

The Consumption of Rap Music at a Predominantly White Institution

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Introduction

On November 26, 2012, Jordan Davis and his three friends were listening to rap music in a parked car outside of a gas station. Michael Dunn, a white man in a Volkswagen Jetta, pulled into the gas station next to them and asked them to turn their music down. Jordan and his friends complied, but later turned the music back up. Dunn claimed he saw “what looked like a barrel of a shotgun or a lead pipe through the back passenger window” and “feared for his life.”¹ Dunn then fired 10 shots at the car, killing Jordan Davis.

On July 4, 2019, Elijah Al-Amin, a Black 17-year-old, had just left work when he visited a Circle K convenience store in Peoria, Arizona. He was followed inside, stabbed, and had his throat slit by a white, 27-year-old man named Michael Paul Adams. The police arrested Adams near the store, and the news later reported that Adams allegedly attacked Al-Amin because “he felt threatened by the music Al-Amin was playing in his car.”² Adams told police that “rap music makes him feel ‘unsafe’ because he had been attacked by people who listen to rap music in the past” and “people who listen to rap music are a threat to [me] and [my] community.”³

The various stereotypes attached to Black consumers of rap music affect the way people perceive them and even indict them. In *State v. Moore (1999)*, Moore was sentenced to 12 years in prison because his consumption of rap music and the rap lyrics he wrote led the judge to believe he was guilty of helping a robbery. In *State v. Miller (2002)*, Miller was convicted of

¹ Jasper Scherer, “Fla. ‘Loud Music’ Murder: Firing into Car Full of Teens Playing Rap Music Not ‘Self-Defense,’ Court Rules,” Washington Post, November 18, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/18/fla-loud-music-murder-firing-into-car-full-of-teens-playing-rap-music-not-self-defense-court-rules/>.

² P. R. Lockhart, “A Black Teenager Was Listening to Rap Music. A White Man Allegedly Killed Him for It,” Vox, July 8, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/7/8/20686624/elijah-al-amin-arizona-stabbing-rap-music-hate-crime>.

³ Ibid.

murder despite a lack of evidence confirming his connection to a series of shootings. His rapper pseudonym, C-Murder, and rap lyrics that he had written were used against him during the trial. The jury convicted him of second-degree murder, an automatic life sentence in Louisiana.⁴ A controlled study examined how juries might regard a murder defendant who had written violent and misogynistic rap lyrics. The results showed that potential jurors were significantly inclined to “judge a gangsta rap lyricist not accused of murder more harshly and with more disdain than a nongansta rapper who was accused of murder.”⁵ This study and these cases emphasize the severe consequences of stereotypes imposed on rap artists and listeners.

The shootings and convictions mentioned above provide evidence of the racial significance of rap that adds complexity beyond its function as a musical genre. Because rap is strongly associated with Black culture, it carries with it racial history and attitudes of hate, discrimination, and violence, specifically in the United States.⁶ The racial significance of rap underscores the need for further investigation of the extent to which race plays a defining role in the consequences and social structures associated with consuming and producing rap.

Over time, rap music has been blamed for gang-related crime, drug use, youth violence, and violence against women.⁷ Rap as a genre has developed negative stereotypes, and the subgenre of rap music featuring lyrical content focusing on drugs and violence has even been referred to as ‘gangsta rap.’ The media has devoted extensive negative coverage to gangsta rap, creating an erroneous common belief that all rap music contains endorsements of violence and

⁴ Sean-Patrick Wilson, “Rap Sheets: The Constitutional and Societal Complications Arising From the Use of Rap Lyrics as Evidence at Criminal Trials,” *Entertainment Law Review* 12, no. 2 (2005): 345-376.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁶ Wendy M. Laybourn, “The Cost of Being ‘Real’: Black Authenticity, Colourism, and Billboard Rap Chart Rankings,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 11 (2018): 2085–2103.

⁷ Christine Reyna, Mark Brandt, and G. Tendayi Viki, “Blame It on Hip-Hop: Anti-Rap Attitudes as a Proxy for Prejudice,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 12, no. 3 (2009): 361–80.

criminal activity.⁸ This generalization wrongfully accuses other rappers who do not rap about violence and crime; in reality, rap consists of a diverse array of artists who discuss a variety of topics beyond drugs, violence, and misogyny. For example, rappers like Joey Bada\$\$, J. Cole, and Saba speak on sociological issues like eviction and mass incarceration.

Furthermore, rap music is commonly categorized as “Black” music, and the lyrics are seen by some as “authentic” representations of Black life.⁹ This perception of authenticity leads to negative attitudes toward rap, which can coincide with and inspire negative perceptions towards Black Americans.¹⁰ If left unchecked, these attitudes can manifest in the form of prejudice, discrimination, and other representations of racial inequality.¹¹ People of color are accused of committing crimes and being undeserving of affirmative actions because they produce, write, or listen to rap music.¹²

Whites also play a large role in rap as a genre. White people have been heavily involved in rap from its beginnings as corporate executives empowered to paint a rapper in a certain image or ask the artist rap about specific subjects.¹³ Additionally, white people are rap music’s largest consumer base.¹⁴ The combined heavy involvement of white executives and dominance of whites as consumers of a Black artform begs the question: is rap being appropriated? To be clear, it is not appropriate for non-Black consumers to simply listen to rap music. However, deriving

⁸ Reyna, Brandt, and Tendayi Viki; Wilson.

⁹ Laybourn.

¹⁰ Reyna, Brandt, and Tendayi Viki.

¹¹ Avriel Epps and Travis Dixon, “A Comparative Content Analysis of Anti- and Prosocial Rap Lyrical Themes Found on Traditional and New Media Outlets,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 61, no. 2 (2017): 467–98; Srividya Ramasubramanian, “The Impact of Stereotypical Versus Counterstereotypical Media Exemplars on Racial Attitudes, Causal Attributions, and Support for Affirmative Action,” *Communication Research* 38, no. 4 (2011): 497–516.

¹² Reyna, Brandt, and Tendayi Viki; Wilson.

¹³ Wilson; Isabel Molina-Guzmán “#OscarsSoWhite: How Stuart Hall Explains Why Nothing Changes in Hollywood and Everything Is Changing,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication: Stuart Hall Lives: Cultural Studies in an Age of Digital Media* 33, no. 5 (2016): 438–454.

¹⁴ Laybourn.

the benefits from listening to rap music but subscribing to negative stereotypes and attitudes about Black people is a form of exploitation.

I conducted my study on rap music at Davidson College, a small, highly selective liberal arts school in North Carolina. The college was established in 1837 by Presbyterians and has been a predominantly white institution since its founding. My study focuses specifically on how Davidson students consume rap music and the gratifications they attain from choosing to listen. In order to best qualitatively analyze my findings, this research is developed through the *uses and gratifications theory*, *mood management theory*, and *social identity theory*. The majority of studies that intersect music and the uses and gratifications theory fail to investigate qualitatively why people listen to certain music.¹⁵ This leaves a gap in the literature; while quantitative analysis allows the researcher to identify different functions for listening to music, it fails to explain why these reasons are important. I seek to discover the meanings behind participants' music usage through these questions: What gratifications are attained by students who choose to consume rap music? Do students have an understanding of the cultural and historical significance of rap?

Literature Review

Rap Music

Many factors went into the historical creation of rap music.¹⁶ Keyes asserts that rap's origins begin with the African bardic tradition, in which historians told stories through song, and that this tradition survived the emergence of the slave trade, eventually forming traditions like

¹⁵Adam J. Lonsdale and Adrian C. North, "Why Do We Listen to Music? A Uses and Gratifications Analysis," *British Journal of Psychology* 102, no. 1 (2011): 108–34.

