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Violence in Hip-Hop Journalism: A Content Analysis of the Source, A Leading Hip-Hop Magazine

Oredein T* and Lewis MJ

Rutgers School of Public Health, Piscataway NJ USA

Abstract

Objectives: This study seeks to determine the prevalence of violence in a popular hip-hop entertainment magazine, a previously overlooked medium.

Methods: We performed a content analysis on a random sample of 48 issues of *The Source Magazine* and coded magazine covers, and feature articles about celebrities and accompanying photographs for the presence of violent content.

Results: 35% of covers contained at least one violent category in text or graphics. Nearly 80% of feature articles contained at least one violent category in the text and approximately 30% of feature articles were accompanied by at least one violent graphic.

Conclusion: Findings suggest that *The Source Magazine* and possibly other hip-hop entertainment venues are a potential source of mediated modeling for violent behaviors.

Introduction

Since the mid-1980s hip-hop has been criticized for its heavy violent content and credited with encouraging violence. Although often justified as a reflection of urban life, the prevalence and portrayal of violence in hip hop and the potential ramifications have become a focus of research [1]. Several studies found that hip-hop has consistently had a higher prevalence of violent portrayals [2-4] and greater effects on violence and aggression than other music genres, such that youth exposed to rap music were more likely to consider violence as an acceptable means to resolve social conflicts, and were more likely and to practice violent behaviors in real life [5-13].

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) posits mechanisms to explain how exposure to violence in hip-hop can shape violent attitudes, and behaviors. According to SCT, individuals learn vicariously by observing others perform behaviors and receive resulting rewards or punishments, which makes the observer more or less likely to perform the modeled behaviors [14]. This observational learning occurs whether the modeling is witnessed in person or through the media. Viewers are more likely to pay attention to models they consider to be similar to themselves, attractive, wealthy, and/or powerful [15-20]. Hip-hop artists are often of similar age, racial and/or socioeconomic backgrounds as their fans, and many hail from the same neighborhoods, increasing the likelihood of attraction and identification with such celebrities and their lifestyles for youth across various racial and socio-cultural background combinations [21].

Adolescents often express the desire to be like celebrities in the media [22] and such wishful identification often leads young audiences to make changes in their appearance, attitudes, values, and activities accordingly [23,24] in order to emulate them. According to SCT, hip-hop provides plenty of opportunities for such mediated modeling via lyrics, videos, film and even print [25-28] but so far studies surrounding the hip-hop culture only focused on lyrical content [29,30] and music videos [2,31] while print venues, such as monthly hip-hop magazines have not been assessed. Hip-hop magazines are also popular media that have the potential to impact and influence their audience. As a journalistic venue, the magazines discuss the professional and personal lives of celebrities, and where relevant reference violence in their bodies

of work, as well as any real-life violent infractions. This additional exposure may contribute to reinforcing violence as a norm especially as young audiences are more likely to be interested in celebrity affairs and look to celebrities to learn how to act and how to achieve prestige [32].

Therefore, we explored the prevalence of violence appearing in *The Source: The Magazine of Hip-hop Music, Culture and Politics,* a popular hip-hop magazine in order to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the frequencies, and categories of violence occurring in The Source Magazine's covers?

2) What are the frequencies, and categories of violence occurring in feature articles in The Source Magazine?

3) What are the frequencies, and categories of violence occurring in photographs that accompany feature articles in The Source Magazine?

Methods

We chose *The Source Magazine* because it is the longest-running and most popular hip-hop publication and has a large minority and urban youth readership [33]. It is available in The New York Public Library system. Since large portions of issues were not available for 1988 through 1990 the study excludes the first three years of the publication. The sampling frame was all issues between 1991 and 2006. We randomly selected three issues per year using the web-based Research Randomizer random number generator and photocopied each magazine's cover, table of contents, and relevant articles along with their related photographs. The final sample was 48 magazines.

