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Hip Hop Music and Communicative Messages: Non-white Resistance of Marginalization Experienced in America

Cover Page Footnote

Fatima Albrehi, M.A. Doctoral Candidate in Communication Wayne State University Detroit, MI Presented at the National Communication Association conference in 2018 I thank Dr. Anna Popkova for providing guidance on this study during my time as a M.A. student at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI.

Hip Hop Music and Communicative Messages: Non-white Resistance of Marginalization Experienced in America

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This research attempts to understand how non-white, marginalized races and/or ethnic groups feel about using hip hop music to address and combat structural violence. Structural violence includes institutional, social, and political barriers that prevent equality. Twenty-six non-white participants were recruited and asked to listen to and watch music videos for three contemporary hip hop songs: Nowhere Fast by Eminem ft. Kehlani (2017), This is America by Childish Gambino (2018), and Nothin' New by 21 Savage (2017). Participants then conversed with one another through a focus group session in which questions were asked about how they felt about artists using hip hop music to communicate discontent towards societal practices that enable structural violence, how hip hop music may or may not contribute to feelings of group cohesion and identity within marginalized groups, and their thoughts on the use of hip hop music in the future when addressing inequality.

Keywords: hip hop, music, structural violence, non-white, cohesion, identity

Hip hop culture reflects an ongoing, dynamic phenomenon in which marginalized groups may speak on their lived social, racial, economic, political, and cultural realities (Aldridge & Stewart, 2005). It encompasses not only a musical genre but extends into a form of dialect, a way of dress, and a lens through which to view the world. Hip hop provides insight into the lives of marginalized groups through their own words; it gives a stage for these otherwise unheard voices to be recognized and acknowledged. Here, the term “marginalized” is specific to people of non-white races or ethnic groups that have typically been victims of structural violence.

The origin of hip hop music in the U.S. stems from DJing in the early 1970s in the Bronx (Chang, 2007). While DJ Kool Herc is credited for creating the blueprint for DJing, other elements of hip hop culture include B-Boying (breakdancing), MCing (a master/host of ceremonies), and graffiti. DJ Kool Herc claims:

Do we realize how much power hip hop has? The hip hop generation can take a stand collectively and make a

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statement. There are a lot of people who are doing something positive, who are doing hip hop the way it was meant to be done. They are reaching young people, showing them what the world could be - people living together and having fun...Not enough people are taking advantage of using hip hop as a way to deal with serious issues, as a way to try to change things before tragedy strikes (Change, 2007, p. xxi).

According to DJ Kool Herc, hip hop is a powerful tool that allows individuals to make statements and change reality for the better. Much of the origins of hip hop music arise from a combination of white flight, road construction, and high unemployment (Chang, 2007, pp. 11-13). Robert Moses, the powerful 20th-century urban builder, found that 60,000 Black, Latino, and Jewish families stood in the way of his plans to transform Manhattan into a wealthy city connected to suburbs through highways (Chang, 2007). As people of color were forced out of their homes and relocated to South Bronx, whites relocated to Westchester County and the northeastern portions of Bronx County; jobs moved with white residents. Poverty, racial discrimination, and limited jobs resulted from the influx of white people into the South Bronx, driving out people of color. During this period, political organizations such as the Black Panther Party and Young Lords were formed for self-defense and empowerment.

Just as political organizations formed to counter oppression that non-white racial groups faced, hip hop music was used to voice thoughts, concerns, and lived experiences. Hip hop music provided a way to memorialize the experiences of marginalized Black, Latino, and Jewish groups forced out of their homes and into areas with few job prospects and limited opportunities for upward mobility. Decreased opportunities for upward mobility are institutionalized through actions such as redlining and urban renewal.

Redlining is the process of denying home mortgages and other financial support to non-white – and especially Black – communities to prevent investments by non-white groups in non-urban spaces (Winling & Michney, 2021). Redlining contributes to the racial segregation between the suburbs and inner cities. Urban renewal, on the other hand, often involves the demolition of housing and businesses in inner cities to pave the way for housing and business infrastructure, often leading to gentrification. When residents of inner cities are not protected by urban renewal, they face increased physical and mental health issues due to displacement and construction (Mehdipanah, Marra, Melis, & Gelormino 2018). Hip hop culture addresses these acts that result in inequality.

