

# Examining Hip-hop from a Socio-economic and Political angle

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## ***Abstract***

*Hip-hop is known as one of the genres for music; however, it is a piece of writing and rhythm that shows African Americans' lives throughout the days, and social and economic impact in the US. The following paper examines the history of hip hop, including a social, political, and economic lens. It also analyzes how hip hop influenced the American culture, the involvement in politics that eventually shaped the US into the country today, and how hip hop contributed to the economy directly and indirectly.*

Recently, there has been a lot of controversy regarding rap music in the American media. From the demonization of this music after the school shootings experienced in Colorado, it appears that media and political groups have quickly placed blame on hip-hop music for a rising trend in violence among the youth. Despite critics being quick to highlight the violent lyrics of some hip-hop artists, they miss the point of the message of rap. Similar to other musical forms, rap cannot be understood unless it is studied without considering the social and historical context (Söderman & Folkestad, 2004). The current rap music is a reflection of its origin or background within the hip-hop culture of young, working-class African Americans living in urban areas. It acts as the voice of an underrepresented group, and it has increasingly grown in commercialization, popularity, as well as appropriation. Thus, hip hop is not only one type of music; rather, it is a history of African Americans' lives throughout the days – social and economic impact in US.

## **Definition and Brief Historical Background of Hip Hop**

Despite being perceived to be synonymous with rap music, Chang (2007) defines hip-hop as a complex culture consisting of four major elements: rapping, deejaying, graffiti painting and B-boying (made up of hip-hop style, dance, and attitude). Hip-hop has also been defined as a cultural movement that achieved widespread popularity during the 1980s and 1990s (Dyson, 2007). As a music genre, it embeds rhyming and rhythmic speech that became the most influential form of art.

Since its introduction, hip hop has become the most popular genre of music globally. It has drawn inspiration from numerous preceding music genres and embedded these elements into its culture. Because of its direct role in socio-political changes witnessed during the 1990s and in the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has proven to the world that it is more than a music genre. Despite no one having knowledge on the exact date of its creation, it is believed that it was created in 1973, South Bronx by Kool DJ Herc (Pelton, 2007). While creating, Herc deployed an innovative technique for stretching the drum break of a song and came up with the first hip hop beats. He also spoke and rhymed to the songs, thus making this to be perceived as the earliest rapping

version. Due to the increasing popularity of the genre, numerous artists commenced rapping over songs that were played by DJs. They were gradually referred to as MCs, meaning the mic controller. By 1977, what had commenced in Bronx spread to the other New York boroughs. It continued spreading throughout America.

Despite hip hop having many sub-genres, the most popular one by the 1990s was gangsta rap. West coast artists, including Ice-T and NWA, rapped regarding the life in slums and the violence experienced by African-Americans as they grew up. Whereas it was somehow exaggerated, gangsta rap was a reflection of the life for the black population in the 1990s (Pelton, 2007). Despite finding its place within the American culture, the conflicts between African Americans and the police peaked. Since the Second World War ended, police brutality incidences against Americans were more intense and frequent. The forms of police brutality included physical violence, verbal attacks, murder, excessive deployment of force, sexual assaults, and threats (Moore, 2020). Apart from the gangsta rap, political hip hop also emerged as a way of converting rap music into a quest for socio-political change. Ideally, political hip hop is usually reflected by the anger that the Black community holds against authority figures. Notably, political hip hop raised awareness of social issues in the lyrics and offered people some new perspectives.

The tone and lyrics of hip hop could be aggressive, but this is important for helping the listener to not only comprehend but also sympathize with the anguish, tribulations, anger, and pain of the rappers. Hip hop also expresses ideas in an authentic and raw way, thus making it a great way to tell stories and illuminate the injustices that the African American community faces (Travis, 2013). For instance, Tupac Shakur, a famous artist, raps about the negligence of the society towards African-Americans in the song *Changes*.

Cops give a damn about a negro  
Pull the trigger, kill a n\*\*\*\*, he's a hero  
Give the crack to the kids who the hell cares  
One less hungry mouth on the welfare

The other example is of a famous group called NWA raps on the way police officers usually mistreat blacks mainly due to their skin color. They also illuminate the way the law enforcement personnel deploy excessive force and violence.

