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## Hip Hop, Religion and the Youth of Romania: A Preliminary Study

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### **Abstract**

For the past two decades, Hip Hop has attained a significant presence in Romania. The fall of Communism as well as growing social unrest has led a growing number of Hip Hop artists to incorporate strong Orthodox and nationalist messages into their lyrics. However, not all Hip Hop fans advocate this stance. This essay argues for an investigation of how Romanian youth respond to the religious and spiritual lyrics in Hip Hop. This mixed-methods study examines whether Romanian youth gravitate toward “spiritual-oriented messages or religious-oriented messages” and are thus, “hardcore listeners” or “casual listeners.” The results of the study highlight Romanian youth’s support of religious/spiritual Hip Hop as well as the ability of religion to foster tolerance.

## Introduction

Hip Hop has been on the Romanian urban scene for approximately twenty years and has shaped public preferences regarding clothing, music, and dancing. However, what is Hip Hop? Some definitions include, but are not limited to "a social political movement created in the late 70's"<sup>1</sup>, "a subculture especially of inner-city youths who are typically devotees of rap music"<sup>2</sup> or "a type of popular music in which the words are spoken rather than sung and the subject of the songs is often politics or society."<sup>3</sup> While these definitions recognize the musical and activist characteristics of Hip Hop, they do not acknowledge its impact. Taking into consideration the four primary elements of Hip Hop (MCing, breaking, graffiti and DJing) and candidates for the fifth (knowledge, fashion, religion, etc.),<sup>4</sup> we understand that Hip Hop is more than just the sum of its parts, but rather a lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> From rapping to breakdancing, individuals born and reared during the last days of Communism (or after 1989) manifest their desire for an alternative lifestyle through one or more of the elements of Hip Hop.<sup>6</sup>

However, what, if any, relationship exists between religion and Hip Hop in Romania? There are three reasons why we situate Hip Hop within this European country. First, based on concert attendance,<sup>7</sup> a significant number of individuals in Romania support Hip Hop. Second, social unrest in Romania has caused many youth to question the salience of the Orthodox Romanian Church. Finally, and related to the first two, Hip Hop's focus on religion and spirituality has led many youth to gravitate toward international artists. The goals of this paper are two-fold. The first goal is to determine the extent Romanian youth respond to religious and spiritual lyrics in Hip Hop. The second goal is to determine whether Romanian youth believe Hip Hop can foster religious tolerance.

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<sup>1</sup> Madison P, "Hip Hop," Urban Dictionary. May 14, 2015, Accessed April 22, 2017. [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hip Hop](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hip%20Hop).

<sup>2</sup> "Hip Hop," Merriam-Webster, Accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hip-hop>.

<sup>3</sup> "Hip Hop," Cambridge Dictionary, Accessed April 22, 2017. <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hip-hop>.

<sup>4</sup> Watkins, Ralph. *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2007), Daniel White Hodge, *Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural* (Downers Grove, IL, 2010), Justin A. Williams, "Introduction: The Interdisciplinary World of Hip Hop Studies," 1-10, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, edited by Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 3.

<sup>5</sup> We recognize that several scholars have various perspectives on real Hip Hop. We are sharing our definition in order to indicate what it means when we use the term Hip Hop in this work.

<sup>6</sup> Although "Hip Hop" generally describes the whole culture, for the rest of the article we use the terms "Hip Hop" and "Rap" interchangeably. We acknowledge the existence of break dance and graffiti scenes in Romania, but they do not represent the object of our study.

<sup>7</sup> Based on "Concert La Coka Nostra @ Silver Church," *București*, May 25, 2012, for *HipHopLive*, Accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.hiphoplive.ro/poze-la-coka-nostra-silver-church-bucuresti> and "DJ Premier & Bumpy Knuckles - Lansare 'Kolexxion' @ Atelierul de Productie, București," October 17, 2012, for *HipHopLive*, Accessed December 10 2016, <http://www.hiphoplive.ro/poze-dj-premier-bumpy-knuckles-atelierul-de-productie>.

