

RAP MUSIC, AN ARENA FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL DISTINCTION

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ABSTRACT

Rap music is one of the *cultural goods* that have been developed especially among teenagers and youths in the present decade. This rapid development takes the attention of academic researchers and institutions. The present research is trying to understand the place of Rap music among teenagers and youths who are playing Rap music in Rasht city: Iran, Guilan province.

There are two important questions in this research. The first is: whether Rap songs in the studied time/place have resistance aspects? And, the second is: where is the position of distinctive strategies in these songs? For investigating this research, 24 rappers in Rasht (Guilan province) were interviewed by qualitative approach, and three texts of the songs also were analyzed based on qualitative content method.

The results showed that Rap music can include resistance and subcultural approach; and more important, it can create arena for discrimination and personification of social/cultural identity among teenagers and youths. Individuals who are attempting to construct their identity based on specific reading of their generation about society, politics, culture, and art. This type of identity in today's pluralistic cultures has collage- like nature.

KEYWORDS: Rap Music, Resistance Culture, Sub Culture, Socio, Cultural Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Comparison between value structures of tradition and modern societies indicate that there is a fundamental transition. In traditional societies, social values have important role in determining the behavior and actions of individuals, and especially in organizing the individual and social identities. Today, however, along with increasing complexity of human relations in diverse areas, this value formation has taken new dimensions. In this regard, the influences of universal and unchangeable values have declined. In contrast, according to different life styles, we can see different value systems and distinct identities. As Giddens says, the more the social situation and environment that person lives in it belong to post tradition world, the more his/her lifestyle deals with real core of personal identity, and structure and restructure of it.

In recent decade, we have witnessed the extension and influence of Rap music between diverse strata of Iranian society. Youth, regardless of their class background, increasingly were attracted to this music. Rap music, Apart from simplicity, contains many features of youth generation, including excitement, speed, reckless and ingenious. Rapid expansion of this trend raised many concern and anxieties in the formal and institutionalized culture. Many writings have been published about the entity of this genre and the reasons for its prevalence. Diverse and often conflicting views and analysis in various domains is discussed. For example, *Shock*, a documentary program that has provided by Iranian state television, has associated Rap music with Satanist groups, drugs, and promotion the non-conventional sexual relationship. In academic level, however, despite various debates about Rap music in Iran, not much research has been done about it.

Bogt and others (2011) believe that adolescents love music; it is the soundtrack of a life phase with rapid changes that are often exciting, confusing, and profound to young people. Dominant themes in pop music lyrics reflect issues that are of utmost importance during this life phase: self-identity and worldview, peer relationships, romance, and sexual expression. Evidence shows that music listening serves important emotional, developmental, and social functions in adolescence. Further, the structure and origins of music taste are discussed and this is followed by a review of the role of listening to and identifying with rebellious or defiant music in relation to adolescent problem behavior. Roberson (2010) examined the cultural politics of the images of Okinawa – as both place and space – that are constructed within Uchinaa Pop music.

The author argues that these images construct “Okinawa” as internally hybrid and, thereby, as marked by differences from mainland Japan, including linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, purity of heart, closeness to nature, and a proud and sometimes overtly political defense of Okinawan identity. The author suggests that such musically constructed images of Okinawan hybridity and difference must be understood within a set of national and international political-economic dynamics that render any simple listening to Uchinaa Pop problematic. Woods’ research (2009) is an attempt to understand how the voice participates in the construction of identities in rap music.

He investigates the ways in which gender and race are performed vocally through musical and lyrical conventions. Roebuck (2008) in his research develops 3 socio-acoustic profiles which represents a respondent’s orientation towards sound. Results of his research indicate that socio-acoustic profiles sets associated with elite spaces are associated with high occupational prestige, increased age, being female, not being Black, being politically tolerant, and being racially intolerant. Findings highlight how moving beyond class evidences differing bases of cultural structuration. Wheeler (2006) investigated the relationship between rap music and hegemony.

