

The Language Of Music And The Subjective Mind

Introduction

When hearing music no matter what genre, it can potentially evoke an emotional response from us as individuals. When we hear a good beat, lyrics we resonate with, or even a pause and a beat drop, our brain emotionally responds. There is something beyond just hearing sound that elicits an emotional response that deeply connects me to the music. Yet when we dig a little deeper into how our brain, mind, and body respond to music, to what extent are we referring to the song compared to the artist behind it? Often when we think about art in all forms, we think about art as being an extension of the artist. However, if we eliminate the artist from the equation, is there still an emotional connection formed purely from the sound? We have studied how hip-hop has impacted our society on a social, political, and economic level, but to what extent of this impact stems from the artist compared to their artwork? A hip-hop artist and their artwork can become two mutually exclusive languages of communication given the artist has control over their music and the listener possesses a mindset with an objective orientation.

Literature Review

As we think further about if hip-hop art can truly be separated from its artist, determining this becomes much more complex and challenging taking into account the diversity of all seven billion people on this Earth. However, it is possible to identify factors that affect the strength of an emotional connection formed to hip-hop music. Sofia Kim, staff writer for The Record Newspaper, addresses that a person's ability to separate artwork from the artist depends on the extent the artist has control over their artwork, and whether our mindset is closely aligned to a subjective or objective perspective. Essentially, an extreme case of artist separation is represented by an artist who has little control over their artwork and an individual with a strong objective mindset. Within the realm of hip-hop in modern-day society, hip-hop artists and most musicians have control over the music they produce with the implementation of legal intellectual property. Artists that do not produce their music will have less control over their artwork. The extent of subjectivity in one's mindset can range from any level, making it difficult to determine one's level of art separation given that the musician has control over their music. Thus, I want to research more about the objective mindset and its susceptibility to the language of music.

First, we must establish music as another form of communication, giving the music its own unique language. Many people consider music to evoke a more emotional level of communication than just plain English or other conversational dialects. When thinking about music as a language, dubstep offers a genre of music focused solely on the rhythm of electronic sounds that ultimately showcases the physiological, neural, and emotional response from its listeners. Dubstep helps the world investigate the direct physical and emotional effects of the

language of music and specifically analyzes how rhythm impacts the mind and body. A thesis from the University of Pennsylvania highlights that rhythm increases engagement levels enormously, allowing the opportunity to form an emotional connection to sound. The thesis also highlights the phenomenon known as mirror neurons, which are identical neurons triggered by both doing an action or observing the same action. Mirror neurons allow us to understand why we do things, thus allowing us to neurally explain socialization, playing a central role in empathy and social cognition. Studies have found that people listening to live music can emulate the neural patterns of the musician or artist playing due to mirror neurons. Music can trigger these neurons, communicating with our brain in a way that is impossible within the constraints of conversation languages, establishing music as its language for communication.

There is much evidence to be found that music is its language, suggesting that the sound's communication has an emotional impact different from the emotional connection formed with the artist. As we see two languages of communication emerge, our ability to process both of these messages diversifies immensely. However, people have consistently elicited emotional responses upon hearing music. Jeanette Bicknell, the author of academic articles on the philosophy of music, explains the concept of "ecological naturalism" which refers to the idea that mental processes are part of a dynamic living community instead of isolated in our brain. Ecological naturalism allows Bicknell to examine music from a social perspective, and draw conclusions about the correlation between social responses evoked by music and neural responses evoked by music. Strong emotional responses to music are contingent upon two factors: the features of the music and the psychological characteristics of the listener.

Bicknell also highlights the idea of music as a social character, as it is created by humans and relies on human transmission for success. Systems of music are heavily based on culture and the people who produce them. Uniquely, music embodies the emotional complexity of a human, increasing the value of its social character and level of communication and thus evoking strong emotional responses from humans in its language.

The idea of music as a social character becomes more realistic when we envision how music ultimately impacts our society. Lia Peralta, senior manager for content creations at Save The Music Foundation, reiterates that music motivates us to socialize, offering a unique medium of communication that feels different from any other form of communication. Ultimately, the socialization of music aids individuals in improving one's mood or emotion, offering a new coping mechanism, and providing a platform for the undermined to speak out and be heard. Socially, music is an opportunity to communicate with ourselves, others, and the world in a novel way that cannot be emulated by another other medium of communication or language. Further, Peralta points out that music also affects our sense of self. Music can unlock memories, subconscious thoughts, emotions, and in some cases new interests. Although more research is needed in this area, it is clear that ultimately listening to and making music will change how

one's brain works. Not only does music instigate neural change, but music is also an influential social agent for children, thus opening up the idea that music can aid learning in several dynamic ways. Music impacts society through its ability to communicate neurally and emotionally in ways that traditional conversational languages cannot.