## The Country of Romania

Romania rests in Eastern Europe and neighbors Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria and the Black Sea. This country has been an important factor in both World Wars and is currently a member of the European Union and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization. According to the 2011 census, the population exceeds 20 million, and 12% are in the 15 to 25 year age group. Furthermore, 86.5% of the population declares allegiance to the Christian Orthodox Church. Catholics, Neo-protestants, Muslims and Jews are among the religious minorities.<sup>8</sup>

Recent mass protests<sup>9</sup> demonstrate the deep fragmentation of Romania, which relates less to majority versus minority status and more to the division within the Orthodox community. Currently, the three most discussed topics<sup>10</sup> relate to a mandatory class on religion, the quota of Muslim refugees Romania is supposed to receive correlated to the construction in Bucharest of both the largest mosque in Europe as well as of the largest Orthodox Cathedral, and the fire in the Colectiv Club.<sup>11</sup> In all three cases, the core problem is the significance of the Orthodox Romanian Church as an institution and of Orthodoxy<sup>12</sup> as a faith in the state's process of policy-making. Although the state is constitutionally secular, most politicians appeal to the religious factor in their discourse. When it comes to national or international issues, the media oscillates accordingly to ownership or political affiliation and the Romanian Orthodox Church is either vehement in its speech or completely silent, thus neither giving a coherent discourse. In the midst of this, many young people do not know what to believe or whom to trust. Since Hip Hop can be personal, one may wonder whether this genre can also be an influential platform to assist disoriented youngsters when they most need it.

## Hip Hop in Romania

Hip Hop found its place in Romania during the 1990s, after the fall of Communism. At first, it was of foreign origin, imported mainly from the US, but by the

<sup>8</sup> Population Census, Accessed November 9, 2016, [http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/REZULTATE-DEFINITIVE-RPL\\_2011.pdf](http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/REZULTATE-DEFINITIVE-RPL_2011.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> See for example Anna Nemetzova, "Inside Romania's Huge Protests Against a 'Get out of Jail Free' Decree," *The Daily Beast*, February 13, 2017, Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/02/13/inside-romania-s-huge-protests-against-a-get-out-of-jail-free-decree.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding religion, based on number of articles/screen time devoted in the media.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the tragedy that took place in Colectiv club paralyzing an entire country see "Bucharest Nightclub Fire Leaves Romania Stunned," October 31, 2015, *BBC News*, Accessed November 13, 2016 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34684973>, and Elissa Stolman, "After the Fire: How the Colectiv Tragedy Changed Bucharest," April 1, 2016, for *Electronic Beats*, Accessed November 13, 2016, <http://www.electronicbeats.net/after-the-fire-how-the-colectiv-tragedy-changed-bucharest/>.

<sup>12</sup> When we use the term "Orthodoxy," we are referring to the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church.

end of the decade, a few crews like Bucharest Underground Mafia or Paraziții were already making an impact, establishing a Romanian Hip Hop scene.<sup>13</sup> While common themes of these artists' lyrics were the rough life on the streets and political corruption, around the year 2012 a high-profile group started incorporating strong Orthodox and nationalist messages into their lyrics. One might wonder whether these messages contribute to the disorientation or stabilization of youth.

In light of this polarization of society and the personal nature of faith, our goals for this work is to determine how much the spiritual-religious oriented messages of Hip Hop influence the youth of Romania. In the subsequent sections, we first outline the methodology and terminology used in this article. Next, we present the findings, which relate to the public's attitude towards imported Hip Hop, as well as their attitude toward Hip Hop produced locally.

### Methodology

Because Hip Hop is a global phenomenon, the study seeks to examine the influence of foreign Hip Hop<sup>14</sup> on the young Romanian public. Since Oana Alexandra Chirilă is Romanian, she interviewed individuals who were her age peers, who could share national and international life events. Participation in the study required that individuals be at least twenty years old, be a university student or graduate, and reside in an urban area of Romania. Moreover, Chirilă chose to speak to women and men because, although widely seen as a man's world, KRS-One notes, "Hip Hop belongs to all of us."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, targeting individuals from urban areas was purposeful because Hip Hop in this region provides better access to this genre, which includes concerts, dance performances or competitions. It was also important for Chirilă to determine if the scene in Bucharest aligns to the rest of the country,<sup>16</sup> as well as whether differences exist between regular and non-regular Hip Hop listeners.