Based on the foundation of hip hop music and its longevity in the 21st century, the purpose of this research is to conceptualize how marginalized groups can use purposeful hip hop music to resist structural violence. Structural violence includes any institutional, social, and political barriers that prevent equality regarding race, class, gender, education, and political opportunity and rights (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2016). In the context of this

study, purposeful hip hop music refers to hip hop music that serves to address policies that continue to perpetuate structural violence against non-white groups. I argue that purposeful hip hop music excludes hip hop music that exists for the sole purpose of entertainment. This study seeks to understand the utility of hip hop music within social movements geared towards increasing racial equality. Given that marginalized communities created hip hop music for marginalized communities, this study will examine how communicative symbols are embedded in hip hop music to evoke a sense of group identity within marginalized groups today.

The following research questions guide this study:

1. *How do individuals utilize hip hop music to communicate their discontent towards societal practices that enable structural violence?*
2. *How does hip hop music contribute to feelings of group cohesion and identity within marginalized groups?*

Literature Review

Critics of hip hop music often label the genre as “ghetto minstrelsy” or “ugly art to inspire youth to even uglier behavior” (Dyson, 2007). Hip hop music can be seen as misogynistic, violent, and a bad influence on youth, while the violence presented is interpreted as problematic at times (Rebollo-Gil & Moras, 2012). Despite these concerns, hip hop music is more dynamic and positively influential on individuals than some scholars may believe. Hip hop music can provide an outlet for expressing life struggles (Zillman & Vorderer, 2000; Martinez, 1997). Hip hop itself is a culture; it includes rap, graffiti, breakdancing, and clothing that emerges as a representation of poor, urban youth looking to create their own culture to counter dominant ones (Martinez, 1997). It is used as a mechanism to voice the experiences and concerns of underrepresented groups. Rose (1994) contends that rap music exists within hip hop culture to provide a voice for inner-city African American youth living in a society that typically dismisses them. Hip hop music narrates struggles and resistance faced by people of color against racial and social inequality. Rose (1994) further contends that music as an art form is used to express discontent and rage and develop a sense of communal resistance against those in power.

Hip hop music allows for co-cultural voices to develop a platform for their experiences to be heard (Ramirez-Sanchez, 2008). Music provides a forum where co-cultural groups may interact with dominant group members. It gives insight into their perspectives as individuals at the bottom of societal hierarchies. Hip hop culture and its music have allowed for an innovative communicative mechanism unique to these marginalized groups. These groups’ members use it to express individual and group struggles. Narratives of non-white racial groups’ experiences, values, beliefs, and behaviors are told

without the risk of dominant racial groups censoring, muting, or reframing communicative messages expressed. It provides an opportunity for these groups to manage and negotiate their own identities (Hauser, Tomal, Rajan, Peterik, & Thomas, 2017). Instead of underrepresented groups having to hear misconstrued accounts of their experiences through dominant groups, they have the agency to communicate their experiences to the public through mainstream art.

According to Stapleton (1998), hip hop music is more than a form of entertainment; it utilizes the voices of co-cultural groups to engage in politics. Co-cultural groups are members of marginalized positions, such as women, people of color, the disabled, the LGBTQ community, etc. (Orbe, 1998). It is a form of protest for artists and fans, increasing awareness of co-cultures' struggles and concerns. Due to its accessibility, hip hop music serves as a mechanism for individuals to organize, communicate their concerns as marginalized individuals in today's society, and act upon their circumstances. Well-recognized rappers from the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s have paved the way for ideological warfare through their music. For instance, Tupac Shakur was a prominent artist throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. While Tupac produced music as entertainment, he also embedded messages that communicated the muted concerns of poor, urban, working-class people of color (Stanford, 2010). His music shares his struggles as an impoverished, marginalized man of color navigating social, racial, and economic struggles normalized in inner cities. Tupac is also recognized for expressing his discontent towards the actions of dominant groups and the role they serve in maintaining societal hierarchies. For instance, in his track *Changes*, Shakur highlights how he does not see positive changes in the lived experiences of Black Americans and that hunger, poverty, and police brutality are persistent issues experienced within his community.

