in overall references throughout the time analyzed, except for noticeable brief drops during times coinciding two recessions and after 9/11. Thus, sex was a dominant theme in rap, including in the most recent period of 2011-2013. Sex became a major theme of more songs over time starting with “4,5,6,” by rapper Sole. Sexual references range from implicit to the explicit, and became more explicit over time. The implicit sexual references are sexually suggestive and metaphorical use of references or used in passing in many of the song in which sex is a sub-theme. The explicit sexual references are more blatant. They can also be used in passing, but often occur throughout the song and are found in all sub-themed songs.

Chubb Rock’s “Just the Two of Us” (not to be confused with Will Smith’s song) has an interesting sexual reference, a depiction of his parents having sex. Chubb rapped:

“Chubb has been dope since he came out the shaft of his pop’s wood

Yes I’m (good!)

Yo he shouted and he plopped into the uterus

And they knew this about me; was gonna be a great MC.”

Chubb Rock explained details of the instant he was conceived just to say that he was destined to be a great rapper. He also used implicit sexual references later in the same verse.
“I told her I love her and then she did me a solid
Did it real good like a nice girl should
Back polish waxed up the wood
Yo Hitman Howie Tee you should of seen her on me
She got all Vanessa Del Rio on me.”

It can be easily assumed of what he meant by ‘she did him a solid’ and ‘she did it real good like a nice girl should.’ He also brags to his DJ by the name of Hitman Howie Tee about how good she was at sexual relations comparing her to a pornographic actress named Vanessa Del Rio.

As for explicit examples, there are different context to different songs. In the earlier mentioned “Romeo and Juliet” Slik-E Fyne has explicit content in context of loving one man. In contrast, “Shawty” by Florida rapper Plies in 2007 is about a woman he would not label his significant other but has access to her body. He brags about training her:

Now she a animal, I got her sex game right
I taught her how to talk to me while she take the pipe.”

In “4,5,6” Sole raps about how she doesn’t want to find her boyfriend cheating because she already satisfies him sexually:

“And ain’t nan ho gon’ bring it like I bring it
And ain’t nan ho gon’ freak it like I freak it.”

4,5,6 features JT Money on the song just as his song “Who Dat” features Sole. His verse is the most explicit verse out of all the songs; nearly every line is sexual in nature. Sex,
along with materialism, dominated rap in the period examined, while other themes such as love and political conscious declined over time. Apparently, rap reflects the dominance of a materialistic worldview over a more soulful rap that engages political conscious and the heart. In what follows, I discuss and analyze why that may be the case through an intersectional framework.
Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusion

My research questions explored whether rap had changed over time in its lyrical content regarding materialism, diversity, and sex/misogyny. Rap themes of opulence and decadence noticeably increased over time, particularly after the year 2000. At the same time, diversity in content (politics, love, violence) disappeared or lessened after the first period of 1990-1995 and with no other new themes developing after that. The diversity of rap music diminished over time. However, sexually explicit lyrics dominated rap music over time, and often intersected with the other dominant theme of opulence or materialism. Although references varied at times, explicit sexual references ultimately increased over time.

Another interesting finding was the lack of violent themes over time, because rap often carries a reputation for violent lyrics. Although there is truth in the violent nature of many song lyrics, violence hardly appeared in any of the billboard-charted songs I examined. Although dangerous lyrics can be alluring a subset of fans or maybe even broader (as violence sells), many rappers and/or corporations may fear fallout from endorsements and lack of radio if their lyrics are too violent. That fall in line with the narrative that mainstream music version of the music. Furthermore, from an intersectional framework, the corporate hegemonic order—capitalist, white, and masculine—may not be interested in reproducing or promoting an image that threatens them—young black men from the ghetto with guns. This may also explain the absence of politics in rap over time.
Political/pro-Black references in songs were rare in the 1990-1995 sample, and were not present in any time period after. As political rap is most certainly controversial as the content challenges the dominant power structure, it is not surprising that political references became non-existent as rap music became more commercialized. Corporate recording labels may see Pro-Black rhetoric as alienating to non-Black consumers, particularly White consumers who buy the majority of the music. As with violent lyrical content, rappers and/or corporations may not find political rap as lucrative as other proven subgenres and that alone can be the reason not to release such content. The intersection of class and race comes into play as wealthy White CEO’s have can dictate whether music with pro-Black content can be mass produced and if a rapper wants to have the best chance of national exposure and a marketing machine available to advertise their product, they will have no choice but to abide.