Fuck the police comin' straight from the underground!  
A young n\*\*\*\* got it bad 'cause I'm brown  
And not the other color, so police think  
They have the authority to kill a minority

Thus, hip-hop seeks to promote social and economic justice by airing out the grievances of the African-American community. It gives people a voice to ventilate on what they think is not right, thus ensuring that politicians and other policymakers listen to them.

### **Relationship between hip hop and politics**

Hip hop has remained political because the essence of rap was to illuminate the injustices that occurred or are taking place in communities where the people felt that they have been neglected. Educating hip hop fans on the significance of elections demonstrates the impact of hip-hop culture. Since the early days, the

hip hop culture has remained political, an influential vehicle for delivering messages that need to be heard by the society (Bonnette, 2015). For example, through the spoken word, MCs have ably delivered the politics of hip-hop in a more direct way compared to those of the folk and rock predecessors. Since the earliest releases, political messages have always been infused into hip-hop. For example in 'Rappers Convention' released in 1980 by Harlem World Crew, the lyrics were like a news story taken from the headlines informing the people, "But we Americans gettin'/sick and tired of this politicalgong show/So we're sendin' our message over to Iran: let our people go/Now we been pushed around a lot, but we're not afraid of war/And Iran, your little cat and mouse game has really become a bore" (Patton 2018, p.1)

The involvement of hip hop in politics symbolizes that it has matured. Whereas hip hop has expanded to become the most loved genre of music, its influence has commenced spreading beyond music and clothing trends into social problems. There was a period when many rappers were in their 20s, thus making it unlikely for rappers to even have knowledge about politics, particularly because they felt that politicians were not representing their interests (Travis, 2013). Currently, rappers have continued their careers into their 30s and even 40s. With maturity, the content of their music also matures, along with the way they utilize their influence (Patton, 2018). As they become leaders for this music genre within their community, they spearhead the political campaigns through messages. The efforts of many seasoned rap artists to ensure that the hip-hop community takes part in the process of elections has affected individuals within urban regions, and younger generations of hip-hop artists. In this regard, as one sees Chance the Rapper, Travis Scott, as well as many other upcoming young artists, air out their grievances, it is critical to understand that the greatest hip-hop artists already laid a platform for them.

For a long period, the relationship between the hip-hop genre and politics has revolved around groups trying to talk to each other instead of with each other. In the past, politicians looked at hip-hop artists as thugs. Hip-hop viewed politicians as white people who did not understand the realities of the happenings in urban areas. By 2018, both politicians and hip-hop used their platforms to promote the greater good of the country. Since politicians are more willing to work with the hip-hop community influencers, it demonstrates that they have interests in concerns of a group of individuals who feel that they have been neglected by politics for a long period. Also, the mere fact that the culture of hip-hop has adopted the political process demonstrates that this group feels it has been disregarded and is starting to realize that it has immense political power (Patton, 2018). In spite of the divisiveness created by mainstream media, politicians and rappers collaborating depicts the beauty of the diversity of America. The American political landscape is more turbulent than ever before, and this has led to the emergence of a political awakening. Many Americans follow the happenings in Washington, and this is not different in hip-hop. Rappers are looking for change within their communities by writing and singing songs about it, and engaging with public policy shapers. Unlike the period when politicians would not engage in dialogue with rappers on public policies, the new America is characterized by the coexistence of politics and hip-hop culture to benefit the human race.

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### **The social significance of rap and hip-hop culture**

Rap music has occasionally been labeled as excessively violent compared to popular rock since it emanates from a culture that has been seeped in the fight against socio-economic and political oppression. In spite of the theatrics revolving around major MTV videos, rapping about gang life and guns reflects the day-to-day life in economically and racially stratified inner-city housing projects and ghettos. Violence in rap is an outcry of an underlying problem from people who have been influenced by deep economic inequalities divided by racial lines (Lena, 2006). Thus, rap's criminal activity and violence are usually defended as resulting from the disparities faced by the African-American community from where rap originated and remains. The recent census report indicated that African-American youth have a higher likelihood to live within poor neighborhoods and households, not to be employed, be targeted, or spend some time in prison at least once in their lifetime (Lena, 2006). One of the objectives of rap is that it can offer an opportunity for socio-economic power within neighborhoods where hope has faded away. The gun is symbolic of empowering oneself and gaining respect in continuing cycles of both economic and racial prejudice.

