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Gangsta Rap and the Trapped Mentality

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Communication Arts.

By

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Under the mentorship of Shana Bridges

ABSTRACT

This research paper provides historical background into the evolution of Hip Hop culture and further investigation into the evolution and foundation of Gangsta Rap music. Throughout this investigation, five recurring fundamental themes are recognized through patterns presented by its pioneers. The five themes that are addressed within this subgenre include: (1) masculinity, (2) respect, (3) violence and retaliation, (4) misogyny, and (5) wealth. As Gangsta Rap emerged into popular culture, it became socially acceptable to exploit issues and limitations experienced within African American communities. In turn, Gangsta rappers overcame limitations typically experienced by black males. In what follows I will provide origins and characteristics of Gangsta Rap. I will discuss the emergence of Trap music from Gangsta Rap. In addition to the five themes above, Trap music remains distinctive through the introduction of a sixth theme, drugs. Furthermore, this paper not only elucidates the foundations of these genres, but it also supports them as creative forms of communication.

Keywords: hip hop, gangsta rap, trap music, masculinity

Thesis Mentor:________________________
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Dr. Steven Engel

April 2017
Communication Arts
University Honors Program
Georgia Southern University
Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to my parents for exposing me to Hip Hop culture and the concepts instilled within the music. They have provided me with the necessary mental tools to handle a diligent task such as this. In addition, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Shana Bridges, my mentor and a lecturer in the Department of Communication Arts. I am beyond thankful for her willingness to share her time and knowledge, and for providing valuable guidance and continuous encouragement. I am very grateful for her support and attention, as I would not have obtained such success without her. Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to express gratitude to Dr. Abby Brooks, Assistant Professor, in the Department of Communication Arts. I am extremely thankful for desire to share her expertise and provide guidance throughout this venture.
Overview of Hip-Hop

There is a diverse pool of cultures within today’s society, with many individuals belonging to multiple groups. Some cultures are born as a result of shared characteristics among other dominant cultures. Others are born through acts of adoption and manipulation in efforts to achieve a greater purpose and provoke change. This was true for one culture in particular that was created to overcome the heavy doings of oppression and devastation. This culture was Hip Hop.

In the 1970s, New York City was seen as the party epicenter, with disco music at the forefront and formal dress code highly enforced. However, this scenery was not an accurate representation of all realities within this state. At this time, many Blacks were facing chaos and havoc from fires burning in Bronx, New York (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). With many in this area already struggling financially, the fires added more devastation, resulting in an alarming increase in the crime rate. Various news outlets and political figures would visit and report on the destructed city, but little change would be implemented. The people of the Bronx thus took matters into their own hands to reshape the minds and provide a sense of hope for its citizens. In 1973, DJ Kool Herc, a Jamaican American from the Western Bronx broadcasted a sound built from the soulful musical beginnings of African Americans (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). This sound was unlike the disco music at the forefront of the music scene during this time. DJ Kool Herc would extend break beats from soul records to virtually generate a new song. Break beats are the breakdown portions in soul music. Simply put, the breakdown portions are parts of a song in which the instruments take precedence and have solo portions. In order to successfully extend these break beats, he had multiple copies of the record and alternated the playback
of the particular breakdown portion. Now although DJ Kool Herc broadcasted this sound through the element of deejaying at parties where he did not act alone. Alongside him stood Coke La Rock. Coke La Rock would add a vocal presence to accompany Kool Herc’s mixes and introduced the emceeing element to Hip Hop culture (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). The emcee (or MC) began as the master of the ceremony, but as will be described later, the delivery and style of emceeing developed through the years. At these parties, people would gather to dance and enjoy the beats created from their favorite soul artists. In the beginning, the gatherings were typically held outdoors or in homes. However, crowds quickly tripled and larger venues were necessary for this increasingly popular new wave of music in the Bronx.

Some participants at these musical events began entertaining the crowd and dancing to these break beats. This led to the birth of the third element of Hip Hop culture, breakdancing. James Brown is often credited as having influenced the dance moves in breakdancing, given the rampant mimicry of his fancy footwork. (Del Barco, 1996). Breakdancing follows suit of the first two elements, allowing room for innovation alongside the adoption of pre-existing styles.

The last element -- graffiti art -- was introduced as an alternative to street violence and showcase a form of visual art that would now be associated with Hip Hop. Some street organizations used this element as a tactic to simple establish territory, Others utilized this art form as a venue of expression. During this same period, various street organizations were being formed to protect areas of the East part of the Bronx. The crime rates in this area did not attract many visitors, but one man who came to Eastern Bronx was Afrika Bambaataa. Bambaataa belonged to one of the several street
organizations that would align for the greater good of the community (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). They compared themselves to other organizations who focused on Black consciousness, such as the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam. During meetings, organizations would not only work to solve problems within the community, but would also settle the issues among street organizations. Bambaataa created a constructive environment that focused on verbal communication rather than violence (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). As a means to shift the focus and uplift the community, Bambaataa made sure that no matter what ethnicity or race you were, you understood your lineage. He also emphasized that being of African descent should be accepted rather than dismissed (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). He would use this consciousness and knowledge acquired through organizing people alongside the pre-established platforms by DJ Kool Herc to create a community (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). This added sense of community, in conjunction with the four elements (deejaying, emceeing, breakdancing, and graffiti art), constituted the culture we now know as Hip Hop.