We coded each magazine's cover because covers are generally

designed to attract readers. Covers were coded for celebrity subject, occupation, and any violent graphics or text. We also coded celebrity-based "Feature Articles" because they have been a part of the magazine's formatting across the span of the publication, and it is the only element consistently appearing in every issue. Furthermore, The Source Magazine's feature articles mostly consist of interviews with high-profile celebrities. The interviews provide an opportunity for modeling behaviors as it is a forum for celebrities, who often have role model status, to discuss their bodies of work in addition to their real lives. We identified "Feature Articles" by the listings under the heading "Feature Articles" in The Source's "Table of Contents". A Feature Article was eligible to be coded if its subject was a specific celebrity or group entity. Montage articles featuring several unrelated artists or groups (i.e. "The 100 Greatest R&B Singers of All Time"), articles solely about fashion, and articles about violence within the hip-hop, minority, and/or urban communities, were not coded. However, coders recorded if the latter category was present. We recorded relevant articles for subject persona, occupation and violent reputation. All relevant articles were coded at the sentence level for violent content and anti-violent statements within the text. Pictures accompanying the articles were also coded for violent graphics. The text was also reviewed for illustrative quotes. Relevant examples of violent categories were recorded during the coding process for inclusion in the manuscript.

Coding

The coding scheme was developed deductively based on the research questions and information from prior research [34] and inductively based on initial reviews of The Source Magazine's feature articles. Violence was defined as aggressive physical or verbal actions occurring in real life or art projects (i.e. lyrics, videos, movies). We coded each article for violence according to the following violent categories: feuding/verbal violence; physical assault; murder/attempted murder; weapons ownership or use; sexual assault; gang activity; robbery; vandalism; being the recipient of violence or some other violence (e.g. self-inflicted violence). Each mention of general violence in music (i.e. "gangsta rap", "hardcore lyrics"), violent reputations (i.e. terms "thug", "gangsta", "G", "O.G.", "live nigga", and "street soldier" or other terms indicating a tough persona), violent neighborhoods, and violent metaphors were coded as well. Coding was not mutually exclusive. We also coded the article's layout to capture whether it included enlarged, prominently placed excerpts from the article containing violent text.

We coded each unique photograph within each Feature Article for weapons; violent accessories (i.e. clothing, tattoos or jewelry with violent graphics e.g. picture of guns); aggressive body language or posturing (i.e. scowling, fighting stances, hand gestures); and/or other violence (e.g. spattered blood, bullet holes). Each violent image in a photograph was coded. Coding was not mutually exclusive.

A second coder, a public health doctoral student at the time of the study, independently coded a sub-set of 20 randomly selected magazine articles. Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated to determine the percent agreement beyond chance. The average agreement was 0.791 across text variables some of which had moderate agreement and others of which had near perfect agreement [35] (range: 62.5–100), and .982 across photograph variables (range: 87.5–100).

Statistical analysis

We used the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS®) version 14.0 for all analysis. We ran Chi-square analyses and used a standard alpha level of p < 0.05 to determine statistical significance.

Results

Cover analysis

Each of the 48 covers in the sample featured a celebrity. More than a third of covers contained at least one instance of violence in the form of weaponry (6.3%, n=3), violent accessories (12.5%, n=6), aggressive body language (14.6%, n=7) or other violence (22.9%, n=11), mainly violent language in headlines highlighting features within the issue (Table 1).

Feature article analysis

We coded 218 feature articles. An average of 4.29 (s.d.=1.48) feature articles per magazine met the coding criteria. Articles averaged 4.5 pages (s.d.=2.10) in length. The majority of featured subjects were primarily rappers (85.3, n=186).

Almost 80% of articles contained at least one instance of violence in the text, and almost half had five or more. The most prevalent category was having violent reputations, appearing in 45% of articles.

"[Slim] was a gangsta...By all means necessary [36]."

Weapons appeared in approximately 40% of articles and the majority of these (81.6%) mentioned firearms.

"…Free was released from Tehachapi State Prison after serving nine months for possession of a SKS assault rifle and kidnapping… [37]"

"Spice pulls his Glock from his jeans, lays it on the table and slides comfortably into the nearest chair [38]."

General mentions of violent media (i.e. music, videos and films) appeared in about 40% of articles.

"Fat Joe won't be going soft anytime soon, as you'll see by the majority of straight-up hardcore songs on the album. Even Puff Daddy's contribution, the CD's title track, sounds like the dark, piano-and-strings driven soundtrack to an urban crime tale [39]."

