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*Psychology & Social Sciences***Substance Use References in the Lyrics of Favorite Songs of African-American Adolescents****Trenita Brookshire¹, Celeste Davis², Erin Stephens¹, and Sharronne Bryant³**¹Davidson College, ²Bennett College, ³Morgan State University**Advisors: Dorothy C. Browne, Ph.D., Patty Clubb, Ph.D.**

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[Discuss this article!](#)**Abstract**

National studies indicate that drug use continues to be a problem facing adolescents living in the United States (e.g., the Monitoring the Future Study). A wide range of factors have been linked with drug use, including family, peer, and individual factors (Hawkins, Catalano & Miller 1992). In addition, concerns have been raised regarding the effect of media messages on health risk behaviors, particularly given that media with explicit content are often marketed toward adolescents under the age of 18 (Federal Trade Commission 2000). The goal of this study was to investigate the extent to which drug-related references were present in popular songs nominated by a sample of African-American adolescents. To address this issue, secondary data analyses were performed using data originally collected by the Reaching Adolescents, Parents, and Peers project (Project RAPP). In the spring of 1997, participants reported their five favorite songs. Songs that were nominated five or more times by the sample (popular songs) were coded for genre and drug-related content. Of the 93 popular songs, the most popular genres were R&B (34%), gangsta rap (32%), and non-gangsta rap (27%). The majority of rap (68%) and gangsta rap (80%) songs contained at least one reference to illicit drugs, whereas few R & B songs did (6%). Marijuana and stimulants were the most commonly referred to drugs. These findings substantiate the need for more research on the potential relationship between exposure to media messages and drug use among adolescents.

Introduction

Substance use continues to be a problem facing American adolescents. Of the 23 substance abuse goals for the nation's health outlined in "Healthy People 2010," eight specifically address the adolescent population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000). A number of nationally representative studies monitor the extent to which adolescents use drugs, including the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) (SAMHSA 2002), the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (Grunbaum et al. 2002), and the Monitoring the Future Study (Johnston, O'Malley & Bachman 2002). According to the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA), a household-based survey, 10.8% of youth ages 12 to 17 were current drug users in 2001 (SAMHSA 2002). Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, a school-based survey, provide even higher estimates of drug use (Kann et al. 2002). Furthermore, data from the Monitoring the Future study indicate that the prevalence of some forms of drug use have increased in the past decade. For instance, the prevalence of reports of marijuana use in the past 30 days by 12th graders doubled from 1992 to 1997 (from 12% to 24%).

A wide variety of factors have been linked with drug use, including family, peer, and individual characteristics (Hawkins, Catalano & Miller 1992; Petraitis, Flay, Torpy & Greiner 1998). In addition, the potential influence of media messages on the behavior of adolescents has raised concerns among parents, pediatricians, politicians, and researchers. Researchers continue to investigate a possible causal relationship. For example, in a European study, Forsyth, Barnard, and McKeganey (2001) found that listeners of rave music were more likely to have used drugs than youth who preferred other music styles. In addition, a number of strategies have been suggested to counteract the impact of negative media messages, including: educational programs designed to enhance media literacy among youth (Office of National Drug Control

Policy 2001), efforts to enhance parental monitoring (American Academy of Pediatrics 1996), and changes in labeling and marketing practices by the entertainment industry (American Academy of Pediatrics 1996; Federal Trade Commission 2000).

Few studies have empirically investigated the types of substance use messages contained in music lyrics (DuRant et al. 1997; Roberts et al. 1999). The authors of these studies examined the content of music videos (DuRant et al. 1997) and music lyrics (Roberts et al. 1999) selected by the researchers. Findings indicated that substance use was observed in a substantial number of songs/music videos. For instance, 18% of the 1,000 songs coded contained references to illegal drugs (Roberts et al. 1999). In addition, the degree of drug-related content varied by music genre, with rap music containing the most references to illicit drugs.

Previous research documents the extent to which drug-related lyrics are present in songs chosen from music industry charts (Roberts et al. 1999); however, adolescents may also listen to songs that do not top such lists. The current study extends previous research by examining the lyrics of songs frequently nominated by a sample of African-American adolescents for drug-related content. In addition, this study addresses the question, "Among songs popular among a sample of African-American adolescents, which music genre contains the most references to illicit substances?"