Based on these issues faced, McDonnell (2008) asserts that hip hop music has a role in changing the status quo. It is a form of protest created by underrepresented groups to organize while providing an easy way to communicate with dominant groups that may attempt to suppress these voices. Marginalized communities create hip hop culture for marginalized communities; it is a vehicle meant to navigate societal hierarchies that try to keep marginalized voices at the bottom. Through music, these voices are allowed to be heard by the larger public.

The relatability of hip hop culture establishes its significance as an area of study. Within the communication discipline, Boylorn (2016) discusses the consumption of hip hop feminism to make sense of her lived experiences as a Black woman. Durham (2007) defines hip hop feminism as "a cultural, intellectual, and political movement grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color... who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist, and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation" (305-306). Boylorn expresses, "I was sacrificially seduced

by hip hop, and the black women who looked like me and were telling me I deserved to be all of who I was..." (797). Boylorn further expresses, "When I was on the verge of womanhood, and desperate for an expression and voice that felt like me, I used the words and voices of black women artists to find myself and reckon with my consciousness..." (797). The resonance with hip hop culture, and with hip hop feminism as expressed by Boylorn (2016) and emphasized by Durham (2007), highlights the need to continue examining hip hop culture studies within non-white audiences. The messages advanced by many hip hop tracks, regardless of the artists' performed gender, are necessary investigation points because of their influence and resonance with marginalized populations. These messages serve to disseminate information to hip hop culture consumers to digest and interact with by shaping their values on inequality and any actions they may take to address such disparities (ex. protests, sharing their values and experiences on social media. etc.)

Methodology

Participants were recruited through a Midwestern University's student research participant pool (SONA) system. SONA is a database that university researchers use to recruit undergraduate students to engage in research as participants. Twenty-six undergraduate participants who identified as members of a non-white racial group took part in focus groups ranging from two to seven participants per session. Participants self-identified as members of a marginalized group through a demographic survey conducted before the focus groups. The ages of participants ranged from 18-21, while races represented throughout the participant pool included African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, and Italian Americans.¹ Participants were asked to listen to and watch videos for *Nowhere Fast* by Eminem ft. Kehlani (2017), *This is America* by Childish Gambino (2018), and *Nothin' New* by 21 Savage² (2017). These tracks were chosen because of their popularity, contemporary release dates, and meaningful lyrics. Discussion centered on how hip hop artists use their platforms to address inequality and how listeners feel about the influence of these hip hop artists. Discussions delved into general hip hop music as critical art; whether the three songs selected could be considered purposefully charged hip hop music; whether the songs addressed social and political issues related to race,

1 While the "whiteness" of Italian Americans is questioned (Caiazza, 2018), the single participant who self-identified as white responded to the call for "non-white participants." Therefore, this participant's self-identification as a person of color was included in the data.

2 Since this study has been conducted, popular culture outlets have revealed that 21 Savage has lied about his upbringing. 21 Savage claimed that he was from a low-income neighborhood in the U.S. Despite lying about his upbringing, the lyrics of the song still resonated with the participants who at the time were unaware of his U.K. upbringing, as highlighted in the findings and discussion.

class, gender, education, and socioeconomic status; how hip hop music evokes group cohesion and a sense of identity; and the trajectory of hip hop music in the future with regards to social movements geared towards reducing inequality. Each focus group's transcript was coded for common themes using a grounded approach. Grounded theory methods consist of systemic guidelines for collecting and analyzing data (Charmaz, 2006). The data was analyzed through axial coding, where major categories are developed through initial coding and broken down into subcategories through subsequent coding.

Results

Hip hop music as a critical art

Throughout the six focus group sessions, a commonly held viewpoint on hip hop music was that it provides a platform for marginalized voices to be heard. Whether the music is created by marginalized youth or by artists who bring light to social, political, and economic issues that marginalized groups face, most participants agree that hip hop music is a critical art. According to participants, music provides an entertaining and creative form of expression and political activism. One participant summed up the collective viewpoint held on hip hop music by stating:

I think looking back at the history of music with lyrics, it's a form of storytelling... They're telling their story or telling the stories of marginalized people. You can go back 20 years from now and look back at that song that will tell you the cultural history of what's happening in that day and age.