The substantial increase of opulent themes and sub-themes occurred in 2000 and stayed relatively at the same level even during a recession. Economic down turns often have the worse affects on Black people who often last hired and first fired. Although the “keepin it real” mantra is still around in current rap music, much of rap’s content is often aspirational and filled with fantasy and hyperbole. Often times, up and coming rappers lyric reflect what they one day hope to acquire, although some would not admit that publicly. As was written in regards to rapper Old Dirty Bastard, many rappers say and even do things to maintain an image. Materialism and consumerism is a cultural value that aligns with the mainstream power structure.
The increase of sexual explicit content was not surprising as with rap’s braggadocio in regards to wealth, women are often seen as material gain. Sexual conquests are often seen as status symbols in a hyper-masculine climate. Porn culture has infiltrated hip-hop as evidenced among notable rappers. However, from an intersectional analysis, the corporate media filter out politics and violence because it may not be agreeable to the mainstream society, yet misogyny and sexism against women do not get the same sensitivity or concerns that it will hurt the bottom line, profits. Simply, wouldn’t music producers make more money if the lyrics appealed to both men and women, not just horny young and old men? Similarly, violent themes sell, so why so few of them in rap in mainstream? It matters who enacts violence—race, gender, and class. Those with power may not want to encourage the dispossessed in thinking critically or in seeking empowerment through whatever means.

Although mainstream rap music themes are still limited in scope compared to the music of the past, there are rappers whose music goes beyond mainstream rap conventions. Rap music that is independently distributed can and often will have more diversity in content as rappers who are not beholden to major corporations that will possibly sensor or hold back their music if the content is not deemed marketable. Many musicians make music for the love and/or are satisfied with having a small core audience, rap music is no different. With access to social media, the ability to have a home recording studio, and the to upload music videos on YouTube and other similar platforms, rappers can make a name for themselves on the internet and make money performing and selling merchandise.
This trend is not a new phenomenon as regions of the United States that were often neglected by recording labels in the past often cultivated their own rap scene. The San Francisco Bay Area and Houston Texas were and still are hubs for independent music where many classic rappers sold their music from their car trunks. With the decline in sells in the mainstream and recording labels pushing a new contract called a “360” deal where the label take a percentage of your touring and merchandising, many rapper find recording and distributing music independently the feasible option. Although independent rappers do not have the resources to get their CD’s into music stores all across the country, they can sell their music on ITunes and other outlets and receive more of a percentage of money instead of the label taking the lion’s share.

Content and quality from the underground range from cutting edge to the absurd. Anyone and everyone has an opportunity to record and release music to various social media outlets.

Mainstream rap music’s lack of diversity can be reversed if the rap audience advocates for rappers whose content varies from the norm. As stated in my literature review, corporate backed recording labels are profit driven and if labels see a profit in political rap for example, then labels will pursue political rappers. Recording labels will not take a chance on content that they are not sure can be profitable, especially if it challenges the status quo. The listening audience has an ability to dictate what music will be played on the radio by supporting and demanding a more diversity in the music by supporting more diverse artist.
There have been rappers who have signed to the mainstream recording labels or had mainstream success as of late whose music does not reflect the norm. One of the top billboard songs of 2014 was a song called “Thrift Shop” which was an atypical song about bargain spending which catapulted independent rapper Macklemore and producer Ryan Lewis to success. An interesting aspect to their popularity is that they are White men. It would be interesting if a Black rapper from an urban environment could make the exact same song and receive the same amount of fanfare because Black men and women may not be expected to make music. The intersection of race, gender, and class can dictate expectations and valuation of an artist. Black masculinity is often dictated by the street codes, and Black women are often limited in their portrayals in rap as well. The popular White rapper whose material is considered outside the box also is not anything new. Eminem is a wildly popular rapper who lyrics were violent and misogynistic, but not from an urban perspective. His lyrics were often absurd and intentionally controversial. He was interestingly signed to legendary gangsta rapper and producer Dr. Dre. Both Eminem and Macklemore benefit from having White male identities as the White majority can identify with them more and give them more creative license than a Black female artist.

