

Artists & Artisans: A Critical Discourse Analysis of SoundCloud Rap

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Abstract

The following paper examines what sort of influence is being exerted through the discourse reproduced in one of the newest waves in the Hip-Hop/Rap genre, SoundCloud Rap. SoundCloud Rap could be categorized as one of the few competing sub-genres that opposes themes of authenticity which “gatekeepers” of original Hip-Hop/Rap attribute to the genre’s earlier days. In this paper, a close reading of the lyrics from the most listened to SoundCloud Rap songs of 2017 and 2018 is performed to determine if SoundCloud Rap demonstrates the formulaic structure and promotion of certain social practices, ideologies and themes that are characteristic of “mainstream” popular culture hegemonic products.

Introduction

In June 2017, The New York Times published an article revealing the newest wave in the Hip-Hop/Rap genre to a more general audience, known as SoundCloud Rap (Caramanica, 2017). SoundCloud is presented as a streaming service oriented towards musical discovery, with a low barrier of entry for aspiring artists. The new wave takes its name after the streaming service since it serves as the platform for the artists behind the most recent “vital and disruptive movement in hip-hop”. The music is described as “low-fidelity” and “insistent” referring to its substandard production quality and repetitive beats, while the artists are described as “outlandish characters” known for their face tattoos, dyed hair, high fashion streetwear and prescription drug use.

The history of the Hip-Hop/Rap genre and its subsequent surrounding culture is well known. Emerging during the 1970s as an expressive art form commenting on the social, economic and political disparities of New York’s oppressed inner-city youth (Price III, 2006), Hip-Hop has now become a multibillion dollar institution of the music industry. SoundCloud Rap is no exception, as major recording labels “hover” over SoundCloud to sign new artists

(Caramanica, 2017). Hip-Hop/Rap culture has evolved to represent a wide range of communities from differing races, ages, and social classes, thus growing beyond its “sub-cultural roots” (Kotarba et al., 2013). SoundCloud Rap could be categorized as one of the few competing sub-genres that opposes themes of authenticity which “gatekeepers” of original Hip-Hop/Rap attribute to the genre’s earlier days.

At the turn of the century, the Hip-Hop/Rap genre was the best-selling genre of popular music (Neal, 2002), meaning it had surpassed the realm of youth culture, into a product shaped for “commercialized mainstream consumption”. When music becomes labelled “mainstream”, it is often viewed as a representation of a hegemony (Huber, 2013). The case can be made that SoundCloud Rap, is a hegemonic product of the music industry that exerts an influence over its millions of consumers world-wide. Therefore, one question that should be asked is: what sort of influence is being exerted through the discourse reproduced in SoundCloud Rap? The aim of this paper, is to perform a close reading of the lyrics from the most listened to SoundCloud Rap songs through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis to determine answers to the following questions: (1) Do the songs follow a formulaic structure characterized by the homogeneity and inauthenticity (Huber, 2013) of commercial “mainstream” hegemonic cultural products? (2) Does its content promote certain social practices, ideologies or themes that may contribute to its listeners’ personal deprivation, misery or denial of a pursuit towards a fulfilling life (Lê and Lê, 2009)?

Defining Popular Culture & Popular Music

The concept of “popular culture” has been defined in many contradictory ways (Bennet, 1980), therefore it is up to the user of the concept to define it within a given context, often by contrasting it to other “conceptual categories” (Storey, 2006). Williams (1983) identifies four reoccurring definitions of the term “popular culture” in relation to cultural products: (1) products

