

2019

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Recommended Citation

Sayre, Lauren (2019) "The Art of Hip-Hop in Digital Media," *Writing Waves*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/writingwaves/vol1/iss1/17>

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The Art of Hip-Hop in Digital Media

Lauren Sayre

Keywords: Music video, Production, Hip-Hop, entertainment, CHAT Analysis

IF you've ever seen the "trending" page on YouTube or checked the popular page on any social media site, then you're familiar with hip-hop music videos. Although, I wouldn't say rap is my favorite music genre - I love watching hip-hop videos because I find many of them to be well thought out and highly produced, while also being nonsensical enough to be turned into memes. To me, watching rap videos is almost a guilty pleasure. Part of me will say, "Come on... trap? That's not real music. Why watch a video on something with no depth?" Yet, I always end up convincing myself that these music videos are far more entertaining than anything produced by other genres. While researching this genre, I have seen that hip-hop music videos are much more complex than I assumed, and the ending product is a result of careful planning and many stages of production. So, that critical part of me? Not so critical anymore.

In my research, I have found many similarities between rap music videos and music videos of other genres. Although they share similar production and marketing techniques, using Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) analysis, which is the process used to understand a genre through the environment and processes that compose it, has shown me hip-hop's uniqueness in comparison to other forms of visual media. When doing my analysis, I found that making a hip-hop music video is much more complex than having an idea and filming it. It involves a certain environment and community, and the responses commented on these music videos are just as important to their success as their production.

Making Money

Rap artists make music videos for many reasons. If the artist is passionate about the message behind their songs, music videos are an effective way to help listeners visualize what the artist is trying to say. Nowadays, people aren't as impressed with videos that look "low-budget", so artists spend thousands or up to millions of dollars to make a video that will become popular.

If the video is popular, then the artist makes more money from views and album sales from it. But, how is an artist able to pay for all the expenses that come from making a music video? Advertisement. The general audience of rap music videos are teens and young adults. "Youth identify music as one of the top five areas on which they spend their money (Burkhalter 367)." Artists acquire sponsors by using what's called product placement, which is showing a company's product or service in the background of their video. One of the most common product placements I've seen in these music videos is for Beats by Dr. Dre headphones. For example, in Rich the Kid's music video for his song "Plug Walk", the camera zooms out to show the artist wearing the headphones while making sure to focus on the logo. This is a common business move to gain exposure for both the artist and the brand. Beats by Dr. Dre can pay the artist money to feature their product, which is one of the more successful ways artists end up with enough funds to make videos to sell their music. People will see their favorite rapper wearing Beats and want to buy them, leading to more exposure for the company. Though, Beats by Dr. Dre isn't the only company looking to offer its sponsorship for exposure. In Cardi B's video for "Bartier Cardi", the rapper shows off to the camera, using EOS lip balm that is the only object in focus.



"Plug Walk"



"Bartier Cardi (feat. 21 Savage)
[Official Video]."

Figure 1: Product placement in music videos

A Concept

I love watching hip-hop videos because they make me feel as though I am looking into the mind of the artist. While artists typically come up with the themes and concepts for their music videos, it can also be a collaborative effort between the rapper and the director (Porter). An artist who is invested in their work might have certain ideas that they want to display in their videos, but they don't know how to carry them out in a way that viewers will react positively to. Directors, producers, and writers can improve these concepts and help bring them to life

by carrying out the more technical processes that come with making a music video. In some cases, an artist might not be able to come up with an idea for a music video, so the directors end up creating one for them. To come up with an idea for a music video, the rapper usually listens to their song a couple times and tries to visualize what the song looks like (Porter). It's sort of like trying to paint a picture from what you are hearing. Artists best do this by trying to reminisce on the feelings and events that inspired them to make their song, and then convert it into something people will be able to see.

Production

Although an artist may have a certain concept they want their music video centered around, there is usually a large crew that helps create, produce, shoot, edit, and create digital effects for the video. The director is the head of the entire shoot, and they help bring the artist's ideas to life by leading the entire crew. The producer supervises the shoot, and is usually the one to suggest any changes to the camera angles, lighting, and actors. Writers are also on set to create and edit scripts, so while the artist may have a hand in the creative process for their video, it is also up to the on-set team to fine-tune said ideas and carry out the finalized concept. The rest of the crew consists of more behind the scenes jobs such as lighting and sound technicians, make-up artists, editors, and service technicians. Making a music video is a very tricky process, however. An artist and their crew must figure out how many resources they can afford with their budget, search for filming locations, hire actors, and still have enough money left over to pay the crew. Essentially, budget influences how to "shape the look of the video (Porter)."