Feuding appeared in 36.7% of articles.

"… [Nas] went on a one-man rampage against New York radio station Hot 97 for not allowing him to bring gallows onstage to symbolize the lynching of his then nemesis, Jay-Z [40]."

"Major rappers like Beanie Sigel and Jadakiss and Nas, Prodigy and Jay are now going at each other with fervor [41]."

Recipients of violence appeared in 34% of articles. The majority of recipients (61.3%) were murder victims, followed by non-fatal shootings (37.3%).

	(%)	(N)
Magazines Coded	-	48
Any Violence in Magazine	100.0	48
Covers Coded	100.0	48
Cover Graphic of Celebrity	100.0	48
Any Cover Violence	35.4	17
Articles Coded	100.0	218
Articles with Any Violence	79.4	173
Articles with only 1 depiction of violence	5.0	11
Articles with 5+ depictions of violence	48.2	105
Pictures	100.0	959
Pictures with Any Violence	28.4	62

Table 1: Magazine analysis.

"…an unknown assailant fired a 9mm pistol multiple times into the black vehicle's rear window. The young man in the Dodges' backseat attempted to retaliate but was shot nine times in the process [42]."

Roughly 30% of articles made mentioned living in violent neighborhoods.

"Raised on the rugged streets of Chicago's famously gang and pimp saturated West Side…. [43]."

Almost 15% of articles use a violent metaphor, most of which (71.4%) were posed by the article's author.

"As Mike the driver artfully negotiates this boat of a stretch limo through evening mid-Manhattan traffic, Knight and Kenner strategize a little, but mostly they sit in silence like two hit men on their way to do what they gotta do [44] "

"…and his eyelids drop like two guillotines falling in slow motion… [45]"

Fifteen percent of articles mention other violence such as animal cruelty or suicide. Eleven percent boldly featured a violent text excerpt within the article's layout.

Expressions of anti-violence were present in 35% of articles, and included sentiments or actions taken to reduce violence.

"He employed many from the city of Compton at Ruthless Records and was quick to contribute some of his big bank to anti-gang efforts... [46]" (Table 2).

Photograph analysis

Collectively we coded 959 photographs, 62 of which had at least one violent graphic. Almost 30% of articles contained at least one photograph featuring violent graphics. Aggressive body language was the most common category occurring in about 84% (n=52) of violent photographs (Figure 1 and Table 3).

Discussion

Several components of hip-hop culture have been analyzed for violence and subsequently linked with aggressive and violent behaviors, however this is the first time that a hip-hop magazine has been reviewed for its violent content, and considered for potential

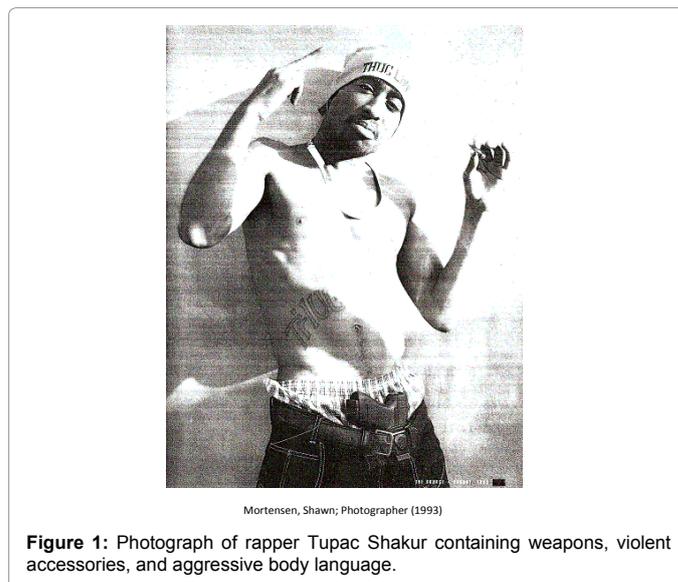Mortensen, Shawn; Photographer (1993)

Figure 1: Photograph of rapper Tupac Shakur containing weapons, violent accessories, and aggressive body language.