The evidence is supports the conclusion that rap music's relationship to hegemony has changed and this change is curvilinear, meaning that in the beginning (1984 - 1990) rap's counter-hegemonic value was low and this value grew in the middle years (1992 - 1998), only to fall to its lowest point in today's time. Beginning at the start of the new millennium (2000 - 2004), nicholas’ thesis (2006) attempts to complicate and raise questions about Black masculinity and hip hop.

This thesis addresses how interviewed subjects negotiate the internal differences between their rap persona and their everyday identity. This thesis concludes that artists are reluctant to call their own rap persona a performance, for fear that it would be acknowledging that it was somehow an ‘act’ or not ‘real’. This research describes their rap identity with words like “aggressive” and their everyday persona as “patient”. When asked about what characterizes a ‘real’ man, they nearly always use the same words they used in describing their everyday persona.

There is not much research about Rap music in Iran. Among the few studies that have been done in this area in Iran, we can pointed out to Samim (1389) and Naficy (1389) researches. In part of his article entitled “*Consuming popular music and Aggression levels in college students in Isfahan*”, Samim has been associated Rap music with aggressive behavior and drug use. On the other hand, Abdolahian and Nazer Fasihi in their article as “*Analysis of the formation and evolution of resistance music in Iran*” have considered Rap music as a symbol of socio-cultural resistance. Of course, there is not any doubt that these interpretations show part of the reality, but can we simply consider Rap music the representation of resistance desires and its themes? The main purpose of this article is answering to this question.

We believe that Rap music, in addition to the above aspects, provides an arena for distinction and dignity of the rappers. On the one hand, by this kind of music and through more equal access to cyberspace, rappers can find opportunity to express their opinions and experiences; on the other hand, because of the access to this opportunity and through it, they can distinct themselves and receive cultural dignity in the eyes of their peers.

THEORETICAL DEBATES

Hip-hop is a cultural movement started by African Americans and Latinos in the context of urban renewal, economic changes, and social dislocations in the mid-1970s South Bronx, New York City (Basu, 2008). Hip hop, though, is an umbrella term that refers to four distinct cultural forms: Graffiti, break-dancing, deejaying and emceeing or rapping (Dartiy Jr, 2008: 480). Rap music initially rejected by middle class severely, and even the companies dominate the music industry and radio stations had not favorable view about it. After the success of Rappers like Melle Mel and Grandmaster Flash, that by investment of independent individuals and companies had found opportunity to present their works, rap music could attract the attention of big and active companies.

Rap music, following this process, spread not only in American cities but also in many cities in other countries. This trend emerged especially in immigrant Cities in countries like Sweden, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. However, as Rap music developed, like other musical genre, subgenres and distinctive styles like Gangsta rap, Crunk, Jazz rap, Hardcore rap, Religious Rap, Political rap, and many other emerged. Gangsta Rap, among the various genres, due to violent and man-centered content, promotion of criminal activity, drug abuse and sexual abuse of women has been subjected to much criticism (Adams, 2009). But ultimately, it should be noted that Rap music, as a cultural phenomenon that has universal dimension, has attracted the attention of many researchers around the world. Review of the literature about Rap music in the past two decades show that imagine of Rap music as the representation of cultural resistance has become increasingly dominant (Rose, 1994 and Tanner, 2009).

The notion that Rap is or can be represented as cultural resistance-the counter frame identified by Binder-has become increasingly prominent in the Rap literature over the past 20 years (Rose 1994; Krims 2000; Keyes 2002; Quinn 2005). In his influential book *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, Kitwana (2005) expounds at length on his emancipatory view of Rap's history and development. Kitwana sees hip-hop as a form of protest music, offering its listeners a *message of resistance*. He also makes the additional claim that the resistive appeal of hip-hop is not restricted to black youth.