Race to the Top

Once a music video is made, the goal is to get the largest audience possible to see it. In many cases, music labels will pay TV channels such as MTV to run the video to make it look as though it has already gained enough popularity to make it to TV. Although MTV is not as popular as it was when I was a kid, it still has a large influence on what songs break into mainstream culture. Artists can submit their videos to the company with a chance of being chosen to be played, but usually, MTV chooses videos of songs that already have some level of popularity. So, how can a rapper that is not yet well known have their breakthrough moment? On MTV's submission page, they state that, "the more creative you get, the more our music programmers will take notice (Duncan)." While popularity can boost an artist's chances in getting chosen, creativity and uniqueness is the most important. Speaking of promotion, what artist wouldn't turn down free advertising? Artists can post their videos to Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on, for free. Nowadays, social media has been more effective in helping promote rappers' music videos, because it is a more accessible

platform for their target audience: teens and young adults.

Reception

Social media is an increasingly beneficial way to spread an artist's video quickly, when it hits the popular pages and is reposted by fan accounts. This way, an artist can gather thousands of viewers without having to pay. Whenever I see a rap video posted by a fan account on the explore page of Instagram, I like to go to the person's account to see what other videos they find interesting now. From this, I've noticed that rap music videos create a community between artists where people can click on one video by a rapper to another created by a different artist. I also see this on YouTube. When watching a certain music video, a suggestions bar will show on the right side, with videos it thinks you will like. These usually include music videos made by other rappers as well. Therefore, Youtube is a great platform for rappers to promote their work, while giving exposure to other rappers as well.

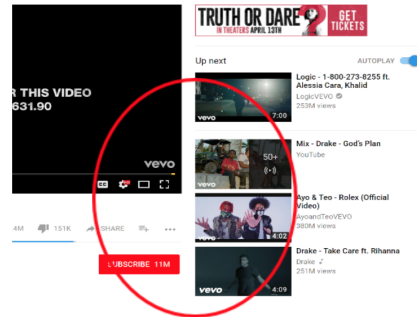


Figure 2: Drake's "God's Plan" on the suggested page of YouTube

Response

Who can count how many music videos are released weekly? Hundreds? With that many videos pouring onto the Internet, the goal for artists is to make their video gain popularity. So, even if it may be "mindless" or "stupid", if it gets attention, the artist is technically succeeding. YouTube comments are an extremely effective way for creators to see people's feedback on their content because the beauty of the internet is that it is completely anonymous. Because of this, people feel less inclined to "hold back" on what they want to say once they're hidden behind their computer screens. It is also one of my favorite parts about watching music videos. Whenever I don't get the meaning of what I am watching, I go to the comment section to see if someone has a better explanation. Additionally, funny comments help make the video more enjoyable to watch. The comment section of a music video on YouTube is a great way for artists to receive feedback on their creation. Whether comments are good or bad, it is still publicity.

Reputation

Usually, when an artist comes out with a new single that people like, it is expected that a music video will follow soon. However, the timing of a music video release is significant in how much the single will sell, and if it will help the artist's image. For instance, it's common for rappers to have political symbolism in their music videos nowadays, because it helps gain an audience of like-minded people. Sometimes rappers release videos with images that can be taken as offensive depending on what is happening politically at the time of its release.

When Snoop Dogg (also known as Snoop Lion for a short while) released his music video pretending to shoot President Donald Trump in the head, not many people could say they were on board with someone who pretended to kill the chief diplomat of the United States, regardless of their personal feelings about him. However, if he released the video before Trump even announced his running for President, people might have found it much more comedic than how it was presented. This led me to think that maybe a rapper's reputation has just as much to do with the video they produce. While an artist could easily push out a video that didn't take much effort to make, it would not reflect well on themselves in the public eye. Therefore, while there are factors that affect a music video's success, music videos in return determine the rapper's success.



"Lavender (Nightfall Remix)"

Figure 3: Snoop's controversial video shooting "Trump."

Conclusion

Ultimately, I have learned that making hip-hop music videos is a very complex process, and the resulting product is due to careful planning, shooting, and editing, as well as considering the feedback the end product will receive. Music videos are an important genre to myself and many others because they help provide visuals to an artist's ideas, almost as if we are looking into their minds. It is also fascinating to see how a person can make a genre visual through both the writing of their lyrics and by making music videos. I assumed that many rappers did not have a lot of input into what they wanted their music videos to look like, or that they simply didn't care enough, because as long as they earned money from it they would be happy. Yet, after researching the steps and factors that go into making a video, I've seen that rappers rely on music videos to boost their reputation and respect with viewers.

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