Reactions on the three tracks varied. *This is America* and *Nothin' New* were described as relevant and impactful songs, while *Nowhere Fast* was criticized for its lyrical content and Eminem's race. *This is America* appeared to be a participant favorite, with African American, Mexican American, Latinx American, Asian American, and Italian American participants all expressing that the song, coupled with the music video, successfully addresses structural violence in an artistic way. Participants considered the track's lyrics and viewed Childish Gambino's criticism of U.S. society and racial inequality as necessary. However, most participants felt that the music video was more potent than the lyrics alone. Participants spoke of how "deep" the music video is, reciting plots within the video such as bombings on Black churches, Childish Gambino wearing confederate pants, seeing gun violence, having a Ku Klux Klan member walking across the camera frame on a horse, and past violence against minorities being reenacted. Participants spoke about the complexities of the music video, such as when the chorus sings "Mmm get your money Black man. Get your money" in the background and how it relates to the denial of equal financial opportunities for people of color in comparison to white Americans.

As one participant stated, “When you see the video, you’re forced to see all this stuff going on in the background, and then it makes you go back and listen to this song and say ‘Oh, ok. There is something deep here.’” Participants were enthusiastic in expressing the song’s relevance to their lived experiences when discussing a lack of social, political, and economic opportunities. Black male participants addressed their fear of police brutality when considering the violence and shootings depicted within the music video. They expressed their fear of being targeted by law enforcement and how that contributes to mistrust towards law enforcement. After all, 1 in every 1,000 Black men can anticipate being killed by police in America (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito, 2019).

While *This is America* was instantly recognized by all participants, most participants were exposed to 21 Savage’s *Nothin’ New* through the study. Nonetheless, participants discussed the relevance and impact of the track on their lives. When prompted on their reactions to *Nothin’ New*, one participant contributed, “This is reality. This is something that other people really need to keep in mind.” Participants discussed the plot of the music video that shows a dysfunctional family. The family includes a father in prison, a drug addict mother, and their child. The child intends to rob a store at gunpoint to earn money to pay overdue rent when threatened with an eviction notice. They reflected on the cycle of poverty and how families from low socioeconomic backgrounds are forced into a vicious cycle of dysfunctionality depicted in the video. Participants also focused on the struggle for survival that youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds face, claiming that “... you really have to do what you have to do sometimes because a 9 to 5 job is not the means created for them because of institutional racism. So, they have no other option, and their families have to eat sometimes.”

An interesting contribution that one participant made when comparing *This is America* to *Nothin’ New* involves the production of the two music videos. While the participant found *This is America* to be overly dramatic and more theatrical, they found *Nothin’ New* to have a more substantial storytelling element. To this participant, *Nothin’ New* was easier to watch because 21 Savage presented the video as a straightforward plot, while *This is America* was convoluted with overt and covert messages; it required participants to look very closely and re-watch the music video to recognize each reference to inequality in the U.S. The simplicity and lack of covert messages in the *Nothin’ New* video, by contrast, allowed for more accessible relation on the part of the participant.

In contrast to participants’ enthusiasm and interest in *This is America* and *Nothin’ New*, participants did not have much to say on the relevance of *Nowhere Fast* to their lived experiences as people of color. *Nowhere Fast* was filled with political messages centered on gun violence, mediated framing of racial protests and police brutality, and Donald Trump’s character and policies. Several participants expressed that they had similar liberal political beliefs as those described by Eminem on the track, and others

applauded Eminem for speaking out on gun violence in the U.S. When discussing gun violence, one participant questioned whether police officers wear extensive protective gear while carrying guns to protect civilians or to protect themselves when targeting unarmed Black men. Another point addressed Chicago's gun violence and whether the government truly cares about the influx of illegal weapons into the city. Eminem's verses about gun violence forced participants to consider gun usage and carry laws in the U.S.

While discussing Eminem and Kehlani's track, two participants were quick to discredit Eminem's attempts at raising awareness on gun violence and political affairs by claiming that due to his white racial background, he is not in a position to empathize with people of color's lived experiences as marginalized individuals. One participant claimed:

Eminem is still white at the end of the day... Yes, you may be from the hood. You may be from bad parts. But by the end of the day, if it comes down to getting a job, he will get it over a Black person because of his skin color. It doesn't matter where you came from; it doesn't matter about his background. All they see is what is on the outside, so he can't say too much.