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the origins of Hip Hop in Romania see *Tango-direct din strada ta*, documentary, directed by Tedy Necula, 2009, Accessed November 9, 2016, <http://www.filmedocumentare.com/tango-direct-din-strada-ta>, and *Originile hip hop-ului în România*, documentary, directed by Mario Ovidio Grasso, Accessed November 9, 2016, <http://www.filmedocumentare.com/originile-hip-hop-ului-din-romania>, and "Începutul hip hop-ului românesc," January 14, 2011, blog entry, Accessed on November 9, 2016, <http://istoriahiphopuluiromanesc.blogspot.ro/2011/01/inceputul-hip-hopului-romanesc.html>.

<sup>14</sup> By *foreign Hip Hop*, we mean Hip Hop music produced outside of Romania.

<sup>15</sup> Originally, his message is a call for peace between the West and the East Coasts, KRS-One, *Move Ahead*, Produced by DJ Muggs, *Muggs Presents...Soul Assassins Chapter I* album, Accessed June 7 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Other cities respondents live in are Baia Mare, Cluj-Napoca, Târgu-Mureș and Craiova, which are all university centers.

## Participants

The first author interviewed a purposive sample of thirty people from urban areas in Romania. In particular, twenty-two participants (74%) were male and eight participants (26%) were female. In addition, the participants' ages range from 20 to 35 years old. From these, twenty-five were in their twenties and five in their thirties. In regards to education, twenty were university students and ten were university graduates. Their majors differ significantly, from medical schools to theology or history. Furthermore, twelve participants consider themselves *hardcore* Hip Hop heads, while eighteen participants consider themselves casual listeners. Pseudonyms protect the identity of all participants.

## Procedure

All interviews occurred April 15 – June 15, 2016. Since not every participant lived in the residential city of Bucharest, Chirilă conducted face-to-face and email interviews. The length of time for interviews was twenty to thirty-five minutes and audiotaped on a cellular phone. The questionnaire has three parts: foreign Hip Hop, Romanian Hip Hop and a few follow-up questions to understand the audience. Questionnaires sent via email took between ten and fifteen minutes to complete. While Chirilă knew some participants personally, she obtained others through snowball sampling. In addition, to make the sample as random as possible, she asked strangers publicly if they would complete the survey. The response rate<sup>17</sup> was high, which may have been because Hip Hop in Romania is generally a peripheral art form. An additional reason may relate to participants' excitement that someone was interested in his or her view of Hip Hop.

## Interviews

**Foreign Hip Hop.** The following four questions relate to foreign Hip Hop: (1) Do you actively listen to religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop? (2) Do the religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop motivate your life in any way? (3) To what extent are you attracted to certain Hip Hop artists due to their religious/spiritual lyrics? (4) Does foreign Hip Hop influence your view of Islam?

As the last 15 years have seen increased global tension between Christianity and Islam,<sup>18</sup> and has given birth to "Islamophobia," we are interested in whether Hip Hop influences perceptions of Islam.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Islam and Hip Hop can jointly effect positive world change. In *Roc the Mic Right*, Samy H. Alim asks, "How has Islam served as a transformative force both in the personal lives and in the public roles of many hip hop artists as community-conscious agents? How has Islam helped to shape their identities

<sup>17</sup> 30 out of 35 individuals participated in the study.

<sup>18</sup> Cassandra Chaney and Wesley T. Church, "Islam in the 21st century: Can the Islamic Belief System and the Ethics of Social Work be Reconciled?," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 36, no. 1-2 (2017): 25-47.

<sup>19</sup> Chirilă is studying the relation between Hip Hop and Islam as part of her Ph.D. Thesis.

and ideologies as human beings in process and practice and their actions as socially and politically conscious Hip Hop beings involved in a movement for change in the world?"<sup>20</sup> Thus, we are interested in how the transformative force passes from the artist to the audience and therefore to the world community.

**Romanian Hip Hop.** The following four questions relate to Romanian Hip Hop: (1) Do you prefer certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics? (2) Do you avoid certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics? (3) Do the religious/spiritual messages in Romanian Hip Hop influence you in any way? (4) If so, which Hip Hop artists' music has influenced you the most?