Rap’s Origin

For centuries, ceremonies have been practiced among various cultures for countless reasons. When a ceremony or even an event is commenced, someone is appointed to ensure that the necessary activities are carried out as intended. The designated individual is referred to as the master of ceremonies (MC or emcee). This role has been adopted and transformed to better represent Hip Hop culture and its foundational purpose.

During Hip-Hop’s development, block parties were utilized as opportunities for disc jockeys to gain exposure and provide entertainment, and would later be true for
emcees (Fontaine, 2011). Many have paved the way for present day emceeing flows. DJ Hollywood, who is known to many as the first King of Rap rose to fame during the New York disco era (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). Kurbin (2005) defined Rap as “a musical form that makes use of rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular, which is recited or loosely chanted over a musical track” (p. 360). DJ Hollywood would use his influences (such as The Last Poets, Pigmeat Markham, and radio personality DJ Frankie Crocker) to use word play, denotation and connotation, and rhythmic speech to generate massive crowd responses (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). This rhythmic Rap -- along with his background in disco and Rhythm and Blues -- set him apart from other emcees.

Simultaneously, Coke La Rock and other Hip Hop emcees began emceeing by calling out names at parties or vocalizing a few rhythmic lines to contribute to the entertainment. Eventually, DJ Grandmaster Flash and his group the Furious Five made a group of emcees the new norm. However, the financial backing and equipment required to support these groups made it hard for many in the Bronx. On July 13, 1977, the tables would turn as a power outage that spread across New York City and other surrounding boroughs (including the Bronx) would allow for many aspiring entertainers to achieve their dreams. Many took advantage of this situation by stealing electronic equipment from stores to kick-start their journeys to becoming deejays and emcees (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). Other groups such as The Treacherous Three and the Cold Crush Brothers also rose to popularity during this time.

Although Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five reigned supreme in New York, they began to spread the sound of Hip Hop by co-headlining shows across the country. The Cold Crush Brothers attempted to fill the number one spot in New York, which lead
the two groups to battle for the title. During this battle, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five took monetary prize, though audiences who listened to the illegal recordings of the battle reportedly appreciated the lyricism of the Cold Crush Brothers (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). This introduced a greater demand of audio tapings in the Hip Hop community. Now although the Cold Crush Brothers increased the demand for Hip Hop recordings within the Hip Hop community, another group would introduce this demand on a global scale.

**Hip Hop Goes Mainstream**

In 1979, Sylvia Robinson, a Rhythm and Blues singer and the co-founder of All Platinum Records experienced hardships with her record company. This led her to begin a search for the best new talent in New Jersey. One night, she went to Harlem World Nightclub and witnessed her first rapping deejay (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). After being mesmerized by the talents of the deejay, she began to search for talent in this genre. During her search, she met three men that could mimic this sound and possibly rejuvenate All Platinum Records. Sylvia brought the men into her studio, and would create what would be known as the first commercial Hip Hop group, Sugarhill Gang (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). After working in the studio, Sylvia would help produce the first internationally-known Rap song, “Rapper’s Delight” (Robinson, Gee & Hank, 1979). Although many in New York and surrounding areas knew this was not the first song to come from Hip Hop, others around the world would think otherwise. This not only allowed global exposure of Hip Hop, but ignited the recognition of rapping as an art form by independent record labels and entrepreneurs alike (Tummons, 2008, 69).
There is no doubt that Sugarhill Gang can easily be credited with popularizing Hip Hop on a grander scale. At this point, Rap was introduced to the world and was being incorporated into popular culture. However, with exposure comes popularity and potential appropriation. This became a reality for the Hip Hop community after rapping became a national phenomenon and was even being used by other commercial mediums to appeal to relevant audiences. This exposure was significant for Hip Hop, but its creators and earlier members of this community were not satisfied with the direction of this culture and genre (rap).

The adoption by many allowed others to believe that rapping was simply a fad, but Afrika Bambaataa worked to ensure the viability of the art. However, instead of keeping Rap music and Hip Hop culture in Bronx, New York, they looked toward Manhattan to widen the scope of Hip Hop sound (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). This allowed for exposure to a new crowd, consisting of predominantly white alternative rock listeners. By having deejays mix Rock and Funk music instead of the usual Soul and Jazz music, white crowds began to truly appreciate their craft. Simultaneously, it allowed for deejays to expand their musical repertoire and even play music that would not be accepted among crowds in the Bronx. Through the combination of this new sound along with new technology, Electro-funk became a part of the Hip Hop “umbrella” and resulted in the enhancement and advancement of Hip Hop among Whites.

**Hip Hop’s Major Transformation**

According to Kubrin (2005), “Rap music has undergone major transformations in the last two decades. These changes adhere to the switch in narrative provided by rappers displayed within the culture. When Rap group Sugarhill Gang surfaced in 1979, Hip Hop
culture and Rap music was broadcasted worldwide. At that time, the narrative reflected the original motives of Hip Hop culture, by entertaining and uplifting its people. As Dimitriadis (1996) stated, “Early groups were loosely structured, members delivering and trading verses, rhymes and chants in a flexible and non-thematic manner...These artists, again, did not have strictly orchestrated or linearly composed approach to art” (p. 184). This approach tended to invoke an optimistic perspective for its listeners and audiences worldwide. However, as Hip Hop continued to thrive in its birthplace and surrounding areas, the appearance of one outside component would change the tone of this culture forever.

