Does Rap Music Increase Aggression?

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Abstract

When rap music first came onto the music scene, people started noticing an increase in violent behaviors and offenses. Is this merely a coincidence or could music actually be causing people to act out on the feelings that they go through while listening to or watching this genre of music? Many researchers have found that after observing violence in the form of music or music videos, participants reported higher aggression than their counterparts who were exposed to no violence or less amounts (Anderson, Carnagey, & Eubanks, 2003; Kistler & Lee, 2009, p. 82; Tropeano, 2006, p. 33). We hypothesized that participants exposed to rap music would report more aggressive responses than participants exposed to no music. However, this study found that there was no difference on reporting aggressive responses between participants exposed to rap music and those who were exposed to no music. This discrepancy could be attributed to flaws in research design, or it could be due to some acknowledgement of the violent music being necessary in order for it to become influential to a listener. Future research should research at what level of awareness does the environment around an individual influence a listener?

Does Rap Music Increase Aggression?

Dating back to the origination of rap music, people have argued if it has an influence on violence. It has been talked about that when rap music first came onto the music scene, people started noticing an increase in violent behaviors and offenses. Is this merely a coincidence or could music actually be causing people to act out on the feelings that they go through while listening to or watching this genre of music? If music does play a role in aggressive tendencies, being able to control what influence it has can be extremely crucial in furthering our understanding of why some people are more aggressive than others. Being able to identify individuals who may be more susceptible to outward influence on behavior could allow researchers to then look closer into if there is a biological or psychological basis to this ability to be influenced. Is there a biological predisposition to likelihood to be influenced, or does it have to do with merely how often one listen to a certain type of music? Once it is determined if there is a factor that manipulates degree of likelihood to be influenced by external stimuli, researchers could then identify ways to help these individuals acknowledge they are being influenced and how to handle these situations appropriately. Also, this knowledge can help support the argument that artists need to take responsibility for the music they put into society and how it may influence individuals. For example, many rappers write about being violent towards police. While it may not be intentional, many listeners' adrenaline gets flowing while driving and listening to this music. If the police officer then pulls the listener over, will they react in a more violent manner than they would have if they had not been listening to rap music? Rappers need to acknowledge, and potentially be held responsible for, the influence their music has on listeners. This study aims to determine if the presence of rap music causes an increase in aggressive responses in contrast to no music being present.

Many researchers have tried to tackle the topic of rap music's influence on aggression. For example, Kistler and Lee (2009) found that men exposed to hip-hop music videos with high levels of sexual content were more likely to objectify women and accept rape myth beliefs than their counterparts who were exposed to low levels of sexual content (p. 82). These behaviors can be categorized as aggressive and are concerning. This conclusion supports our hypothesis that rap music causes an increase in aggression. The men watching the videos with high sexual content saw that these behaviors were acceptable and then adopted these ideas and acted in accordance with what they had been exposed to. In another study, it was found that individuals who watched violent music videos had immediate changes in behavior and reported higher aggression in situations that were presented on a questionnaire (Tropeano, 2006, p. 33). This immediate change in demeanor could be directly linked to the content of the music video. Due to the music video being the only stimuli present during this time, participants' demeanor change must have been accounted for by what they were watching. Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks (2003) also found that students tended to be more aggressive and hostile when exposed to some form of violent song. This article covers the gap that it may not be only rap music responsible for this increase in aggressive tendencies. Also, research has been done into the effects listening to rap music has on substance use. It was found that listening to rap music that references substance abuse and violence was positively associated with abusing substances and acting violent (Chen, Miller, Grube, & Waiters, 2006). Any music that propagates violence and negative behaviors seems to result in the listener acting in a negative manner and having an increased tendency to commit aggressive behaviors.