well-liked by many people, (2) products of inferior quality, (3) products created to gain favor with the general population, and (4) products created in the interest of the general population. The definition of “popular culture” that should be applied in the context of this paper is a blend of William’s first three definitions, or put simply, popular culture as “mass culture”. This definition defines popular culture as a “formulaic”, “manipulative” and a “commercial” enterprise produced for “brain-numbing” consumption by an audience that is “non-discriminating” (Storey, 2006). Another useful definition of popular culture in reference to the context of this paper could be popular culture as a “form of public fantasy”, meaning that popular culture represents a “dream world” that provides an everyday escape for the consumer (Storey, 2006). To complete our definition of popular culture, it must be contrasted with the other conceptual categories that are absent from the term being used. Popular culture and its products, in this context, are lacking the complex, authentic, moral, aesthetic and creative aspects that would be found in, for example, a youth or counter culture. Those who use the “mass culture” definition of popular culture are said to have a certain “lost organic community” in mind (Storey, 2006) when reflecting upon the history of a given culture. This is observed through the “gatekeepers” of the Hip-Hop/Rap genre who reflect upon its subcultural roots as its “lost organic community”, however, it is not the aim of the paper to apply our definition of “popular culture” to the entirety of the genre today, rather it is to determine if the definition, as well as the term “popular music”, applies to the SoundCloud Rap wave.

Compatible with our definition of “popular culture”, “popular music” is equated to “commercially mass produced music for a mass market” (Shuker, 2001). Being a product of mass production, popular music is, in this context, a “highly standardized commodity” and not a creative expression of personal or group identity (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2008). Popular songs are described as formulaic, superficial, and made for passive consumption. Although they are

described as uncreative expressions of identity, they are identity forming nonetheless (Hall and Whannel, 1964), since they have been observed as an instrument used to deal with emotional difficulties. In contrast, “authentic music”, a product of for example “youth-culture”, is described as conveying innovative, individualized expressions of an artist that reflect certain values belonging to a subcultural group that the artist identifies with (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2008). Rap music is the undisputed “creative force” of Hip-Hop/Rap culture (Kotarba et al., 2013), therefore it is justified to perform a lyrical analysis of SoundCloud’s most played songs to determine what sort of identity is being constructed, and what sort of meaning is being conveyed to its listeners. Specifically, as a “highly standardized commodity”, SoundCloud Rap should be analyzed as representative of the music industry’s political economy of popular music: an identity forming instrument that maintains a hegemony between a controlling music industry and compliant consuming audience.

Hip-Hop/Rap as “Mainstream”

As previously stated, the Hip-Hop/Rap genre emerged as a black subculture of the generation that followed the civil rights movement, highlighting the struggles of their inner-city experience during the 1970s. The genre was quick to be embraced by a variety of communities, leading to several subcultural spin-offs of the genre, however it was also quick to be transformed into a global commodity by the music industry’s corporations. Corporations began to guide the creative process of the genre, offering up a product that satisfied the “voyeuristic demands” of a middle-class consumer society, described as “totally removed” from rap music’s themes of poverty, drug dealing and violence (Kotarba et al., 2013). The creativity and social consciousness of oppressed Black Americans that marked the early days of the genre was forgotten as the music industry framed the Black American as anything but creative or complex as the genre became mainstream (Bynoe, 2004). Hip-Hop enthusiasts detested the mainstream movement and image

the music industry was creating out of the genre (Harrison, 2009), such as popular 1980s rapper KRS-One (Forman, 2013). He suggested that the mainstream movement of Hip-Hop/Rap compromised the culture as it restricted the “genuine cultural expression” of the artists, who instead have shifted their focus to “commercial self-interest”. Although this concern is not unanimous amongst the audience and artists of the genre today (Forman, 2013), it is undeniable that the genre fits the categorization as “mainstream” by contemporary standards (Huber, 2013) through its dominating presence on digital platforms (streaming services, social media) that we are exposed to daily.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Analyzing SoundCloud Rap