Understanding the extent to which lyrics contain references to substance use is particularly important given the concerns voiced about the content in some forms of popular music. Gangsta rap, a form of rap in which lyrics refer to gang-related activities and violence (Latham 2002) is the most controversial style of the rap music genre and has incited criticism from politicians, political activists, and journalists. Former presidential candidate Bob Dole and former Education Secretary and drug czar William J. Bennett have led efforts to ban gangsta rap (Steiner & Steiner 2000). Empirically examining the extent to which gangsta rap contains references to drugs is also important in that there may be a bias against this music form. In one study, undergraduates rated the extent to which lyrics were antisocial. Ratings varied depending upon whether the lyrics were labeled as heavy metal, rap, pop, or country, despite the fact that the lyrics were identical (Ballard, Dodson, & Bazzini 1999).

The goal of this study is to investigate the extent to which the lyrics of popular songs among a sample of African-American adolescents contain references to substance use. It is hypothesized that gangsta rap will contain more references to illicit substances than any other genres examined.

Methods

Participants

Data for this study were originally collected by Reaching Adolescents, Parents, and Peers (Project RAPP), a longitudinal study of risk behaviors among a predominantly African-American sample of youth. Participants were recruited from four middle schools located in a southeastern school district. Adolescents completed in-depth questionnaires regarding risk behaviors (e.g., violence, substance use, unprotected sex), as well as risk and protective factors associated with these behaviors. In the spring of 1997, questions were added regarding music listening habits; thus, analyses are based on data collected during this time period. A total of 977 students completed questionnaires in the spring of 1997. Analyses were restricted to students who provided at least one response to the item regarding favorite songs. In addition, analyses focused only on African Americans, given that the majority of the RAPP sample was African Americans. This resulted in a final sample of 756 adolescents, 59.7% of whom were female. Most students were in eighth (25.1%), ninth (41.3%), or tenth grades (19.1%) at the time of the spring 1997 survey. The remaining students were in either seventh (4.4%) or eleventh (10.2%) grades.

Procedures

In the RAPP study, participating students were administered paper-and-pencil questionnaires during a non-academic class period at their school. The questionnaire contained two parts, which were given to students on two consecutive days. Each part took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Research staff and undergraduates from a local Historically Black University distributed the surveys and were available to answer any questions.

Measures

Students were asked to list their five favorite songs in any order. The actual phrasing of the question in the text was, "Please list on the following lines your five favorite songs and the artist." The students provided a total of 3,461 nominations of favorite songs. Students were asked to provide both the title and the artist so that the correct lyrics could be located. However, some respondents listed only the song title, with no reference to the artist. In many cases, the song title was unusual, thus the artist could be identified. However, in a few cases, the song could have been sung by several different artists. In other cases, the song, and thus, the lyrics, could be neither identified nor located. The song titles were then standardized, meaning that when the same song was listed in a different way, one was considered the standard. This was done so that an accurate number of songs nominated by the sample could be calculated. After the songs' existences were verified and the song titles standardized, the song lyrics were obtained using various search engines on the Internet. Search engines included www.lyrics.com, www.sing365.com, and www.ohhla.com (Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive). Finally, popular songs were identified. Popular songs were defined as songs that were nominated at least five times. Ninety-three songs were classified as popular using this decision rule.

Each of the 93 popular songs was classified into one of the following mutually exclusive categories: rap, gangsta rap, R&B, gospel, pop, and other. A number of definitions of rap music exist (e.g., Lagasse et al. 2000; WordNet 2002). These sources generally describe rap music as a form of music that developed in the 1980s and 1990s in which songs are typically chanted, include rhyming lyrics, and are sometimes improvised. For instance, "Rock the Bells" by the artist L.L. Cool J. (1985) was classified as a rap song. A sample of the song's lyrics states, "So listen to the lines of rhyme, I rhyme on time. He'll cut the record in a second, make your d.j. look blind."

Gangsta rap has been defined as a form of rap music that describes a gangster lifestyle or activity (Wikipedia 2002). In this study, gangster rap could include a discussion of violence, criminal activity, territory, and issues related to membership. "Notorious Thugs" by the Notorious B.I.G. and Bone-Thugz-N-Harmony (1997) was classified as gangsta rap, with lyrics stating, "Armed and dangerous, ain't too many can bang with us. Straight up weed no angel dust, label us Notorious. Grab yo' gat, call yo' click, Squeeze yo' clip, hit the right one Pass that weed, I got to light one."