Now establishing this language of music through emotional, social, and neural responses, how does the language of music affect one's mindset from an objective versus subjective perspective given the artist produces (controls) their music?

Methods

Music Research Survey

To investigate the average extent one believes art can be separated from the artist, I created a survey to collect primary data regarding individual emotional connection to hip-hop and hip-hop artists. The survey consists of 20 questions where subjects are asked to listen to a popular hip-hop song from a controversial artist. The survey begins with general demographic segmenting questions and assesses the subject's music taste by asking each subject to select their top three favorite genres and rate how much they enjoy listening to hip-hop music on a scale from 1-5 (Likert scale). Subjects then receive another Likert scale and are asked to rate how much they agree with the statement "art can be separated from the artist" on a scale from 1-5. This question gauges to what extent the subject's mindset is subjective. For example, if one strongly agrees that art can be separated from the artist by selecting a "5", it is safe to assume that this subject has a more objective mindset than someone who disagreed with the statement and selected a "1" or "2". The answer to this question is contingent upon each subject receiving a song to listen to.

Depending on the extent to which the subject agrees with the statement, "Art can be separated from the artist", the individual will receive a socially controversial artist that matches their level of significance. Thus, if a subject were to strongly disagree with the statement by selecting the number "1" on the Likert scale, they would receive the least controversial artist featured within the survey. As there are five options included in the Likert scale contingency, subjects can receive one of any of the five songs featured in the survey. A subject cannot receive more than one song, as they are only allowed to select one number on the Likert scale. The only deciding factor for what song a subject listens to is determined by how to answer the Likert scale question regarding if art can be separated from the artist. In hindsight, having only one contingency regarding the subjectivity of one's mindset disregards taking into account one's music taste within the tested songs. If I redo this survey, I would need to find a measurable contingency to account for the subject's music taste and increase the Likert scale to 1-10 to include a great variety of songs. However, it is important to note that increasing the point scale on a Likert scale reduces its efficiency.

Scale Rating (can art be separated from the artist)	Artist	Song Title
1 (disagree)	Tyler the Creator	See You Again
2	Travis Scott	90210
3	Ice Spice	In Ha Mood
4	R. Kelly	Ignition
5 (agree)	Kanye West	Bound 2

The five artists and their respective songs were chosen for this music research survey reflect different levels of extremity regarding the artist’s social controversy. These five artists are all high-profile celebrities that have created controversy in our society due to their moral compass and/or behavior. All of these artists own songs that are loved and treasured by the public, yet people hold mixed feelings about the artist, thus impacting their emotional connection to the music or art. I selected one of or if not the most popular song by each artist to reach a stable level of familiarity between the subjects and the song they were listening to. The table above features each artist and song at their respected positioning on the Likert scale, ranked by the level of their controversy within our society. These artists were also chosen as Kanye, Tyler, Travis, and R. Kelly are music producers, having a higher level of control over their artwork thus allowing us to focus solely on the subjectivity of one’s mindset. I wanted to include a female hip-hop artist within the survey and had trouble finding a controversial female hip-hop producer as the other four artists are male, thus I chose Ice Spice as my next best option even though she is not a producer.

When determining each artist’s level of controversy, I considered the relevancy of each artist’s controversy, the degree of social disparity caused by the artist’s moral values, and objections to the law. All of these artists instigate social disparity due to their ethical perspective, self-expression, and socialization.

Kanye’s controversy is the most relevant, as he is consistently offending different demographic segments within our society, going to extremes where he was recently banned from Twitter. Due to the relevancy of his controversy, I placed Kanye as the most controversial artist, however, in hindsight, R. Kelly should have been first. Kanye has politically offended the public countless times to fuel his narcissism, however, he has never harmed anyone like R. Kelly and within the studio has preserved a good reputation. With the premiere of Surviving R. Kelly Part 3, the relevance of Kelly’s controversy is high. Kelly’s moral compass has led him to over 30 years in

prison, going against the law and causing an alarming amount of social turmoil due to his abusive, pedophilic, and predatory behavior toward young black girls for the past 30 years.