With all the research that has been conducted, one might question why another study is even necessary. However, previous researchers have missed many key elements that the present

study hopes to further explore. First, participants have always been exposed to stimuli with the knowledge that they are supposed to be paying attention to the music or music video. This introduces a confound that participants may be responding more aggressively because they are paying closer attention to the music than they otherwise would. Our study will not draw attention to the presence or absence of music; rather it will be a subconscious acknowledgement of the content. When individuals are going through daily life, music is often just background noise that the listener is not directly paying attention to. This study aims to determine if the mere presence of music still causes an increase of aggression. Another missing element is that many researchers have been comparing rap to other types of music that have the potential to actually decrease aggressive tendencies. For example, Tropeano (2006) stated that her study used a music video that was fun and included people dancing on the beach (p. 33). Instead of allowing the control to be a neutral stimulus, this video had the potential to actually decrease aggressive behaviors. In order to account for this confound, this study will compare presence of rap music to absence of all music. Having no music present in the control group will then account for the confound that the difference found is due to the non-violent music decreasing aggressive responses.

This research will investigate the relationship between presence or absence of rap music and its effect on aggressive tendencies. We hypothesize that the presence of rap music will cause an increase in aggressive behaviors detected via self-report surveys. Our study will examine if participants exposed to no music report lower aggression than their counterparts who are exposed to the rap music stimuli. This will help to close the gap that exists in the current research. Our study will also research if the background presence of rap music results in an increase in aggressive tendencies. Removing the step of directly telling participants to pay

attention to the music or music video will help to simulate a real-life scenario and give a more accurate depiction of how rap music is affecting individuals on a day-to-day basis. This will also help to bridge the gap in the current research and potentially open up new avenues for research. We hope to find that the presence of rap music does cause an equal increase in aggressive behaviors as was found in previous research that had participants acknowledge the music.

This research is extremely important to various fields of study such as communications, social psychology, mass media, fine arts, and even law enforcement. If it is discovered that the presence of rap music does cause an increase in aggressive behaviors, then researchers will be able to find better ways to deal with people who may be influenced by this music. For example, if a police officer comes up to a car playing rap music and knows that the research suggests this individual is going to respond in a more aggressive manner, he or she can take the proper steps in order to ensure an extra level of caution and safety when dealing with this individual. Likewise, helping an individual expand his or her music preferences to include more positive genres of music could help counselors work with their clients who may struggle with aggressive tendencies. This research opens up a window into determining if the subconscious acknowledgement of music has a measurable effect on behaviors, and can thus help people better understand how to handle these situations. It also necessitates that the music industry acknowledge it's role in either hindering or improving the movement towards ending the violent culture that seems to be sweeping over the United States, and even the world. Also, being able to demonstrate to the general public that the concerns that exposing youth to violent music is a legitimate concern could help to move the cause forward to regulating what children should and should not be exposed to. In the least, it will give parents a better understanding of the effects

that the type of music they choose to listen to will have on not only themselves, but also all others who are simply exposed to it.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were recruited through Sona Systems. Sona Systems is an online database that allows students to sign up for, participate in, and receive credit for the research they participate in. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at Angelo State University. These participants could be psychology majors, minors, or students just enrolled in psychology courses. The participants were also assigned a random participant number in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Prior to the research starting, random numbers were assigned to surveys. These numbers were not included on the confidentiality form, the only document with the participant's name, in order to ensure that the number and name could not be connected. This number was then used to analyze and record data accurately. There were 21.4% male participants, 78.6% female participants. There were also 50% Caucasian, 21.4% Black/African American, 21.4% Hispanic or Latino/a, 7.1% Asian/Asian American. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 27 (M = 19.93, SD = 2.40).

Design and Procedure

This design is experimental and between-Ss subjects. We had an independent variable that was manipulated and a dependent variable that was measured based on the manipulation. The independent variable for this design was the presence of rap music or absence of rap music (no music present). Participants were randomly assigned to two different groups. One group, the experimental, was exposed to rap music. The other group, the control, was exposed to no music. The averages of the two groups were then compared against one another.