In this study, Rhythm and Blues (R & B) was defined as African-American lyrical music without gospel or rap themes. The song "I Believe I Can Fly" by R. Kelly (1996) was an example of a Rhythm and Blues selection. The gospel genre was defined as African-American lyrical music that includes a religious theme. For instance, "Melodies from Heaven" by Kirk Franklin and the Family (1995), was classified as a gospel song. The definition of pop music was considered mainstream music that relates to pop culture. This was consistent with the definition provided in "Baker's Dictionary of Music" (1997), which emphasizes the wide appeal and commercial value of this music. An example of pop music was "You Don't Have to Worry" by musical group New Edition (1996). The category "other" represented any other types of music type, such as country, rock, heavy metal, classical, etc. An example of one such song nominated by this sample was "Steelo" by artists 702 (1996).

Song lyrics were also reviewed to determine whether there were any references to drugs, the frequency of these references, and the message associated with the drug mention. References to drugs were defined as descriptions of use (or related activities) of the following drugs: cannabis, hallucinogens, inhalants, narcotics (e.g., cocaine, heroin, opium), stimulants (e.g., cocaine, methamphetamines), and depressants (e.g., barbiturates). In addition, the mention of getting "high," drug trafficking, and drug use without a specific drug reference were also considered a drug reference. Oftentimes, drugs are referred to by street names (National Institute on Drug Abuse 2002); thus, it is important to take into consideration the context of the statement. For example, the term "rock" could refer to cocaine or to a wedding ring. Therefore, in order to give proper consideration and accurate coding of all songs, the lyrics were all read in context.

Coders also recorded the frequency of the drug references in each song lyrics. The frequency was split into four categories: no drug references, one reference, two to five references, or six or more references. Written lyrics often did not note how many times the chorus was repeated. Thus, any drug references mentioned in the choruses were counted only once.

Finally, for songs with a drug reference, the overall message regarding substance use was classified as being positive, negative, or neutral. Songs with a positive message discouraged the use of drugs. In contrast, negative messages conveyed a pro-drug message. For example, the song "C.R.E.A.M." performed by the Wu-Tang Clan (1993) endorses drug use by stating, "No question I would speed, for crack and weed/The combination made my eyes bleed." Finally, songs could mention drugs in an artistic manner, such as when drug references are used in analogies. For example, the song "Big Daddy" by Heavy D (1997) makes an analogy between love and addiction in the phrase, "You got me hooked on like Phonics or Weed Heads on Chronic."

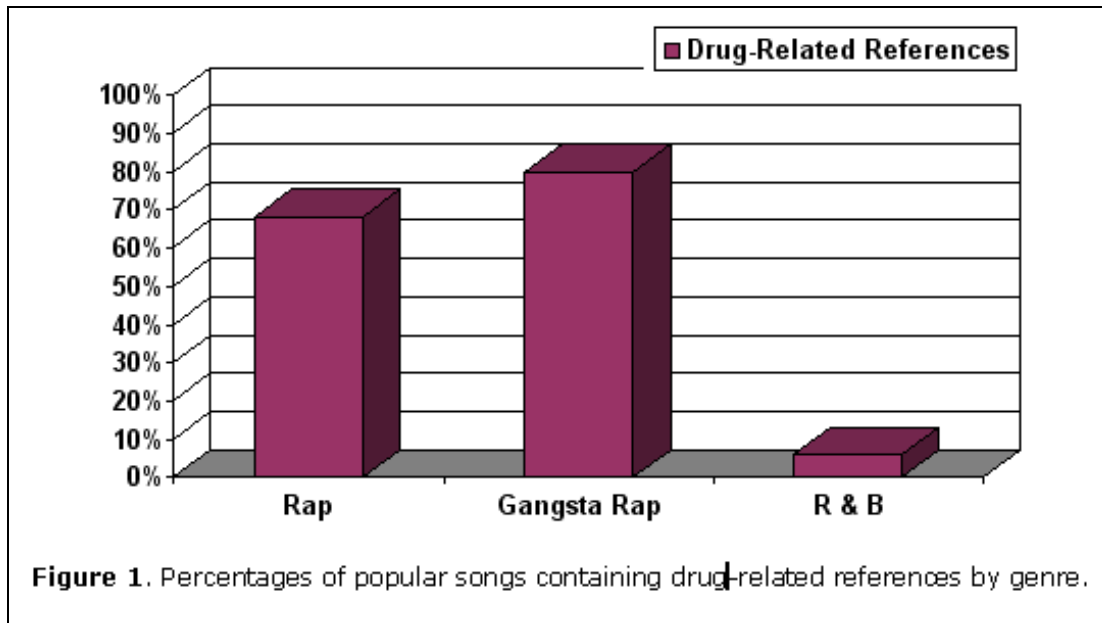
Songs were coded by the authors. In addition, an independent group of four undergraduates coded 20 of the 93 popular songs to determine the level of inter-rater reliability. The average percentage of agreement across the four coders was 86.1%, with