In the 1980s, the crack epidemic took America by storm, leaving the Bronx in drug turmoil. Crack-cocaine, a rather cheap drug compared to its parent, cocaine, allowed for individuals in poorer areas to capitalize and not only sell but also use the drug on a grand scale. As a result, the Bronx and other areas began to endure what Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five called a “jungle” filled with harsh realities (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016). As the environment worsened and addiction increased, many wished for change. Hip Hop provided a public platform to initiate political change. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five took advantage of this resource to help project the harsh realities they faced during this time. Their song, “The Message,” paved the way for what we know today as Rap music. The lyrics in this song provided experiential narratives of the obstacles the artists faced. At the same time, it showcased the ingenious creativity utilized in Hip Hop culture. This combination of factors led to increased listenership and provided a sense of security for the genre itself.
Gangsta Rap’s Birth

After the addition of message and knowledge to emceeing, the adoption of Rap and Hip Hop culture increased across the country. However, on the West Coast, Hip Hop did not hold sway in the same way because Techno music continued to rule the party scene. However, the West Coast was not immune to the crack epidemic, and soon the realities of many Black communities changed. In Los Angeles, California (and surrounding areas), crack heightened tensions among gangs due to territorial restrictions on where drugs could be sold and distributed by each gang.

Tracy Marrow, better known as Ice-T, utilized rap to project his own experiences on the streets of Los Angeles. With rapper Schoolly D from Philadelphia being his primary influence, Ice-The learned to use rap music to verbally document his lifestyle alongside a beat. The two, Ice-T and Schoolly D deployed a style of rapping that exploited authentic events of street life in an explicit form. Even in his first commercial song, “6 in the Morning,” Ice-T provided a window for viewing street culture and the life of a gangbanger. Rapper MC Eiht called the song “the gangbanger and drug dealers anthem,” and remarked that it was “talking about real stuff. It was a street anthem, and they had no type of music that they could relate and say they were seeing every day” (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016).

Simultaneously, in the late 1980s, law enforcement began demonstrating more aggressive behavior in Los Angeles. As crime grew and gangs became more violent and less controlled, law enforcement worked to combat the drug influence in these areas. In 1989, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) initiated mass arrests (Eastman, 1992). Deemed “Operation Hammer,” officers rounded up African Americans and Hispanics.
without probable cause that they committed a crime, simply because the police wanted to avert the threat of gang violence (Eastman, 1992). Given the violence between police and non-whites during these years, it came as no surprise to African Americans when, in 1991, the recorded beating of civilian Rodney King surfaced around the nation. When the four officers were acquitted of the charges, the city erupted into what are referred to as the “L.A. Riots” (Bascunan & Wheeler, 2016).

Using rap as medium to exploit hardships, these events motivated rap group Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A). This group consisted of such notable names as Eazy-E, Ice Cube, Arabian Prince, MC Ren, Dr. Dre and DJ Yella. In 1988, they released one of Hip Hop’s most revolutionary rap songs, “Fuck tha Police.” In the song, Ice Cube, starts his verse by saying:

Fuck the police coming straight from the underground / A young nigga got it bad cause I’m brown / And not the other color so police think / They have the authority to kill a minority / Fuck that shit, cause I ain’t the one / For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun. (Jackson & Patterson, 1988, track 2)

Wahl (1999) explains “‘Fuck tha Police’ (and every song released by N.W.A) helped ensure its underground status by upping the level of obscenity, violence, and misogyny, often simultaneously in the same line” (p. 100). N.W.A made it more socially acceptable to rap about social consciousness and issues apparent in African American communities. As a result, more revolutionary and conscious groups arose to convey their message and add political awareness to rap. Famous groups, Public Enemy and The Last Poets focused on contentious subjects and political accusations to stimulate conversation and convey their messages to audiences.
By developing the message-oriented foundations set by rappers Ice-T and Schoolly D, rappers used Gangsta Rap to highlight discrimination, injustices, and dire conditions in the inner cities. Rappers provided lyrical evidence of African American communities that were poverty stricken, drug addled, and stifled by gang violence. With street culture being a reality for many rappers, gangsta Rap provided not only a genre with relatable narratives, but also a distant window into a new reality for others. This newfound reality presented the introduction of new elements, street roles, and perceptions that may not have been accessible otherwise. Simultaneously, while looking through this window, audiences may justify rappers’ personas, lifestyles and perspectives. Like many venues of media, music plays a role in the shaping of the mindsets of its audiences. With Gangsta rap, we learn that the streets, and street code, play a vital role in the mindsets and identity creation of its producers. This enabled Hip-Hop culture and Rap music to receive more credibility, contributing to a style atypical of the prior Rap scene. From the exposure on television, and explicit language, many people, including Whites were intrigued by the straightforwardness, and lack of censorship (Yousman, 2003, p. 367). With more exposure, iconic rappers such as Snoop Dogg, Tupac Shakur, and Notorious B.I.G would soon follow in their footsteps and develop the pre-existing foundation. This was only just the beginning of a new era for Rap music and Hip Hop culture.