¹⁶Moving forward, rap and hip hop will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Some believe there are slight differences between the two that requires them to be treated as separate genres. However, due to the close similarities between rap and hip-hop, and given the nuanced focus of my research, I treat the terms as synonymous

“toasting,” that would lead to the birth of hip hop.¹⁷ Rose has found that the driver of hip hop was the emergence of the postindustrial political economy.¹⁸ Others contend that hip hop’s birthplace belongs to the Bronx. Ewoodzie argues that hip hop derives from DJing, MCing, breaking, graffiti writing, and other artforms.¹⁹ Fricke describes rap emerging from rival gangs throwing block parties.²⁰ Laybourn asserts that the genre originated from marginalized Black and brown youth artists in the Bronx in the early 1970s.

Before diving deeper, one must acknowledge an aspect of rap not commonly discussed: the role white people have played in its development, especially given that white people are hip hop’s largest consumer base.²¹ This is significant because, economically speaking, consumers drive the demand for products, which gives them the power to decide which products are sold and how they are sold. In other words, even though consumers are not the ones directly making production decisions, their spending power influences what producers make and how they make it. That white American consumption of rap at its origins frequently consisted of racial stereotypes, violence, drugs, and misogyny influenced record label executives to produce that kind of rap. As a result, “white suburban tastes increasingly began to determine the nature and direction of the hip hop art form”, resulting in more abrasive rap.²² The process of creating rap in an anti-Black image articulated by a white audience represents “oppressive othering,” in which the “dominant group’s creation of an inferior group...is achieved through a reliance on racial

¹⁷ Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002). 17. .

¹⁸ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: Civitas Books, 2008).

¹⁹ Joseph Ewoodzie, *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop’s Early Years*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

²⁰ Jim Fricke, *Yes Yes y’all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop’s First Decade* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002).

²¹ Laybourn.

²² Wilson, 350.

ideology” and designates Blacks as the out-group and whites as the in-group.²³ By othering Blacks within the production of rap, “whites...justify the social, political, and economic networks that construct, maintain, and advance White privilege and White power.”²⁴

The commodification of rap explains how this oppressive othering was executed with such ease. According to Rogers, commodification abstracts the value of an object so that it can enter systems of exchange, allowing the value, specificity of labor, and social relations invested in the original commodity to be lost.²⁵ Rap’s significance and value in Black culture and history are lost through the process of commodifying the genre for a white, mainstream consumer. Images of “authentic” Black life are transformed into mediated products that whites can purchase in the marketplace.²⁶ This “authenticity” is only applicable to the livelihood of a portion of Black people and cannot be translated to the experiences of all Black people. Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory explains while members in the racial in-group (Black people) know these representations are not authentic nor complete, members of the out-group (the white, mainstream audience) may mistake their limited interactions with Black culture through rap as fully authentic, resulting in stereotyping.²⁷ Some rappers have even been “packaged” by record labels, delivering lyrics about ‘the hood’ despite having grown up with economic privilege. For example, many white consumers did not know that members of the popular rap group, RUN DMC, came from middle-class families; one had college-educated parents and the other was a

²³ Laybourn, 2086.

²⁴ Bill Yousman, “Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy,” *Communication Theory* 13, no. 4 (2003): 377.

²⁵ Richard A. Rogers, “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation,” *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (November 1, 2006): 474–503.

²⁶ Yousman.

²⁷ Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Inter-Group Conflict,” in *The Social Psychology of Inter-Group Relations*, eds. W.G. Austin and S. Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33-47.

“mama's boy” from a Catholic school background. Not many listeners knew this because “RUN DMC was a commodity to be sculpted, packaged, and sold to the public.”²⁸

This aspect of rap's commodification can be seen as a form of “eating the other,” or the tendency for cultural differences to be commodified as a source of titillation and pleasure for white consumers.²⁹ Motivation for commodification of rap comes from its ability to allow whites to soothe their guilt over Black repression and cope with the crises of white identity while achieving excitement “through its transgression into a strange and uncharted world” of Blackness.³⁰ Listening to hip hop therefore becomes a medium for cultural tourism. Cultural tourism is the idea that mass media viewers may learn about others by looking in on a culture with which they have little unmediated personal interaction.³¹ The contact hypothesis further suggests that when contact with a nondominant group is infrequent, media is more likely to cultivate the dominant group's perceptions of the minority group, resulting in stereotyping.³² By becoming cultural tourists, viewers adopt a white racial frame.³³ White, middle-class residents of suburban America are fascinated by rappers' depictions of inner-city life and enjoy a glimpse into a world of violence, crime, poverty, and death.³⁴ Many white teenage listeners are fascinated by Black culture and its differences, drawn in by mainstream social constructions of Black culture as a forbidden narrative and as a symbol of rebellion.³⁵ In sum, between the corporate

²⁸ Wilson, 350.

²⁹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Routledge, 2014).

³⁰ Yousman, 378.

³¹ Ginger Jacobson, “Racial Formation Theory and Systemic Racism in Hip-Hop Fans' Perceptions,” *Sociological Forum* 30, no. 3 (2015): 832–51.

³² Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and David Ta, “Cultivating Virtual Stereotypes?: The Impact of Video Game Play on Racial/Ethnic Stereotypes,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 25, no. 1 (2014): 1–15.

³³ Joe Feagin & Sean Elias. “Rethinking Racial Formation Theory: a Systemic Racism Critique.” *Ethnic and racial studies* 36, no. 6 (June 1, 2013): 931–960.

³⁴ Wilson.

³⁵ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (Music/Culture)* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

executives and consumer base, white interests shaped the origins of mainstream rap music through corporate interests directly being imposed on rap and the demand of a particular brand of rap lyrics from consumers engaging in cultural tourism.³⁶

The anti-Black stereotypes associated with rap are preceded by many other examples of how the American media has depicted Black people. Historically, in many industries, white people have held positions of power, controlling whose voices and faces are seen in the media. This gatekeeper role has often limited minorities' access to opportunities, and the lack of public roles have resulted in whites' stereotypes of minorities being broadcasted to mass audiences.³⁷ During the late 1970s and early 1980s, American consumers were receptive to stereotypical Black figures in motion pictures, known as blaxploitation.³⁸ Even in the present, Ramasubramanian finds that media characters activate stereotypes of African Americans among white audiences in ways that tend to attribute responsibility for social inequalities to the individual victims.³⁹ In local television news, media depictions of Black criminality increased support for Black stereotypes, and violent news stories were closely associated with participants' mental constructions of dark Black faces while whites appeared in hero roles, overrepresented as both officers and victims.⁴⁰ In sports, Ferruci and Tandoc find that journalists and broadcasters describe Black athletes stereotypically, marking them as less qualified than white athletes.⁴¹

³⁶ Laybourn.

³⁷ Molina-Guzmán.

³⁸ Wilson.

³⁹ Ramasubramanian, "The Impact of Stereotypical Versus Counterstereotypical Media Exemplars on Racial Attitudes, Causal Attributions, and Support for Affirmative Action."

⁴⁰ Travis Dixon, "Good Guys Are Still Always in White? Positive Change and Continued Misrepresentation of Race and Crime on Local Television News," *Communication Research* 44, no. 6 (2015): 775–92.

⁴¹ Patrick Ferrucci and Edson C. Tandoc, "The Spiral of Stereotyping: Social Identity Theory and NFL Quarterbacks," *Howard Journal of Communications* 29, no. 2 (2018): 103–21.

