RAP MUSIC'S VIOLENT AND MISOGYNISTIC EFFECTS:
FACT OR FICTION?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – We review the literature on the general effects of rap music and discuss in detail those studies that purport to examine how it affects attitudes and behavior related to violence and misogyny.

Methodology – Critical review of the popular and scholarly rap music literature.

Findings – We describe four critical weaknesses in this literature that limit our ability to draw firm conclusions on rap music's effects: (1) the nonempirical nature of most writings on rap; (2) vagueness regarding the precise relationship between rap music and attitudes and behavior, and the associated lack of theoretical perspectives in rap literature; (3) the exclusion of the perspectives of rap music listeners in most studies; and (4) the drawbacks of both experimental research and existing ethnographic studies in this area.

Value of chapter – Based on the deficiencies in the literature, we provide recommendations for future work and discuss why it is imperative, despite the many challenges that exist, to conduct research on rap music and its effects.
INTRODUCTION

Rap has become one of the most popular music genres of all time. From its inception in the late 1970s to today, rap has gained more new listeners than any other music genre, including rock, country, pop, and R&B. According to data from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), the percentage of all music purchased that was classified as rap/hip-hop increased from 3.8 percent in 1987 to nearly 11 percent in 2008 (RIAA, 2009). Recent figures indicate that by far the most popular form of music for 7th- through 12th-grade adolescents is rap/hip-hop (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). This music genre’s popularity now extends far beyond the United States to international contexts, where rappers express local identities through the vernaculars of rap and hip-hop (Mitchell, 2002). Listeners and rap music fans are also more diverse than ever before. They include members of all ages, races, and classes.

It is clear that rap is enjoying unprecedented success. What is less clear is the impact rap music has had on American society broadly, and on its listeners in particular. In fact, “the precise meaning of rap’s significance as a cultural form produced predominantly by African Americans and consumed by a multi-racial and multi-ethnic audience has been and continues to be a subject of public debate” (Fenster, 1995, p. 224).

One side of the debate stresses rap’s positive impact, particularly for African American youth. Henderson (1996, p. 309) notes, “One of rap music’s greatest contributions derives from the fact that it has fostered a profound nationalism in the youth of black America.” While Smith (1997, p. 345) argues rap “serves as an expressive artistic outlet for a marginalized urban social bloc.” Supporters draw attention to rap’s educational benefits, declaring it “a vehicle for telling the repressed and suppressed histories of African American culture” (Potter, 1995, p. 116). Rappers themselves echo these sentiments claiming, “Rap is entertainment” (KRZ-ONE) and “Rap music is the CNN for black America” (Chuck D of Public Enemy).

Far outnumbering these appraisals are the many criticisms surrounding rap music and its impact on society. Opponents argue that rap is extremely violent and misogynistic, particularly in the subgenre of “gangsta rap,” which has been growing in popularity over the past 15-20 years. Gangsta rap is known for its “vivid, sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic lyrics, as well as its violent depiction of urban ghetto life in America” (Abrams, 2000, p. 198). Its roots can be traced to early depictions of the hustler lifestyle and blaxploitation movies of the 1970s that glorified blacks as criminals, pimps, pushers, prostitutes, and gangsters. Gangsta rap is considered a product of the gang culture and street wars of South Central Los Angeles, Compton, and Long Beach, and the resurgence of the “mack” culture (pimp attitude and style) of East Oakland (Perkins, 1996, p. 18). Since its early pioneers were gang members, gangsta rap conveys the life experiences of the rappers themselves, and its lyrics portray gang and ghetto life from a street criminal’s perspective (Krims, 2000, p. 70).

Critics such as C. Dolores Tucker, an American politician and civil rights activist most recently known for her stance against gangsta rap, maintain that early rap was an art form of prose and poetry that expressed life in the same way that Christian spiritual music did, whereas gangsta rap is a “perverted form which has been encouraged by those who have always used the entertainment industry to exploit and project the negative stereotypical images to demean and deput African Americans as subhuman” (Tucker, quoted in George, 1998, p. 189). Critics further maintain, “The misogyny is so dense that it sounds more like little kids discovering nasty words for the first time.... It is pure profanity bereft of the rich storytelling and use of metaphor and simile that have been cornerstones of rap music since its origins” (Kelley, 1996, p. 147).

Embedded in these criticisms are claims and assumptions about rap’s effects on listeners, particularly young listeners. These claims and assumptions center on how the lyrics and videos affect listeners’ attitudes and behavior. According to the most common assumptions, listening to rap music can make youth become more violent and encourage them to develop negative attitudes toward women.

