

VOTING TO THE BEAT

Why rap matters in politics

Rap music is hip and edgy. The best artists use it to talk about their problems, desires, fights and friendships, dates and nights out. But rap is more than catchy tunes that attract millions of followers. It can communicate political messages – it can talk on behalf of an under-represented group, or it can give voice to the quiet ones. In some countries rap musicians replace journalists and hold politicians to account – becoming ‘musical journalists’ like in Senegal. In the U.K. Stormzy is the rapper that shifts the paradigm – he calls for the voices of young people to be heard more. Rap can also be dangerous when in bad hands – there are examples of rap that promote sexism and violence. But rap is not bad or good in itself – it is what musicians and their fans make of it.

We need to take rap seriously and see what it means for improving our societies.

KEY IDEAS

American rap has played a profound role in the global expansion of rap (Street, 2013). The main topics of original rap music relate to the struggles and poverty of American suburbs where the genre started in the 1970s (Chang, 2007). Various movements, minorities, and political groups across the globe used rap to bring attention to inequality. As a result, rap and hip hop were 'almost exclusively viewed as political' in many places, especially in its original context of the Afro-American and Latin communities of the 1970s and 80s (Street, 2013).

Nowadays, rap music has spread out of the US and musicians across the globe use it for advocacy, protest, and political commentary. For example underground hip hop musicians in Senegal act as the voices of anti-government resistance and as 'musical journalists' (Helbig, 2014). Rap music can be seen as a 'youth arts mass movement' that cleverly combines speech and tune to say important things in a laid-back manner.

Music is popular – and this means politicians want to control it. This is why in Russia, for example, music has been censored through the 20th century. Rock, jazz and blues were forbidden almost until the 1990s. The state paid money to the loyal musicians who, they hoped, would distract local citizens from the Western bands like Rolling Stones and Guns'N'Roses. These state-sponsored rock bands were relatively popular, but not as fiery as Western rock.

Punk, rap and hip-hop are the edgiest music genres in modern Russia. However, there is a state-sponsored version of rap music and there are rap artists critical of this. Russia has little free media and free journalism. This means people who are critical of the state cannot express themselves in newspapers and also fear talking on social media. However, they come to the YouTube videos of rap artists to discuss important topics. They talk about conformity and free spirit, responsibility and hypocrisy. Comments attached to rap videos are becoming a place where a lively community is growing (Denisova and Herasimenka, 2019). Rap is not perfect. A U.K. study showed that gangs attract people via rap videos (Storrod and Densley, 2017). Rap music can be cruel towards women or weaker people which is a problem, but there are a growing number of Black female rappers emerging. This gives hope that sexism will be over and done with; one does not need to make sexist jokes for a great rap song.

KEY READINGS

Chang, J. (2007). *Can't stop, won't stop: a history of the hip-hop generation.* London: Ebury.

Denisova, A. and Herasimenka, A. (2019). How Russian rap on YouTube advances alternative political deliberation: Hegemony, counter-hegemony and emerging resistant publics. *Social Media + Society* 5(2). Available from: bit.ly/2JlaYP8.

Storrod, M. L., & Densley, J. A. (2017). 'Going viral' and 'Going country': the expressive and instrumental activities of street gangs on social media, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20 (6), 677-696. Available from: bit.ly/2HqgSf6.

Street, J. (2013). *Music and politics.* Oxford, UK: Wiley.

ACTIVITIES

1. Think about your favourite rap band/artists. Watch the music video of a rap song. What is the main message? Who does the artist represent? Is he mean to anyone? Is he kind to anyone?
2. What is progressive and what is disturbing in the video? By progressive, we mean social situations that can help people live in a fairer, safer society.
3. Does the rapper demand recognition or equality for any particular social group? What is catchy about the lyrics in these demands?
4. Look at first 15 comments on the video. Are they just fan reactions or do they make any meaningful point about society or politics?
5. Discuss your favourite rap artist with the person sitting next to you. Write down the best lines from the song and ask if the other person would consider the lyrics political? Progressive? Disturbing?
6. Extra task: if you wanted to create rap about a subject that is really important to you, which modern rapper would you commission? If you feel brave, try to come up with your own rap line (3 sentences would do).