Indeed, as the title of his book suggests, he is particularly interested in the patronage of Rap music by white youth, those young people who might be seen as the contemporary equivalents of Mailer's "White Negro" (Keyes 2002:250) In his view, the global diffusion of Rap rests on the music's capacity for resonating with the experiences of the downtrodden and marginalized in a variety of cultural contexts (Tanner, 2009: 697). Tricia Rose believes that Rap music is a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless. On this stage, Rappers act out inversions of status hierarchies, tell alternative stories of contact with police and the education process, and draw portraits of contact with dominant groups (Rose, 1994: 101). Bennett (1999, in: Leung, 2008: 446) pointed out that hip-hop and Rap have been used to express concerns about local issues such as racism, police harassment, people's rights, unemployment, and opposition to skinheads in England and Germany. In contrast, however, some thinkers and researchers believe that Rap music is a representation and producer of violent behavior, delinquency, and risky sexual behavior (Wingood, et al, Chen et al, and Lobey; in: Tanner, 2008). Some Rap music lyrics may have contributed to ecstasy being perceived as a trendy, high-status party drug among Rap audiences (Diamond et al, 2006: 278). Of course, these theoretical approaches have been subjected to various criticisms. For example, some believe that in most of these studies audiences are less considered, and most of the criticism

has focused on textual analysis of rap songs. Tanner and others (2009: 698-713) suggest that Rap is not a unitary genre category. Cultures of crime and resistance are likely associated with distinct subgenres, and that the Urban Music Enthusiasts most involved with subcultural delinquency are, in all probability, listening to gangsta Rap, or variations thereof.

On the other hand, there are other theoretical approaches that do not specifically analyze rap music, but are interested to study popular music in general. For example, we can point to Birmingham school and Pierre Bourdieu's theory. Theorists of Birmingham school sought to understand the subcultures of post-war youth and its major components, such as clothing styles, music and the process of making sense of these sub-cultures. It can be said that they wanted to make a relationship between sub-cultural practices such as music and clothing styles and strategies of resistance. According to them, the fashion styles that working class young gain from youth Emerging Market became the sources for strategies of resistance that working class youth using them for protest against their material conditions (Bennett, 2005:44). In other words, for Birmingham theorists, the music and style of the various spectacular youth subcultures, such as teddy boys, mods, rockers, skinheads and punks, signified fractions of working-class resistance to the structural changes occurring in post-war Britain. In particular, a Gramscian understanding of class domination and opposition is mobilized in an effort to assess whether subordinate groups are incorporated into the dominant ideology (Story, 2010: 244).

The analyses of Birmingham school about cultural practices, both from conceptual and methodological aspects were subjected to criticism. Some critics, inspired by postmodern conditions, believe that the concept of sub-culture as a conceptual tool is inadequate for the study of youth cultural practices in late capitalism era. Another major criticism to Birmingham school is the lack of attention to women. Bourdieu's theoretical approach can also be used to help us understand the complexities of Rap music. To Bourdieu, taste is always a disposition forming part of the habitus of any person. As a matter of fact, Bourdieu criticized the 'pure' aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime, for which, in his opinion, Immanuel Kant is mainly to be blamed. Bourdieu adopted one possible empiricist solution to the antinomy of taste by claiming that the taste of the ruling class is always the legitimate taste of a society. But in his opinion this legitimate taste is not genuine good taste: in fact, there could not possibly be any genuine good taste. Legitimate taste pretends to be the universally valid and disinterested good taste, whereas in reality it is nothing more than the taste of one particular class, the ruling class (Gronow, 1997: 10-11). He was interested to use of cultural differences by dominant groups as a means of social reproduction, and tried to show that consumption in social groups how and to what extent is a part of strategy for construct hierarchy in social space. Bourdieu claims that nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class', nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music (Bourdieu, 1984: 18). According to their social background, different people gain different habitus that fit to it, and this in turn led to creation different taste structure.

This structure at dealing with artworks, according to practical involvement with the principle of necessity or lack of necessity, takes different dimensions. Thus, working classes compared to other classes has more attention to the function and benefit. The upper classes, however, pay more attention to the aesthetic dimensions, shape and configuration virtue. In other word, working class has less ability than middle and upper classes in acceptance of aesthetic or hobby perspective toward the things that their definition and establishment need hobby judgment (Jenkins, 1385: 211). Since the process of Rap music production in Iran is wildcat and non-commercial, unlike other communities, it seems that we can better understand the dynamics of rap music with regard to the concept of limited production field or art for art. In this field, that the aim of competition is to obtain symbolic interests such as prestige, veneration and reputation, Economic benefits are often denied by the artists themselves.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, according to the subject, we have used qualitative method for gathering and analysis of data. This is because one of the goals of this research is understand the mental aspects and connotations that the actors construct from their action. Two method in qualitative approach, Semi-structured interviews and content analysis, have used to collect and analysis of data. First, the 24 person who were active in the field of rap and had works in this kind of music were interviewed. Then, after thematic categorizing of music tracks into three categories (Gang -Party, Love- Dis-love, and Political – Social) and using qualitative content analysis, randomly one track from each category has been analyzed.