Despite pervasive criticism, very little empirical research has actually tested the claim that rap music and violence are causally related. And the few studies that have, which are mostly experimental in nature, suffer from methodological limitations. In this chapter, we review the literature on the general effects of rap music and discuss in detail those studies that purport to examine how it affects attitudes and behavior related to violence and misogyny. We identify four critical weaknesses in this literature that limit our ability to draw firm conclusions on rap music’s effects: (1) the nonempirical nature of most writings on rap; (2) vagueness regarding the precise relationship between rap music and attitudes and behavior, and the associated lack of theoretical perspectives in the rap literature; (3) the exclusion of the perspectives of rap music listeners in most studies; and (4) the drawbacks of both experimental research and existing ethnographic studies in this area. We conclude our chapter with recommendations for future work and discuss why, despite the many challenges that exist, it is imperative to conduct research on rap music and its effects.
NONEMPIRICAL NATURE OF RAP WRITINGS

A quick literature search on rap music yields hundreds of writings on dozens of topics related to rap. There is a direct correlation between the genre’s success and scholarly interest in rap music; as rap has become increasingly popular, more scholars have written about its content, broader societal effects, and related issues. A careful review of this literature, however, reveals that few writings, including published journal articles, are empirically based. That is, relatively few authors base their claims or conclusions about rap music on data or observations. Of those writings that are based on some form of data collection, most have relied heavily on anecdotal evidence and the selective use of quotes from songs to support their arguments. As a result, we argue that a critical weakness in the rap literature that has a bearing on our ability to assess its attitudinal and behavioral effects is the nonempirical nature of much rap writings.

This drawback is not limited to studies on rap music’s effects. The nonempirical nature of most work in this area extends to all types of rap studies. Here are a few examples: researchers have examined topics ranging from rap’s hidden politics (Rose, 1991), to identifying the various dimensions of rap music (Lusane, 1993), to describing the historical context for rap as part of the black rhetorical tradition (Kopano, 2002) and contemporary black life (Pinn, 1999), to identifying rap’s evolution as it has become commercialized (Watkins, 2003). None of these writings approach their topic from an empirical standpoint; most are critical essays of one sort or another. While this is not a problem in and of itself, the abundance of nonempirical work on these topics raises larger questions regarding the literature’s conclusions.

Our central concern here, though, is with those writings that purport to examine the music’s attitudinal or behavioral effects on listeners, whether in terms of violence and misogyny or some other aspect of identity formation (e.g., race/ethnicity, political consciousness, etc.). In the literature, it is not difficult to find claims or assumptions regarding rap’s effects, most of which are never empirically examined or tested using data of any kind. Work of this type also ranges from considerations of how rap music is used by listeners to redefine their ethnicity and relationship to mainstream culture (Stephens, 1991), to how rap functions as a vehicle to express oppositional politics (Delgado, 1998), to how rap affects cultural identity formation (Forman, 2002), to the music’s effects on violence and misogyny (Oliver, 2006). None of these writings is empirical; yet all, at some point in their discussion, make claims regarding what rap does to and for its listeners.

For example, in considering rap’s effects on the definition of one’s ethnicity, Stephens (1991, p. 72) claims, “we can conceive how rap’s non-black constituents use this art form as an interracial bridge, even as many blacks, by defining it as ‘only black,’ attempt to use it as a source of power and exclusive identity.” Unfortunately, no data are provided to examine these claims, so the idea that blacks and whites “use” rap for different means is never empirically ascertained.

In another example, Oliver (2006, p. 923) asserts, “Hip hop culture, particularly gangsta rap music and videos, has had a major influence on the evolution and transmission of contemporary street culture socialization and the social construction of gender identity among poor and nonpoor African American males.” Although this is not the main focus of his article, he provides little empirical evidence to support this major claim, citing only one study that itself is nonempirical. He later claims that portrayals of Black women by male artists in hip hop culture serve to perpetuate existing stereotypes (e.g., Jezebel and Sapphore) or reformulate new stereotypes (e.g., “skeeters,” “bitches,” “hoes” and “ride-and-die chicks”) that render Black women vulnerable to aggression and violence perpetrated by Black males who have internalized misogynistic messages that provide justifications for engaging in acts of violence against Black women. (Oliver, 2006, pp. 926–927)

Once again, no empirical evidence is provided that documents the process by which black males internalize misogynistic messages that provide them with justifications for engaging in violence against women. While we do not necessarily disagree that such a process may exist, such claims and conclusions must be tempered until evidence is provided along these lines.