Ice Spice's hypersexualization has caused public backlash as well as public support, making her a controversial figure. As a new rapper the relevancy of her controversy is strong however she has no legal trouble and does not cause the degree of social disparity Kanye or R. Kelly does. Travis Scott faces legal trouble over his wrongdoings at Astrofest, refusing to stop the show in 2021 that resulted in the death of nine people due to a poorly engineered festival that lacked medical assistance. The relevancy of Scott's controversy is less than Kanye, Ice Spice, and now R. Kelly with Netflix's docuseries, thus placing Scott as the second least controversial figure featured in the survey. Finally, Tyler the Creator is positioned as the least controversial hip-hop artist in the survey as the relevancy of his issues is the weakest compared to the other featured artists. Tyler's controversy stems mainly from his original albums, as the albums regarded derogatory lyrics about women regarding sexual expression and sexual assault of pregnant women. However, Tyler has gone on to produce numerous successful songs and albums following the release of *Tron Cat*, inspiring millions with his music and becoming an eccentric public figure.

Once subjects listen to the song, subjects are asked a series of questions that attempt to gauge how much they like the song and artist again using Likert scales. A Likert scale converts qualitative data into quantitative data, making my survey efficient and easily measurable. All Likert scales are from 1-5. Subjects are also asked to choose the artist they like the most and the least that was featured in the survey to see how the controversial artists compare to each other from the subject's perspective. Finally, the last question of the survey once again asks subjects to rank how much they agree with the statement "art can be separated from the artist" to gauge if the survey affected the subjectivity of their mindset.

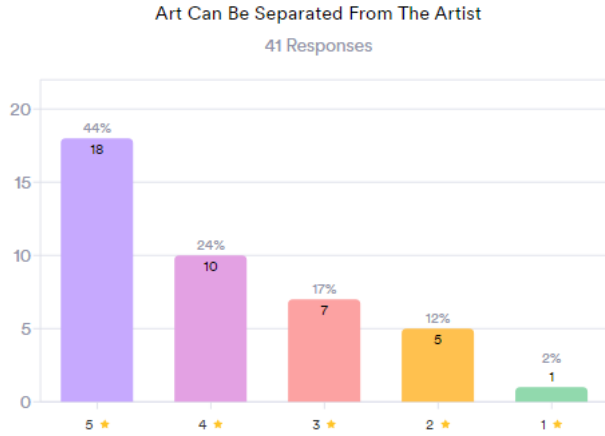
Findings

Music Research Survey

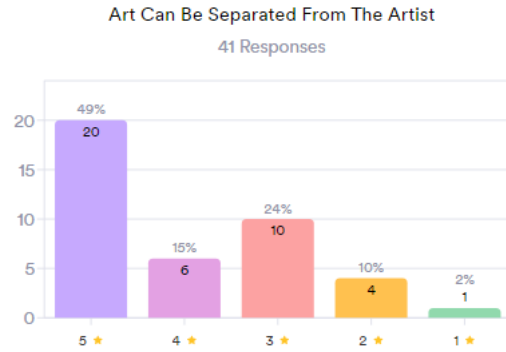
In total, I received 41 submissions.

First, only 2% of those surveyed answered that they do not like hip-hop, allowing us to mitigate the possibility that one just simply does not like hip-hop regardless of how the subject feels about the artist, song, or the controversy behind them. From the data given, the change in the rating of the statement "art can be separated from the artist" only decreased by 0.03, indicating that listening to a popular song by an artist they most likely find socially controversial did not affect the surveyor's overall level of mindset subjectivity. Thus, depending on the surveyor's initial response to rating the statement "art can be separated from the artist" we can determine if the surveyor possesses a more subjective or objective mindset. Disagreeing with the statement by choosing a "1" or a "2" indicates a subjective orientation, and choosing a "4" or a "5" indicates

an objective orientation. Of the 41 subjects surveyed, 41% chose a “1” or a “2”. 22% chose a neutral ground of “3”, and 34% chose a “4” or a “5”.



