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**RELIGION AND CONTEMPORARY MUSIC CULTURE
THE EFFECT OF RAP MUSIC ON YOUTH
BRIEF SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS**

By

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Abstract

With this article, I will argue the impact of the musical culture of the musical subgenre of rap on youth today. To achieve this, I set specific questions within the context of Sociology of Religion and further, trying to seek the conditions of sociological methodology and the very reason that explains the big, and for some people, annoying impact of rap and its music subgenres on young people. The postmodern subproducts of the contemporary globalized music industry; are they really entertaining or not? And on what scale? What are the values, the principles and the social reflections that rap music really promotes? Are the rap artists and those who manage and promote them, very willing to contribute within the context of an authentic artistic expression or do they lean to the tendency to reproduce anti-social stereotypes?

Key words: rap music, gen z, religion, sociology, music culture

Introduction

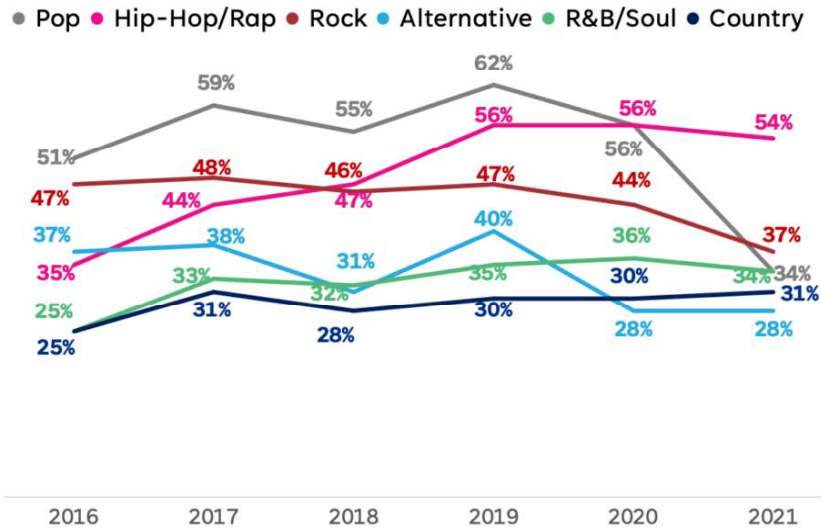
The appeal and influence (social, cultural, etc.) of any musical genre or subgenre depends on whether it develops the characteristics of a cyclic phenomenon (tendency). Rap music has been found to be particularly popular, especially among young people, the so-called *generation z*¹, according to modern sociological and sociographic research. Since classical antiquity, music has been known as the art and science of sounds (Paris, 2022). Both Plato and Aristotle will point out that music is the one that dives into the human soul and affects it deeply, directly affects the human senses, transmits, and produces feelings and meanings².

¹ “This has rapidly become Gen Z’s Top music genre”, 16/11/2021, *ypulse.com* (last retrieved 2/6/2023).

² Plato, *The Republic III*, LCL, 410d. Aristotle, *Politics* 9, SCBO, 1340a. See also, s.a.

Chart 1

Which of the following genres / categories of music do they enjoy listening to?



Source: YPulse Surveys n=1000 ages 13-39 | September 2019, 2020, and 2021

In the context of the Sociology of Music, reference is made to Max Weber and Theodor Adorno's thought. The first, always within the context of axiological neutrality, tries to discover the particular social conditions and circumstances under which music developed in Western Europe, with an emphasis on harmonic rationalization (Anagnostou, 2008). The latter seems to treat musical matter in its historicity³. For Adorno, the composer is not only a social subject, but also the music itself has a social character because social conditions are present in it. He will observe that: *“The composer is not only tied to the objective social facts of production, but his real contribution, a kind of logical composition of a personal nature which reflects what is more subjective in him, is ultimately also social. The subject that is assembled is not a single entity, but a collective one”* (Adorno, 1958. Anagnostou, 2008).

Durkheim defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices, while defining the Church as a single moral community (Durkheim, 2001, p. 46). Religious music and hymns are not only significant points of religious-cultural reference and identity, but also an important qualitative element in the cohesion and bonding of the religious community. It is also mentioned, in the context of the study of the history of religious worship, that hymns and chants melodiously express the doctrinal truths of a religion (Filiás, 2018).

Religion and rap music.

Based on the above, it is necessary to look for the beginnings of rap music and how it evolved into one of the most popular music genres, especially among the youth. Rap appears as a subgenre of hip hop with the roots of the latter being found in

³ S.a., pp. 248 – 249.

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the African American ghettos in the large urban centers of the USA and especially in the city of New York and elsewhere (Chang, 2005, p. 11). Combining elements of the music culture of the African American community from the ante bellum era and beyond, along with the electronic sounds of the modern era, rap manifests itself as a protest movement against the US music industry's promoted «white» music culture. It is also worth noting that already in the 19th century in the USA and after the Civil War, the so-called «slave music», was coincided with the abolitionist movement due to religious debates (Cruz, 2002).

The trend towards the autonomy of African American artists is not limited to the birth and development of the musical genre we are looking at. Since the early 1960s, the famous *Motown* record company gave black artists who were excluded from the major companies of the American music industry, the opportunity to reach audiences larger than those gathered in the music scenes they appeared in, or in some cases to highlight “street musicians”, who later stood out for their talent and had a very long career (Boyce, 2008).