**Supporting Questions.** In addition to aspects that were the focus of the questionnaire, Chirilă poses the following three auxiliary questions: (1) Are you usually interested in finding more about the personal life of the artists? (2) In your opinion, does the Romanian public pay attention to the spiritual/religious messages in Hip Hop? (3) In your opinion, can Hip Hop induce or teach religious tolerance?

### Terminology

We define the following terms: "spiritual-oriented messages," "religious-oriented messages," "hardcore listeners," and "casual listeners." "Spiritual-oriented messages" refers to lyrics that relate to the need to understand the nature of the universe and the human condition in relation to the divine. This theme does not associate to a particular organized faith. "Religious-oriented messages" refers to lyrics that directly relate to religion, by specifically naming that religion, or incorporating elements of religion into the song.<sup>21</sup> "Hardcore listeners" refers to individuals that listen to Hip Hop regularly, generally have great knowledge of the subject and the music business, and reject the mainstream. Further, use of the term "hardcore" is appropriate as participants commonly use it. "Casual listeners" refers to those less engaged; do not listen to Hip Hop on a regular basis.

Todd Dedman refers to these categories as "purists" and "peripherals."<sup>22</sup> Essentially, Dedman considers all elements of Hip Hop, not just music, and limits the term "purist" to those that, in addition to the criteria met by "hardcore listeners," involve themselves in rapping or breakdancing. Because of this, "purist" does not necessarily apply to our group of interest, as it is irrelevant whether one engages in such activities in this study. On the contrary, the definition Dedman gives for "peripherals," with the required limitation to music, is very much the same as we give

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<sup>20</sup> H. Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right. The Language of Hip-Hop Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2006, 22.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion of the difference between religion and spirituality, see Chaney (2008), Kadar, Scott, Hipp, Belavich, Butfer, Rye, Cole, Pargament, and Zinnbauer (2015), Clark (2018), Handal and Lace (2017). Kvardordt, Sheridan, and Taylor (2017).

<sup>22</sup> See Todd Dedman, "Agency in UK Hip-hop and Grime Subcultures- Peripherals and Purists," in *Journal of Youth Studies* 14, no. 5, (2011: 507-522).

for “casual listeners.” He also makes an interesting observation, one that the interviews support, “The peripherals had a desire to be seen as authentic Hip Hop fans and they understood the need to project an idea of underground integrity, yet they were placing such labels on multi-platinum selling artists and themselves as consumers of such acts.”<sup>23</sup> Keeping in mind the different definitions, for the remainder of the manuscript, we use “*hardcore* listeners”/“purists” and “casual listeners”/“peripherals” interchangeably.

## Results

### Foreign Hip Hop

**Research Question #1: Do you actively listen to religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop?** Twenty-seven participants (90%) actively listen to religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop. Three participants (10%) do not listen to foreign Hip Hop, and only support Hip Hop produced locally. **Research #2: Do the religious/spiritual messages in foreign Hip Hop motivate your life in any way?** Twelve participants (40%) say Hip Hop’s religious/spiritual messages influence them to improve their lives by modeling their lives on the messages they hear. Of this number, three (25%) were female and nine (75%) were male. When comparing *hardcore* listener/casual listeners, of the twelve that describe themselves as casual listeners, nine (75%) responded negatively and only three casual listeners (25%) responded ‘yes’ to this question. **Research Question #3: To what extent are you attracted to certain Hip Hop artists due to their religious/spiritual lyrics?** Thirteen individuals (43%) listen to certain artists specifically because of their religious/spiritual messages; two individuals avoid certain artists because of their religious/spiritual messages. **Research Question #4: Does foreign Hip Hop influence your view of Islam?** In regard to their attitude towards Islam, eleven participants (33%) consider themselves more tolerant of this religion and want to learn more about it because of Hip Hop.

### Romanian Hip Hop

**Research Question #1: Do you prefer certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics?** Four (13.3%) individuals listen to certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics. **Research #2: Do you avoid certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual lyrics?** Fifteen (50%) individuals avoid certain Hip Hop artists because of their religious/spiritual messages. **Research Question #3: Do the religious/spiritual messages in Romanian Hip Hop influence you in any way?** Six individuals (20%) consider themselves influenced by the religious/spiritual messages in Romanian Hip Hop. From these, three consider themselves influenced negatively and the other three consider themselves influenced positively. **Research Question #4: If so, which Hip Hop artists’ music has influenced**

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<sup>23</sup> Dedman, “Agency in UK Hip-Hop and Grime Subcultures- Peripherals and Purists,” 516.