**Gangsta Rap’s Foundation**

There are several concepts that are persistent among most songs within the Gangsta Rap subculture. Throughout the research conducted, there are five concepts that continued to appear, which includes: (1) masculinity, (2) respect, (3) violence and retaliation, (4) misogyny, and (5) wealth. Many within society tend to object to the
consistent concepts and elements utilized in Hip-Hop culture given the negative impact they may have on society. Due to the more extreme aspects of Gangsta Rap music, compared to the basics, many have opposed the themes consistent within the foundation of this subgenre. In addition, the moral character gangsta rappers portrayed throughout the media tended to attract negative attention from parental figures, politicians, and other governmental figures.

Individuals have a tendency to use ethics and morals interchangeably. Ethics can better be explained as the rights and wrongs presented by a job, position or system that have been previously established (Patterson & Wilkins, 2014, p. 2). Although ethical dilemmas may occur, a template or basic set of guidelines should be pre-existent when a newcomer appears. On the other hand, one’s moral character or standards may influence him/her to pursue a situation or ethical dilemma differently. Morals or morality solely concerns the individual at hand, and their personal beliefs on what should or shouldn’t be accepted as right or wrong (Patterson & Wilkins, 2014, p. 2). Persons within society delineate their moral character, whether deemed righteous or unpleasant.

Within the Rap industry, there are many ethical practices that are common. Most rappers within this subgenre are byproducts of street life and incorporate aspects of the street code in their lyrics and persona. Although some contemporary rappers may not share similar morals or experiences of those of the streets, by understanding the common ethical concepts within gangsta rap, the façade can still be presented.

**Gangsta Rap and Masculinity**

Masculinity, in our society, is an ideology traditionally taught from man to man.
However, many Black males from poor urban areas commonly lacked a father or positive male role model in their life. Many sought this masculine direction in other areas, such as the streets (Hooks, 2004, p. 97). Throughout their youth, many learned that Black subjectivity incorporates the notion that masculinity (in Gangsta Rap and street culture) means exhibiting domination, invulnerability, and extreme toughness (Oware, 2010, p. 22).

Furthermore, Iwamoto states that artists:

> Asserted their manhood through a set of related physical postures, clothing styles, social roles and social scripts, behaviors, styles of walk, and context and flow of speech, types of dances, hand shaking, and attitudes that are used to symbolically express masculinity. (Iwamoto, 2003, p. 45)

Through their lyrical catalog, persona, and expressions, rappers were then given the ability to showcase their dominance in hopes to establish their presence and create their masculine identity.

Artists in the Gangsta Rap genre often include hyper-masculine lyrics in their songs. Although their environment may differ than others, the goals and aspirations of males in Gangsta Rap remain aligned with the patriarchal norm. Majors and Billson note that similar to their white male counterparts, Black males still wish to fulfill masculine roles, such as being a “provider, breadwinner, procreator, and/or protector” (as cited in Oware, 2010, p. 23). However, the “particular presentation of self emerges due to the limited opportunities that many Black males face in their daily lives” (Oware, 2010, p. 23). These limited opportunities stemmed from environmental and
racial factors and prevented Black males from attaining this overall dominant discourse of manhood.

There are numerous limitations that stem from street culture that various gangsta rappers have experienced. To begin, most rappers tended to live and grow up in predominantly poor urban areas. As a result, many would lack parental guidance due to incarceration, abandonment, drugs, or even prostitution. In addition, these environments typically lacked resources such as adequate education, stable employment opportunities and/or efficient and regulatory law enforcement personnel. This can also result in negative connotations of political groups, or in cases of incarceration, prevent citizens of these communities from having any political presence.

With that said, creators of Gangsta Rap utilized Rap as a way to exploit these limitations within a public forum while simultaneously using this platform as a means of achieving this so called white manhood. Oware (2010) states that Black men had to create their own standard of manhood given their resources, which emphasize a more routine form of masculinity through their postures, expressions, and performances (p. 23). This allowed them to not only provide monetarily for their families or themselves, but also for Black culture.

**Dominance**

From Gangsta Rap’s beginnings, respect and dominance have been primary focal points and motives for actions and lyrical themes. Within street culture, one’s rank or range of authority influences an individual’s dominance. Having the ability to control a group of people and maintain a level of loyalty from those within their environment also increases respect. The amount of control (in the Rap industry or on
the streets) is displayed by the amount of people willing to adopt their projected mentality and the perpetuation of their actions by their audience members and associates. In street culture, this concept is exemplified, as drug dealers maintain and acquire loyalty while expanding their empire, or pimps mentally and physically controlling the prostitutes within their rings.

In Hip-Hop culture, this is shown as rappers control their posse, and through their ability to generate a fan base and entertain various demographics. This exemplifies the application of Oware’s findings, as members of Gangsta Rap and street culture utilize their given resources to continue their journey to achieve “white manhood.” As street culture provides parental guidance, this desire for control aligns with the patriarchal domestic role of the breadwinner and provider.