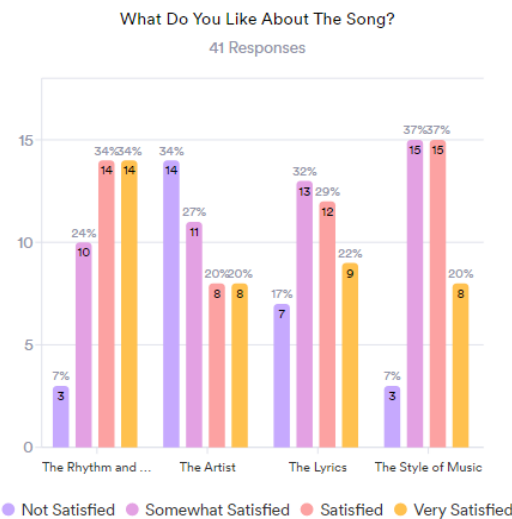
Data	Response	%
★★★★★	18	44%
★★★★☆	10	24%
★★★☆☆	7	17%
★★☆☆☆	5	12%
★☆☆☆☆	1	2%



Data	Response	%
★★★★★	20	49%
★★★★☆	6	15%
★★★☆☆	10	24%
★★☆☆☆	4	10%
★☆☆☆☆	1	2%

Although the majority of surveyors have a subjective orientation with “5” being the most selected category by far, we can see a very slight shift to a more subjective orientation, as the amount of “3”, “2”, and “1” responses increased by 5%. The small shift towards subjectivity

could be explained by the subjects realizing the ethical and social conflict behind the artist and song they were given, decreasing their emotional connection to the music, and changing their opinion regarding the extent of art and artist separation.



Besides this slight shift, the majority of surveyors answered the survey questions objectively with “5” being the most popular selection for both the pre and post-question regarding if art can be separated from the artist. When asked how satisfied the subject was with each aspect of the song, the majority of surveyors (34%) were not satisfied with the artist, yet were very

satisfied with the rhythm and beat (34%), the lyrics (32%) and the style of music (34%). The results of this survey question indicate that although the language of music has satisfied the listener through its core sound aspects of style, rhythm, and lyrics, the artist’s communication to society does not enhance the emotional connection listeners are making to the music and the genre. Although it can not be determined to what extent the artist’s communication to society impacts listeners socially and emotionally, there is evidence to support that the conversational language of the artist influences social, emotional, and neural change differently than the language of music due to this difference in satisfaction rating.



When asked further if the controversy behind the artist changes the surveyor’s opinion of the song, the average answer was slightly less than neutral “3”, at 2.71. When asked if the controversy behind the artist changed the surveyor’s opinion of the artist, responses increased by one point on the Likert scale with an average response of 3.41. The increase in agreement that the controversy around the artist changed how much the surveyor liked the song compared to the artist represents the difference in the language of music compared to the conversational language of the artist. As music speaks to us differently in a neural, emotional, and social way, the language of music communicates a different message than the language of the artist. As the controversy around the artist involves the personality and behaviors of the artist within society, the controversy decreases how much listeners like the artist, yet subjects are still able to find an appreciation for the language of music generated by the controversial artist. As the majority of those surveyed possess an objective-oriented mindset, it makes sense that the rankings regarding the controversy’s effect on song appeal differ from the controversy’s effect on artist appeal. Thus, this evidence suggests a hip-hop artist and their artwork can become two mutually exclusive languages of communication given the artist has control over their music and the listener possesses a mindset with an objective orientation.

Conclusion

From the literature review and primary data collected in the music research survey I conducted, we can conclude that there is evidence to suggest a hip-hop artists and their artwork can become two mutually exclusive languages of communication given the artist has control over their music and the listener possesses a mindset with an objective orientation. As the language of music and the conversational language of the artist communicate different messages to listeners neurally, emotionally, and socially, the more objective one’s mindset is the more capable that listener is of

separating the language of music from the language of the artist to become mutually exclusive learning processes. Throughout this journey to research the language of music, there is an ethical component that is missing. Even if we can program our brain to separate the artist from their artwork, we must ask ourselves: is it always morally just to do so?

In extreme cases of unjust behavior, our society should ponder to what extent we are willing to sacrifice great music to advocate for the equality of human rights. The mutually exclusive process of listening to beautiful music is ultimately not worth the opportunity cost of enabling unjust communication stemming from the artist behind the beautiful music. In most cases, having some level of healthy controversy around artists for prosocial reasons is normal, as it fuels individuality and motivational competition. However, in the case of enabling a predator to hide behind their artwork, we have a moral obligation as a just society to hold all individuals accountable, regardless of how powerful the musical language the artist creates is.

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