*you the most?* All six individuals mentioned Cedry2k and Dragonu' AKA 47 as the artists that influenced them the most.

### Supporting Questions

**Research Question #1: Are you usually interested in finding more about the personal life of the artists?** Twenty-one (21) individuals (70%) say they do want to know more about the personal life of the artists whose music they enjoy. **Research Question #2: In your opinion, does the Romanian public pay attention to the spiritual/religious messages in Hip Hop?** Only four individuals (13.3%) believe the public actually pays attention to the spiritual/religious lyrics in Hip Hop. **Research Question #3: In your opinion, can Hip Hop induce or teach religious tolerance?** All participants (100%) believe Hip Hop should teach all kinds of tolerance, including religious tolerance. Thus, regardless of age, sex, city of residence or appurtenance to a certain category of listeners, Hip Hop fans believe that this genre has the power to change minds.

### Discussion

As the field of religion and Hip Hop Studies grows, researchers are giving more attention to the roles this genre has in their respective communities as well as how those local scenes integrate with the global phenomenon. Although a strong relationship exists between Hip Hop and the Academy, this is not the case in Romania. While scholars like Dan Rădulescu or Andrei Alexandru Babadac have begun to examine trends within Romania's young population, few scholars examine this cohort, especially in regards to religion and music, particularly Hip Hop. Madigan Fichter's and Adrian G. Matus's works, among others', on rock 'n' roll music and counterculture in Romania during the Communist era are especially pertinent to the current work. Their conclusion of a "psychological need" and of a tradition of religiosity<sup>24</sup> can apply to Hip Hop in Romania. First, during the Communist era, due to the atheist nature of the ideology, there was tremendous toleration of religion. Orthodoxy was the only legal denomination, and even members of this Church had met their end in the Communist prisons. Second, the geographical space that is now Romania is one of the earliest to convert to Christianity, tradition stating that the Apostle Andrew had done his missionary work in the region of Dobrudja.

The main goal of this research is to understand how much the religious and spiritual-oriented messages found in Hip Hop music mean to the Romanian *aficionados*. The findings suggest that although some listeners beg artists to stop "infesting Hip Hop with messages about the Church,"<sup>25</sup> the majority understand these messages and seek artists who discuss faith and religion in their music. This is logical,

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<sup>24</sup> Adrian G. Matus, "The Reception of the American Counterculture in Communist Romania," Accessed February 14, 2017, <http://phantasma.lett.ubbcluj.ro/?p=5823&lang=en>.

<sup>25</sup> Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 18, 2018, author's translation from Romanian.

as most religions assert seeking a connection to the divine is inherent to the human condition. Romanian youth do not necessarily turn to Hip Hop for guidance, but use the messages in the music to inform their religion and spirituality. In this sense, the situation in Romania parallels other corners of the world. To quote Daniel White Hodge on the American public, “Young persons understood God and Christian sacred scripture with deeper meaning than from leaders labelled as pastors or reverends. Artists such as Tupac...were among some of the spiritual and theological leaders for younger generations, because the story of God ‘is from their perspective and their language.’”<sup>26</sup>

As it relates to international Hip Hop (produced outside of Romania), the Romanian public’s views are not contingent on gender or age; however, there is a marked difference between *hardcore* listeners and casual listeners. Essentially, purists have extensive knowledge and tend to talk more freely, while peripherals in general, are dismissive and prone to monosyllabic answers. Therefore, these individuals know foreign languages; have an open mind and curiosity, which, as it relates to religion, can translate to tolerance towards others and a hunger for spiritual guidance. While nearly 90% of respondents have extensive knowledge on Romanian Hip Hop, not all of them actually listen to it. However, as it relates to Romanian Hip Hop music, casual listeners appear to be more into it than *hardcore* ones.