Also, some rappers contend that the presence of violence within their lyrics manifests the American culture and history of violence. What this means is that the US was deeply in love with hip-hop prior to hip-hop. The experience of African-Americans has been influenced by slavery legacies, political and economic subjugation, segregation as well as widespread incidences of violence. For example, according to Rapper Chuck D, nihilism and violence in rap music symbolizes the hate experienced by minorities in the country. Chuck D stated that African-Americans were a product of hate. They were taught to hate themselves. Moreover, these rappers argue that American history has been characterized by rebellion, bloodshed, and conquest, which is contrary to popular belief that only African-Americans are responsible for them. For instance, Rapper Ice Cube states that politicians have been hypocritical when trying to blame gangsters for the rising rates of violence experienced in the US, yet it is part of the American culture. Ice Cube believes that whereas African-Americans do things on a lower level, America does it on a higher level.

Also, rappers such as Sean Puffy Combs, Will Smith and Wyclef reached substantial levels of popularity among African-Americans. In this regard, many youths believed and continue to believe that the music industry provides them with the only realistic opportunity to attain money and fame as well as forget resentment (Ro, 2002). In spite of the blame imposed on rap, it symbolizes a cultural phenomenon attributed to various economic and socio-political circumstances. It is a way of opposing the systems conquest that has led to the creation of class differences within the US.

### **The economic impact of hip hop in US**

More than four decades ago, hip-hop commenced as a penniless outcast in the poorest neighborhoods of America. It is an innovation that came out of necessity, particularly being broke. However, today, hip-hop is a multi-billion industry which has spread across generations and cultures, permeating pop music charts, TV, movies, fashion, product lines as well as comedy. It is a combination of cultural innovation and capitalist

opportunity, a story of music coming up with a community that attracted maverick investors that corporations swallowed (Light, 2004). This transformation produced multimedia stars, celebrities like Eminem and Jay-Z, and even business moguls. Thus, hip-hop has always remained about getting a way of being paid, a form of art that was fueled by economic aspiration. The economic impact of hip-hop music has been immense, with the rise of labels, artists, studios, producers, and other related businesses which have contributed significantly to the economy. For example, Perry Master P Miller developed his New Orleans No Limit label to become a \$56 million business, thus enabling him to earn revenue from clothing, dolls, real estate, phone sex lines, and music. Jay-Z built the Roc-A-Fella label to become a multi-billion business.

Whereas hip-hop artists should be commended for their socio-political activism, assisting to ensure that their young black fans are economically viable could have a tangible and lasting effect. Ideally, hip-hop stars significantly influence their fans. Young fans often embrace the genre, and many of them aspire to live the same extravagant lifestyle embraced by others. Fans usually spend large chunks of money on fashion and purchase costly beverages that videos and songs promote (Wade, 2013). While it is not necessarily an outcome that should be applauded, adopting a hip-hop sensibility demonstrates that rappers should also influence young African-Americans to go beyond being an aspirational consumer to what can be deemed as an inspirational entrepreneur. The challenge is to get more artists to look at their economic effect on music as a chance to extend their financial muscle to the wider community. For example, Magic Johnson, a former basketball player, transformed urban America through the creation of jobs and businesses.

Political engagement is important for ensuring that young individuals are not marginalized from the other part of society. However, it is more imperative to ensure that they are not further disenfranchised from the economy. Artists invest and can continue to invest in high-growth corporations, including advanced manufacturing, technology, as well as energy in order to prepare young artists for future jobs (Wade, 2013). Going forward, the impact on the economy can be improved by ensuring that annual awards such as MTV and BET present an award for the job creator or entrepreneur of the year. This can help to change the way rappers are viewed by young people and also demonstrate that rappers are offering a return to the investors.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, hip-hop is not merely a form of music, but rather represents a history of black lives. In spite of the blame imposed on rap for the violence in the American society, the genre of hip-hop symbolizes cultural violence, but is not the cause. To comprehend hip-hop, it is critical to view it as a product of various economic, social, historical, and economic circumstances. It is also important to examine its role as the voice for the ones who have been subjugated by systematic economic and political oppression. In case the problem of violence within rap music should be effectively tackled, the main cause of the problem-disparity in opportunities and resources for minorities in the urban areas should be aggressively tackled. Rap music resists the subjugation systems that have led to the creation of class discrepancies within the US. To end violence, there is need to pay attention on getting rid of the inequalities among the communities. Opportunities and resources should be availed equally for all in order to end the nihilism cycle.

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