

Violence in Hip Hop, R&B, and Rap Music Videos

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Violence is shown in the media almost as much as it is shown in the real world. Media has some aspect of violence in them whether it be shows, movies, video games, music, or print. Media gatekeepers are using violence to spread different types of messages across to people, whether good or bad. As media becomes more widespread, society can consume these violent messages, and become influenced by them, whether individuals know it or not. Music is one such medium. Though lyrics can have violent tones to it, seeing it as a video gives a whole new experience. Music videos can have stories completely different from the lyrics, as well as match the words exactly. The videos can be more or less violent than the vocals. Seeing the violence could have more of an impact than just hearing the words. Popular music videos within the Hip Hop, R&B, and Rap genres have a trend of violent content, however, the videos still use the violent behaviors to get messages across for the betterment of society.

Understanding the Definition of Violence

In order to understand the effects of violence in the music videos, one must understand how violence is defined. In her article, “On Defining Violence, and Why It Matters,” Sherry Hamby explains that there are four approaches to defining violence: exemplar, social psychology, public health, and animal research. The exemplar approach uses examples when defining violence (Hamby, 2017, p. 168). The American Psychological Association (APA) website gives an exemplar approach example by defining violence as “an extreme form of aggression, such as assault, rape or murder” (Hamby, 2017, p. 168). The social psychology approach specifies between aggression and violence, providing definitions for both terms (Hamby, 2017, p. 168). Nathan DeWall, Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman define aggression as “any behavior intended to harm another person who does not want to be harmed” and violence as

“any aggressive act that has as its goal extreme physical harm, such as injury or death” (Hamby, 2017, p. 168). The public health approach looks at threats to the physical and well being of a person when defining violence (Hamby, 2017, p. 169). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (Hamby, 2017, p. 169). The animal research approach uses aggression and sees it as an “adaptive form of social communication, which is aimed at functional endpoints such as the acquisition of food, shelter, mates, and status” (Hamby, 2017, p. 169). Animal researchers differentiate animal violence from animal aggression specific characteristics that animals display such as attack rates and types (Hamby, 2017, p. 169). For the purpose of this paper, the public health approach will be considered when analyzing the violence presented in the media messages.

Hamby also explains that there are four key elements of a definition of violence — nonessential and unwanted behavior, harmful outcomes, and intent. Nonessential and unwanted behavior go hand in hand; the violence is unnecessary to survival and is not wanted by a person. Essential behaviors include an act such as self-defense. Violence has harmful outcomes, as addressed by WHO’s definition of violence. There is often an “intent to harm” when violence is present, however, there are also “intentional behaviors that result in harm” according to the public health approach (Hamby, 2017, pp. 170-176). In the article, Hamby also applies the essential elements to different acts, specifying whether they qualify as violence or not. Aggravated assault, robbery and murder, for example, do qualify as violence (Hamby, 2017, p. 172). They are nonessential and unwanted behaviors that are intentional, typically with an explicit intent to harm, and have harmful outcomes (Hamby, 2017, p. 172). An act like

self-defense is considered aggression, not violence, and is essential to survival (Hamby, 2017, p. 171). Self-defense is intentional in the sense that it is a behavior that could result in harm. It is considered an unwanted behavior as well as harmful, however (Hamby, 2017, p. 171). These elements help one look at what is considered violence and what is not, and is important in understanding whether what media is showing is violence or aggression. In order to analyze the types of violence in the specific music genres of Hip Hop, R&B, and Rap, four fairly popular music videos were selected for analysis.

Description of Messages

The first music video, “Love the Way You Lie,” by Eminem featuring Rihanna was first shown on Youtube in 2010, and, today, has 1.8 billion views. The video tells the story of an abusive and violent relationship between a man and woman. At the start of the video, the woman wakes up to see a phone number on the back of her partner’s hand, and immediately starts to physically assault him in response. He retaliates, throwing her around and choking her, also punching a hole in the wall of their house, but not before she’s also hit him with an object from the room. The video shows good moments in their relationship, such as when he apologizes with a teddy bear holding a rose. However, there seems to be more bad aspects than good. They both abuse each other, verbally and physically. In one scene, the man beats up another man for speaking to his partner. In another scene, the woman tries to apologize to him in a similar method that he did, but instead he gets angry and starts throwing things around the room. The woman has to lock herself in the bathroom to protect herself. Their house goes up in flames, and even amid the fire, the man is still attacking his partner. The video ends with them seemingly making up within the fire and them waking up together in the same manner as the beginning (EminemMusic, 2010).