Recall that the majority of participants (90%) perceive the spiritual and/or religious messages in foreign Hip Hop, twenty-seven participants (90%) answering they do, which means they hear them and understand them. The other three participants (10%) do not listen to foreign Hip Hop, but only to Hip Hop produced locally. The reasons behind this question are both the possible language barrier and the rapid flow of some artists. Another possible reason may relate to the strong foreign language skills of some individuals, which may enable them to pay great attention to the lyrics in songs.

Of the twelve (40%) that considered themselves influenced by the lyrics, three (25%) were female and nine (75%) were male, which suggests gender is not an influential factor regarding susceptibility to religion or spirituality in Hip Hop.<sup>27</sup> Neither is age distribution as positive answers come from both ends of the 20-35 range. We believe this may be because men and women receive the same education and grow up in similar environments. However, this changes when we compare the answers from a *hardcore* listener/casual listener perspective. Of the twelve that describe themselves

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel White Hodge, “Baptized in Dirty Water: An Ontology of Hip-Hop’s Manufacturing of Socio-Religious Discourse for Contextual Spirituality”, p. 59-73, in *See You at the Crossroads: hip-hop Scholarship at the Intersections*, edited by Brad Porfilio et al, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014, 60.

<sup>27</sup> While 75% may seem like a high percentage of males, it is not. The number of female participants was significantly smaller than that of the male participants. Therefore 3 out of 8 is similar to the 9 out of 22, the difference is negligible. Although it is evident that males are more inclined to listen to Hip Hop, there is no evidence that women who listen to Hip Hop are less susceptible to its messages.

as casual listeners, nine responded 'no' to this question (75%) while only three (25%) said 'yes' to the same question, meaning that casual listeners are less inclined to feel influenced by the lyrics.

Gender and age are again dismissible and the purists/peripherals comparison supports the second research question in this study. In particular, responses show great tolerance, a tolerance that does not link to a particular religion or philosophy, but rather, acceptance of any religion specifically mentioned or implied in lyrics. This claim supports participants who attest Hip Hop does not lead them to a particular religion *per se*, but rather, to a more open view of the Divine. To support this, one participant says, "Having been listening to Hip Hop music ever since I was a child, I can say it stirred my interest for a world of the spirit. However, to put it metaphorically, I think that all Hip Hop can do in this world of the spirit is to take you to the first station."<sup>28</sup> Another one, thinking about the historical wars fought in the name of religion expresses, "This is what I learned from Hip Hop. To make my own religion in which peace reigns supreme."<sup>29</sup>

When asked which artists shape their opinion, the two groups that appear most often are Jedi Mind Tricks (with front man Vinnie Paz) and the Wu Tang Clan; however, they also mention Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def), Immortal Technique, Nas or Rakim. The gender/age/listener type division is similar to the one presented before. What is interesting is no one attributes their openness solely to Hip Hop, but rather, to their very own inherent curiosity. While one of them used a beautiful metaphor of a bridge between cultures<sup>30</sup> to describe the power of Hip Hop, another simply said, "I did not really need Hip Hop to tell me that Islam is cool. I knew Islam is cool."<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, some of the people that consider themselves purists, and the 90% who said they perceive spiritual/religious lyrics, have no knowledge of the relationship between foreign Hip Hop and Islam. For example, one-participant remarks "the foreign Hip Hop I listen to does not approach Islam,"<sup>32</sup> only to later mention Vinnie Paz as one of their favorite artists. This supports Todd Dedman's observation that peripherals sometimes see themselves as purists in order to gain credibility.

While several (13.3%) listen to certain artists specifically because of the religious/spiritual messages in their lyrics, 50% avoid certain artists for the same reason. This is interesting for a number of reasons. First, there is a dispute over the degree of "coolness" foreign and Romanian Hip Hop have when compared to the other. Thus, it is very hard to find a person that enjoys both Hip Hop genres to the same degree. Second, while none of the participants has an aggressive attitude towards

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<sup>28</sup> Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 19, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

<sup>29</sup> Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 25, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

<sup>30</sup> Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, April 21, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

<sup>31</sup> Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, April 23, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

<sup>32</sup> Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 20, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

religious messages sent via foreign Hip Hop, this becomes an issue when it relates to autochthon (or locally produced) Hip Hop. Third, the artists 13.3% enjoy listening to because of their religious and spiritual messages are the same artists that 50% avoid. Nevertheless, who are the Hip Hop artists that most avoid?

