Introduction

This article documents and analyzes references to safe-sex in rap music between 1985 and 1995 by attempting to answer two basic questions. The first question is to determine whether there was a discernible increase in the number of rap songs that reference safe-sex in some form during the period under examination. A secondary question explores the qualitative expressions of safe-sex references by asking what was the nature and tone of those references. This study is a socio-historical content analysis that is methodologically patterned off of the prior work of several scholars that have long utilized qualitative content analysis in an effort to better understand hip-hop culture, and how the subculture influences the worldview of its adherents.1 While this article is not intended to be a direct comparison to those studies, it contributes to a recent and nascent body of scholarship that has broadened our understanding of the role that rap music has played in informing the dialogue around safe-sex in the black community.

Historical Background

The chronological scope of the study begins, loosely, with the September 1985 press conference during which President Ronald Reagan publicly acknowledged the growing AIDS crisis for the first time, and ends with the death of Eric Wright in March of 1995. Eric Wright, the rap artist and impresario better known as Eazy-E, died from complications due to AIDS, only weeks after having been diagnosed with the virus. Health experts and AIDS activists claimed that his death, coming just nine days after the diagnosis was made public, forced a different segment of the population to face the AIDS crisis. More so than the prior deaths of actors Rock Hudson and Robert Reed, rock singer Freddie Mercury, African-American athlete Arthur Ashe, and the especially high-profile diagnosis of Magic Johnson, the loss of Eazy-E led many African-American youth to take a closer look at the contraction and consequences of the HIV/AIDS virus.2 Eazy-E’s career spanned a time when hip-hop culture, and rap music in particular, was receiving intense negative publicity due to what the genre’s critics claimed were destructive beliefs and behaviors inherent in its lyrical content. This included the celebration of risky and indiscriminate sexual behavior, which critics claimed not only led to an increased threat of sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs), but of unplanned pregnancies, and unstable “broken” or single-parent households.3 The music of Eazy-E, both as a solo artist and as a founding member of gangsta-rap


progenitor N.W.A. had for years been front and center in this debate which drew countless rap artists into its orbit.

Ice Cube, a bandmate of Eazy-E with N.W.A., before embarking on a solo career, has long claimed that the extreme language of rap music is not used as an attempt to shock, but to reflect the world that the artists come from. As a member of N.W.A. in 1989, Ice Cube said “We make these records for our people first…Our stuff is more or less documentary. It’s what we grew up with.”

The summer of the same year Chuck D of Public Enemy claimed that rappers are idolized by youths because they tell it like it is, “We’re almost like headline news, rap music is the invisible T.V. station that black America never had…Public Enemy and rap music are dispatchers of information.”

If there is credence in the claims of Ice Cube and Chuck D then the lyrical content of rap songs provide a rich and prescient source of attitudes towards safe-sex among fans of that music, but especially the African-American youth from whom it most directly mines its talent, and to whom it most directly speaks.

The period under examination is particularly noteworthy because it was during this timeframe that rap’s original core audience-black African American youth- began to be disproportionately affected by the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS throughout the nation. Between the years 1981 and 1986, black Americans- who comprised 12% of the total population- accounted for 25% of all HIV diagnoses. That figure jumped to a catastrophic 58% among youth. By 1988 the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that the rate of HIV infection among black Americans was 3.6 times higher than that among whites, and the mortality rate was higher still. By 1993 AIDS was the leading cause of death among black males aged 25-44, and was the second leading cause among black women of that same age range. This escalation was occurring at a time when HIV/AIDS was still largely viewed as an epidemic that afflicted, primarily, homosexual men and intravenous drug-users, resulting in community-based staples such as public schools and black churches remaining largely silent and inactive.

This research focus is based on the allowance that during this time-period- between the acknowledgement by Reagan and the death of Eazy E- the knowledge of, and education about, the HIV/AIDS virus became more commonplace among the American public. This study examines the level at which rap music contributed to that discourse.