Here, wariness towards the political messages present in the track was expressed because the participant felt that Eminem's race did not qualify him to speak on the issues of people of color. However, another participant countered that although he can never represent people of color, he should be commended for taking the time to discuss non-white issues and using his privilege to discuss inequality. The participant further expressed the need for inclusivity within hip hop, stating that the more allies people of color have, the more likely reality can be changed to increase equal opportunities for marginalized people. Participants were asked if a hip hop artist's race mattered to them in subsequent sessions. While one participant expressed hesitation in allowing a white artist to speak for the Asian American community's struggles, another Asian American participant countered that one's upbringing influences a hip hop artist's relevance and credibility than race alone. The participant chimed:

I grew up in a predominantly Black community and that is my community. I don't see the white picket fence. I didn't see that. I grew up with my friends getting shot. I grew up with drugs everywhere. I grew up with a lack of resources. I grew up with that, and just because I'm not Black, it doesn't mean I don't experience that. I would argue that he [Eminem] does experience that. He has music that's more to home and how he experiences life.

To this participant, Eminem's upbringing in a low socioeconomic community provides him with similar experiences as any Black artist from the same neighborhood, including issues of poverty. The participant relates Eminem's

life experiences and race to their own, placing less emphasis on the artists' racial background as a determining factor in whether they can speak for marginalized communities. While the feelings about Eminem's relatability and power as a hip hop artist were mixed due to his racial background, the song encouraged participants to question how exclusive hip hop culture should be.

Unification and Group Identification of Marginalized Groups Through Hip Hop Music

When probing participants on their examples of artists that use their profession as an avenue to address structural inequality faced by marginalized groups, an array of hip hop songs from artists from the late 1990s to 2018 were mentioned. For instance, participants spoke of NWA's track *Fuck the Police*, which focuses on police brutality throughout the 1990s. Another track mentioned was *Changes* by Tupac Shakur, in which Black issues such as poverty, gang violence, police brutality, and Black stereotypes are discussed. Participants spoke of J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar as artists that utilize their musical platform to raise awareness about issues faced by people of color. While *This is America* by Childish Gambino was incorporated throughout the focus group discussions, participants were quick to speak again about how the song brings up elements of structural violence committed against Black Americans.

One African American participant discussed the R&B singer Solange as a great representation of their values. The participant spoke of how Solange's song *Fubu* centers on Black lives, Black empowerment, and the need to have a culture dedicated to only Black people, saying

...let us have our moment; let us be together as one for a moment. At the end of the day, we're just going through stuff right now. Yeah, all lives do matter, but you're not seeing other people on the news every single day getting shot or getting beat up or sent to jail over crazy things. I feel like certain stuff should be for one group only.

Upon finishing their thought, another African American participant chimed:

I feel like since coming to this country ... we have had our identities constantly stripped away from us. When we were forced over here, they separated us so we wouldn't know anyone who spoke our language. They took away our children so they wouldn't learn about our culture. We lost our sense of home. Even other Africans that come here right now, they don't see us as them... But why is it everywhere I go it can't just be a Black thing? Why do we have to sacrifice so much?

This contribution raised the consideration that hip hop music should be a space exclusively for Black Americans to artistically address their lived experiences and struggles. The participant's repetitive usage of the pronoun

“we” signified how connected they felt to the Black community. Although it was evident that these participants felt a sense of cohesion as Black hip hop artists spoke about racial, social, political, and economic issues related to Black Americans, the question then arose of whether hip hop culture should be an exclusively Black culture.