The two names participants mention most often are Cedry2k and Dragonu' AKA47. Both artists have been present in the Romanian Hip Hop landscape nearly since its inception and they both began rapping about life on the streets, drug-consumption and political corruption, only to change, embrace Orthodox Christianity, turn their lives around and rap openly about religion. To these they added a strong nationalist message and while no one dares dispute their lyrical skills, the changes create a rift among their fans. This rift is evident as six individuals report the lyrics of Cedry2k and Dragonu's influence them, but three indicate their music has a negative effect on them. What makes this especially noteworthy is many resent the religion preached by these artists, which coincidentally is the religion most learn as children. Positive or negative perceptions of Cedry2k and Dragonu's music largely depend on *how* Hip Hop artists put the religious element into the song. For those that criticize the two, some assert Romanian artists should tone down their speech. Conversely, the other half fully embraces these messages and salutes the artists' manifesto for regaining national Orthodox and Romanian pride. It is important to note that when Chirilă asked the owner and chief publisher of *hiphopdinromania.org*<sup>33</sup> if he ever received negative feedback regarding his posting of news about Cedry2k or rappers associated with him, his answer was "yes, at first, but then people got used to the idea and now they are waiting for the next trend."<sup>34</sup>

Even though their videos are not being shown on television and their music receives no airplay, Cedry2k and Dragonu' are currently stars of the Romanian Hip Hop underground scene. Given their popularity, The Romanian Orthodox Church have included Cedry2k in their policies to turn youngsters to the Church, inviting him at different events such as conferences, book releases or award ceremonies.<sup>35</sup> In addition, his biography appears on multiple blogs dedicated to understanding Orthodox Christianity, promoting him as a role model for the youth.

As Sarah Simeziane notes in her article on Roma rap in Hungary, "Although often linked to race by artists, fans and the general public, Hip Hop seems in fact to be a locus of identification for groups who feel, or seek to be, outside some aspect of

<sup>33</sup> A website dedicated to news from the Romanian Hip Hop scene, interviews with artists, etc.

<sup>34</sup> Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, April 26, 2016, author's translation from Romanian.

<sup>35</sup> For an example of such an event see Augustin Păunoiu, "Premierea Celor Mai Bune Eseuri din Concursul 'Crucea, Semn al Biruinței'," December 16, 2013, *Lumina Newspaper*, Accessed on November 10, 2016, <http://ziarullumina.ro/premiera-celor-mai-bune-eseuri-din-concursul-crucea-semn-al-biruintei-87501.html>.

mainstream culture.”<sup>36</sup> For the Romanian Hip Hop scene, it is not a matter of ethnic minorities versus ethnic majority. There is not a single artist that identifies as Hungarian, Roma, Turkish, Arab or Jew. It is not a matter of religious minorities either. Apart from a few that stem from the Protestant environment, no artist raps about Catholicism, Islam or Judaism. Moreover, it is not a matter of gender as females have yet to take the mic. For those who strongly support Cedry2k and Dragonu’, the mainstream culture is one that regards Romania as a country sold to the West (or Muslims) or one that has forgotten its roots, values and history. They identify themselves as the minority that keep these values alive and have the long Orthodox Romanian tradition as their core while their opponents see all these as obsolete.

While few dispute the skills behind these rappers’ lyrics, their religious messages stirred two opposite kinds of reactions. On one side are those that, regardless of their affiliation to Orthodox Christianity or other cults, believe extreme religious and nationalist lyrics can have dangerous effects on people. On the other side are those that salute these messages and propagate them via internet or personal relations. Thus, the two groups do not have favorable opinions of each other. To quote another participant, “It was a weird social experiment that split Romania in half”.<sup>37</sup>

Seventy percent (70%) of the interviewees indicate they want to know more about the personal life of the artists, which does not relate to gossip but rather to understand what triggers the rapper’s style or just certain lyrics. This means that a majority of listeners of Hip Hop in Romania is interested in the culture on a deeper level, trying to familiarize with it and its vectors, making it more than a superficial affiliation. There is again no notable difference in terms of age or gender, but *hardcore* listeners tend to respond positively.