The stimuli in this experiment were rap music songs. The first song used was XO Tour Llif3 by Lil Uzi Vert. This song was played from Youtube and was approximately three minutes long. The next song that was played was Gangsta's Paradise by Coolio. Gangsta's Paradise was also played from Youtube and was approximately four minutes long. The final song used was Immortal by J. Cole. This song was also played from Youtube and was approximately three and a half minutes long. We played the clean version of all of these songs. The volume was kept at fifty percent in order to ensure it was audible, but not distractingly loud. For the groups that were assigned to hear music, the music was already playing when they entered the room and was on a loop until they left.

We used two self-report surveys that were developed by other researchers. The first survey was the Word Completion Task by Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks (2003). This survey included 99 words with blanks where letters were missing. For example, *in _ _ re, pr_ _e,* and *h _ t* are words that were used on this survey. Participants were given three minutes to complete as many words as they could. These responses were then scored on a scale with 3 = aggressive, 2 = ambiguous, and 1 = neutral. A higher score represented more aggressive tendencies. The next survey used was a set of four scenarios developed by Tropeano (2006). These scenarios measured if participants would respond in an aggressive manner or a nonaggressive manner. For example, one scenario on the survey was, *"You're driving home, minding your own business, traveling at a decent speed, when the person next to you abruptly cuts you off. What would you do?"* These scenarios were then scored on a scale with 1 = answer choice A and 4 = answer choice D. A higher score on this scale represented a more aggressive response. The final survey that participants took was a demographic survey asking for participants to report his or her gender, ethnicity, and age.

For the participants who were randomly assigned to the experimental group, the song XO Tour Llif3 was playing at 50% of volume when they entered the room. For the participants who were assigned to the control group, no music was playing. After this step, all of the procedures were identical for both groups. The participant was asked to enter the room, close the door behind him or her and then take a seat anywhere. The participant was then asked to confirm his or her name and that he or she was here to participate in the study "Fill in the Blank." Upon confirmation, the participant was given a consent form and pen. He or she was asked to read over the information and sign if he or she agreed to participate. After signing the form, the participant was instructed to turn the consent form into the envelope at the front of the room and then return to his or her seat. Once the participant was seated again, the researcher handed the Word Completion Task to the participant. The participant was told that he or she had three minutes to complete as many words that he or she could. After three minutes passed, the participant was instructed to again turn the survey into the envelope at the front of the room and return to his or her seat. Having the participant turn the survey into the envelope was to ensure that the responses could not be connected back to the participant. Once the participant was reseated, the researcher handed the participant the scenario and demographic questionnaires. The participant was instructed that there was no time limit for this portion and to turn it into the envelope containing his or her Word Completion Task upon completing it. After the participant completed the final two surveys, he or she was debriefed, handed a debriefing form, thanked for participating, and allowed to leave the room. The debriefing form included more information on what the study was looking to answer, places the student could go if he or she felt the need to talk to someone, and the information of the IRB chair and research mentor to contact if there was a problem or question that needed to be reported.

Results

We hypothesized that students exposed to rap music would report higher levels of aggressive behaviors than students exposed to no music. I used an independent samples t-test to compare total aggressive responses to music exposure. In order to calculate the total aggressive responses, I added the sum of aggressive responses on the Word Completion Task to the scores of the four scenarios. This total then became the dependent variable. There was not a significant difference between individuals exposed to rap music (M = 15.25, SD = 5.37) than the individuals exposed to no music (M = 11.00, SD = 1.79), $t(12)$ = -1.85, p = .089, d = 1.06.

Additional Analysis

Another test I wanted to run was to determine if there was a difference between gender and reporting aggressive responses. I suspected that females may have a heightened aggressive response to the music due to many of the lyrics being derogatory towards females. I used an independent samples t-test to compare if there was a difference between how many total aggressive responses each gender reports. I used the same method to calculate total aggressive responses for this test. There was not a significant difference between men (M = 12.00, SD = 3.00) and women (M = 13.82, SD = 5.04), $t(12)$ = -.587, p = .57, d = .04 in reporting aggressive responses.