Critical Discourse Analysis aims to address social problems that are created as the result of a hegemonic relationship between groups of differing social power (Lê and Lê, 2009). Social power is associated with a given group or institution that exerts social control over a group of lesser power through a given resource. A discourse that is controlled by an institution of greater social power over a lesser group exerts a certain ideological work by influencing the “acts” and “minds” of the “lesser” people (Van Dijk, 2004). The discourse shapes the consumer’s ideologies, values, attitudes and social practices in relation to certain situations and environments. In the case of SoundCloud Rap, a power relation can be observed between the music industry, the artists and creators belonging to the genre, and the listeners. The music industry is perceived as the institution with the greatest social power in this dynamic as they have been observed to guide the creative process of Hip-Hop/Rap music (Kotarba et al., 2013) to the point where some artists have commented that there is a restriction in the representational options (Forman, 2013). The restriction is driven by “commercial self-interest”, thus limiting authentic cultural expressions of Hip-Hop/Rap culture. Artists and creators are thus below the music industry in terms of social power, but above the consumer of the cultural product, in this case, the audience of SoundCloud

rap. The consumed music, its associated culture and commodities shape the listeners identity and serve as an important resource for dealing with emotional transitions (Hall and Whannel, 1964). The most listened to songs of SoundCloud Rap are the controlled resource, as it is the discourse embodied as text that mediates the listeners relations to certain situations and people, their attitudes towards certain topics and activities, and their identity as members of the Hip-Hop/Rap culture within their society. The aim of the following analysis is to determine if the most played SoundCloud Rap songs follow a formulaic structure in terms of content, vocabulary, and stylistic components that mark inauthentic products of a mainstream popular music genre, as well as to determine if its content promotes themes or social practices that may negatively influence a listener's life.

According to SoundCloud's official "Playback" channel, the most listened Hip-Hop/Rap song released in 2017 is Lil Uzi Vert's "XO TOUR Llif3" at 190,000,000 plays (The SoundCloud Blog, 2017). The tempo is upbeat, the beat is bass-heavy, while the lyrics relay the artist's relationship issues, prescription drug abuse and displays of wealth.

I don't really care if you cry
On the real, you shoulda never lied
Shoulda saw the way she looked me in my eyes
She said, "Baby, I am not afraid to die"
Push me to the edge
All my friends are dead (Chorus, 1-6)

The chorus' first three bars refer to the artist's breakup with his significant other, while the final three provide the gloomy tone to the song and reveal a few topics that are prevalent in SoundCloud Rap. Suicide is often alluded to in light of any emotional distress the artist is conveying. For example, Uzi later sings "She say I'm insane, yeah / I might blow my brain out

(hey)” (Verse 1, 12-13). As mentioned earlier, popular music serves as an important resource for listeners dealing with difficult emotional transitions (Hall and Whannel, 1964), therefore listeners may come to associate this negative solution to common distressing social situations, in this case referring to breakups. The last bar, “All my friends are dead”, can also be interpreted as a reference to the dead presidents depicted on American currency, therefore we observe a glorification of wealth by the artist declaring that his only friend is his money. The song also promotes a reoccurring social practice commonly found in SoundCloud Rap, the abuse of prescription drugs as a means of coping with personal anxiety or emotional pain.

Xanny, help the pain, yeah

Please, Xanny, make it go away

I'm committed, not addicted, but it keep control of me

All the pain, now I can't feel it

I swear that it's slowin' me, yeah (Verse 1, 14-18)

Uzi is referring to Xanax, a prescription drug used to treat anxiety disorders, as a means to numb his emotional pain. In saying “I’m committed, not addicted”, the artist hints that he is aware of the dangers of addiction, however, by saying but it keep control of me”, Uzi contradicts his previous claim that he is not addicted. This denial of addiction reinforces the portrayal of the egotistical persona in rap music. Again, we observe the promotion of a social practice that could contribute to a listener’s personal misery should they identify with the message being conveyed in this song.

That is not your swag, I swear you fake hard

Now these niggas wanna take my cadence

.....