**Hip-Hop as Preventative Public Health Tool**

The qualitative and quantitative inquiry conducted here contributes to a substantial body of scholarship that has examined the role that hip-hop culture has played in shaping the narrative around social issues and lifestyle choices, including sexual health, impacting predominantly black communities. For example, a 2016 study by researchers at the University of Texas School of Public Health concluded that exposure to rap music in adolescence impacted the sexual development of ethnic minority youth, including early sexual initiation, by skewing the perceptions of peer sexual behavior. The influence of the music on sexual behavior having been demonstrated, a 2020 study

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by Griffin and Fournet inquired as to the values encoded in rap music that might have a deep impact on youth sexual behavior. To answer that question, they conducted a content analysis of safe-sex and condom-use messaging in the top-10 albums on the Billboard R&B/Hip Hop year-end charts between 1991 and 2017. By coding for condom and safe-sex messaging they “were able to pinpoint hip-hop’s most sexually explicit moments and unpack the underlying cultural beliefs these moments communicate with listeners.” While Griffin and Fournet set out to produce a content analysis firmly grounded in femininist critique, the subject matter, methodology, and partially overlapping time period under examination has clear relevance for this study. Their assertions will be noted throughout the following pages for comparison to the findings reported here, especially in regard to the work of women in rap music and how their work often challenges, but sometimes also reaffirms the gender and sexual power dynamics at play in the genre.7

An earlier content analysis conducted by Rattani, Syad, and Sugarman proposed that knowledge of such messaging could arm public health officials with a more comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural factors that may influence sexual risk behaviors associated with acquiring HIV/AIDS. They conclude that familiarity with the content of rap lyrics may enable them to better understand public-health messages, and to prepare more effective education and prevention counseling efforts. In fact, there have been several case studies in which rap music and other elements of hip-hop culture were used as tools through which to start conversations about safe-sex and HIV-prevention. A 2010 study conducted by Thomas, Stephens, and Blanchard documented how rap music was utilized as a mechanism to spur an increase in vaccinations for the Human Papilloma Virus among young African-American women. And two years prior Turner, Rhoads, Harper, and Quinton had directly measured the impact of hip-hop driven prevention programs in raising individual knowledge of HIV. At the program’s conclusion, they found that students who had participated were more knowledgeable about HIV, but what the researchers did not address was whether the inclusion of hip-hop content made the program more effective than those that employed more traditional measures, and/or what it was about the music that made it an effective medium.8


Heightening the cultural relevance of messages regarding sexual health is research that demonstrated there was a fundamental knowledge gap as it relates to HIV/AIDS among black Americans. Research conducted by Maustaikas and Chin in 2007 supports the notion that this knowledge gap has a direct impact on the rate at which individuals practice safe-sex, get tested for STDs, and seek necessary treatment. Their fieldwork led them to conclude that the most substantial barrier to participation in HIV vaccine trials was the stigma attached to being identified as a carrier of the virus, especially given its early association with homosexual men and intravenous drug users. Fear and mistrust of the American medical establishment also played a part, as demonstrated by a 2005 study from Bogart and Thorburn that found a correlation between the acceptance of HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories among black men, and negative attitudes towards the use of condoms and other prevention measures.9

 Scholars have argued that the biggest culprit in widening this knowledge gap as it relates to HIV/AIDS, especially during its early period, have been government officials on both the local and federal level. One study described how the elimination of the sex education requirement in public schools in Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia directly impacted the HIV rate in rural black communities.10 Public ignorance surrounding HIV was not confined to the southern states, Californians went to the polls in 1986 to vote on whether or not to quarantine individuals who were diagnosed as HIV-positive. On the federal level, the government was lax in providing constitutional protections for persons living with HIV/AIDS, as there were several incidents of private companies terminating the employment of persons who were even suspected of having the virus. This lack of both structural education and advocacy for victims of HIV/AIDS during the late 1980s and early 1990s makes analyzing the response of rap artists especially important. Quantitative data from prior studies measuring the relationship between hip-hop and HIV-prevention would suggest that messages promoting more responsible sexual behavior and knowledge were not abnormal outside of experimental settings.

The type of grass roots hip-hop measures carried forth by the researchers surveyed here were motivated, in part, by the tepid initial response on behalf of the government to the HIV/AIDS crisis impacting the black community in the 1980s. Hip-hop studies scholars contend that there was a lost opportunity during the early phase of the crisis in failing to utilize culturally relevant cues like rap music as HIV-prevention mechanisms. However, even more significant than culturally relevant messages, is that the messages are received from sources deemed credible and respected by the core audience.11 In his brilliant work on the African-American response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, historian Dan Royles related a story of rap music being utilized by a volunteer AIDS task force in Philadelphia to raise awareness of the epidemic among the African-American


community in that city. In 1985 they produced and released a rap single “Respect Yourself,” with an initial run of 500 copies to be distributed to radio stations and dance clubs. The effort was a complete flop, as radio stations in Philadelphia never played the song. Popular opinion was that the single had been too much like a “Sesame Street rap,” with lyrics such as:

Be you a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker
AIDS don’t care about the color of your skin
You gotta keep your body strong
Respect yourself and you will live long.  