Other media forms like television also depict Black characters in a way in which the audience stereotype Black people as poor, unintelligent, less professional, intimidating, and hypersexual.⁴²

To capitalize on consumer trends established by these forms of media, white-owned corporate labels decided to “adapt” rap to best appeal to mass consumption, forcing rappers to present as social misfits. As previously mentioned, stereotypes of violence, drugs, and misogyny came to dominate the genre and overshadow rap about other topics.⁴³ Majority groups (record labels) capitalized on minority groups’ (Black artists) lack of political power in the media industry to symbolically alienate and marginalize Black artists, creating representations with serious implications for media consumers’ attitudes toward outgroups.⁴⁴ The music industry chose to profit from perpetuating racialized and sexualized images of Black gangstas, pimps, and hoes, appealing to a white racial frame which combines racial stereotypes, narratives, and interpretations to maintain a positive orientation towards whiteness and a negative orientation to oppressed and exploited nonwhites.⁴⁵ Even in scholarship, researchers ignore the value of rap in Black culture and history, focusing on the negative effects of rap music and its anti-social themes rather than positive effects and pro-social themes. In addition, these content and effect studies utilize the commercialized rap distributed by the major record labels referenced earlier.⁴⁶

The stereotypes attributed to hip hop in its early beginnings were not harmless and are still attached to the genre today as anti-rap attitudes in the general public.⁴⁷ More consequently,

⁴² Dixon; Riva Tukachinsky, Dana Mastro, and Moran Yarchi, “Documenting Portrayals of Race/Ethnicity on Primetime Television over a 20-Year-Span and Their Association With National-Level Racial/Ethnic Attitudes,” *Journal of Social Issues* 71, no. 1 (2015): 17–38.

⁴³ Epps and Dixon.

⁴⁴ Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi.

⁴⁵ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters*; Feagin & Elias.

⁴⁶ Epps and Dixon.

⁴⁷ Laybourn.

those anti-rap attitudes translated into anti-Black attitudes to the point where Black people are incriminated and killed for creating and consuming rap.⁴⁸ Rap music has been blamed for youth violence, the rise of gangs, drug use, and violence against women, and “the culture that surrounds [rap music] has become associated with negative stereotypes of Blacks.”⁴⁹ The content in commercialized rap songs are seen as authentic representations of Black life, and some people believe that “songs [are] indicative of what’s going on through an individual’s mind.”⁵⁰ The public and the media believe rap is accountable for the aforementioned phenomena to the point where Geraldo Rivera, a talk show host, said live on Fox News, “Hip Hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years.”⁵¹ When the content of hip hop, so abstract by the process of commodification, becomes closely tied with the perceived lifestyles of Black people, the negative stereotypes of the genre are forced onto Black people.

Cultural Appropriation

Because hip hop is an artform rooted in Black culture, it is necessary to acknowledge the roles that non-Black consumers play in consuming Black culture, including rap music. To best address these roles, it is important to understand cultural appropriation. Richard Rogers takes a theoretical approach to cultural appropriation, categorizing it into four occurrences: cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation, and transculturation. According to Rogers, cultural appropriation involves the assimilation and exploitation of marginalized and colonized cultures and the survival of subordinated cultures and their resistance to dominant cultures. Cultural exchange, entails the reciprocal exchange of the symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres,

⁴⁸ Lockhart; Reyna, Brandt, and Tendayi Viki; Scherer; Wilson.

⁴⁹ Reyna, Brandt, and Tendayi Viki, 362.

⁵⁰ Wilson, 369.

⁵¹ Ezra Glenn, “Kendrick Lamar Sampled Fox News On DAMN,” The Fader, April 14, 2017, <https://www.thefader.com/2017/04/14/kendrick-lamar-sampled-fox-news-damn>.

and/or technologies between cultures with roughly equal levels of power. This category is quite idealistic because it requires roughly equal levels of power which emphasizes the importance of understanding the context and history of each situation under investigation.⁵² Cultural dominance is the use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture when the dominant culture has been imposed onto the subordinated culture. This category also includes any actions of resistance by the subordinate culture using these elements. Cultural exploitation involves appropriating elements of a subordinated culture and treating them as resources to be “mined” and “shipped home” for consumption by the dominant culture. Commodification is essential to cultural exploitation because it removes the meaning or function of the subordinated culture that will be consumed by the dominant culture.⁵³

Lastly, Rogers defines transculturation as the cultural elements created from appropriating multiple cultures such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic. The unique aspect of this category is that it challenges the validity and assumptions of the three previous categories and defines cultural boundaries as multiple, shifting, and overlapping. Although each category may not apply specifically to the context of this study, one must understand the full theoretical background to correctly interpret the consumption of rap music and elements from other cultures. Especially due to rising globalization, it is important to understand that situations may not have one “correct” answer related to cultural appropriation.⁵⁴ Further, it is important to understand the historical prejudices and appropriative elements of rap and the influence that white consumers and record label executives hold in the development of the genre to best comprehend the significance of rap’s consumption at Davidson College.

⁵²Rogers.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Theoretical Background

Three theories heuristically guide my research: the uses and gratifications theory, mood management theory, and the social identity theory.

Uses and Gratifications Theory: In communication scholarship, the concept of selective exposure includes the uses and gratifications theory and mood management theory. The term selective exposure was first used by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet and refers to individuals' selections of mediated content.⁵⁵ The uses and gratifications theory builds upon selective exposure, understanding the needs and gratifications the audience members aim to fulfill with media exposure. Herzog was the first to study what drives media users to be conscious of mediated messages.⁵⁶ By the 1970s and 1980s, the uses and gratifications approach became popular and was commonly applied using survey methodology in which respondents would rate statements explaining why they consumed their preferred messages, programs, and channels. Studies like Rubin's, which found viewing motives such as habit, pass time, and escape, focused on media such as newspapers, television, and movies.⁵⁷ However, the uses and gratifications theory is applicable to even more types of media today, including social media and music.⁵⁸

The theory explains how audiences seek out media to fulfill their needs (uses) which leads to ultimate gratification of these needs.⁵⁹ Individuals are seen as active rather than passive

⁵⁵ Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).

⁵⁶ Herta Herzog, "What Do We Really Know about Day Time Serial Listeners? In P.F. Lazarfield & F.N. Stanton," *Radio Research* (1944): 3–33.

⁵⁷ Alan Rubin, "Television Uses and Gratifications: The Interactions of Viewing Patterns and Motivations," *Journal of Broadcasting* 27 (1983): 37–51.

⁵⁸ Karen A. Foss and Stephen W. Littlejohn, eds. *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2009); Carolyn Lin, "Uses and Gratifications," *Clarifying Communication Theories: A Hands on Approach* (1999): 199–208; Veikko Pietilä, "Chapter 8: Uses-and-Gratifications Approach and Functionalism," in *On the Highway of Mass Communication Studies* (New York: Hampton Press, 2005), 127–40; Anita Whiting and David Williams, "Why People Use Social Media: A Uses and Gratifications Approach," *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 16, no. 4 (2013): 362–69.