Clothes from overseas, got the racks and they all C-Notes

You is not a G though

Lookin' at you stackin' all your money, it all green though (Verse 2, 1-2, 7-9)

Lastly, a pattern in language associated to displays of wealth, whether it be referring to money, expensive brands, or excessive consumption, is repeatedly observed in SoundCloud Rap. Accompanying displays of wealth are often references to the inauthenticity of other artists who are accused of copying a certain artist's fashion style or rapping style. In the above bars, Uzi seems to take a shot at other artists, accusing them of not only copying his "swag" meaning his fashion sense and overall persona, but also "cadence" referring to his distinctive rap flow. He later goes on to brag about his superior wealth, by referring to his "C-notes", meaning 100\$ bills, and expensive foreign clothes, while belittling other artists wealth since their money is "all green though", referring to an absence of the distinctive blue coloration of American 100\$ bills. A lifestyle of excessive displays of wealth and consumption is repeatedly promoted in SoundCloud Rap, potentially pushing a pro-capitalist and pro-consumerist ideology upon its listeners. Certainly not all pursuits of wealth contribute to personal deprivation or denial of a fulfilling life, however seeing as most musical products fail (Fiske 1989, Frith 1983) the association between a musical career and wealth primed in this song is not the most viable of options when considering achieving an overall fulfilling life. Pursuing wealth by drug-dealing, a social practice glorified in the other SoundCloud Rap songs we will observe, is also not an encouraging option.

Next, we turn to Juice WRLD's "Lucid Dreams" as SoundCloud's most listened to Hip-Hop/Rap song released in 2018 on their official "Playback 2018" playlist at 125,000,000 plays (The SoundCloud Blog, 2018). Like Lil Uzi Vert's "XO TOUR Llif3", "Lucid Dreams" delves into the artist's emotional distress over a breakup.

It's to the point where I love and I hate you

And I cannot change you, so I must replace you, oh

Easier said than done, I thought you were the one

Listenin' to my heart instead of my head

You found another one, but I am the better one

I won't let you forget me (Chorus, 3-8)

Comparing his emotional anguish to a dream, Juice WRLD copes with his feelings towards his significant other as a dreamer can control a lucid dream, by “replacing” her. As previously observed in Lil Uzi Vert’s song, Juice WRLD also abuses prescription drugs to cope with the emotional distress of a breakup, potentially creating an association between the harmful practice and the given social situation of a breakup in a listener’s understanding.

You left me falling and landing inside my grave

I know that you want me dead

I take prescriptions to make me feel a-okay

I know it's all in my head

.....

Now I'm just better off dead (Verse 1, 1-4, 9)

Both “XO TOUR Llif3” and “Lucid Dreams” have a nihilistic and gloomy ambiance through their references to death and suicide. Although both artists acknowledge the danger of prescription drug abuse, the songs nevertheless promote the harmful social practice as a coping mechanism in a specific social context, and thus can be labeled as detrimental to an audience that identifies with these songs to deal with the emotional distress of a breakup. The songs also share some stylistic similarities. Both songs are 808 heavy (base-drum producer), contain repetitive choruses and are structured intro/chorus/verse with a slight differentiation in the later halves of the songs. The similar content, repetitive choruses and shared formulaic structure of the two songs reflect the homogeneous aspect we identified earlier as a characteristic of popular,

mainstream music. “Lucid Dreams” differs from “XO TOUR Llif3” in that it is less up-beat, utilizing a slower melody and a lower BPM, while there is an absence of common Hip-Hop/Rap vernacular and the use of ad libs that marks the next SoundCloud Rap songs.

“Gucci Gang” by Lil Pump is SoundCloud’s second most listened Hip-Hop/Rap song released in 2017 featured in their official playback playlist at 127,000,000 plays (The SoundCloud Blog, 2017). With a play time of two minutes and five seconds, Lil Pump says “Gucci Gang” fifty-three times throughout the song, indicative of the repetitive nature and lack of creativity of the song’s lyrics. Trademark features such as ad libs, heavy use of bass, a simple rhyme scheme and language associated to popular topics and activities characterize this popular song.

Spend three racks on a new chain (Yuh)

My bitch love do cocaine, ooh (Ooh)

I fuck a bitch, I forgot her name (Brr, yuh)

I can't buy a bitch no wedding ring (Ooh)

Rather go and buy Balmain (Brr) (Chorus, 3-7)

The chorus of the song provides an example of the song’s shallow content. The song promotes substance abuse, as the artists mentions cocaine, Percocet, meth, and lean all within the same song. The song also promotes a consumerist culture, as the artist brags about buying an expensive necklace, “chain”, and designer shoes, “Balmain”. The language associated to women, referring to them as “bitch”, depersonalizes not only the artist’s romantic engagements to them, but also reflects the recurring objectification of women found within Hip-Hop/Rap culture. This may negatively influence a listener’s interpersonal relationships if they identify with the themes of the song in similar social contexts involving a romantic partner.