Another set of writings are what we would describe as quasempirical. In some cases, data are used to support a point but there are methodological flaws that limit the ability to draw conclusions from the study’s findings. Forman (2002), for example, analyzes how hip-hop and rap music influence cultural identity formation, particularly new racialized identities, among Somali immigrant and refugee youth in North America. Forman concludes, “Hip Hop culture emerges as perhaps the single most powerful force through which Somali teens learn the definitions of authentic black identity that guide their own subjective transitions” (Forman, 2002, p. 5) – quite a powerful statement in regard to rap’s effects. Yet nowhere in the study does Forman present any data to support this claim or to explain how he arrived at this conclusion. In the study’s abstract, he mentions having conducted “extensive ethnographic research among Somali high school students”
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 rap and such attitudes and behavior is much more complex. For example, in a study using participant observation and interviews of youth in various classrooms to explore how students interpreted or reflected upon rap music and hip-hop culture, particularly its representations of crime, violence, and sex, Mahiri and Conner (2003, pp. 137–138) report three key findings: (1) youth had complex understandings of the nature and causes of violence and crime in their lives and communities; (2) their understandings often included critiques of negative images and messages of violence, crime, and sex in rap music; (3) their understandings and critiques of instances and images of crime and violence worked to mitigate influences from these sources and increased their desire to circumvent or ameliorate violent situations in their lives and communities. At a minimum, these findings begin to counter the argument that rap music and negative attitudes and behavior are linearly related. More empirical research of this kind is necessary.

THEORIZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RAP MUSIC AND ITS EFFECTS

It has long been claimed that violent images in popular culture promote violence in the real world. Such claims are often made with regard to violence on television and, more recently, violence in rap music. It is frequently argued that rap music “causes” or “contributes to” negative behavior or “reinforces” preexisting negative inclinations among audience members - but these associations are typically loosely described, if they are described at all. What is needed is a more theoretically grounded, systematic approach. This section of the chapter addresses this issue by outlining competing theoretical perspectives that highlight different types of media-crime relationships, with implications for studying rap music’s effects.

One approach presents a direct challenge to the conventional wisdom that the media shapes audience perceptions or contributes to criminal violence. The real-world thesis portrays such perceptions as largely or entirely shaped by conditions external to the media, such as personal experiences or neighborhood characteristics. According to this perspective, the media plays little or no role because media messages are typically far removed from the audience’s everyday lives and because the media often gives disproportionate coverage to atypical or spectacular events that are remote from most individuals’ personal experiences (Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988; Tyler, 1984). Whether it is crime news reports, crime in fictional television shows and films, or violence in music lyrics and videos, according to this perspective, all have
little, if any, impact on audience members’ perceptions or conduct. In short, the media constitutes a world apart from the real world, and it is the latter that matters most in shaping attitudes and behavior.

A contrasting perspective echoes the popular notion that the media has a direct effect on the audience in the real world, such as increasing actual violence or misogyny via emulation. The cultivation thesis asserts that heavy exposure to media influences audience perceptions of reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). Greater consumption of particular media messages increases the odds that audience views of the world will match what is presented in the media. For example, since the news media disproportionately focuses on murder and neglects both crime patterns and the larger causes of crime, audience views of crime are typically distorted in the direction of believing that crime is inexplicable and random (Sacco, 1995). Both television news and crime dramas differ greatly from reality and may cultivate exaggerated fears and a sense that the world is a dangerous place, especially when one is frequently exposed to such images (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Likewise, entertainment shows, video games, and music that glorify violence may have a cultivating effect on individuals who come to view violence as a solution to problems, who see violent actors as role models, and who identify with music icons who celebrate violence in their songs and videos.

The cultivation thesis is consistent with social learning theory’s argument that children internalize new attitudes and conduct norms from television (Bandura & Walters, 1963) and other media. Cultivation is also related to Glaser’s “differential identification” thesis, which holds that criminal behavior is learned when individuals positively identify with other criminals and their values, including people they are exposed to via the mass media. Glaser (1956, p. 440) writes, “A person pursues criminal behavior to the extent that he identifies himself with real or imaginary persons from whose perspectives his criminal behavior seems acceptable.” Deviance is pervasive in the mass media, which may partly help to reinforce deviant values and inclinations, at least for a segment of the population. This theoretical perspective thus echoes popular claims that, say, rock or rap music encourages deviant behavior among its listeners.

A variant of the cultivation perspective, the substitution thesis, holds that “media effects are most powerful for issues that are outside a subject’s personal experience” (Surette, 1998, p. 205). Heavy consumption of media crime messages is predicted to have an especially strong effect on those with no direct experience of crime; for these individuals, media images become a surrogate for real-world experience (Gunter, 1987; Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986).

Persons who are well insulated from street crime (e.g., the affluent, women, residents of low-crime areas) should be the most heavily influenced by media images of crime. For example, middle-class white youth who live in tranquil neighborhoods and who consume mass quantities of violent video games would be predicted to have an inflated fear of violent crime and/or elevated inclinations to engage in violent crime. And if they were heavily exposed to rap music, they would similarly be expected to adopt the viewpoints of their favorite rappers, even if these views were inconsistent with their own lived experiences and socialization at home.