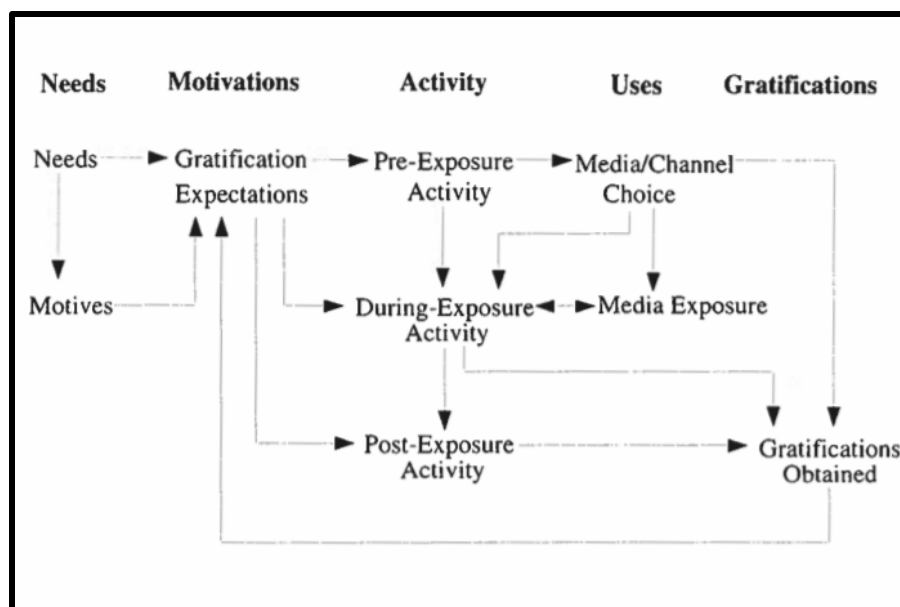
⁵⁹ Whiting and Williams.

participants because they are intentional in using the media to serve their needs. Individuals' needs are divided into two categories: deficiency needs and non-deficiency needs. The uses and gratifications model asserts that the media operates in a give-and-take relationship with society, and all media compete with one another to fulfill an individual's needs.⁶⁰ A majority of research has found that people use music specifically to manage their moods, express their identities, experience pleasure, reduce boredom, express in-group preference and exclusivity, be trendy or cool, reduce loneliness, and improve interpersonal relationships.⁶¹ Schäfer, Sedlmeier, Städtler, and Huron find that people will listen to music to intensify the mood they are feeling or change their emotional state.⁶² For example, people who feel very happy might decide to listen to a song that makes them feel good. On the other hand, some people who feel sad may play upbeat music

⁶⁰ Foss and Littlejohn; Lin; Lonsdale and North.

⁶¹ Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Adrian Furnham, "Personality and Music: Can Traits Explain How People Use Music in Everyday Life?" *British Journal of Psychology* 98, no. 2 (2007): 175–85; Alexandra Lamont, "University Students' Strong Experiences of Music: Pleasure, Engagement, and Meaning," *Musicae Scientiae* 15, no. 2(2011): 229–49; Lonsdale and North; Adrian C. North, David J. Hargreaves, and Susan A. O'Neill, "The Importance of Music to Adolescents," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 70, no. 2 (2000): 255–72; Thomas Schäfer, Peter Sedlmeier, Christine Städtler, and David Huron, "The Psychological Functions of Music Listening," *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013).

⁶² Schäfer, Sedlmeier, Städtler, and Huron.



that helps them feel less sad. North, Hargreaves, and O'Neill add that people use music to increase focus like when getting ready for a sporting event or when completing homework.⁶³

Mood Management Theory. As suggested by the preceding findings, music can be used to change or intensify individuals' emotional states. These findings are rooted in the mood management theory, which suggests that people's choices in media are driven by hedonistic motivation, meaning that people's well-being is dependent on seeking pleasure and avoiding suffering. Zillman was the first to propose that a key element in media selection was to optimize one's mood.⁶⁴ Ultimately, media users aim to terminate or alleviate negative affective states while preserving and improving the positive states.⁶⁵ Individuals use media ranging from music and movies to the news and documentaries to alter or enhance their mood. McFerran, Garrido, O'Grady, Grocke, and Sawyer analyzed the relationship between self-reported mood

⁶³ North, Hargreaves, and O'Neill.

⁶⁴ Dolf Zillman, "Mood Management through Communication Choices," *American Behavioral Scientist* 31 (1988): 327–40.

⁶⁵ Mary Beth Oliver, Arthur Raney, and Jennings Bryant, *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020).

management and music preferences among Australian teenagers. They found that most teenagers, particularly when their initial state was already positive, reported using music to improve their mood but were less successful in using music to improve their mood when they were in an initial state of sadness or stress.⁶⁶ While the uses and gratifications theory and mood management theory help explain audiences' choices in media consumption, the social identity further explains how these decisions affect the audiences' identities and group associations.

Social Identity Theory. Social identity theory, established by Tajfel and Turner, posits that people are motivated to maintain or achieve a positive social identity which results from the status of one's in-group relationship to out-groups(s).⁶⁷ The concept of in-groups and out-groups is essential to the theory and is based upon the defined boundaries assigned by the in-group. Another part of the theory is Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell's self-categorization theory which acknowledges that people source part of their identities from groups they join and belong to.⁶⁸ The theory offers three levels of self-categorization: the superior category of the self as a human being (human identity), the intermediate level of the self as a member of an ingroup defined against other groups of people (social identity), and the subordinate level of personal self-categorizations based on interpersonal comparisons (personal identity).⁶⁹ Furthermore, the presence of functional antagonism between levels of self-definition results in one level of definition becoming more salient while the other levels become less salient. By-products of the

⁶⁶ Katrina Skewes McFerran, Sandra Garrido, Lucy O'Grady, Denise Grocke, and Susan M. Sawyer, "Examining the Relationship between Self-Reported Mood Management and Music Preferences of Australian Teenagers," *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* 24, no. 3 (2015): 187–203.

⁶⁷ Tajfel and Turner.

⁶⁸ John C. Turner, Michael A. Hogg, Penelope J. Oakes, Stephen D. Reicher, and Margaret S. Wetherell, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

⁶⁹ Hornsey, Matthew. "Social Identity Theory and Self-categorization Theory: A Historical Review." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 1 (2008): 208.

self-categorization process are ethnocentrism, positive in-group attitudes and cohesion, and stereotyping.⁷⁰

Many scholars have used media to apply the social identity theory. Arnett finds that media allows people to engage in self-socialization because they can select the media products most attractive to them as individuals while also seeking comfort in finding others who like what they like, and seek guidance about what is most likely to be desired by many.⁷¹ My study is focused on the intersection of music and social identity and the ways rap music serves as a socializing agent, identity marker, and a boundary for in-groups and out-groups. Based on the preceding literature review, I posit the following research questions: What gratifications are attained by students who choose to consume rap music? Are students educated about the cultural significance of rap?

Methodology

To best understand the gratifications students attain from rap music and whether or not they understand rap's cultural and historical significance, I conducted eighteen one-on-one interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol. Furthermore, I adopted a purposive sampling method which involved choosing participants that fit the parameters of my research question and study's goals. This qualitative study does not require randomness in the sample selection or a large sample size like quantitative studies because I am focused on the depth of the respondents' answers and the explanatory power of stories and lived experiences. In addition to the purposive sampling, I conducted ethnographic research on Davidson College's Martin Court apartments where rap music is frequently played. Being physically in the space where Davidson

⁷⁰ Michael A. Hogg and Deborah I. Terry. "Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts," *Academy of Management Review* 25, no. 1 (2000): 121–40.

⁷¹ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Adolescents' Uses of Media for Self-Socialization," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 24, no. 5 (1995): 519–33.

students listen to rap music allows me to interact, watch, listen, and make observations to gain additional insight into the participants' responses.⁷² The data from the site observation provides context for how rap is consumed on Davidson's campus and further insight on what gratifications students attain from listening to rap.

Participants and Data Collection

The sample includes eighteen Davidson College students and is further broken down into subgroups by race: six Black students, six white students, and six non-Black students of color. Out of the six non-Black students of color, there are four Asians, one Hispanic, and one multiracial student. Because rap is a Black musical artform, I decided to separate the Black sample from the non-Black student of color sample. Although I did not set a required number of participants based on gender, the sample reflects a somewhat gendered balance: the Black sample consisted of three women and three men, the white sample consisted of two women and four men, and the non-Black students of color consisted of three women and three men.