My lean cost more than your rent, ooh (It do)

Your momma still live in a tent, yuh (Brr)

Still slangin' dope in the 'jects, huh? (Yeah)

Me and my grandma take meds, ooh (Huh?) (Verse 1, 1-4)

While the previous songs promoted the consumption of drugs as a coping mechanism, here Lil Pump refers to “lean”, a mix of prescription cough syrup and soda, as well as “meds”, for recreational use. “My lean cost more than your rent / Your momma still live in a tent” is a reiteration of the theme observed in the Lil Uzi Vert song, in which the artist bragged about his wealth while belittling the wealth of a listener. Bragging to the interlocutor continues in “Still slangin’ dope in the ‘jects, huh?/Me and my grandma take meds, ooh”. Lil Pump belittles the listener who still sells drugs in the projects while he has moved on to the expensive hobby of prescription drug use. The artist’s positive association to drug consumption and his negative association to interpersonal relationships, promotes a lifestyle that undoubtedly denies a fulfilling life.

Lastly, we turn to SoundCloud’s second most listened to Hip-Hop/Rap song released in 2018 on their “Playback 2018” playlist: Rich the Kid’s “Plug Walk” at 75, 000, 000 plays (The SoundCloud Blog, 2018).

Plug walk (plug walk, plug, plug)

I don't even understand how the fuck my plug talk (Huh? what, what?)

Pick him up in a space coupe, I don't let my plug walk (Skrrt, pull up in a space coupe)

New freak, had to cut my other lil' bitch off (ooh, ooh, lil' bitch)

50K, you could come and book a nigga for a plug walk (Chorus, 1-5)

The chorus refers to the artist’s drug supplier, the “plug”, and how Rich the Kid doesn’t understand him since he likely speaks another language. Rich doesn’t let his plug walk, rapping

that he picks him up in his “space coupe” referring to an expensive, futuristic-looking car. “Freak” and “bitch” are vocabulary associated to women, and as observed in “Gucci Gang”, sexual relations to women are objectified and depersonalized. The artist also brags about his wealth, claiming it costs nothing short of 50,000\$ to strike a drug deal with himself.

I stuck kis in the Louis V (Louis V)

Fuck 12, I’m a G, ain't no stoppin' me (ain't no stoppin' me)

And my wrist is on overseas (drip)

Rich nigga, you can't talk to me (rich) (Verse 2, 9-12)

“Plug Walk” promotes drug consumption and dealing, material consumerist culture, and depersonalized sexual relationships with women. “kis in the Louis V” is understood as kilograms of drugs in an expensive brand name bag, while “wrist is on overseas (drip)” refers to an expensive watch that has been covered in diamonds. The artist promotes a negative attitude towards law enforcement, “12”, reinforcing the commercial image of the rapper as “gangster” in contrast to the complex and socially conscious image they once had during the genre’s early days. Lastly, we get a hint of the of the artist’s wealth-driven ego through his last bar, “you can’t talk to me”. Social practices of illegal drug consumption and distribution, a pro-consumerist ideology, objectification of women in interpersonal relationships, are all patterns previously identified as not beneficial for a listener to identify with as it may deny the pursuit of a fulfilling life.

Both “Gucci Gang” and “Plug Walk” utilize a simple rhyme scheme, a vernacular consistent with the Hip-Hop/Rap genre and culture, and repetitive adlibs that characterize the songs as homogenous and formulaic in structure. The content of the songs reflects Bynoe’s comment about the music industry creating an image of the Rapper as anything but a complex or creative individual (2004). Together, not only do “Gucci Gang” and “Plug Walk” satisfy our

definition of a product of popular culture as mass culture due to their formulaic structures, but they also satisfy the voyeuristic definition of popular culture in that the middle-class listener escapes into the dream world of the cultural “other” (Storey, 2006). The excessive material consumption, recreational drug use without consequence and the numerous depersonalized sexual relationships is not a lifestyle that the average middle-class consumer can live out, therefore it could be said that they live out this almost utopian fantasy through songs such as these.