The substitution thesis is more nuanced than the cultivation thesis because the former does not predict monolithic media effects. A glaring deficiency of the cultivation thesis is its assumption that media images and messages indeed have a uniform and direct effect on audiences. First, with regard to criminal violence in television and film dramas, the social learning and cultivation theses can be turned on their head: Since crime does not pay for TV and film criminals (who typically are caught, punished, or killed) (Sacco, 1995), it could be argued that violence in such genres might reduce the violent inclinations of viewers. Learning is still involved in this process, but the result is deterrence, not emulation. Second, scholars increasingly regard the reception of media content as a dynamic process in which the audience actively interprets and perhaps reconstructures media “messages” in light of their personal experiences and social backgrounds (Dahlgren, 1988). Audience experiences (e.g., socialization, victimization) and demographic characteristics (race, gender, age, etc.) play an important role in how media content is received. For example, studies of media effects on fear of crime have found that media messages are variably interpreted, in line with a person’s background and life experiences (Eschholz, 1997; Heath & Gilbert, 1996; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). Similarly, for those whose social circumstances are at variance with the messages in rap music lyrics and videos, we should expect some compartmentalization—that is, the music would have little effect on this audience’s perceptions and behavior.

This is where the fourth perspective comes in. The resonance thesis holds that when media portrayals are consistent with one’s demographic characteristics, lived experiences (e.g., criminal victimization) and social location (e.g., living in a high-crime community), media and real-world factors mutually reinforce each other (Gerbner et al., 1980). (This perspective is thus diametrically opposed to the substitution thesis.) When the messages in rap, rock, or country music are consistent with one’s lived experiences, the potential effect of the music is magnified, and the same prediction would apply to other entertainment and news media generally. Residents of
high-crime areas “may be particularly sensitive to crime on television because of their direct knowledge of a crime problem in their neighborhoods” (Eschholz, 1997, p. 47). In a Toronto study, fear of crime increased with heightened television watching in high-crime communities but not elsewhere, suggesting that media exposure is salient only in interaction with neighborhood crime conditions (Doob & MacDonald, 1979). The researchers reported that residents of low-crime neighborhoods “do not feel that the violence on television has any relevance for them” (Doob & MacDonald, 1979, p. 177). Similarly, Heath and Petraitis (1987) found that viewing television crime dramas increased fear of crime for residents of high-crime but not low-crime neighborhoods in Chicago. And a study that examined city-level patterns in 242 Florida cities found that individuals’ consumption of local television news programs had the strongest effect on fear of crime in cities with high crime rates (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gettz, 2000). Because many high-crime neighborhoods are predominantly African American and because blacks are disproportionately victimized by crime, the resonance thesis predicts a stronger media-crime relationship among blacks than among whites. Exposure to crime news in the media, coupled with greater personal vulnerability or experience of neighborhood crime, is indeed associated with a heightened fear of crime among blacks (Chiricos et al., 2000; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004).

Empirical support for the resonance thesis suggests that it is superior to the other perspectives. When media images are congruent with real-world circumstances, the two have a combined, mutually reinforcing effect on the audience. The general pattern is nicely summarized by Gerbner et al. (1980, p. 20): “These people receive a ‘double dose’ of messages,” increasing the chances that media messages will influence audience perceptions and behavior.

None of the empirical work on rap has explicitly linked it to any of these perspectives, and we argue that it can be theorized along the lines presented above. The four perspectives would predict different outcomes when applied to rap music lyrics and videos. The real-world thesis would predict little or no effect of exposure to rap on listeners’ attitudes or behavior; the cultivation and substitution theses would predict significant effects of exposure on the audience; and the resonance thesis would theorize exposure as mediated by listeners’ social contexts.

We argue that researchers should more explicitly theorize the predicted effects of rap music on behavior and attitudes. Existing studies make strong causal claims yet pay little attention to potential complexities involved in the relationships. Before researchers can adequately test causal relationships, more complex, theoretically driven models are necessary. The four perspectives discussed above move us in the direction of thinking about alternative models of the relation between rap and audience attitudes and behavior.

THE MISSING PERSPECTIVES OF RAP MUSIC LISTENERS

As just noted, there are several ways one can theorize the relationship between rap music, attitudes, and behavior. One of these perspectives (resonance) emphasizes the importance of listener characteristics, context, and agency for extrapolating meaning from media generally, and music in particular. This point is emphasized in other media studies, where it is widely assumed that listeners play an active role in their media consumption. Unfortunately, the same assumptions are not present in studies of rap music. Thus, a third major weakness of the rap literature, with direct implications for the music’s effect on violent and misogynistic attitudes and behavior, is that it fails to incorporate a key player in the equation – consumers.