Rapper Young Dolph in his song, “Preach” demonstrates this point by saying:

Mama she was in the streets, so guess who raised me (the streets) / You muthafuckin’ right / Couldn’t get it from my mama, so I got it off the block / Been working my whole life, but I ain’t never punched the clock / Nine years old I seen a nigga get shot, damn”. (Thornton, 2014, track 10)

Within this verse, he explains that his mother was addicted to crack, and with no father figure, he allowed the streets to fill that void. Furthermore, the patriarchal association can be drawn, as he worked his entire life, despite not working a typical “nine-to-five job”. As young as nine, he created the opportunity to achieve the provider and breadwinner roles in his environment.
However, with dominance and hyper-masculine qualities being essential in street life, Dolph and rappers alike learned to adopt the necessary processes to achieve these qualities. These measures tend to be presented within an ongoing process of exerting extreme toughness and invulnerability in order to maintain or recapture dominance within their territory.

**Extreme Toughness and Invulnerability**

The dominance characteristic of masculinity, in gangsta rap, is revealed through vulgar and aggressive lyrical expression. According to Watts (2009):

> Urban youth, whether oriented predominantly toward "street" or "decent," learn at an early age that aggression and toughness earn respect among peers. Being able to handle affronts, verbally and physically, is a valuable skill on the streets. As such, one's capacity to "dis" others while not being "dissed" enhances one's reputation and self-image. (p. 44)

Watt’s noted process of “dissing” while not being “dissed” is exercised in Gangsta Rap and street culture through the use of extreme toughness and invulnerability. In Gangsta rap, this exercise can be presented as lyrical warfare through the use of offensive and defensive strategies.

Extreme toughness is typically used as the offensive tactic to establish dominance through the use of verbal abuse, violent threats, and/or vocalizing disrespect. The effectiveness is typically measured by the loss of respect, credibility, or generation of inferiority created by the lyrical (or verbal) attack. Rappers with high credibility, dominance, and fanatic responsibility may simply choose to dismiss or discredit the source from which the toughness was projected.
On the other hand, if ample disrespect is displayed or low credibility exists, some rappers may choose to retaliate by expressing invulnerability. However, this concept of invulnerability is not new to African-American culture, as it can be traced through historical events of Black males. Historically significant events such as slavery, civil rights movements, and the establishment of gender roles associated vulnerability (or defenselessness) with weakness. Gangsta rap’s adoption of this idea is enacted as artists counteract attacks by reciprocating extreme toughness in efforts to decrease their opponent’s effectiveness. This can be conveyed through a rapper’s expression of “hardness” through explicit and threatening lyrical allusions, or physical gestures, or violence. This can also be achieved by suggesting their lack of intimidation or even showcasing various penile extenders (such as weapons, guns, cars) to augment their masculine presence.

The use of violence as a form of retaliation can also be seen in street culture, through territorial street wars within gangs, prostitution rings, and illegal drug trades. From Rap beefs to the creation of lyrical themes, violence in and out the studio has surfaced in gangsta Rap music. One of the most notable applications in gangsta Rap history were the East Coast versus West Coast wars of the 1990s, with rappers Tupac Shakur (West Coast) and Notorious B.I.G (East Coast) at the forefront. Other examples include, Jay-Z versus Nas, 50-Cent versus Ja-Rule, Gucci Mane versus Young Jeezy, and the list continues. Violence has also contributed to the development of the regional gangsta Rap sound, Drill music. While the word drill withholds various denotations, this form of music utilizes it as slang to denote various vulgar acts in the highly violent areas of Chicago. Producer, Young Chop is accredited with the creation of its
foundational sound, as it employs various gun sounds alongside lyrics filled with violent threats, murderous acts, and quietus references (Noisey, 2014). Although the narrative is a reflection of the artist’s personal encounters and situational mentality, it perpetuates the practice of invulnerability with the use of retaliation to reinforce dominance.

**Misogyny and Homophobia**

Adams and Fuller (2006) portray “misogyny as the hatred and disdain of women. It is an ideology that reduces women to objects for men’s ownership, use, or abuse” (p. 939). In our society, the objectification of women continues to reign given the patriarchal norm. With music videos contributing to visual media, Laura Mulvey’s reading of the male gaze can be assessed in Gangsta Rap culture. According to Sellen (2005), through the male gaze, women in film are constructed within a framework that situates men as “the bearer of the look” (p. 319), making their purpose on camera to stimulate male pleasure.

However, many claims are made to argue the blatant use of misogyny within Rap music. Kelley (1996) suggests that this mechanism is utilized to mask men’s fear of female sexuality (p. 216). With the expectations and boundaries of female sexuality constantly changing, the insecurities of men are displaced through anger and vulgarity in their lyrics. On the other hand, Oware (2011) states that this could simply mimic true tensions between Black males and females. By demeaning and promoting the negative image of Black women through their music, gangsta rappers (and Black males) attempt to regain their footing in society. As Black women now surpass their Black male
counterparts in professional and academic settings, the bodily exploitation and verbal degradation serves as a continued effort to suppress their advancements.