agreement varying depending upon the aspect of the song being coded. For instance, inter-rater reliability ranged from 72.1% for genre of song to 100% for mention of hallucinogens in lyrics.

Results

Of the 93 songs most often nominated by the sample, the most popular genres were R&B (34%), gangsta rap (32%), and non-gangsta rap (27%). Few popular songs were classified as gospel (2%), pop (1%), or another music genre (3%). Given the low number of these types of songs, all results reported below are based on rap, gangsta rap, and R & B songs. Figure 1 illustrates the proportion of songs that contained drug-related content by genre. As can be seen, the majority of rap (68%) and gangsta rap (80%) songs contained at least one reference to illicit drugs, whereas few R & B songs did so (6%). An independent chi-square test indicated that there was a relationship between type of song and the presence of drug-related content ($\chi^2 = 38.53, p < .0001$).

Additional analyses explored the frequency of drug references and the type of drugs mentioned in the 41 rap and gangsta rap songs that mentioned illegal drugs. Multiple references to drugs were found in 59% of the songs. Marijuana (78%) and stimulants (22%) were the most commonly referred to drugs. In addition, almost half of the songs (49%) made general references to drugs or drugs not included in the coding scheme. Few songs mentioned hallucinogens (5%), inhalants (2%), or narcotics (7%) specifically, and none of the songs coded referred to depressants. Of the 41 songs that contained a reference to a drug, 98% conveyed a negative message about drugs.



Discussion

The findings above provide additional descriptive information regarding the content of songs popular among a sample of African-American adolescents. Consistent with a previous study of popular music lyrics identified from industry music charts (Roberts et al. 1999), the majority of rap lyrics in this study contained references to illegal drugs, and marijuana was the most commonly referenced drug.

Despite such consistencies with previous work, several limitations should be considered. Students wrote their five favorite songs on a form. This sometimes led to difficulty determining the version of the song being nominated (i.e., an original version versus a remix, the original version or a "clean" version). Also, lyrics were located by using online databases. These databases collected lyrics from Internet users willing to submit lyrics; thus, lyrics may contain errors. Choruses are frequently repeated in songs, but the number of times the chorus was repeated was not indicated in the

lyrics. Thus, frequency of drug mentions does not take this factor into account. In addition, coders did not actually hear the songs; thus, the impact of intonation on the nature of the message is not taken into account. Finally, the findings of this study are based on a sample of African–American students from one school district and may not generalize to other populations.

Despite these limitations, this study extends the current literature by focusing on favorite songs frequently nominated by students, regardless of whether these songs are popular according to national sales. It created a larger and more accurate reflection of the music listening preferences of the students. Also, the coders were familiar with many of the songs, which allowed for a more accurate interpretation the lyrics.

The findings above clearly demonstrate that adolescents, particularly those who listen to rap music, are exposed to lyrics that portray drug use in a positive manner. This further substantiates the need for more research on the effect of music content on health risk behaviors among adolescents. Future work should investigate the relationship between self–reported music listening habits and drug use behaviors, given the potential impact of these lyrics. Ideally, longitudinal studies would be employed to determine the effect music has on drug behavior and the effect drug behavior has on music listening preferences. Also, it is important to note that many factors have been linked with drug use. As Michael Dyson (1996) points out, drug use existed long before the emergence of rap music and simply blaming rap artists will not help us address this complex problem.

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