There were and are White artist whose rap styles are mainstream, and they too have had vast success, however with the success, has come harsh criticism of authenticity that a Black artist may not have received. One of the earliest examples was rapper Vanilla Ice. He was extremely successful in the early 1990’s with his hit song “Ice Ice Baby.” His violent and materialistic lyrics led to his background being called into question by Black
and White rapper alike. He was eventually exposed as inauthentic and is considered an embarrassment to White rappers. Recently, a White female rapper has gained notoriety and similar criticism. Iggy Azalea, an Australian native who moved to the United State to pursue a rap. When rapping, she develops a southern accent, which makes her sound like a Black female, yet speaks with her natural Australian accent when conversing. Her lyrics are sexually provocative and materialistic. Her hit single “Fancy” has been very successful. She is signed Atlanta Rapper Clifford Harris, better known as T.I.’s record label. Just as with Eminem, I predict more established Black rappers who want to benefit from a potentially large White fan base; will seek out White male and female rappers who they feel may be very profitable for them. White rappers are closer to the hegemonic norm that has reflected the past 20 years of changes in rap towards materialism, misogyny, and homogeneity (in terms of lyrical content diversity).

**Limitations**

A limitation on the study is the sample size and thus generalizability. The number of songs on the Billboard charts decreases over time makes the songs chosen over time less varied. A possibly more representative sample would find a certain percent for the 5 timeframes and picked the number of songs based on the percent. Out of the nearly 300 possible songs, nearly half of them were in the 1990-1995 timeframe. Over time, songs started to stay on the charts longer minimizing the chances for more songs appearing on the charts per year.

Another limitation was the rap songs appearances on non-hip-hop charts. The pop charts has songs from all genres including rap. There were rap songs that were only on
the rap charts, rap songs that made were on both the rap and pop charts (50 Cent in the Club) and rap songs that were only on the pop charts. The absence of Eminem on the rap charts in the early 2000s, the height of his success puzzled me until I went to the pop charts and saw his presence there. Eminem may have simply not had enough urban radio play to be considered on the rap charts.

Future Recommendations

A recommendation for future research would be to observe music videos over time to examine songs that are opulent and decadent in nature. Examining the music videos of those particular songs would be interesting as well in observing what the artist or group is trying to convey visually as well and audibly. Financial themes were on the incline, even in a bad economy so it would be interesting to explore what could be the motivation for opulent themes in video. Rappers claim to “keep it real” and “represent the streets” but if the intercity across the United States are struggling. How are songs about cars and jewelry relatable to the people?

Another aspect of that would be branding. As with “Mercy” many rappers name-drop brands of cars clothes, shoes, alcohol among other things. It would be interesting in looking at who profits off their free advertisements. How many rappers have received endorsement deals form mentioning a brand in their music? What brands have voices displeasure in being associated with hip-hop and has there been successful boycotts of brands?

To conclude, rap music’s ascension to popularity has watered down the product and narrowed the content in the mainstream. Rap’s anti-establishment roots have all but
disappeared and rap has become something some have fought against. Considered one of the best rap groups of all-time, A Tribe Called Quest was one of the many critics of hip-hop becoming pop and major recording labels in his last words on “Check the Rhime,” group member Q-Tip addresses popular rapper MC Hammer when he rapped,

“Proper. What you say Hammer? Proper

Rap is not pop, if you call it that then stop.”
### Appendix A. Themes

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Appendix B. Sub-Themes

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References


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