As these points were brought up, competing ideas were introduced. One Asian American participant felt that hip hop music serves as an escape for any misunderstood person of color. Other African American participants expressed the need for hip hop music to be inclusive to different races to be an effective political tool in addressing and combating inequality. While there were competing ideas on how exclusive hip hop music should be, all Black and non-Black participants agreed that hip hop brings people together through shared experiences. The existing variations revolved around whether white individuals could form cohesive relationships with non-white hip hop consumers. As one participant put it, “Underrepresented groups – we have such similar struggles and stories... because of those shared experiences, we come together, and we can discuss it in open dialogue.” This dialogue may take shape through music that speaks to all marginalized individuals of people of color. Another participant contested the belief that hip hop culture should be an exclusively Black culture by advancing the idea that hip hop music can bring majority and minority/underrepresented groups together. To this participant, hip hop music can be used as a tool to gather white allies focused on minimizing the inequality gap in the U.S.

Future of Hip Hop Music

When asking participants about predictions on what hip hop music will entail in the future, responses were mixed. While some participants believed that hip hop could help unite marginalized people by providing a platform to raise their voices, others struggled to see a profound effect. An optimistic participant claimed, “Music is a timeless history book... It’s always going to be a tool. It’s an endless tool. You don’t need much funds to sing a song or rap a song or touch people’s hearts.” However, another participant expressed wariness at optimistic outlooks on hip hop music and its purpose in the future, claiming, “I wouldn’t say it’s realistic to think that things are going to change just because of one hip hop song.” Another cautious participant contributed:

Well, the music in the past is mostly about – it had good meaning. This new generation of hip hop is just flexing, showing what you have in your life, and telling people how good you’re living. I’ll say it’s eroding little by little...I would say it’s actually diminishing in a way of bringing awareness.

An unsure – yet hopeful – prediction includes looking forward to artists mentioning political and social inequalities in their songs. While these participants were not overly buoyant about hip hop being a catalyst

for change, they weren't pessimistic about its purpose either. Multiple participants had similar responses, including, "I think hip hop is going to be a great way to at least start that conversation... I hope that this may inspire other artists from different genres to wake up and smell the coffee." Similar responses included, "Using your platform for something good every once in a while can really help with creating change." Overall, there appeared to be a mixed response about what direction participants believed hip hop music would take and its role in ameliorating inequality in the United States.

Discussion

During the focus group discussions, participants considered both lyrical and visual elements of the songs *This is America*, *Nothin' New*, and *Nowhere Fast*. Participants spoke of the theatrical performance within Childish Gambino's music video for *This is America*, including bombings on Black churches, the dancers' attire, seeing gun violence, having a Ku Klux Klan member walking across the camera frame on a horse, police brutality being depicted, and background choirs. They related these performances to slavery, the injustices African Americans faced during the Jim Crow era, and current inequalities such as police brutality. Participants concluded that Childish Gambino effectively communicates his discontent towards societal practices that enable structural violence. The public attention of the music video in 2018 is apparent through w media coverage, as every participant had seen the video and heard the song before the study took place. At the very least, it can be concluded that Childish Gambino's song reached a large audience and gained recognition for the communication messages present.

When discussing *Nothin' New*, participants drew similar conclusions about the effectiveness of the music video and 21 Savage's lyrics expressing discontent towards societal practices that enable structural violence. Participants discussed many aspects of the lyrics and music videos: allusions to drug usage in low socioeconomic communities, the need to commit crimes to survive, and the endless cycle of imprisonment of men of color – especially Black men. Some participants saw it as a typical experience for African American male youths. Lyrics alluded to gun violence in the ghettos, police brutality, financial struggles, struggles with receiving a quality education, and gang initiation within poor communities. While *Nowhere Fast* wasn't interpreted believed to be as memorable or relevant as *This is America* and *Nothin' New*, participants still saw the value in utilizing music to express marginalized lived experiences and concerns towards societal practices. However, Eminem's racial background and credibility as a hip hop artist were questioned. Each focus group session opened up with discussions of how participants felt artists used their platform to address structural violence through their music. All participants agreed that hip hop music is an artistic form of voicing marginalized communities' thoughts and that this music memorializes these experiences.

While participants focused on how these artists utilize their music and positions to address inequality, they also discussed how they could use hip hop music in their lives. As mentioned, participants discussed how hip hop music could bring people together based on shared experiences. Participants agreed that hip hop artists release tracks that speak to their lived experiences and that they could relate to the plotlines of many such tracks. As the consumption of hip hop music grows and more discussions arise on the meanings and implications of the music, individuals are more likely to share and advance messages against inequality faced by people of color.