When asked about their peers, we return to the idea of “the in-group”. Only 13.3% believe the public actually pays attention to the lyrics and therefore pays attention to the religious messages as well. When asked why they believe this, the answers vary from a supposed lack of curiosity of the other for further information to superficiality stemmed from the need to seem “cool,” yet generally lacks depth. The purists are those that have this kind of feelings and the category they are describing is that of the peripherals. From a researcher’s point of view, these terms do not imply a qualitative comparison, but rather, a tool. For the public however, being a *hardcore* listener gives one both authority and superiority over a casual one.

When discussing Hip Hop music produced abroad, the consensus is these messages can have a positive effect by making the listener aware of other religions, thereby respecting them. However, this becomes more complicated when Romanian

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<sup>36</sup> Sarah Simeziane, “Roma Rap and the Black Train: Minority Voices in Hungarian hip hop,” 96-229, in *Languages of Global Hip Hop*, edited by Marina Terkourafi (London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010) 101.

<sup>37</sup> Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 25, 2016, author’s translation from Romanian.

Hip Hop gets involved in the discussion. While foreign Hip Hop might seem to contain scattered philosophical and religious ideas in a pond of something else, today's Romanian Hip Hop is seen to be more or less only about religion, making Romanian equal to Orthodox Christian and creating rifts and therefore barriers within the community. As previously discussed, the minority versus majority struggle that defines Hip Hop to its core is, in Romania, in no way related to ethnic, gender or religious minorities. The minority in this case is the group of people who are trying to protect national and Orthodox values in the face of what they see as an increasingly "westernized" Romanian mainstream culture. On one side there are those who use Hip Hop to broaden horizons and on the other those who use it to restrict them. Add these to the divisions in public opinion and you get a generation that does not fully understand which way to go.

Although one might assume the Romanian audience is a homogenous community that does not pay attention to religious-oriented lyrics, this work reveals youngsters pay great attention to messages regarding religion and spirituality. Therefore, Romania is not a homogeneous community, but rather, one defined by the division between those who embrace music, which promotes and preaches national Orthodox values and those who do not necessarily reject them, but are trying to bring to light other points of view. Therefore, there is a link between Hip Hop and the religious or spiritual affiliation of its audience, a link that is a part of the much greater issue of the role religion is playing in Romania.

### **Limitations of the Current Study**

There are limitations of this study. First, the small sample size does not allow generalizability of the findings to the country of Romania, other countries in Europe or abroad. Second, since the sample was primarily male, the findings of this work cannot be generalized to the other males in Romania, other countries in Europe, or abroad. Finally, as the participants respond to questions regarding Hip Hop music, one cannot generalize the findings in this study to other music genres. In spite of the small sample size, we provide a glimpse of the relationship between the youth of Romania, religion, and Hip Hop and thereby make a valuable contribution to the Hip Hop Studies literature.

### **Conclusion**

We started this inquiry in order to see to which extent the youth of Romania perceive, understand and relate to the religious and spiritual messages disseminated in Hip Hop music and whether or not Hip Hop can be a tool in the struggle for religious tolerance. As this article has demonstrated, youngsters in Romania pay attention to the lyrics and incorporate the messages found therein into their own life philosophies. However, they are more inclined to do so if, rather than receive these messages forcibly, they receive them and allow them to influence them organically. In light of growing tensions between Christianity and Islam, the findings herein attest to individuals'

strong desire to create a spirit of peace. Recall that one participant believes Hip Hop taught him to make his own religion in which peace reigns supreme, giving hope for a global-scale religious tolerance and pointing to the fact that an ultimate vision of the Divine is a concept every religious denomination share.

As Hip Hop continues to grow, it is important that scholars examine the ways that social changes influence how individuals respond to the lyrics in this genre. Moreover, it is important to note that since there is a wide array of religious manifestations and spiritual ideas, rendering a distinction between the two concepts is mandatory. By considering this distinction, in closing, we urge scholars to continue to examine the far-reaching effects of Hip Hop throughout the world.

“All the best, didactic Hip Hop!”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Farewell greeting used by one of the interviewees, Oana Alexandra Chirilă, *Interview*, May 3, 2016, author`s translation from Romanian.

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