By adopting this practice, Gangsta rappers are creating a hegemonic form of masculinity exemplified through the domination of Black women aurally and visually. By preserving the objectification and embodiment of women within their lyrics and visual content, artists learn to acquire their masculine identity through repeated hegemonic practices. Gangsta rappers, and those within street culture typically refer to women as “bitches, tricks and hoess” in efforts to reinforce this idea. For example, Rap artist Nelly became the center of controversy in 2003 after the release of his music video, Tip Drill (Torero, 2000). The visual content includes women with minimal and promiscuous clothing, along with the glorification of bodily characteristics such as the breasts, buttocks, and female genitalia. However, with feminist operations and alternative readings becoming more socially acceptable, these practices are being challenged.

Unfortunately, one sector of gangsta Rap fails to break barriers when confronting the limited construction of masculinity developed from dominant readings. Homosexuality, or the sexual and romantic attraction toward those of the same sex, is a rare topic of discussion among Rap artists. When assessing masculinity in the hegemonic context, gangsta rappers tend to rely on the verbal bashing of homosexuals in order to vindicate their manhood. As noted earlier, street culture stems from the resourceful adaptation of dominant and patriarchal concepts. So, by accepting gay and queer actions one would resist the dominant discourse, and challenge the foundation of which Gangsta Rap was set.
Consequently, if gangsta rap’s foundation rejects alternative sexual readings, it contributes to the idea that gangsta Rap is homophobic. “Many male rappers embrace pejorative language with an anti-gay stance” (Oware, 2010, p. 25). In hopes of furthering the formation of their masculine identity, rappers use sexual slurs such as fag, pussyboy, pussynigga, and dyke (and etc.) to lyrically publicize their position on homosexuality. Jefferies (2009) explains that caveats, such as “no homo” and “pause” exemplify masculine anxiety and the compulsion to negate queer sexualities as a defense mechanism (p. 38). These caveats create another opportunity for gangsta Rap artists to sanction their position within the socially dominant hierarchy of sexuality.

**Gangsta Rap’s Current Presence**

Although Hip-Hop is a byproduct of the African American culture, individuals of various demographics are represented in its audience. This is apparent given Gangsta Rap’s. Different races, cultures, and age ranges contribute to, benefit from, and are entertained by the profits and production of Rap and Gangsta music. However, in this research paper, I will focus on the two cultures labeled as the biggest contributors to the profits and production of gangsta Rap music.

When evaluating profits, the biggest consumers of Gangsta Rap music are whites (Yousman, 2003, p. 367). With that said, the reasoning behind this is varied, as one may appreciate the lyrical flow and rhetorical strategy, as others may simply enjoy the beat. On the other hand, Yousman (2003) addresses the possible “obsession” by white youth listeners of African American and Hip-Hop culture (p. 368). Many members of White culture are intrigued by African American cultures, but based upon sales, decide to indulge in the most hyperbolic form, Gangsta Rap (Kurbin, 2005, p. 376).
However, this could be a medium that provides an insider’s look into a portion of African American culture that one may not experience. This interest and curiosity into the street code or “thug life” appeals to many, not just whites, as the storytelling aspect and unwanted censorship attract a wide range of people. In addition, the overcoming of hardships and possible poverty stimulate a sense of hope for listeners of many demographics (Kurbin, 2005, p. 360).

As far as production, African Americans dominate this domain. Most artists are of African American descent, and the gangsta lifestyle has placed its footprint in the Hip-Hop culture. With drug dealing being an easily attainable job option in poor urban areas, many African Americans have achieved monetary success, but risk incarceration. With the option of gangsta rap, and its success, persons of these areas have chosen to pursue a career within this realm to stimulate cash flow.

**The Trap and Trap Music**

The abundance of crack cocaine in the Bronx and Los Angeles has opened doors for new subcultures to arise in Hip Hop. The increase in drug flow throughout these cities allowed for the additions of message and knowledge to be instilled in rap music. This remains true for the birth of another sub-genre that currently dominates Hip Hop culture known as “Trap music.” Trap music is a regional sound that originates from the streets of Atlanta, Georgia.

As Trap music evolves and becomes commoditized, documentation of this sub genre and culture have increased. However, there are not many scholarly workings that fanatics can find to educate themselves on the historical backings and foundations that combine to create Trap music and Trap culture. With that said, documentaries, blog
articles, and interviews are readily available to assist in translating the messages artists wish to convey through their songs. With high interest in the culture, and its increasing demand, this research will contribute to the education of Trap audiences.

**Trap’s Origin**

The word “trap,” when referring to this sub-culture, stems from a drug-related background. In the mid-1980s, crack cocaine reigned the streets, just like in the Bronx and Los Angeles, and similar to others, law enforcement and the laws against crack cocaine were getting heavier (Noisey, 2017). As a result, major drug dealers were being recognized and gradually being taken off of the streets. While the heads of drug rings were being seized and arrested, the lower-level drug dealers within their rings were allotted the opportunity to acquire more customers and expand their personal empires. Due to their limited experience and resources, many lower level drug dealers tended to keep their drugs in the back of apartments and houses (sometimes abandoned houses), where there was one way into the house and one way out (Noisey, 2015). Inevitably, this would allow for higher risk of dealers being trapped by police upon discovery; however, due to lower status, the probability of being caught tended to be low. Rapper Killer Mike recalled many adults saying, “I don’t know what they back there in that mouse trap for” or “what they back there in the dope trap for” (Noisey, 2017). So, the trap was more-or-less an office for drug dealers, because most drug transactions occurred here. In turn, the term “trap” simultaneously became an action, as “trapping” was referred to as a profession for many within Atlanta and cities alike.