The second video, “False Alarm” by The Weeknd was published in 2016 and now has 148 million views on Youtube. This video is extremely violent in content, and is about a group of robbers who attack a bank and take a girl hostage. They ultimately either die from the police or from fighting among themselves. The story is followed through the eyes of one of the robbers, presumably the protagonist. On their way out of the bank they are stealing money from, he grabs the girl, yet is seemingly protecting her during and post the bank attack. The other robbers are randomly killing people and fighting with the police, and, eventually, die off one by one. In a scene close to the end, the protagonist chooses to save the girl instead of a bag of money and his colleague gets angry and is about to kill him. The girl shoots the robber and the protagonist finishes the job. The video ends with the main character and the girl getting in an accident. As the protagonist is dying, he gives the woman the key to her handcuffs in order to free herself. Once she is free, she simply takes a bag of money the robbers stole and flees. The protagonist pulls a cross from his shirt, the view cuts to him looking at himself in the mirror before he shoots himself (The Weeknd, 2016).

“This is America” by Childish Gambino has now 612 million views and was published on Youtube in 2018. This is another video that is quite violent in nature. It shows an African American man, Gambino, Dancing in a warehouse to very happy and lively music. However, it takes an extremely dark turn as the video progresses. Gambino pulls a gun, seemingly out of nowhere, and shoots a man that had been playing a guitar, then Gambino goes back to dancing as if everything is alright. His next victims are members of an African American gospel choir, and again, he returns to his dancing after murdering them. While all this is going on, and after, there is chaos in the background: people running in all directions, people being chased and people doing the chasing, some holding weapons. The video ends with Gambino’s first victim playing

his guitar again, but alive. Gambino is dancing on top of one of the cars in the warehouse before cutting to him running away from the police (Donald Glover, 2018).

The last music video, “Story of Erica” by Bmike, was published on Youtube in 2019 and has 4.6 million views. The video is about a girl named Erica who became a sex worker in her early 20s for the money. When she was a child, Erica was getting sexually abused by her uncle, which bled into the problems and reasoning for the work she does now. She goes to a party, where she decides to have sex with a man, but it turns nonconsensual. As a result, she becomes pregnant and the father of the child refuses to help out with the baby. Erica decides to take him to court, but he instead comes to her house, physically assaults her and then kills her. Then, realizing what he’s done, he kills himself, leaving the child without any parents (BMIKEMUSIC, 2019).

Analysis of Patterns Across Messages

Several patterns can be identified from these messages. Across all four music videos indifference versus acknowledgement of violent behavior and aggravated assault — specifically violence not resulting in death — are present. Murder and a negative impact on all parties are present in three videos as well.

Aggravated assault is present in all of the videos. According to criminal law, aggravated assault is the “attempt to cause serious bodily injury to another or to cause serious bodily injury purposely, knowingly or recklessly, with an extreme indifference to the value of human life” (FreeAdvice, n.d.). In “Love the Way You Lie,” the way the couple treats each other shows aggravated assault. From the very beginning, the woman is attacking her partner, and then with an object (EminemMusic, 2010). The male retaliates, and, although in the beginning scenes it can be seen as self-defense, he is very aggressive towards her (EminemMusic, 2010). The roles

reverse later in the video as the man becomes the violent one: pummelling a male who was speaking to his partner and punching her during the fire that engulfs their house (EminemMusic, 2010). The Weeknd's "False Alarm" video is extremely violent in nature, with the robbers seeming to have no care for human life. They are shooting civilians, the police, and each other (The Weeknd, 2016). The police are shooting the robbers, and close to the end, the protagonist fights with his colleague, killing him as well (The Weeknd, 2016). Then at the end, the main character kills himself (The Weeknd, 2016). "This Is America" shows an extreme indifference to human life. The main character is shooting innocent people — the guitarist and gospel choir — and moves on as if it does not have a significant impact (Donald Glover, 2018). In the "Story of Erica" video, the man that is the father of her child does the unthinkable when she decides to take him to court. He comes to her house, punches her, shoots her, then shoots himself. In that moment he seemed to not have any care for the value of her life (BMIKEMUSIC, 2019).