While the strategy of using rap music as outreach may have proved visionary, the single’s failure was not unpredictable. African-American AIDS activists had argued that in their communities “the messenger mattered as much as the message itself. Only culturally competent messages- those produced with black communities in mind by those who knew members’ values, language, and everyday activities- would be effective.” In contrast to the task force’s amateurish effort, few messengers are viewed as more credible to the hip-hop generation than the rap artists who originated from within such communities and had the rare platform to tell their authentic stories. It is this credibility, after all, that is at the core of Chuck D assigning rap music its status as the Headline News of black America. With this in mind, the disproportionate rate of HIV infection within the black community would suggest that descriptions and analysis of sexual norms would be a persistent theme of leading rap artists between 1985 and 1995.

Methodology

The present study involved a content analysis of rap lyrics from recorded studio albums released between 1985 and 1995 that peaked in the Top-25 of the Billboard R&B/Hip-Hop chart. As has been the case in other musical content analyses, the Billboard charts were utilized as they provided the most reliable indication of an album’s distribution and sales, strongly suggesting they found a wide reception among the era’s adolescent listeners. From the list of albums that fit the stated criteria, the authors read the lyrics for each song and made note of all direct references, and clear allusions, to safe-sex. All coding was done manually; no software or pre-existing database

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13 Royles, To Make the Wounded Whole, 5.

was utilized. While conceived independently, the methodology employed here is largely consistent with that used in the work of Griffin and Fournet.

In conducting a content analysis of this nature, the authors assert that a strong knowledge and intimacy with rap music is necessary to produce hip-hop scholarship, as so much of its meaning is encoded in an intricate and extensive slang. The clever, sometimes playful, deployment of slang by rap artists constitutes what the sociologist, and pioneering hip-hop scholar, Tricia Rose, called a “hidden transcript” of black culture. The meanings and messages that emerge depend on the addressed group having special access, a privilege of ingroup experience. This necessary familiarity with slang is noted also in the work of Griffin and Fournet, and more so in the work of Rattani, Syad, and Sugarman who compiled a glossary to provide definitions for twenty-seven slang terms relevant to safe-sex discourse. With this close attention to language and slang in mind, the authors carefully noted the nature and tone of those references.

Basic descriptive statistics were utilized to examine whether safe-sex, in some form, was referenced with greater frequency as time advanced. If so, the authors intended to discuss whether this was part of a shift in the larger culture, or whether there was a more specified reason for this occurring in African-American communities, and in rap music in particular. If there was a dearth of references, the authors intended to discuss whether this was part of the larger social silence surrounding safe-sex, or part of a masculine stigma towards safe-sex in African-American communities, and in rap music in particular. Towards that end, the authors gauged whether there was a difference in the number of references to safe-sex made by women in rap music, and how the messages of those artists differed, if at all, from those of their male counterparts.

Quantitative Results

This study yielded a sample of 3,202 songs from 237 albums released by 126 different individual artists and groups. Each song was analyzed for references to safe-sex, including the use and promotion of condoms, as well as for references to unprotected sex and the consequences thereof, including the causes and spread of STDs, most notably HIV/AIDS. 167 songs from the sample fit these criteria, encompassing 238 total references to safe-sex. The tone of these references, and their intended message, differed substantially. After diligent analysis of the 167 songs that referenced safe sex in some form, these various treatments of safe sex were coded into the following categories: 1) lyrics that stigmatize persons with STDs; 2) lyrics that normalize condom use and other safe-sex practices; 3) lyrics that educate or promote awareness of safe-sex practices; 4) lyrics that serve as a critique of the government’s response to the HIV/AIDS crisis; and 5) other, including lyrics that reference safe sex but don’t fit neatly into any of the above categories. These were predominantly songs that referenced safe-sex more as a tool for the artist to display clever, irreverant, or humorous wordplay, rather than an attempt at any social commentary.