Although trap did not become a sound until the 2000s, there were early associations between drugs and rap in Atlanta. One prime example, Big Meechie, a
member of rap group, Black Mafia Family utilized rap as his primary route to launder money made through his drug ring. As explained in Noisey (2015):

   The dope is what inspires the rap...Black Mafia Family was a Detroit based drug ring that went down South in the late 90s. They ran cocaine from Mexico into the [United] States by Atlanta, using [their rap group], BMF as a cover up. In 2008, Meechie and his brother Terry were sentenced to 30 years each and all their earnings were seized and they’re estimated 2,500 inner circle members were thrown in jail.

This example showcased, on a grander scale, how drug laws affected major dealers, and opened the door for trapping to reign in the streets of Atlanta and surrounding cities. This also exposed an opportunity for gangsters and members of street culture to disguise their preeminent profession, while continuing to expand their venues of monetary flow. Coincidentally, it also created an everlasting association with rap music and drugs in the South, especially Atlanta, leading to the formation of Trap music and Trap culture.

**Trap Music’s Birth**

   The origins of Trap music are hazy, but many accredit the sounds label to Rapper T.I. In 2003, T.I. released his second album, Trap Muzik, which featured songs like 24s and Rubber Band Man. The album’s first track, Trap Muzik, reflects what Trap music is by glamorizing his drug-dealing lifestyle, and how he makes a living selling crack cocaine. T.I. himself even justified his contribution to Trap music by saying, “There was no such thing as Trap Musik, I created that. I coined the term, it was my second album, it dropped in 2003. After that, there was an entire new genre of music created” (Taylor, 2012).
T.I. opened doors for Trap music and allowed for trap culture to be publicized and accepted on a larger scale, but in 2005 rappers Young Jeezy and Gucci Mane elevated Trap culture’s sound to an entirely new level. With the release of their song, “So Icy,” two major drug dealers would secure their rap careers and become two of the most notable trap artists in its history. Furthermore, the journey to achieve popularity is rather interesting in Trap culture. At the time, the black market was thriving due to the success of drug rings in Atlanta, so in strip clubs, crowds were present and provided favorable numbers for rappers to promotion their work (Noisey, 2017). Now, similar to Hip Hop’s beginnings, deejays held a great amount of power when raising awareness and increasing the attraction of an emcee. This would remain true in Trap culture, as artists such as Young Jeezy and Gucci Mane took their albums to strip club deejays to become noticed. The deejays would receive the track, and would rate the track based on the dancers’ reactions (Noisey, 2017). If the dancers favored the track, rappers could trust that their track would excel among other audiences and lead to financial forthcomings.

Now, despite the intentions of earlier Southern drug dealers, many trap artists choose to pursue Trap music as an alternate route to street and drug culture. They reflect on past experiences through their lyrics, and like Gangsta Rap, provide a window into the drug culture. This culture is attractive to many, because drugs are a worldwide commodity. Although illegal, drugs are used among all races and ethnicities, this allows for the exposure of the drug dealing lifestyle to be much more attractive among a range of audiences.
The Commodification of Trap Music

As mentioned in earlier sections, Gangsta Rap began as a genre within Hip Hop that exploited the harsh realities of gang life. Over time, it became a platform for many to convey messages to its audiences while projecting the daily accounts of its creators. At the same time, Trap music permitted those that exercised it to achieve success through the use of similar foundational concepts of Gangsta rappers. With the five themes, (1) masculinity, (2) respect, (3) violence and retaliation, (4) misogyny, and (5) wealth, rappers can continue to reflect on street culture. Although these themes are represented in Trap music, masculinity is most often represented either directly or indirectly. However, with an addition of a sixth theme, drugs, Trap music could now easily specify its focus, and distinguish itself from other sub-genres of Hip Hop music and culture.

In Trap music, masculinity is demonstrated through the personas, mannerisms, and masculine characteristics showcased through their lyrics. Like Gangsta rap artist, Trap artists reinforce the dominant ideology, patriarchy in order to obtain a more widely accepted and respected masculine identity. Unlike Gangsta rappers, drugs and trapping are primary motives over gang life. So, Trap artists translate the masculine characteristics (as well as domination, invulnerability, and extreme toughness) into their experiences in the trap, allowing them to remain distinctive. Rapper 21 Savage in his song, “No Heart” exemplifies these points by saying:

Young Savage, why you trappin’ so hard? / Why these niggas cappin’ so hard? /
Why you got a 12 car garage? / Why you pullin’ all these rappers’ cards? /
‘Cause these niggas pussy and I’m hard / I turn that fuckin’ soft into some hard /
I grew up in the streets without no heart / I’m prayin’ to my Glock and my carbon. (Joseph, S. & Wayne, L., 2016, track 2)

Throughout this hook, 21 Savage changes the narrative by speaking in third-person to himself. This narrative can be translated as such (1) Why are you constantly trapping (selling drugs)? (2) Why are other people so jealous? (3) Why are you bragging about your wealth? (4) Why are you exploiting the lack of authenticity among other rappers? In turn, 21 Savage shifts the narrative back to first-person and replies to clarify and justify his actions. He explains that he traps constantly because he is willing to put in the work and is not weak like those around him. He continues to acknowledge his success as a trapper because he turns cocaine (something soft) into crack (something hard) and makes substantial revenue. Furthermore, he grew up in street culture, and due to his unfavorable circumstances became desensitized and emotionless (Noisey, 2017). As a result of desensitization, he only trusts what he knows can protect him, his gun its bullets.