Each interview lasted an average of 41.5 minutes and was conducted on the Davidson College campus in the E.H. Little Library, E. Craig Wall Jr. Academic Center, and Alvarez College Union. All interviews took place in a private area where the interviewee and I would not be overheard. I gained approval from the Institutional Review Board to ensure the rights of my participants are protected. Before beginning the interview, participants signed a consent form that informed them of their rights, the audio recording process, and that they would be given a pseudonym in the study. The interview begins with learning the participants' musical background, current preferences, and friends' preferences. Then, I ask participants about rap, its

⁷² Sarah J. Tracy, "Research Design, Sampling, Research Proposals, Ethics, and IRB," in *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

origins, its evolving history, and its presence on campus. I finish the interview by asking participants how their rap consumption affects the macro-context of the United States' race relations and if they believe their racial identity factors into the way they listen to rap music.

Scholars have found that white people discuss and experience their racial identities in ambiguous and contradictory ways.⁷³ In addition, my identity as a Black male who likes, and may be presumed to like, rap music can affect the participants' responses to save face and maintain a positive face. Participants might respond in a way that aligns their views closer to mine or change their views to prevent themselves from being perceived as racist. As mentioned earlier, I acknowledged that race is a more difficult subject to talk about for some people, so at the beginning of the interview, I urged my respondents to be as honest as possible. Like Frankenberg, instead of adopting the "blank-faced research persona," I shared elements of my own life when interviewees would self-disclose personal information to build a relationship of trust and safety with my respondents.⁷⁴ Hopefully, by adopting these strategies, I was able to elicit honest and substantive answers.

Participants were selected with a variety of outcomes in mind. Firstly, seeing that a major importance of this study is to understand rap's significance in Black culture, race is a key variable by which all participants were chosen. Intentionally choosing participants to ensure that the number of students in each racial sample group was balanced was significant given that the study takes place at a predominantly white institution. Specifically, when thinking about the history of the United States existing within a spectrum of whiteness and Blackness, it was imperative to hear the voices of the non-Black students of color. Further, participants were

⁷³ Pamela Perry, *Shades of White White Kids and Racial Identities in High School* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁷⁴ Ruth Frankenberg, "White on White: The Interviewees and the Method," in *White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 23-42.

chosen based on their behavior at Martin Court parties, based on if I'd had a previous experience seeing them interact with rap music in-person or on social media (e.g. making a post with rap playing or rap lyrics), or based on the intersection between their racial identities and the influence they possess over the student body.

Site Observation

My observational research was conducted in Martin Court which consists of seven apartment buildings: Martin Court B, Davis, Flowe, Hart, Jamieson, Ryburn, and Armfield. Armfield is isolated and unique from the rest of the Martin Court apartments. It has three floors, but the first-floor apartments are entirely taken up by Interfraternity Council (IFC) fraternity students. It is arguably the most popular location on campus for students to party. At the other Martin Court apartments, parties are hosted by a variety of students including athletes, IFC fraternities, National Pan Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternities or sororities, and clubs. Significantly more people attend parties at Armfield compared to other Martin Court apartments. For this reason, when referring to Martin Court, I refer to all apartments excluding Armfield.

Armfield holds parties from roughly 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. The start time is decided by the residents, and the end time is enforced by the Davidson Campus Police. Students at Armfield tend to be quite mobile, moving in and out of IFC apartments or roaming the common space in front of the apartments. Students typically gather both inside and outside of the apartments, and it is unlikely for students to stay standing in the common space for long periods of time. This allows students to best hear the music that comes from two or three big speakers within each apartment. Every individual apartment is playing different music at once, so it is not optimal to stand in the middle of all the apartments. Despite being open to students of all genders, ages, and races, Armfield is still predominantly white and male. The dominance of

IFC fraternities dictating the parties that all students attend at Armfield instead of Patterson Court Council (PCC) eating houses or NPHC sororities exemplifies the patriarchal aspect of Armfield. Parties hosted by NPHC organizations, international students, or students of color usually attract mostly minority students. These parties are more likely to have themes that students represent with their choice in clothing. During parties, most people gather out on the porch or in the common room. The music typically comes from a loudspeaker positioned in the common room, and the door is left open so students outside can hear.

For each ethnographer, the process of collecting fieldwork and observing the site is unique. I took all my notes on my phone using the Evernote app because of its speech-to-text function. Once I arrived at each site, I took five minutes to observe the site and notice significant physical markers, the floor plan, the speaker set-up, and the areas where people were most congregated. For some of my observations, this was difficult because I knew people at these parties, and they often approached me and engaged in conversation. I did not want to reveal I was conducting research so that participants would not alter their behaviors, so I would entertain the conversation very briefly. By attempting to eliminate my impact on the environment, I was able to conduct ethnography which “expresses a reality that seems true” and provides “a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the ‘real’.”⁷⁵ After selecting my observation spot, I observed the demographics represented amongst the students and watched them interact with the music. These interactions include standing, dancing, moving, jumping, singing, and more. In the case that I was not familiar or acquainted with someone, I would approach them and ask for their name and email them the following day to set-up an interview.

⁷⁵ Laurel Richardson, “Evaluating Ethnography,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (2000): 254; Sarah J. Tracy, “Qualitative Quality: Eight ‘Big-Tent’ Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 10 (2010): 842.

My entrée for Martin Court parties differed from my ability to gain access to Armfield parties. Martin Court residents who host parties usually, but not always, send out invites to other students whom they want to attend their party, making these parties more private. Additionally, friends and sometimes even friends of friends, can come to Martin Court parties because they are considered as part of the in-group. For this study, I attended Martin Court parties hosted by NPHC fraternities and sororities, athletes, student organizations, and students with no organizational association. For the NPHC fraternities and sororities and other student organization parties, my access came from a combination of personal invitations and being part of various in-groups. For the athlete and students with no organizational association parties, my access came specifically from being part of an in-group.

In Davidson's social culture, Armfield is seen as a public space for all students to enjoy and party. Therefore, my access to Armfield parties came from simply being a Davidson College student. However, my presence in the various IFC apartments was more accepted because I am a senior and an athlete. Being a senior, I am familiar with the upperclassmen who host these parties and are a part of these IFC organizations. Furthermore, because I have been on this campus for four years and my role on the men's soccer team has increased my popularity among students, students who are not the host of a party do not question my presence in these spaces.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded using my iPhone and then transcribed using Otter.ai. The 299 pages of interview data were organized into a new word document where each of the respondents' answers were assigned to the respective question asked in the interview. Grouping all the responses for a single question together allowed me to use an open code strategy. Once themes were established from the organized responses, axial coding produced categories with

which I created a new document with each response assigned to its respective code.⁷⁶ At this point, I went back to the ethnographic data and assigned that data to the categories produced from the axial coding. The data was then separated by the two research questions: the first group referring to the various gratifications students attained and the second group referring to students' understanding of rap's cultural significance.

The data for the gratifications group were categorized into five code families: identity, entertainment, interpersonal interactions, mood, and learning. Within those categories, I used a comparative approach to identify how the data differed, specifically within a racial lens.⁷⁷ Data for the identity category was signaled by an expression of rap as being a part of the self. Entertainment consisted of data in which rap was used as a method for having fun. Interpersonal interactions symbolized any interaction between one or more people in which rap music was being exchanged or was the topic of discussion. Mood highlighted any data which referenced the subject altering or intensifying his or her emotional state. Education consisted of subjects using rap as a medium for obtaining information. From there, I organized the five code families into terms grounded in the uses and gratifications theory: personal needs, social needs, affective needs, and cognitive needs. Identity fell under personal needs, entertainment and interpersonal interactions fell under social needs, mood fell under affective needs, and learning fell under cognitive needs.