From the need for public, free, and unfettered artistic expression of an entire community to the promotion of an anti-social fringe subculture of decadence and debauchery, there is obviously a huge gap. The tendency towards underground culture, especially of young people, as a means of reaction and questioning of established traditional values, in the perspective of searching and forming their own identity, is an element that is present throughout time. Each generation seems to be inclined to reject the aesthetics and sounds that shaped it (Fixa, 2020). At present, militant postmodernism is trying to aggressively deconstruct every traditional value and reference, rejecting them as unnecessary “grand narratives” (Kotsiopoulos, 2017).

It is also thought that the prevalence or indirect imposition of mass music culture by the globalized music industry has crushed popular culture and its derivatives. This new situation literally puts the folk art of the countryside and cities, the original and authentic artistic creation, on the sidelines, for the by-products of the new era to “fill” the free time of modern people (*Art and mass culture*, 1984). Common elements in almost all musical subgenres that promote the upper mentioned culture are social apathy and detachment, easy enrichment, the use of substances (drugs, alcohol, etc.), the degradation of the face of women and their absolute sexualization, illegality in context of a generalized and therefore aggressive and violent “anti-authoritarian” style, racist stereotypes, insults, self-destructive tendencies (e.g., suicide) etc. (Tanner, 2009).

We typically mention, for the case of Greece, the special characteristics of the *rebetiko* music subgenre⁴, with lyrics promoting the so-called “drug culture” and the corresponding libertarian way of life and thinking, the “*artists of Exarchia Square*” like P. Sidiropoulos, N. Assimos, K. Gogou and others. On an international scale, we mention for example the “hippies” from the 1960s, the musical subgenre of “chalga” (Bulg. *чалга*) in the Balkans⁵, gansta rap and of course its newest variation, trap. The

⁴ In the context of the so-called “Sociology of rebetiko”, the social and ethnological dimensions are investigated with reference to the influence of the specific musical subgenre. See more, Damianakos, 2001.

⁵ “Chalga” music receives criticism for roughly the same reasons as rap and its various subcategories. We typically mention that the communist leader of P. R. of Bulgaria's Todor Zhivkov had banned by law in the period 1985-1989, the listening of this music as it was considered capable of producing distorted standards and alienating the Bulgarian youth from the country's traditions, perpetuating the Turkish influence in Bulgaria. See more, K. Arbaiza – Sundal, “The development of Chalga: a controversial cultural phenomenon in modern Bulgaria”, *Annual of Language and Politics and Politics of Identity VI* (2012).

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last one seems to have a great appeal among young people today, as evidenced by their massive participation in related concerts and events.

Always in relation to the above, the financial crisis as well as the diffusion of risks in the context of the risk society (Beck, 1986), negatively affect the quality of interpersonal relationships and social interactions. Domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, and school bullying are common in times of general economic hardship. The economic crisis is first and foremost a moral crisis, a crisis in values. The separation of civilization and culture is not a new discovery. For a considerable amount of time, this question occupied intellectuals and sociologists of modernity. Characteristics are what Schafer mentions, to refute Huntington, who considers that "culture refers to the wider cultural entity", an aggregation factor of many cultural elements (Huntington 2001, Denaxas 2008).

In the era of cultural hybridization, the apotheosis of individuality and the multiplicity of values promoted by globalization, the dissociation between the concept of civilization and culture seems not to be distinct enough. As rightly observed: "*the daily social activity of a social body does not simply presuppose handed down principles and perceptions or objectified structures and symbolic systems, but the internalization of principles produced by the interaction of everyday interpersonal and interracial relations*".

As far as music is concerned, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that the capitalist system, among other products, seems to offer the possibility of mostly violent outbursts, through the promotion of the sub - products of the globalized music industry. Unfortunately, the spaces that these outbursts take part in are not limited only to entertainment venues, but also to public and social spaces.

It has been observed in other musical genres and sub-genres that all religious people in a society are treated as a target group by the music industry as well, resulting in the adaptation - at least as it is understood by its initiators - of the musical sounds and especially the lyrics, to the expressed needs of the specific audience. So, for example, we have the so-called *Christian rock* music, *Christian country* especially in the USA etc. Rap, as a musical subgenre of hip hop with a particular appeal, could not be exempted from this tendency to use or abuse religious symbols by the creators and producers of modern music products. This is how genres such as *Christian rap* and *Muslim rap* are presented, with the latter linking its beginnings to the activities of the well-known African American Muslim preacher Malcom X and the Muslim organization to which he referred (*Nation of Islam*) [Henderson, 1996].

Conclusion

Social relations can be influenced by music and social phenomena can be given a special dynamic. Religion, spirituality, and social reactions are closely connected to arts, especially music. Traditional values and principles are clearly discredited in the context of postmodernity's generalization and oversimplification. It appears that young individuals have stopped demanding better living conditions and have fatally accepted the dominance of globalization and its exploitation methodology. It is not unreasonable to think that the depreciation of human existence is causing the imminent death of civilization⁶. Rap music and its subgenres seem to use cultural (and

⁶ Professor V. Gaitanis, referring to *Postman*, will talk about "spiritual desolation" and a "commercial messianism", that directs the lives of modern people. See more, Gaitanis, 2008, p. 170.

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religious) elements not to highlight or promote them, but to reproduce negative social stereotypes, a situation that seems to normalize violence and crime.

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