Another major pattern expressed across all the messages is indifference versus the acknowledgement of violent behavior. In the videos there are times when those who commit violent actions acknowledge what they've done; there are also those who don't do it all. In "Love the Way You Lie," both of the character's have moments where they're acknowledging that they did something wrong and hurt each other. They both use a teddy bear to apologize to the other, as well as seem to make up with each other near the end of the video, while the house is on fire (EminemMusic, 2010). In contrast, the main character of "This Is America" does not seem to acknowledge the lives that he is taking, nor reflect on why it might be bad (Donald Glover, 2018). He just resumes his dancing (Donald Glover, 2018). Additionally, the children dancing with him are also indifferent to his violent behavior and the chaos happening around them (Donald Glover, 2018). The main character of "False Alarm" seems to know that what he has

done is wrong in the end of the music video, but also chooses to escape the responsibility — or quicken his impending death — by killing himself (The Weeknd, 2016). The woman, on the other hand, reacts to the acts of violence happening all around her, but in the end, she is indifferent to the guy who tried to save her life (The Weeknd, 2016). “In the “Story of Erica,” it can be assumed that the uncle never took responsibility for his actions. The father of Erica’s child, at least , acknowledged what he’d done after murdering Erica, however, he still runs from the responsibility of his actions and son by killing himself (BMIKEMUSIC, 2019).

Murder is shown in three of the videos. Murder is distinct in this sense because it the action of killing someone on purpose, with the intent to harm. In “False Alarm,” when the robbers are killing people in the bank, they were just shooting random people, for seemingly no reason (The Weeknd, 2016). When the protagonist killed one of his colleagues, he was intending harm, as well as when he killed himself at the end of the video (The Weeknd, 2016). The main character in “This Is America” is murdering his victims, knowing very well that they will be harmed (Donald Glover, 2018). In “Story of Erica,” the father of Erica’s child goes to her house with intentions to kill either her or the child, but instead kills her, then himself (BMIKEMUSIC, 2019).

How violence in the videos have a negative impact on all parties involved is apparent in three videos. Both the male and the female in “Love the Way You Lie” showed decreased and increased emotions. In the beginning scenes of the video, the female is the one with heightened aggression which influenced her violent behaviors (EminemMusic, 2010). However, as the message progressed, she was less violent and aggressive altogether (EminemMusic, 2010). The opposite was shown in the man. He was less aggressive in the beginning, mainly just using self-defense, but as the video progressed, he got more aggressive and increasingly violent

(EminemMusic, 2010). In “False Alarm,” more than the main character's were harmed. Innocent people were killed, including police officers (The Weeknd, 2016). The girl who was supposedly being protected was put in even more danger, she killed a person, and was involved in an accident (The Weeknd, 2016). The protagonist has the blood of innocents on his hands, in the end, the woman he was protecting left him, and he was badly injured in the accident that he couldn't even move (The Weeknd, 2016). In the “Story of Erica,” the result of the violence on Erica's body was a pregnancy she didn't want and a child the male didn't want (BMIKEMUSIC, 2019). The father of the child was going to be taken to court, which in turn caused him to inflict more violence upon Erica (BMIKEMUSIC, 2019). Erica ends up being killed, and because the father killed her, he felt the need to kill himself, creating an orphan out of their child (BMIKEMUSIC, 2019).

Interpretation of Messages

The messages can have many different meanings. At face value for most of them, all one can see is the violence expressed in the behaviors of the characters. However, when one looks at the underlying meanings, it can be seen that the messages are not condoning the violent behaviors. For the music video for “Love the Way You Lie,” one could say that a positive take on the message is that it shows a couple working through the problems in their relationship. They have their bad days, but they stay together and get through it. On the other hand, it is still an abusive relationship on both parties and the couple would still continue to have problems unless they both decide to get assistance. In “False Alarm,” it can be seen that the protagonist is simply trying to protect the female. However, at the end of the day, many lives were lost to save one person, and possibly, if he had not been a part of the operation in the first place, both of them would be safe. For “This Is America,” the main message of the video is to show the violence on

the black body in today's society and how society reacts to it. This can be seen as positive, since it is raising awareness of an issue. Still, some could say that it happens to other people, or even that the video is too extreme a way of showing it. The "Story of Erica" video could show viewers that sugar baby culture is alright because it can lead to financial stability. Yet, it also shows how the dodging of responsibility can only lead to more strife, violence against females is never alright, as well as how the sugar baby culture can lead to sexual assault and even more suffering in life.