Conclusion

To conclude, we come back to the aims of the paper which was to determine if the songs are characterized by the features of homogeneous mainstream Hip-Hop/Rap music and if their content promote practices, ideologies or themes that could contribute to a listener’s misery, preventing them from pursuing a fulfilling life. All four songs are structurally formulaic, following an identical pattern of intro/chorus/verse to begin the songs with only slight differences in their later parts. Earlier, we described products of a popular culture as highly standardized commodities made for passive consumption. The SoundCloud Rap songs analyzed above could all be described as such, since they make use of repetitive lyrics, catchy and upbeat melodies with little expression of personal or group identities. The first two songs, “XO TOUR Llif3” and “Lucid Dreams” cannot be outright labelled as uncreative since the artists do demonstrate some lyrical complexity. On the other hand, the content as an influencing discourse upon its listeners is problematic as both songs provide detrimental coping mechanisms when experiencing emotional distress due to a breakup by resorting to prescription drug abuse. The last two songs, “Gucci Gang” and “Plug Walk”, are undoubtedly lacking the creative and aesthetic complexities to not label them as superficial. Both their content and stylistic components are marked by the characteristics of an inorganic and inauthentic mainstream production. The content of these two songs, not only reinforce substance abuse as the previous two songs did, but also many other

social practices and ideologies that would lead to the denial of a fulfilling life should listeners identify with them. Drug abuse, drug dealing, depersonalizing interpersonal relations with women, excessive material consumption and an egotistical mentality that encourages looking down upon others of lower financial status are examples of the discourse reinforced through the songs' content.

The close reading of the most listened to SoundCloud Rap songs revealed a discourse reflective of a possible hegemonic relationship between the artists and their listeners. Analysis of the lyrics revealed artists plagued by enormous egos, demonstrated through their displays of wealth, toxic masculinity, unsustainable social practices and ideologies that are not viable to identify with if the listeners hope to pursue a fulfilling life. The commodities, brands, activities and attitudes glorified by the artists could potentially be negatively influencing a group of lower social power. Although SoundCloud is said to promote independent artists, the very same commodities, brands, activities and attitudes promoted by the artists may not be authentic expressions, therefore any negative influence upon listeners cannot be the sole responsibility of the artists. The music industry must take the lion's share of the responsibility as the institution or group with the most social power in this hegemonic dynamic. It is the music industry that continuously guided the creative process of the genre that glorified the pursuit of wealth by any means which was observed in the above SoundCloud Rap lyrics. Steering away from the image of the rapper as a creative and complex individual driven by social consciousness, the primary concern of the rapper becomes the pursuit of wealth and its accompanying values as the genre continues to be commercialized. The music industry continuously reproduced this image of the rapper by only signing artists who reproduce the desired homogenous sound until it began to subtly exert some control over Hip-Hop/Rap culture and those who identified with it. As we noted earlier, after the commercialization of the genre, artists began to feel limited in their

representational options and they become guided by commercial self-interest rather than creative expression. We have observed this in our analysis, as the songs could be described as lacking individual expression or values associated to a non-mainstream, subcultural group. The creative process of the genre is thus said to be controlled by the music industry since an aspiring artist will likely engage in the discursive practice of reproducing the mainstream “sound”. That “sound” exerts an influence over the consumers who begin to believe that it is that specific “sound” which they want to hear. Therefore, regardless of an aspiring artist’s natural talent to rhyme and create music, it is in their best financial interest to reproduce the sound that the industry is already pushing onto Hip-Hop/Rap listeners if they hope to achieve the desired wealth that is glorified within the culture. According to the above analysis, the most popular songs of SoundCloud Rap could be described as reproduced products of artisans, rather than unique expressions of artists.

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