While participants had no qualms about the effectiveness of hip hop music in voicing the experiences, thoughts, and concerns of non-white groups, they questioned the function of hip hop music in the future. While some participants were optimistic about hip hop music bringing people together to fight for equality for all races and backgrounds within the U.S., others were skeptical. This skepticism reiterates a common concern with the capacity of music to act as a powerful enough tool to unite all people in efforts to affect change. Implications of artistic works' political power must also be considered. While hip hop music is a creative form of expression, it's important to consider how artists and listeners may apply it within social and political movements geared towards eliminating inequality. Political power in the context of this study is the ability of hip hop culture shifting policies that exist to marginalize non-white groups. One participant suggested that hip hop songs can be an anthem for national movements. Given that Americans sing the Star-Spangled Banner at sporting, political, and military events, can hip hop songs be used for the same purpose? Based on participant responses, the ability of hip hop music to bring marginalized groups together is evident. However, uncertainty remains in understanding how hip hop culture generates dialogue on the harsh realities that marginalized groups constantly face in the U.S.

Limitations

The focus group facilitator was a teaching assistant to some of the participants recruited through SONA. The participants may have felt nervous about having their teaching assistant run the focus group and may have censored their opinions as a result. In contrast, participants could have been comfortable interacting with a familiar focus group facilitator. Additionally, Eminem ft. Kehlani's *Nowhere Fast* did not have a music video, while *This is America* and *Nothin' New* did. When comparing the three tracks, participants had less to contribute to the discussion about *Nowhere Fast*. The minimal discussion about the track may be due to the lack of visual symbols accompanying the lyrics. The focus group sessions might have had more extensive conversations if all three tracks chosen had music videos to accompany the lyrics. Furthermore, the researcher's inclusion of Eminem as a hip hop artist was questioned by some Black participants.

Future studies should examine non-Black hip hop artists who identify as people of color. The focus group sessions revealed that although there are similar lived experiences and issues of marginalization with all non-white groups, there are still apparent differences in how Black Americans are marginalized compared to non-Black people of color. The methods these artists employ within the hip hop genre to raise awareness of the injustices they face provides an insightful comparison of lived experiences among non-white populations in America. Future studies should also incorporate interviews and focus groups on hip hop feminism to examine women in hip hop culture and their thoughts on structural inequality and modes of empowering women of color. Such research would be an extension of existing research on hip hop feminism advanced by communication scholars such as Durham (2006), Boylorn (2016), and Hecht, Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau (2003).

Conclusion

This study was conducted to better understand how politically charged hip hop music is used to voice the discontent of people of color towards racial inequality. Through the implementation of focus groups, discussions centered on how individuals felt about hip hop artists using their platforms to address disparities faced by non-white groups, how individuals may use hip hop music to communicate their discontent towards societal practices that enable structural violence, and how hip hop music can contribute to feelings of group cohesion and identity within marginalized groups. While participants were excited about the increase in hip hop artists incorporating political and social messages into their music, hip hop music's future direction and utility remain unclear. Specifically, how can messages on inequality in America be communicated to stakeholders (i.e., policymakers) that possess the power to shift discriminatory legal practices? Participants expressed that the music genre is an effective way of bringing individuals with similar lived experiences together. Still, the question remains on how these individuals can use this music to drive the change required to eliminate structural violence within the U.S.

Existing communication literature has examined hip hop culture from a holistic (Hecht et al, 2003) and feminist perspective (Boylorn, 2016; Durham, 2007), focusing on topics such as cultural elements of the culture such as clothing, music, DJing, and breakdancing, as well as more centralized issues such as feminism. Contemporary music and how non-white listeners living within the culture have their societal views inflected by music may be an important consideration for future researchers. Hearing the perspectives of those represented within hip hop culture allows for a creative and mainstream way for their voices to be heard by one another and by dominant groups. While participants were unsure of how hip hop culture and its music can be used as a political tool to minimize inequality gaps between white and non-

white groups in America, it is clear that communication messages embedded through the lyrics, beats, and visuals in music videos affect individuals emotionally and intellectually. Hip hop culture continues to speak for and influence the thoughts of the marginalized. The platform it provides for marginalized voices emphasizes its importance as a culture to study.

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