RESULTS

After analyzing the content of music texts, results show that themes in Gang-Party category are clear and unambiguous. These themes revolve around items such as drugs, alcohol, and male-oriented sex relations. But the themes that are common in love category, in particular dis-love (Love Failure), mainly revolve around concepts like blaming others, self-purification, lack of forgiveness, love rival and betrayal. Of course, it should be noted that these themes are typical representation of relationships which is going on in the context of society and among this generation. Finally, conceptual focus of those who are in socio-political category revolves primarily around issues and problems that the younger generation will deal with it daily. In everywhere of this Rap music kind we can see, either explicitly or implicitly, the discontent from socio-cultural conditions, lack of clear perspective about future, and disappoint from improvement of conditions.

Table 1: Music Genres and its Contents

Music Genre	Content
Gang Party	drugs, alcohol, and male-oriented sex relations
Love, Dis-love	blaming others, self-purification, lack of forgiveness, love rival and betrayal
Socio-political	discontent from socio-cultural conditions, lack of clear perspective about future, and disappointment from improvement

As mentioned in the methodology, in addition to content analysis, we interviewed with 24 people who were active in Rap music. The interviews were based on theoretical topics: Rap music as group cohesion, Rap music as a representation of deviant lifestyles, Rap music and cultural resistance, Rap music and social distinction, and Rap music as symbolic capital in the field of cultural production.

In general, the results show that Rap music lacks coherence properties in the sense of its subculture. In other word, based on the statements of most interviewees, Rap music creates no obligation and commitment to the values of the in-group for rappers. Furthermore, Rap music is used as a medium to express dissatisfaction and dissent with numerous cases. Finally, it should note that most interviewees utilize rap music as a realm to achieve distinction and social dignity. They do it through strategies like introducing their songs and putting their pictures and information in the Internet.

CONCLUSIONS

As the findings of this research show, Rap music rather than would have related to the types of perverted behavior, subcultural readings, and resistance action, is more the representation of young prowling who trying to form unique identity for themselves in the range of cultural categories.

The interviews show that many rappers even some of those who have some work in socio-political genre, have low knowledge about political structure of society, and have no obligation to follow the values of the subculture. The reason is that these works are audience-oriented. Audience has especial position between Rappers, in the extent that most Rappers set up their activity according to the audiences taste. This is why most interviewees have background in the mentioned sub-genres. We believe that this is due to tendency of to be specific and a desire to be recognized between Rappers. They follow up this purpose in texts which is usually has written by themselves, and through strategies such as introducing themselves at the beginning or end of songs, utilizing their titles and special terms, and internet advertising. In this way, they have also implicitly Highlights their cultural capital. On the other hand, based on Bourdieu's theory, economic benefits are often denied by active actors in the field of limited cultural production. In other word, the competition takes place in the field over the symbolic interests, and hierarchy of authority based on different forms of symbolic benefits such as prestige, Sanctification, and artistic reputation. From this perspective and based on interviews, Rap music could have the function of symbolic capital for actors, and have symbolic interests for them among the peer groups and individuals with whom they interact.

Table 2: Typology of Contents and Theoretical Topics in the Interviews

Theoretical Topics	Contents
Rap music as group cohesion	Lack of cohesion
Rap music as a representation of deviant lifestyles	Rap music as a medium to express dissatisfaction and opposition
Rap music and attitude to social norms	Challenging general norms
Rap music and cultural resistance	Criticism of various aspects of social life
Rap music and social distinction	Reflection of young trying to construct unique identity
Rap music as symbolic capital in the field of cultural production	Rap music as a distinguishing feature

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