One reason for this omission may have to do with the types of studies that dominate rap music literature. With few exceptions, “the small body of research … focuses more on artists, lyrical content, and the history of hip-hop” rather than on the audience (Sullivan, 2003, p. 609). As already noted, much of what is written on rap is nonempirical. Yet even among the empirical studies, the vast majority consists of content analyses of lyrics or videos. In most content analyses, major themes of rap are explored but little is said in reference to how these themes are consumed, interpreted, and internalized by listeners: “How these fans interpret and reinterpreting rap music and how important rap music is in their lives have not been thoroughly explored” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 606). While the exclusion of listeners’ perspectives is generally missing, this omission is especially problematic for those studies that are interested in rap’s attitudinal and behavioral effects. With the exception of experimental studies (discussed below), studies that purport to test rap’s causal effects are guilty of omitting listeners’ voices. Sullivan (2003, p. 609) asserts, “Debates regarding the effects of rap music are missing one very critical voice – that of fans.” How can conclusions regarding rap music’s effects be made in the absence of data on listeners? We argue that they cannot.

The exclusion of listeners’ voices may reflect (incorrect) assumptions regarding how music is internalized and how it shapes the attitudes and behaviors of listeners, as we noted in the previous section. In fact, much of the
literature on rap makes such assumptions. In one study, the author claims, “Rap informs the listener of the reality of Afro-American experience and thus raises his/her social consciousness. The questions and resistance musicians express in their songs as well as in interviews make fans aware of the dominant power and moreover invite them to participate in resistance” (Kuwahara, 1992, p. 66, emphasis added). Are rap music listeners aware of the dominant power? Do they feel compelled to participate in resistance after listening to rap? These empirical questions are not addressed in the study due to the lack of data on listeners. Readers must, therefore, proceed with caution when interpreting such causal claims. These assumptions are also prevalent with respect to rap music’s alleged effects on violent behavior or unconventional attitudes, including nihilism and misogyny (discussed in the following section).

Failing to take into account listeners’ characteristics, social contexts, and perspectives assumes that listeners play no active role. Yet listeners are not “cultural dopes” who merely consume what is produced. And, as noted in the chapter’s introduction, there is great diversity among audiences. Researchers caution that there is no monolithic African American experience, let alone a singular experience across racial and ethnic boundaries: “rap may provoke multiple interpretations and constructions” among consumers (Delgado, 1998, p. 96). As indicated in the previous section, other critical dimensions, including sex, age, socioeconomic status, previous lived experiences, and neighborhood context, condition how listeners respond to rap music lyrics and, more importantly, how such lyrics affect violent and misogynistic attitudes and behavior.

Listeners interpret music in multiple ways, and rap lyrics are appropriated and embedded into specific individual, familial, and community contexts of reference. Rap music is a “localized form of cultural expression” (Bennett, 1999a, 1999b, p. 77). It has emerged in several cities with “local hip hop scenes that link various regional and postindustrial urban experiences of alienation, unemployment, police harassment, social, and economic isolation to their local and specific experience via hip hop’s language, style, and attitude” (Rose, 1994, p. 60). In essence, lyrics have situational and situated meaning for listeners, a fact that researchers must acknowledge in considering their effects.

A related issue challenges the linear assumptions made about rap music’s effects: lyrical reception may be oppositional and confrontational for some listeners; that is, listeners may actively disagree with what they hear in songs or see in rap videos. Along these lines, Negus and Velazquez (2002, p. 141) point out that listeners can reject lyrics, resulting in disaffiliation, ambivalence, and disengagement with (rap) music. Empirical findings from a handful of studies support this idea. One study of youths who listen to rap found that although the youths revealed that their lives were saturated with violence, they had more progressive values than are represented in the rap discourse to which they are exposed. The study also found that at least some youths have cogent critiques of the discourse of rap and hip-hop (Mairi & Conner, 2003, pp. 130, 135). In particular, these youths critiqued the negative characterization of men and women as gangstas and “ho’s.” Anticipated disaffiliation may even be part of the lyrics’ design, as in instances of irony, sarcasm, or hyperbole. Press (1994) raises this point in her review of the cultural reception literature. She presents a sophisticated model of reception as a site of struggle between cultural industries, critics, and receivers. This model “highlights the importance of cultural judgments of authority, and the responses of groups with differential power in relation to these judgments” (Press, 1994, p. 230). Collectively, these perspectives challenge “the simple connection that the dominant public discourse and media so often draw between rap music and pervasive negative influences on black youth” (Mairi & Conner, 2003, p. 135).

In sum, studies assessing rap’s effects on listeners must fully incorporate the varied experiences and interpretations of those consuming it. Up to this point, studies have, for the most part, ignored listeners’ perceptions, thereby assuming they are uniform in direction and effect. For this reason, in their summary assessment of the literature, Miranda and Claes (2004, p. 114) conclude that “there were very few attempts in evaluating the impact that adolescents actually give to rap songs’ lyrics. This is an important point, since studies have indicated that music listeners tend to process lyrics and music separately.” There are two notable exceptions to this pattern, however, which we discuss below.

**EXPERIMENTAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES**

It is possible that the images in rap music, like other types of popular culture, affect audience members in diverse ways according to the extent to which they resonate with individual experiences and social contexts. As indicated earlier in the chapter, however, critics’ charges against rap go far beyond what would be predicted by the resonance thesis. Just as earlier generations made sweeping indictments of other kinds of popular music, jazz, the blues, rock, heavy metal, and now rap music have been denigrated because of their “immoral” messages and for allegedly corrupting youth by providing deviant role models who influence listeners. Heavy metal music,
for instance, was targeted in the mid-1980s by organizations that considered the lyrics harmful to listeners and to society (it was deemed violent, suicidal, occultist, and antiauthority) (Binder, 1993). Heavy metal and rap music also stand accused of promoting antisocial attitudes and behavior. Collins (2000, pp. 82, 144) includes rap music as one source of “controlling images” used to subordinate black women, and Oliver (2006, p. 927) claims that rap’s sexist lyrics “provide justifications for engaging in acts of violence against black women.”

Experimental research has attempted to measure the effects of exposure to music. One study found that persons exposed to heavy metal music in laboratory settings are more likely than controls to express negative attitudes toward women after hearing the music (St. Lawrence & Joyner, 1991), while other research reported similar effects for rock music videos depicting violence (Peterson & Pfohl, 1989). A few similar experimental studies have examined how listeners respond to rap, and the findings suggest that the music influences either attitudes or behavior (Dixon & Brooks, 2002). Subjects exposed to gangsta rap songs were more likely than controls to express the belief that men should dominate women (Wester, Crown, Quattman, & Heesacker, 1997), and subjects who viewed rap videos portraying scantily clad female dancers (a measure of objectification) expressed greater acceptance of teen dating violence than did controls (Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995). In an attempt to measure behavioral effects in another study, subjects exposed to misogynistic rap songs were more likely than controls exposed to neutral rap music to show a female confederate a film vignette depicting an assault or rape of a woman (doing so was interpreted by the researchers as an aggressive act) (Barongan & Hall, 1995).

These findings might lead one to conclude that rap music indeed causes listeners to develop violent or misogynistic tendencies. Yet experimental research of this kind has well-known deficiencies that must be taken into account in drawing conclusions from such studies. First, findings of attitudinal and/or behavioral change in a laboratory setting may be artifacts of the experiment—either because of a “demand effect” (i.e., subjects believing that the experimenter condones what is presented), or the result of immediate stimuli in the lab (whose effects are short-lived). In both cases, the experimental effect is lacking in external validity in the outside world. In other words, the cultivation of attitudes or behavior may be momentary, and none of the studies reviewed above attempts to measure any lasting effects caused by the experimental stimulus. Second, the violent scenarios presented in media clips in lab experiments are often quite different from the situations people encounter in their own lives, where there are multiple influences on their behavior. Exposure to such messages in a laboratory is wholly decontextualized and detached from the subject’s real-world circumstances. But even natural experiments in the real world—either comparing different contexts cross-sectionally or longitudinal changes in, say, violent programming—have not demonstrated a link between media violence and the aggressive behavior of children or adults (Felson, 1996).

Media violence appears to lead some people under certain conditions to act violently, though most people exposed to violence in the media do not engage in aggressive behavior. At best, media effects are “weak and affect only a small percentage of viewers” (Felson, 1996, p. 123). What matters is whether a person is socially predisposed to act, or “primed,” in a certain way—preexisting views reinforced by, or resonating with, new stimuli (Donnerstein & Linz, 1995). Given the small numbers of subjects in experimental studies, the impact of any nonmedia variables included in the analysis cannot be statistically tested because of the inherently small sample sizes.

Experimental studies skew the literature in one direction. Few researchers have investigated the deeper meanings attached to music lyrics or videos by male and female consumers in the real world. As noted earlier, the neglect of consumers (aside from lab subjects) is remarkable in light of the grand, sweeping claims that are often made about rap’s impact on listeners. One of the few nonexperimental studies, a national survey exploring music’s real-world effects on behavior, found that, after controlling for other variables, music with degrading sexual content predicted self-reported sexual behavior among young people, while nondegrading sexual lyrics had no such association (Martino et al., 2006). The study was not limited to rap music.

A handful of ethnographic studies are also suggestive of ways in which rap music may be salient in the real world. These studies can be divided into two types: (1) those providing some evidence of a convergence between messages in rap music and youths’ attitudes and behavior and (2) those exploring how youths actively decode rap’s messages.