Photo Category	Total Articles (%)	Total Articles (Frequency)
Total Articles	100.0	218
Articles with any Violent Graphics	28.4	62
Violent/Aggressive Body Language	23.9	52
Weapons	4.1	9
Violent Accessories	3.2	7
Other Violent Graphics	4.6	10

Table 3: Prevalence of articles that contain at least one violent photograph.

implications. With 84.5% of articles containing violence within the text and/or photographs. *The Source Magazine* is a potential source of mediated modeling for violent behaviors. Of the articles containing violence, 95% had more than one violent depiction, and 73.3% had five or more depictions. As magazine covers and content are designed to attract readers, the celebrities featured in and on *The Source Magazine* were most likely chosen to cater to and meet the demand of the magazine's audience. It is possible that celebrities with violent, controversial or otherwise colorful lives and careers are deemed to be more marketable with respect to magazine sales, and such celebrities are therefore featured more often and more prominently. Nonetheless, the high prevalence is still of particular concern as repeated exposure to violence in the media not only can normalize violence [47] but it may contribute to desensitization [48], resulting in reduced tendencies to intervene in violent scenarios [49], help others in distress [50], and have sympathy for victims of violence [51,52]. It also may make it easier for others to commit violence without having to experience the negative emotions and psychological reactions [25-28].

With respect to violent categories, having a violent "thug" reputation was the most prevalent and perhaps it is indicative of the importance paid to the phenomenon of the violent identity and reputation that is so pervasive in hip-hop culture [29,53]. Weapons were the second most prevalent category and firearms specifically were mentioned in one-third of articles, which exceeds the 27% of music videos featuring guns [2], and their 18.7% prevalence in primetime television shows [54]. Feuding was the third most common category represented in 37% of articles. One issue (December 2001) designated itself "The Beef Issue" and interviewed four subjects that were involved in high profile feuds at the time. In pictures, aggressive body language

Violence Category	Total Articles (%)	Total Articles (N)
Total	100.0	218
Any Violence	79.4	173
Violent Categories		
Violent Reputation	45.0	98
Violent Media	40.8	89
Weapon	39.9	87
Feud/Conflict	36.7	80
Recipient of Violence	34.4	75
Violent Neighborhood	29.4	64
Fighting/Assault	23.9	52
Murder	21.1	46
Gang Activity	16.5	36
Violent Metaphor	14.7	32
Robbery	9.6	21
Vandalism	4.6	10
Sexual Assault	3.2	7
Other Violence	14.7	32
Anti Violence	34.9	76

Table 2: Prevalence of articles that contain violence according to violent categories.

was the most popular, again perhaps related to the importance of violent identity and reputation.

The Source magazine was chosen because it is the longest running hip-hop magazine with a large youth readership. Even with the increase in electronic media, *The Source* had an estimated readership of 1.5 million in 2008, and has a large minority and youth following [33]. However, since this study only included one magazine, it is impossible to discern if the violence is excessive for hip-hop, music, pop culture or entertainment magazines in general. The sample was also limited to three issues per year. Some issues may have contained inflated mentions of violence due to articles covering the high-profile, violent deaths of popular rappers. Due to our interest in examining modeling, only selected feature articles about celebrities were coded. However, in all probability this resulted in an underestimation of violence appearing in The Source Magazine as other articles, columns, photographs, and advertisements, many with celebrity foci, were not included in the analysis. Also, most issues were photocopied in black and white, making it difficult to assess some graphic concepts such as identifying certain tattoos, which likely resulted in an underestimation of violent graphics. Lastly, this study did not analyze the way violence was framed with respect to positive or negative portrayals, which may also influence the way violence is interpreted.

We suggest that hip-hop music entertainment magazines, and possibly other similar venues, have the potential to impact their young audiences. Violent perpetrators in hip-hop culture are often high-profile subjects with whom their followers identify and who they revere, so future research should explore additional hip-hop media outlets such as websites, and urban radio stations for violence. In addition, there may be additional effects when the featured violence can be perceived as real as opposed to artistic portrayals. Future research should focus on the positive or negative portrayals, prevalence and presentation of real-life violent transgressions, as well as the audience's perceptions of violence, varying mechanisms for processing violence, and variables that moderate these processes in order to better inform violence prevention interventions.

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Human Subjects Statement

There were no human subjects involved, therefore no IRB review or permissions were required.

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