Discussion

We hypothesized that participants exposed to rap music would report more aggressive responses than participants exposed to no music. Unfortunately, our hypothesis was not supported. Our research found that participants who were exposed to rap music reported no statistically significant difference in aggressive responses than their counterparts who were exposed to no music. Also, there was no difference between men and women on reporting

aggressive behaviors. Previous research demonstrated that men exposed to greater levels of sexual content were more likely to view women as objects and accept rape than counterparts who were not (Kistler & Lee, 2009, p. 82). It was also found that, when exposed to violent music, participants tended to report higher aggression and hostility (Anderson et al., 2003). The findings of our study are discrepant from previous research, which begs the question as to why our hypothesis was not confirmed.

When a study's findings vary from what else has been found, there are many reasons this could be. One reason could be that the study uncovered a new finding, or it could be that the study was flawed in some way. In the case of this study, I presume if changes were made a finding more congruent to previous research would result. One of the first changes I would make is to include participants who are not undergraduate psychology students. Including only undergraduate psychology students is a very narrow sample and is far from representative of the greater population. Psychology students have received schooling on human behavior, and, therefore, may be less likely to report in a "knee-jerk reaction" like participants from the general population. Another problem with the population was the small number of participants. I suppose that if more participants had been included there would have been a greater difference between the groups. In the small amount of data collected, it was observed that participants in the experimental group were reporting more aggressive responses than the control group. In a larger sample size, the extremes in either group would influence the results less and the median data would influence the results more than they did in this small sample. The final changes I would make to this study are three components to how it was conducted. I would decrease the number of questions on the Word Completion Task while choosing to keep the words that allowed for inputting more letters. Participants rarely filled in the same words on this task and also chose to

complete the three letter words over words that may require more thought. Modifying this survey to only include the words that require more thought (i.e. five or more letter words) could result in more variation between the two groups. Finally, increasing the time would allow participants to complete more words, thus giving us more data. However, it was still beneficial to find that perhaps just the presence of violent music is not enough to actually provoke violent behavior. This study, in conjunction with the other present research, suggests that individuals have to be conscious to the presence of music in order for it to have an affect on his or her behavior. This research adds to the existing information and contributes to the unconscious effects of listening to violent music.

In the future, research should dive further in depth on the unconscious effects of violent music and videos. Having the ability to determine at what level of recognition violence begins to have an effect would be a great starting point on learning how to handle the new culture of rap music, violent video games, and violent movies/shows. Another possible route to take with future research is if personality traits affect how likely individuals are to be influenced by violent music. Some people are more susceptible to acting out in an aggressive manner; would these people also be the individuals who are most likely to be influenced? Another interesting project to look at in the future would be if those already reporting aggressive personality traits are also the ones who are most influenced by aggressive music; thus, act in an even more aggressive manner after exposure. Also worth noting would be how ethnicity or age correlates with reporting aggressive behaviors. Older generations are not usually the people who come to mind when discussing rap music. So, would older generations be influenced less by rap music or more due to them being less desensitized to the lyrics? Finally, some ethnicities are stereotyped to

listen to rap music more than others. In result, would these ethnicities be less influenced by the music or would it fall into a question posed earlier, such as personality traits?

In order for society to understand and become accountable for the things that are produced, people must first understand the effects that products are causing. The music industry is extremely prominent in all age groups and should be conscious of how it's products are impacting it's listeners. While this research may not have found that the mere presence of aggressive music causes an increase in aggression, it has added to the present research to determine at what levels of acknowledgement begin to influence aggression in viewers and listeners. Music and aggression will always be major components in human life and this research is just the start to discovering the influences music has on people. This study, in conjunction with other research, can also begin to give us a look into ways to decrease violent acts or high levels of aggression in individuals.

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