Regarding the convergence model, a number of neighborhood ethnographies indicate that the lived experiences and value systems of inner-city youths overlap with many of the themes in rap music. This convergence is not surprising given that rap originally emerged out of the ghetto, but the music and neighborhood culture may be reciprocally related as well, with each influencing the other. For instance, it has been argued that many rap lyrics reflect themes of respect, retaliatory violence, and strained gender relations among youths in many inner-city communities (Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). The harsh conditions of the ghetto and the barrio provide residents with few conventional sources of self-esteem
(Bourgeois, 1995; Horowitz, 1983; Liebow, 1967), which means that self-worth is often sought via unconventional means. Violence is one such way of generating respect from others or punishing those who withhold it (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003). The following lyrics illustrate how this inner-city subculture is expressed in rap songs:

Them other niggas, they get they ass put in check,
When they try to flex and disrespect me,
And that's when I gotta get even with niggas, retaliation.
(Krayzie Bone, Thugz: All Ova Da World)

I ain't gonna let a nigga disrespect my clique,
And I ain't gon' let a nigga come and take my shit [possessions],
That'll make me look like a stone cold bitch,
So ain't no way I ain't gon' grab my AK and let my shit spit.
(Juvenile, Guerilla)

Note Juvenile's concern about looking like a "stone cold bitch" if he does not retaliate against "niggas disrespecting his clique." He embraces violence to maintain respect – a fundamental aspect of the street code. And lyrics sometimes make direct reference to the street code:

Must handle beef, code of the street,
Load up the heat,
If these niggas think they could fuck around ...
By all means, niggas knowin' how we get down. (Nas, Shoot 'Em Up)

Anderson's (1999, p. 76) ethnography of an inner-city Philadelphia neighborhood explained retaliatory violence among young men in precisely these terms: "Their very identity, their self-respect, and their honor are often intrinsically tied up with the way they perform on the streets during and after such [confrontational] encounters." A distinctive neighborhood culture, what Anderson calls the "code of the street," requires both preemptive aggression and a threatening demeanor to prevent verbal and physical attacks by others as well as violent reprisals when one has been "messed with." Anderson argues that young children learn the street code's conduct norms by observing older youths in their neighborhood, but he does not consider how these intraneighborhood dynamics may be reinforced by external sources, such as rap music. In fact, there is a striking convergence between the street code and the values conveyed in much of rap music (Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b).

With regard to gender, some ethnographic studies provide evidence of deep discord between men and women in disadvantaged, minority neighborhoods. Men are admired for economically and sexually exploiting women. Four decades ago, Liebow's ethnographic study of a low-income, black neighborhood described how important it was for men to be seen as "exploitors of women," even if they did not always treat women in this way (Liebow, 1967, pp. 140–144). Recent research indicates that the exploitation and degradation of young women is still a feature of some inner-city communities today and continues to shape gender relations, including male violence against women. Miller's (2008) study of St. Louis and Anderson's (1999) study of Philadelphia identified several aspects of the street code that perpetuate misogyny and gendered violence at the neighborhood level. The street code places a high value on sexual conquest, promiscuity, and the manipulation of women: "In many cases the more the young man seems to exploit the young woman, the higher is his regard within the [male] peer group" (Anderson, 1999, p. 154). A similar male street culture is documented in an ethnographic study of a Puerto Rican barrio in New York City (Bourgeois, 1995, 1996). Rooted in conditions of socioeconomic disadvantage that strip men of traditional sources of dignity, this street culture is characterized by a high level of male promiscuity, the "celebration of the gigolo image," the value of "being an economic parasite" on one's girlfriends, and justifications for violence against women (Bourgeois, 1995, pp. 276–295).

In misogynistic rap songs, violence is depicted as the most appropriate punishment for women who challenge male domination and even for those who simply disrespect men (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Juvenile (March Nigga Step) asks, "If she think you're jokin', is she goin' get a quick chokin'?" and Dr. Dre (Ackrite) tells listeners that "snobby-ass bitches get slapped out of spit." Eminem raps:

Slut, you think I won't choke no whore,
'Til the vocal cords don't work in her throat no more!!
Shut up slut, you're causin' too much chaos.
(Eminem, Kill You)

These lyrics in misogynistic songs both espouse gender norms and advocate sanctions for women who violate them. The norms are mirrored, to some extent, in disadvantaged communities. For instance, Miller's (2008) ethnography of inner-city St. Louis found that both girls and boys believed that male violence was called for when a girl seemed to have "forgotten her
place"—for example, girls who "run their mouth," "act a fool," dress inappropriately, or drink too much. As in rap music, violence in the inner city's street code is portrayed as entirely legitimate in perpetuating gender inequality.