The data for the cultural significance group was categorized into two groups: understanding of the cultural significance of rap or not having an understanding of the cultural significance of rap. To be credited for understanding the cultural significance of rap,

⁷⁶ Brandi Lawless and Yea-Wen Chen, "Developing a Method of Critical Thematic Analysis for Qualitative Communication Inquiry," *Howard Journal of Communications* 30, no. 1 (2019): 92–106.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

interviewees had to demonstrate their knowledge about rap's origins and history by responding to three of the questions in the interview schedule about rap's cultural significance. For the origin, respondents needed to talk about the location, time period, or purpose of rap music at its beginnings. In terms of the history, respondents needed to demonstrate their knowledge of the different stylistic changes or major events that occurred in rap from its origins to the present. If they failed to show an understanding of rap's origins and history or responded that they did not know anything, then they were placed in the other group. In fact, most interviewees who did not understand the cultural significance of rap explicitly said no in response to those corresponding questions.

Results and Discussion

I found that students use rap music to satisfy their personal, social, affective, and cognitive needs. Students satisfy their personal needs by forming and affirming their identities. Students satisfy their social needs by partying and enjoying free time. Students satisfy their social needs by bonding with friends and creating community. Students satisfy their affective and cognitive needs by managing their mood and learning new information respectively. Furthermore, the data showed that eight of the eighteen students understand rap's cultural significance while ten students do not. The students with an understanding of rap's cultural significance consisted of five Black students, one white student, and two non-Black students of color. The students who did not understand rap's cultural significance consisted of one Black student, five white students, and four non-Black students of color.

Students' Gratifications

Personal Needs

Identity Management. Beginning with rap being used to manage students' identities, Carl, a white male student, stated that he listens to rap music partly because listening to rap is "cool." Many other interviewees also stated this as a reason they listen to the genre. Rap's presence in mainstream culture allows people who consume rap to be a part of an in-group as most Americans also listen to this genre. Carl expressed to me that part of his identity is feeling good and being happy, and says, "when I put on my headphones and look in the mirror and rap the lyrics to my song I feel cool and it makes me feel good." In agreement with Chamorro and Furnham's study and Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, Carl's choice to consume rap admits him into an in-group that is perceived positively because the genre is popular.⁷⁸ However, he defends his place in this group by explaining that there is a difference between simply listening to the music and knowing its history and finer details. He believes his understanding of the finer details and his appreciation of the genre makes him more deserving of the in-group identity compared to someone who consumes the music at a surface level. As described by Carl, the in-group, despite consisting of people who hold a common theme, is heterogeneous based on everyone's varying levels of rap consumption, how they consume it, and the identifiers of the individual.

Nicole, a Black female student, presents an opposite perspective by talking about how she observes other students using rap to form their identities. She explains that Davidson students "just do whatever is popular... they feed off of trends and other cultures, not understanding that you have to understand the artist or the information." Here, Nicole describes a situation that Rogers defines as exploitation.⁷⁹ The students Nicole is referring to are non-Black students whose lack of knowledge about rap artists results in the context being stripped from the

⁷⁸ Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham; Tajfel and Turner.

⁷⁹ Rogers.

music and the students benefiting from the positive attributes associated with consuming it. This is significant because, as shown by Rodriquez, non-Black students, and white students in particular, are able to replace the racially coded messages found in rap with color-blind ones.⁸⁰ Alternatively, Claire is a Black student who derives a sense of authenticity for her own self-identity from rap and asserts, “I think there’s something authentic about it and I think it’s not just because of my Blackness but because of my specific Blackness being African American and from a city that I guess people place on the north... that has a relationship with rap.” She loves to listen to rap music because it speaks to her Blackness, specifically being an African American from Baltimore. Claire explains that, in her hometown, rap is a part of the African American culture and the music itself speaks to parts of the African American experience to which she can relate. It is important that Claire acknowledges that she relates to some but not all of the experiences in rap music. Regardless, Laybourn explains how Claire may still be associated with the negative aspects by her peers due to consumers viewing rap’s content as representative of the authentic Black experience.⁸¹

Interviewees also identify that their decision to start listening to rap shaped their identity by allowing them to experience freedom and individualism. Daniel, a multiracial student, explains that he mostly just listened to what his older sister used to play around him. However, with the rise of technology and the introduction of mp3 players, iPods, and YouTube, Daniel was able to explore his own music taste, and the music he began listening to was rap. Daniel also mentions that his love for rap music was strengthened when he discovered Drake, a multiracial rapper who was just beginning his rap career around the same time Daniel started listening to

⁸⁰ Jason Rodriquez, “Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 6 (2006): 645–68.

⁸¹ Laybourn.

rap. Daniel explains that as Drake was finding his identity and confidence and starting to settle into his place in a genre filled with Black artists, Daniel was making his own steps in developing his identity and finding the place that felt right for him in the Black community. Daniel was able to build and affirm his own identity by listening to and watching a rapper's experiences.

Spatial Identity. The Black Student Coalition, or the BSC, is a student organization on campus with its own house on Patterson Court where parties are periodically thrown. Both the organization and the parties are open to all students. Although not included in my site selections, I have been to the BSC numerous times to party, and like Armfield and Martin Court parties, rap is prevalent. In fact, the BSC plays a wider variety of rap songs than at Armfield and Martin Court. Despite the BSC parties being open to all students, the student demographic at the BSC parties remains predominantly students of color. The lack of presence from the white students at BSC parties shows that white students are comfortable consuming hip hop in their own spaces rather than in a space that is designed specifically to celebrate Black people and their culture.

Nixon, a Black student, explains that he experiences this when white people on his own athletic team "talk about how awesome Kanye is, but those same people never say hi to [him] at practice or come to a BSC or NPHC event." He further expresses that he believes that this is because his teammates feel comfortable interacting with Black culture in spaces where they feel comfortable and going to a BSC or NPHC event is uncomfortable for them. Similarly, Martin, another Black student, expresses that non-Black students at Davidson, most frequently white students, idolize rappers from cities like Atlanta, D.C., and New York but do not interact or befriend Black Davidson students on campus who act similarly, come from the same areas, and listen to the same music. To Nixon, it shows that his teammates are willing to listen and consume Black culture but "not actually support the people who are behind it." The students Martin is

referring to are satisfied with interacting with these artists in spaces where the students are in control, such as listening to those artists on their phones or choosing to attend their concerts, but not in situations where they cannot control the kind or number of elements of Black culture to which they are exposed. Instead, these non-Black students choose to consume rap at Armfield and Martin Court and socially distance themselves from Black students similar to their favorite rappers which prevents them from experiencing rap in the cultural context in which it was created (that of Black and brown people) and results in them consuming Black culture in a predominantly white space that has an entirely different context.

Social Needs

Enjoy Free Time. On Davidson College's campus, students use hip hop music to enjoy their free time and workout. Participants Kaylee and Natalie, who are in the white and non-Black students of color samples respectively, describe rap as a genre they listen to while they drink before they go to the parties at Armfield and Martin Court. Both agree that the upbeat instrumentals of rap songs are well-suited for partying, and it is the genre of music that their friends prefer to listen to when they drink. I observed rap being played every night I conducted my site observations at Armfield and Martin Court, and every interviewee mentioned rap's presence at the party scenes on campus. The way students interact with the music is not consistent among all students. Some students dance comfortably and sing along to hip hop while others do not know what to do when hip hop plays. One night, a student played the rap song "Baby" by Lil Baby at an IFC party in Armfield. It seemed as if about half of the room knew the song and immediately started singing the lyrics while other students stopped dancing or left the apartment. My attention was drawn more to the students who stopped dancing but remained in the apartment. After a while, these students began moving their bodies side-to-side or jumping

up and down but still appeared uncomfortable. I found these actions significant because there was a contrast between the people who were dancing and singing the lyrics and the students who left or were not comfortable while the song was being played. This shows that rap's presence is not unanimously accepted on Davidson's campus. It also further defines the heterogeneous groups that exist among the in-group of rap listeners. Because these people choose to stay at the party when rap music is played, they are deciding to continue to consume the rap music, yet their uncomfortable behavior shows that they may not identify strongly with the in-group.