Representing just over 5% of the songs from Billboard’s Top-25 R&B/Hip-Hop albums released during the time under examination, on the surface it would seem hard to argue that the Black Headline News of rap did little to distinguish itself from the mainstream media in regards to a failure of directing attention towards safe-sex. Consider for example, other content analyses on rap music that recorded 18% of songs making reference to politics, 20% making reference to substance abuse, and 22% of songs in the gangsta-rap subgenre engaging in misogyny. However,

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a particularly noteworthy finding from the sample is that although the researchers initially set out to examine patterns of safe-sex references after 1985- the year that HIV was finally acknowledged in the Oval Office- 1990 seemed a more pertinent cutoff point for the hip-hop nation as there was a dramatic spike in safe sex references in the 1990s portion of the sample. Of the 167 songs that referenced safe sex in our sample, 84% were released post-1990, including 100% of the songs critiquing the government response to AIDS. This pattern would suggest, as will be discussed in more detail, that Magic Johnson’s 1991 announcement likely served as a driving force in the attention given to safe-sex in rap music, just as has been shown within the wider culture. Future research would be well-served to measure the extent that safe sex has been referenced post-1995, particularly given the public loss of one of its more prominent ambassadors in Eazy-E.

Rap music has a long, proud tradition of educating its listeners without being overly preachy, choosing instead to allow each individual listener wide latitude in drawing their own conclusions. However, it has also been consistent in laying out some pretty overt standards for sexual behavior within the subculture and beyond. This tradition was illustrated in our sample by the presence of 95 of the 238 references (39.92%) serving to normalize condom use in some manner. Additionally, 47 of the references (19.75%) from the sample contained lyrics that aimed to bring greater awareness to issues regarding safe-sex. Many of the artists portrayed safe-sex in a positive manner, either as a responsible approach to sexual behavior, or as a pragmatic and necessary tool of urban survival. In either case they educated their listeners, if only through normalizing condom use and raising awareness about STDs. Many other artists, however, celebrated indiscriminate sexual behavior with scant reference to safe-sex, often stigmatizing those that did contract STDs. An especially strong wrath was reserved for those, both men and women, who knowingly exposed their sexual partners to those diseases. Notable in this regard was an intense homophobia, directed almost exclusively at gay men. The authors identified 50 of the

Quantitative Results of Safe-Sex References in Rap Music

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Number of Charting Rap Albums</th>
<th>Songs Referencing Safe-Sex</th>
<th>Total References to Safe-Sex</th>
<th>Total References per Album</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
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<td>1994</td>
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<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-1995</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>1.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


references (21.00%) from the sample that stigmatized persons living with STDs in some form. Other songs offered an expanded commentary on these issues, such as the artists that were critical of the government’s inadequate or misleading response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the African-American community, with some directly implicating the government in creating and spreading the virus. This was a smaller element of the sample, with just 11 of the songs (4.62%) inferring government culpability. Lastly, many artists utilized the themes and language discussed here not to make a social statement of any kind, but rather exploited the issue as a lyrical device to enhance their rhyme structure. For example, when Parrish Smith of rap group EPMD, boasted that he was as “deadly as AIDS when it’s time to rock a party,” his primary objective was to construct a tight, braggadocios rhyme.\(^{18}\) Even if the disease and its high mortality rate is audibly referenced by the artist, there was no attempt by Smith to broach the importance of safe-sex, or to educate the listener. There was no further inquiry into the disease, nor assessment of those who contracted it. Of the 238 references in the sample, 35 (14.71%) fit within this category. However, due to its less direct relation to the core research questions under consideration, this final category will not receive extensive discussion here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Reference</th>
<th>Number of References (and % of total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lyrics that stigmatize persons with STDs</td>
<td>50 (21.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyrics that normalize condom use</td>
<td>95 (39.92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyrics that educate or promote safe-sex practices</td>
<td>47 (19.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyrics that critique government response to HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>11 (04.62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>35 (14.71%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statistics cited above have established that these matters were given a fair amount of attention in the years leading up to the death of Eazy-E. However, categories like “normalizing condom use” simply measure the number of songs that include references to using a condom. What the numbers do not disclose is the context in which these references were made. The following pages will chronicle these results thematically and will provide a general sense of chronology for a deeper understanding of change over time.