It is important to point out that we are documenting similarities between rap and conditions in the real world; this is not a feature of the ethnographies discussed above, which fail to consider possible extranearhood sources of youths' attitudes and behaviors (see also Oliver, 2006). The ethnographies link internal neighborhood processes to the extreme socioeconomic disadvantages characterizing such communities, but they fail to consider cultural factors such as rap music. One qualitative study of ethnic cliques in one high school documented the extent to which teenagers adopted the pimp or player persona (and their associated exploitation of girls), but only hinted that these roles might be traceable to rap music—that is, again, convergence, not explicit linkage (Staiger, 2005). There is a striking consistency between the youths' worldviews (in these ethnographic studies) and the content of rap music (as documented in other studies [see Armstrong, 2001; Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b; McFarland, 2003; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009]). But none of the ethnographic studies explores the possible external sources of youths' attitudes. We do know that rap music is heavily consumed by American youth: One survey of 1,590 individuals aged 15-25 reported that the majority of black youth listen to rap music every day (58 percent, compared to 45 percent of Hispanic youth and 23 percent of white youth). Only 3 percent of black youth said they never listened to rap music, compared to 12 percent of Hispanic youth and 19 percent of white youth. And one-quarter of black youth reported that they watched rap music programming on television every day, with about half reporting that they watched it at least several days a week (CSRIPC, 2007).

It can be argued that such music plays at least a reinforcing role, endorsing preexisting worldviews among young men and women. To be clear: this does not mean that rap music causes predatory attitudes or violent behavior among youth who are inculcated with the street code, but it does suggest that there may be reciprocal effects between the music and a particular neighborhood culture. This reiterates our earlier argument regarding the need to more carefully theorize the links between rap music and attitudes and behavior.

The second type of qualitative study, unfortunately all too scarce in the literature, moves from convergence to an attempt to empirically document links between the music and listeners' perceptions. Earlier in the chapter, we mentioned an ethnographic study by Mahiri and Conner (2003) that found that youths variably interpreted and critically engaged with rap music. In another study, a focus group of African American boys and girls aged 11-13; participants were presented with stereotypical sexual labels (e.g., diva, gangster bitch, gold digger, freak, baby mama) and scripts associated with each type of female distilled from hip-hop music. The youths reported that they listened to hip-hop and rap music and videos every day (in part because of the lack of television programs centered on black youth), and they immediately recognized the labels presented to them. Moreover, both the male and female youths reported that hip-hop culture was "an integral part of their daily lives, taught them things about life, and gave them a perspective on their role or position in society" (Stephens & Few, 2007, p. 56). The participants readily sang songs and identified artists who represented each of the sexual scripts. Their "daily consumption of hip hop culture normalized the scripts," and "they actively sought to consume or express aspects" of this culture (Stephens & Few, 2007, p. 59). More importantly, they gave "real life examples of peers who they felt re-enacted key cues associated with these scripts" (Stephens & Few, 2007, p. 56). None of the participants stated that they had personally enacted the messages in hip-hop scripts and none had been sexually active, but they believed the scripts influenced the sexual behavior of other youths. While the study did not examine violence, it is possible that similar findings regarding youth internalization of music messages, and perhaps behavior consistent with those messages, would be found in qualitative studies of violent themes as well.

What is needed, but missing so far, is research on consumers of rap music that is systematically linked to these individuals' lived experiences and circumstances. Some of the ethnographic studies reviewed above are suggestive of a dynamic interaction between the messages in rap music and distinctive social contexts and experiences of some of those who frequently listen to this music, but these studies are suggestive at best. For instance, while there is an apparent convergence between the "code of the street" in inner-city neighborhoods and the conduct norms embedded in elements of the "rap code," a reciprocal relationship between the two has yet to be documented. Instead, claims about the effects of rap music and claims about the origins of the street code are made separately, without considering the potential influence of each on the other. We think such studies would be a fruitful line of research.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter has shown that much of the literature on rap music is filled with unexamined assumptions about both the content and effects of the
music on listeners. Surprisingly, this literature fails, for the most part, to actually document such effects. Even the experimental studies that purport to test rap's effects on subjects' perceptions and/or behavior are deficient (small numbers, lack of external validity, inability to conduct multivariate analyses, immediate "effects" that cannot be tracked over time). Because of these myriad problems, we regard experimental studies of rap's effects as inherently limited. What is needed, as we have argued, are studies that examine how, and in what ways, rap music's values and messages are interpreted and internalized in the real world.

We have also documented the lack of theoretical clarity in this body of literature. While we do not expect to find theoretical frameworks in popular writings on music, the latter nevertheless often make claims about cause and effect relationships. And, regarding academic studies of rap music, very few can be considered theoretically informed. This applies to experimental studies, content analyses, and (the few) relevant ethnographic studies reviewed here. The deficiencies in the existing literature can be rectified by future research that is theoretically driven, based on systematically created samples (rather than anecdotal material), and examines the meanings and practices of those who consume rap music in the real world. This will help to address the unanswered question of the nature of the relationship between music, identity, attitudes, and behavior. How do the consumers really interpret the messages of rap music, and to what extent and in what ways do they model their own behavior on such messages?

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