Workout. Interviewees also use rap to work out. Tanya is a student-athlete at Davidson College who said rap is played most of the time she's working out in the weight room. In a similar sense, Harry is a former track athlete who expressed how prevalent rap is at track meets. He says, "I'm a sprinter. I would never run to country music because it's not fast enough." He stresses that a key attribute of rap music is how upbeat and fast the music is, making it suitable for various sporting events. Harry's comment aligns with North, Hargreaves, and O'Neill's finding that music helps with focusing while playing sports.⁸² Surprisingly, many studies do not list working out as a primary function of music. An explanation for this is that those studies were not focusing on one specific genre and therefore some functions that only pertain to a few genres may have been overlooked. The upbeat quality rap possesses is unique, exemplifying the value in studying rap on its own.

Bond with Friends. Students also use rap to bond with their friends and build community. While many participants noted that rap music is usually played or even a topic of discussion when they hang out, Natalie takes it a step further by claiming it affects her decision about whom she spends her time with. She explains that she still loves her friends that don't

⁸² North, Hargreaves, and O'Neill.

listen to rap, but she finds that she can connect deeper with her friends who listen to rap, and that it is easier being in an in-group in which everyone is a rap listener. Concerning her text messaging group chat, which consists of two friends who listen to rap and two friends that do not, she says, “when we’re talking about rap or we quote something from a song, they just don’t get it. So, we started a group chat with just us three [rap listeners].” In this example, rap is acting as a boundary for in-group selection which results in Natalie’s two friends who do not listen to rap to be excluded. At the same time, rap helps in deepening the friendship between Natalie and her friends who *do* listen to rap. Similarly, Nick, an Asian student, mentions how when he uses rap as a common ground to build new relationships. As he grew older, he started to feel like it was harder to relate to people of different cultures in America but found rap to be “a helpful tool for [him] to at least start a conversation with people who I know listen to rap music whether they’re white, Black, or another person of color.” Nick uses rap music to bypass boundaries with out-group members, enabling him to form new relationships. Furthermore, Nick and Natalie’s use of rap music expands on Eder and Nenga’s finding that music can affect one’s selection of friends by showing that it also can affect the depth of the relationships.⁸³ The prevalence of music can improve the quality of a relationship but also limit a relationship depending on whether music is a shared trait.

In both Martin Court and Armfield apartments, I witnessed numerous examples of friends bonding over rap. Some songs sparked students to discuss their feelings about the song or the artist. I also witnessed some special moments held between friends when one of their favorite rap songs played. In particular, at a Black fraternity party, I watched Nicole and her two friends jump up and down in excitement and start screaming the lyrics to the rap song “Ballin” by DJ

⁸³ Donna Eder and Sandi Nenga, “Socialization in Adolescence,” in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. John Delamante (Boston, MA: Springer, 2006), 157-82.

Mustard. Throughout the song, they did not stop smiling and shouted words like “hey!” or “woah!” to let each other know they liked the way each other was dancing. The fast tempo dance moves and vocal confirmations allowed everyone at the party to see that they were on the same energy level and were really connecting over the song. I could infer by their faces and the way they were dancing that every time this rap song played, it brought them closer together. These examples focus on groups consisting of only a couple people, but I found that students also use rap to build larger communities as well.

Build Community. Claire and Natalie share experiences of building digital communities by sharing music with friends or followers on music streaming apps. Claire says that she and her friends bond more when they share their own personal playlists with each other or playlists that are made by their other friends, as well. She mentions how it is also an enjoyable way to learn more about people who are not very close to her and how there is a special “community you build with people when you ask them for music recommendations,” which emphasizes Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham's finding that music, in this case rap, improves interpersonal relations.⁸⁴

In Natalie's case, she created a public playlist on Spotify that has over 8,000 followers with which she shares a curated collection of music that updates biweekly. The playlist is extremely important to her, and she credits the playlist for her strong love for hip hop music because “it's become a part of my identity... and makes me feel like I am good at something.” When asked if she thinks she would love the genre as much as she does if the playlist never gained so much support, she replied, “I don't think I would have been as passionate about it like the way I am right now.” She has been offered upwards of \$800 to transfer the rights to the

⁸⁴ Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham.

account and has refused that and every other offer. Because of her curated rap playlist, she receives the gratifications of being able to influence others' music preferences and the happiness that comes from her success in acquiring such a following for the playlist. It is important to acknowledge Natalie's positionality as an Asian student who curates a playlist of music rooted in Black culture. Her intentions are innocent in the sense that she aims to make herself and others happy by uplifting and sharing rap music. However, her personal gain from Black music is appropriative because she says that she does not believe she has a great understanding of the historical origins of rap yet gains popularity among her followers and fellow students by sharing music without fully understanding its cultural significance. Although she is not gaining monetary compensations for the playlist, it has provided her with attention, social capital, and validation. She explains that "white people kind of respect me more... like when I play that music they're impressed by it." The validation Natalie's peers and playlist listeners give her shows that they see Natalie as part of the rap culture in-group and a credible source for rap music.

Because Natalie does not have an understanding of rap's cultural significance, she carries with her credibility that can perpetuate past stigmas of rap music depending on the music she adds to her playlist. Because there may be listeners who are part of the out-group and do not have the contextual knowledge to understand rap's history and significance, out-group members can develop negative attitudes toward rap music and its in-group listeners which can lead to stereotyping. For listeners who are not very familiar with Black culture, Natalie's playlist could be used as a medium for cultural tourism. The lack of contact with Black people can lead these listeners to understand what the media is presenting as all-encompassing and authentic, resulting in uninformed listeners internalizing stereotypes about rap or Black culture as a whole.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Srividya Ramasubramanian, "Using Celebrity News Stories to Effectively Reduce Racial/Ethnic Prejudice," *Journal of Social Issues* 71, no. 1 (2015): 123–38.

Affective Needs

Mood Management. My data show that students use rap music to intensify or change the state of their emotions. Harry belongs to a frat on campus, and explains how the frat has a concept called “the last twenty-eight,” meaning for the last 28 minutes of the party they progressively play more aggressive music. The goal is to heighten the students’ emotions to their most excited and energetic state by the end of the party. He gave examples of the artists of the songs they play during this period, which included Travis Scott, A\$AP Ferg, and Drake: all rappers. Kaylee and Natalie also mentioned putting on rap music for the purpose of becoming more energetic in preparation to go out and party. Interviewees Earl, Carl, and Claire, spoke about how they also use music to intensify their emotional state. Claire likes to listen to rappers Meek Mill and NAS when she feels down, while Carl prefers the rapper Juice WRLD when he is feeling sad. Earl listens to Rick Ross or The Game when he “feels good or looks clean.” In all three examples, each student has a go-to artist which they are intentional about playing when they want to emphasize a certain emotion. All the previous examples bring novel insight to Schäfer, Sedlmeier, Städtler, and Huron’s findings about changing or intensifying emotional states as their literature neglects to analyze music from the perspective of partying.⁸⁶

Cognitive Needs

Learning. Notably, responses from Nate and Harry show that rap is a tool to help educate consumers. Nate is very observant when he listens to rap music and points out that, although he does not have similar life experiences to the rappers and the content of their songs, he likes to listen to them talk about their lives. He gives the specific example of learning about Kanye West’s relationship with his mother and refers to rap songs that provide him with a deeper

⁸⁶ Schäfer, Sedlmeier, Städtler, and Huron.

knowledge as songs that are about “more meaningful stuff.” When talking about the content of rap lyrics with Harry, he first acknowledged that his experience growing up white and going to a private Christian school makes him privileged and prevents him from experiencing some of the traumas and losses of which rappers refer. Furthermore, when speaking about the robberies and shootings that Kendrick Lamar references in his raps, he says, “I’ve never experienced things like that. But I think in a way that [the music] is giving me some sort of insight, almost like a miniature history lesson into this window of a different culture.” Harry’s comment embodies Jacobson’s concept of cultural tourism by being able to understand Black people better from rap music.⁸⁷ However, Harry did not exemplify any behaviors that could accuse him of interpreting the learned experiences to maintain a positive orientation of whiteness and a negative orientation of Blackness. Ultimately, Harry feels like listening to rap educated him and claims, “it helped me understand a culture that I had not been exposed to or may ever understand.”