Personal Evaluation of Messages

Personally, I feel as though, although the messages are violent in nature, they do have underlying meanings sharing that violence is unacceptable. Some do a very good job of getting the messages across, others do not, and still others may be too intense for viewers. The videos portrayals of violent behavior also fit the criteria of the definitions of violence.

The main meaning I gathered from "Love the Way You Lie" was that violence is unacceptable in a relationship and that one should not stay in such a toxic relationship, as it can cause more harm than good. I do not feel that the music video did a good job of expressing this, as they still show the characters staying together even though the relationship is bad for both of them. This video could cause more harm than good in society today, as it could show couples that they should stay in a toxic relationship.

"False Alarm" tells me that bad decisions still happen to be detrimental, even when they are seemingly justified, and that humanity will not be so understanding of the reasoning behind a person's actions. Although the protagonist seems to be protecting the woman, I kept on thinking that if he had not been part of the robbery in the first place, maybe what had happened may not have occurred. I do feel as though this video does do a good job of expressing this meaning, as

the main character never attempts to justify his actions directly, nor does he expect anything in return. He also knows that what he did was wrong.

The cultural meaning of “This Is America” has to do with police brutality in today’s society. In relation to this, I also see a meaning for society that is showing that indifference or ignorance will not change nor make up for the effects of violence. I feel as though this video gets both meanings across, especially at the end where the main character is being chased by the police. That scene can have two meanings: the direct correlation to police brutality, and as a way for the main character to be punished, in a sense, for “killing” all the characters he did.

The “Story of Erica” is a very mature video. Both the video and the lyrics are physically telling the story of Erica. But her story has many meanings: it shows a genuine issue of a black female, it stresses that people must take responsibility for their actions, as well as shows the dangers of sugar baby culture. The video does a great job of expressing these concerns to society, however, some of its portrayal of the sugar baby culture could appeal to audiences. For instance, the financial stability that Erica was receiving is something that lots of people wish for and some could see that as an easy way to make money. However, it is a very dangerous way.

Engaging with the Messages and World

Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman explained a very important long term effect of consuming violent media that is apparent in society today: desensitization. According to them “Desensitization is the process through which a person’s emotional reactions to some stimulus habituate and diminish over time with repeated exposures to that stimulus” (Anderson and Bushman, 2018, p. 397). Simply put, when exposed to violence in the media repeatedly, one can become numb to the pain and suffering of others. Things like blood and gore will not phase them. They become less sympathetic to those who are victims of violent behaviors (Anderson

and Bushman, 2018, p. 397). In relation, though the music videos are trying to raise awareness of the violent issues of society, they are still violent in nature. One may not even realize the underlying meanings, or may have already been exposed to often to violent media and will not be phased nor understand why the videos are sharing a meaning such as the ones the examples do. Reeducation on what is considered violence may be needed for society today, as most are already becoming desensitized to violence. Understanding the approaches and essential elements to defining violence is also important to helping society. One could contact the gatekeepers of the medium — artists, producers, directors, screenwriters, etc. — and make sure that the messages they are sending out do not also have detrimental factors to them, such as in “Love the Way You Lie,” where the message could also be interpreted for one to stay in a toxic relationship.

Conclusion

As shown, popular music videos of the Hip Hop, R&B, and Rap can be very violent in content, however, they are mainly using the violence to raise awareness on certain issues that include violence. Still, these music videos are not exempt from the topic of violence in media and how it affects society. They can still cause adverse results, results that can worsen the state of the society as a whole. This is already happening with the issue of toxic masculinity. Forms of traditional masculinity, such as aggression, are being shown in the media in extremes and hazardous ways. Not only is this affecting females in society, but it is affecting males as well since they are expected to be a certain way. When they do not fit the criteria of what society thinks is masculinity, they are humiliated for it. If they try to show some of the criteria, such as, aggression, but also, apathy, they will be labeled as toxic. These trends are seriously affecting the youth of the society, which will, in turn, affect the future of the society.

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