Not only does 21 Savage present his masculinity, but he also displays a similar mission to fulfill the breadwinner, provider, and protector roles associated with white manhood. While facing limited opportunities that closely resemble those of Gangsta Rap artists, 21 Savage and other Trap artists utilized trapping as their resource to create their own standard of manhood. This differs from the gang-related basing that Gangsta rappers used to achieve their masculine identity. As a result, there is a slight change in mentality that can assist in distinguishing Gangsta Rap and Trap music.

In Gangsta Rap’s beginnings, artists Ice-T, N.W.A, and even Schoolly D were using their narratives to exploit their lifestyles to raise awareness about the unfortunate
events that often occurred in their areas. Through their explicit and rebellious personas they opposed the dominant discourse to make it socially acceptable to rap about Afro-centric issues. The messages within their lyrics and the motives behind their music evoked social consciousness, allowing their music to be accepted past the cities of which they resided. With that said, the gang-related background of this sub-genre could have influenced this narrative, as brotherhood and a sense of community are important in gang life. Gang members must be willing to sacrifice for a sense of belonging and understand they must fulfill their roles for the greater good of the organization.

On the contrary, trapping stemmed from the lawful disruption of major drug rings in Atlanta (Noisey, 2015). As higher-ranked dealers became incarcerated, lower-ranked dealers were required to dictate their own dealing strategy in order to maintain financial stability. Trapping allowed individuals to advance through self-created opportunities, thus decreasing the sense of community found in Gangsta Rap. The advancements of trappers assisted in the formation of masculine identities and a preference for self-sufficiency over reliance. This remains true through the development of Trap music, as trappers (T.I., Young Jeezy, and Gucci Mane) utilize their earnings to fund their own rap careers, allowing lyrical self-reflection to remain crucial to Trap narrative. Rapper T.I. even alludes to being “like a one-man band” in his song “Rubber Band Man” (Harris, C., 2003, track 8).

Consequently, Trap music chooses to glamorize the trapping lifestyle, which sometimes leaves little room for the installment of positive messages to its listeners. As trap music becomes a major part of popular culture, wealth and masculine fulfillment are now being associated with the glorification of drugs. With that said, the wealth of
Trap artists heavily influence their personas and is typically displayed through materialism. Expensive jewelry, customized chains, and designer clothing are common physical representations of financial advancements achieved by Trap rappers. Even lyrical references of costly possessions help reinforce the monetary success of rappers. However, many Trap artists achieved financial success prior to rapping but preferred to pursue rapping due to the legal and potential life risks involved with trapping. Despite their current profession, artists continue to lyrically reflect and maintain their trapping personas in efforts to identify with Trap artists and remain relevant in Trap culture. In addition, rappers continue to reinforce the six recurring themes in order to develop their masculine identity and preserve their credibility established through trapping and street culture.

**Closing Arguments**

As Hip Hop emerged from African American culture, the derivatives within it evolved through acts of adoption and manipulation. Although the Hip Hop culture has undergone major transformations and adopted new concepts, this genre surpassed its expectations and became a force rather than a fad. It has provided a stage for enthusiasts to project various messages and evoke mental stimulation through lyrical imagery. Despite one’s willingness to accept or agree with the messages conveyed through this culture, one cannot fail to recognize this creative venue as a form of communication. By creating an opportunity for individuals to reflect through lyrical storytelling, Hip Hop culture epitomizes innovation and everlasting change by way of its members. From the implementation of message by early emcees to the revolutionary movements created by Gangsta rappers, Hip Hop continues to project various Afro-centric perspectives. This, in
itself, allowed individuals from various walks of life to adopt its practices to convey their own personal messages and provide a window into a new reality.

As Trap music progresses into popular culture, the perspective and lyrical workings depicted by members of this culture become more widely circulated in mainstream culture. The trap (place), trapping (the action), and trap music (its voice) are now represented more publicly due to the distribution and popularity of trap music.

Trapping and the Trap music genre that glorifies it serve as a metaphor for the ways in which this sub-culture can trap young Black men. As a profession, it physically traps young men by limiting their movement due to their required presence within the trap. However, once artists physically escape the trap and utilize its gains to fund rap careers, it serves as a mouthpiece that glorifies the profession, trapping one mentally. In addition, by employing trapping as a resource to overcome environmental limitations, artists have subconsciously perpetuated a modified form of patriarchy.

Audiences have developed a correlation of trapping with wealth, women, and the opportunity to form a widely-accepted masculine identity. Many trappers escaped the trap by pursuing rap careers, and continue to demonstrate their self-reliant mentality to progress in their new profession. Unfortunately, due to the continuous glamorization of their trap lifestyle and urge to attain this standard of manhood, these artists will remain mentally trapped in this reality. Subsequently, by merging this reconstructed ideology with popular culture, society will follow suit in becoming trapped in the preservation of this dominant ideology.
References


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