Cultural Significance

Out of the eight students who claimed to understand rap’s cultural significance, five were Black, one was white, and two were non-Black students of color. Two students learned about rap when they were younger, three learned about it through a course at Davidson called Hip Hop and Urban Sociology, and three did their own research using the internet, YouTube, and other video streaming services. Furthermore, all eight students agreed that it was important to understand the history or origins of the music they choose to consume. Tanya expressed how important it is to acknowledge the communities of Black and brown people from which rap originated and the political voice it gave those marginalized communities at the time the genre was emerging.

⁸⁷ Jacobson.

Similarly, Nicole states that whether they were speaking on poverty or racism, “rap music was always a personal and political outlet” to speak about the Black experience.

Out of the eighteen respondents, Earl, a Black student, is one of three students who claimed to not have an understanding of rap’s origins while also believing that it is not important to understand the history or the origins of the music he chooses to consume. He further clarifies that he has a good understanding of the music that he listens to but does not have a well-informed understanding of the genre’s origin. In his eyes, the genre changes over time and “each person has their own symbiotic relationship with the music.” He acknowledges the variety of listeners and asserts that “what it means to me can be something completely different than it does to someone else.” Like Earl, other students did not have an understanding of rap’s origins. For example, they mentioned popular rap artists Tupac and Biggie Smalls as “the founders of rap,” but they could not give any information on the origins of the genre. What makes these results so significant is that each of these respondents believed that, for music in general, it is important to understand the history or origins of music they choose to consume, yet many of them did not understand the history of rap themselves. Kaylee mentions, “understanding the origin helps you understand the music and lyrics better and the purpose of certain songs.” However, she acknowledges that she thinks “it is possible to listen to the music and appreciate it without knowing the history” and “not knowing the origins kind of lets you leave that to your discretion.” Choosing to allow listeners who are uneducated about the origins of rap music to interpret rap’s meaning at their own discretion could potentially result in “the pattern of separating the art from the people” and “leads to an appropriation of aesthetic innovation that not only exploits Black cultural forms, commercially and otherwise, but also nullifies the cultural meaning those forms

provide for African Americans.”⁸⁸ Choosing to displace the racially coded messages in rap music makes it easier for Americans to separate the music from Black culture and continue consuming rap while failing to act against the mistreatment of Black Americans.

Implications

This study expands on the previous literature that has used the uses and gratifications theory and social identity theory by using a qualitative and ethnographic approach. The in-depth interviews and site observations bring additional context and thick description to the study results. The intersection between the mood management theory, uses and gratifications theory, and social identity produces an alternative approach to apply to future studies. The study shows that the emotions people feel, want to feel, or maintain influence them to make decisions based on needs they want to satisfy. Those decisions affect their self-identities and group identities, affecting their alignment with the in-group or out-group. In examining the study’s implications for the social identity theory on its own, the results show that people of color are not always in-group depending on the issue at hand. In many cases, people of color are in-group but with the genre of rap being heavily African American oriented in its origins, not all people of color share that culture and therefore move to the out-group.

Given that my sample was taken at a highly selective liberal arts college, the study focuses on a group of students who are generally knowledgeable and seem to value education. Still, less than half of the students selected had an understanding of the cultural significance of the most popular genre in the United States, the same genre that every student agreed is one of their favorites. The disconnect between the treatment of Black people in the United States and the popularity of rap can be addressed by educating both consumers and non-consumers on rap’s

⁸⁸ Rodriquez, 664.

cultural significance and historical origins, producing a more positive common historical memory of the genre's origins. The negative stereotypes and stigmas attached to the genre become associated with Black people as a whole, encouraging non-Black people to hold negative attitudes towards Black people and policies that benefit them.⁸⁹ Black people continue to face acts of interpersonal and systemic racism while rap remains at the head of pop culture and enters the ear of Americans across the country and people all over the world. This study provides evidence that rap listeners need to seek more education on rap's historical origins and cultural significance, so they understand and remember both the beauty and the oppression that shaped the genre into what it is today. The students who understand rap's cultural significance show that there are many ways to become knowledgeable about the genre thanks to online streaming services, the internet, social media, and academic courses. As a result of having a more encompassing understanding of the genre and its history, people will be able to dismantle the preexisting stereotypes and disassociate them from Black people.

Future Research and Limitations

As mentioned in the methodology, the decision to split the sample into three racial groups is appropriate for my study because of the ethnographic and qualitative aspects of the study and the focus on a genre rooted in Black culture. Nonetheless, the non-Black student of color sample includes an unequal representation of racial identities. Future research should aim to obtain a more equal representation of non-Black people of color to fully explore the difference in their perspectives from white students. Additionally, my study did not have a measure of what participants thought about rap prior to the interview or a way to measure if students' listening habits changed after learning about rap's origins and history. Further research should explore the

⁸⁹ Laybourn.

preexisting stereotypes that students have about rap and those that listen to it and measure the effects that education has on the stereotypes they hold. Results would be able to establish whether there is a causal relationship between rap-specific stereotypes and education. Future studies should consider accompanying the qualitative and ethnographic work with a quantitative survey. The survey would ask participants to rank rap among other genres when it comes to various stereotypes, to describe what characteristics rap music embodies and ask participants to describe the rap artists they listen to themselves. An online survey would decrease bias present in an interview setting where the interviewee tries to maintain face. Furthermore, the answers to the three survey components would allow the researcher to compare the participants' perceptions of rap music, whether positive or negative, and compare them to the personal listening habits of the participant.

Rap is a male-dominated industry with a history in which some, but not all, artists have illustrated misogynistic and sexist themes in their songs. Race, not gender, was the significant variable that constructed the sample groups; however, future research should put more focus into understanding how gender affects the ways in which specifically female students consume rap music. Intersections between gender and race could provide nuanced findings on the differences in how rap satisfies students' needs and if there are different needs satisfied than those found in this study.

Conclusion

Students use rap to satisfy personal, social, affective, and cognitive needs. To do so, they form and affirm their identities, entertain themselves, navigate interpersonal interactions, manage their mood, and learn new information. Rap is used to help students feel more confident, authentic, individual, and free. In a social space, students use rap to party, workout, bond with

their friends, and create digital communities. The diverse spectrum of rap music allows students to listen to the music when they feel any emotion from happiness and excitement to sadness and focus. In addition, rap educates students on sociological problems and even just the artists themselves. On the other hand, only eight of the eighteen students understand rap's cultural significance. In order to prevent the separation of rap music from its roots in Black culture, people must begin to educate themselves on the cultural history of the genre. As a result, the stereotypes heavily associated with Black people will have the opportunity to be dismantled, improving the perceptions between in-group and out-group members. The negative relationship that exists between rap consumption and the understanding of rap's cultural significance leads to Americans consuming rap music at a high rate while simultaneously condoning the mistreatment of Black people and other aspects of their culture.

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