**Stigmatization of People Living with STDs**

While the quantitative documentation of safe-sex references in this study is instructive, it is also important to examine the content of the songs sampled qualitatively in an effort to highlight patterns and narratives common in rap music during the period under study. In the mid-1980s, both the hip-hop underground and mainstream American culture were resoundingly quiet on matters of sexual health. Despite the fact that an estimated 12,529 Americans would be dead from HIV/AIDS by the end of 1985, President Ronald Reagan had neglected to publicly acknowledge the disease. He did so for the first time during a September 17th press conference where he replied to criticism that federal funding for AIDS research was inadequate by calling the disease “a top priority.” Reagan’s first public speech on HIV/AIDS, and the formation of a presidential task force would follow two years later. History has been unkind regarding Reagan’s legacy on sexual health in

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general, and the HIV/AIDS crisis in particular, but his silence was indicative of American attitudes at the time. Even in the arts, despite the death of Rock Hudson and the activism of British-born actress Elizabeth Taylor, the country’s most celebrated figures remained silent. And when HIV/AIDS was given attention in public forums, it often involved victim blaming, passing off HIV as being the exclusive product of irresponsible personal choices. This was true also for the new stars of rap, so recently established as a commercially viable genre of music.

Of the 11 rap albums that charted in 1985 and 1986, only the self-titled debut of Kool Moe Dee addressed sexual health. Moe Dee’s treatment of safe sex followed suit with many mainstream discussions of STDs that engaged more in victim blaming than in trying to find solutions to the crisis. The single “Go See the Doctor,” follows the remorseful rapper as he visits the doctor’s office to receive penicillin to treat an STD:

As I turned around to receive my injection  
I said “next time I’ll use some protection”  
If I see another girl and I get an erection  
I’m walking in another direction  
Cause I don’t want to do the sick sick dance  
So I’m keeping my prick inside my pants

For as much as Kool Moe Dee educates the listener on the dangers of unprotected sex and the importance of seeking treatment, he also presents poor sexual health as a dereliction of personal responsibility, and the local clinic became a reoccurring scene for such narratives. In the years to come it was where EPMD would get their Tetracycline to treat “Mr. Bozack” on the sly, and where Ice Cube got his free “jim-hats” (condoms). In songs like Cube’s suggestively titled “Look Who’s Burnin’,” the clinic was not a provider of essential health services, but a depository for the infirmed and ashamed who, to quote Cube, were “sittin’ there all quiet and embarrassed, whup- there go the bitch who was careless.” Like Moe Dee’s “Dumb Dick” they found themselves in the clinic every other week because they failed to be particularly discriminating in choosing their sexual partners. Notably, Tricia Rose found that the same rappers who criticized America for its perpetuation of racial and economic discrimination also tended to perpetuate conservative notions about personal responsibility, and calls for self-improvement strategies in the black community that focused heavily on personal behavior as the cause and solution for factors contributing to community instability. These included teen pregnancy, single-parent households, and as this study’s sample suggests, sexual indiscretion.

This narrative was also evident in LL Cool J’s 1987 track “The Bristol Hotel,” where the blame for the spread of AIDS rested with men having unprotected sex with sex workers, despite the known danger of doing so. Reflecting the general ignorance on sexual health at the time, the


song contains misleading information, not only suggesting that AIDS could be effectively treated with blood transfusions, but that a woman’s feminine hygiene was an indication of whether or not she had the disease. The misconception that AIDS could be detected in this manner persisted, as found in the 1989 EPMD song “Who’s Booty.”

That same year that LL released “The Bristol Hotel,” The Food and Drug Administration allowed condom manufacturers to advertise, for the first time, that the latex condoms long used to prevent unwanted pregnancy, also helped prevent the transmission of STDs. Rappers like Cool J, meanwhile, continued to be largely devoid of empathy towards people living with HIV/AIDS, boasting, as he did in “Smokin’ Dopin’,” that he was “snatching airplay, from all you AIDS catchin’ singers.” Cool James was far from alone. Many of the rap songs released in the late 1980s and early 1990s laid the primary blame for the spread of HIV/AIDS at the feet of particularly disreputable individuals, and in ways that stigmatized those who suffered from the disease. In "Assassins," off their 1988 debut, the Geto Boys targeted trifling women who knowingly spread the disease ‘there is no cure for,’ an act they deemed worthy of violent physical reprisal. Four years later, this mixture of suspicion, fear, and dismissiveness drives Snoop Dogg’s breakthrough appearance on Dr. Dre’s 1992 classic “Ain’t Nuthin’ but a ‘G Thang’:

And before me dig out a bitch I have to find a contraceptive
You never know she could be earning her man
And learning her man, and at the same time burning her man
Now, you know I ain’t with that shit Lieutenant
Ain’t no pussy good enough to get burnt while I’m up in it

The suggestion, made here by Dre and Snoop, that STDs were often the result of feckless women who employed sex to go after a man for his money, was a persistent theme in this sample. When Luniz, on their 1995 debut, criticized the “Broke Hoes” who slept with them for their money and then came back claiming they “got the itch”, it was indistinguishable in content from songs on the much earlier debuts of Eazy-E and Ice Cube. Only A Tribe Called Quest flipped the script, as male artists expressing empathy towards women who contracted STDs from a predatory man, as dramatized in their 1990 song “Pubic Enemy.”


The stigmatization of individuals with STDs was not exclusive to women. One of the more noteworthy examples was featured on the intro to Snoop Dogg’s “House Party” off his 1993 magnum opus *Doggystyle*. The album was released during the height of the feud between the Death Row label and Ruthless Records where barbs flew between both camps following the break-up of N.W.A. two years earlier. So, although it can be argued that the Snoop-authored dis is literally below the belt, it is not altogether unsurprising to hear the interlude conclude by mocking Eazy-E as a “Busta ass, HIV pussy-ass motherfucker.”

Much in the way that power brokers in politics, religion and media did initially with HIV/AIDS, rappers were more likely to demonize or marginalize people living with the disease than address the structural response to it. This pattern of stigmatization made it where the positive assessments of condom use described in these songs were not generally rooted in motivations to improve communal health, but rather as mechanisms of self-preservation. That Snoop’s dis at Eazy-E came roughly two years before the latter contracted the disease through unprotected infidelity, only underscores this tendency.

In a couple instances, this stigmatization was leveled by female rap artists. In the 1991 song “Lola from the Copa,” MC Lyte criticized the alcohol-induced promiscuity which put both parties at risk. And in 1993 Queen Latifah’s “No Work” put a hot and bothered male on blast, directing the “dingy, dirty bitch” to the clinic. Latifah’s insult was intended as an indictment of the man’s shameless victimization of women, a shot at his virility, and is possibly an attempt by Latifah to reappropriate an insult so often targeted at women (her anthem “U.N.I.T.Y.” pointedly asked “who you callin’ a bitch?”). That women in rap music operated from a position of substantial underrepresentation is undeniable. Of the 126 individual artists and groups surveyed in this study only 6 (4.76%) were female, and they accounted for just 14 of the 237 charting albums that were reviewed (5.88%). The voices of women were further diminished in the discourse surrounding sex, and it wasn’t until Salt-N-Pepa’s 1990 album *Blacks’ Magic* that they addressed the importance of protecting themselves sexually. The collective work of these artists would also combat the misogynistic depiction of women—offered by the work of Cube, Cool J, and Snoop among others—as feckless and virulent carriers of disease. Tricia Rose, therefore, did not interpret such songs as “mournful ballads” about the trials and tribulations of being a woman,” but similar to the work of female blues artists, “they are caustic, witty, and aggressive warnings directed at men and at other women who might be seduced by them in the future.” By offering a woman's interpretation of the terms of heterosexual courtship, Rose concluded, these artists cast a new light on male/female sexual-power relations and depict women as resistant, aggressive participants.

A particularly toxic strain of rap was found in the work of those artists that targeted homosexual men as being predatory and virulent carriers of HIV/AIDS. This attitude was prevalent in American public perception throughout the 1980s. A study of the evolving media coverage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic found that between 1981 and 1986, 83% of stories focused on the disease’s statistical preponderance in the gay community, including references to the “gay pneumonia,” “gay cancer,” and the more official sounding Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, all despite the designation of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome as the clinical name for the

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disease by the CDC in 1982. Unfortunately, the spread of HIV/AIDS further fed into a longstanding homophobia that demonized gay males. According to historian Jim Downs, the AIDS crisis dismantled many of the gains made by the gay liberation movement in the 1970s and, in the view of many, exposed the problems inherent in the “gay lifestyle.” The aforementioned media study disclosed that twice as many news items between 1981 and 1986 noted the closing of San Francisco bathhouses, than those that discussed the Reagan administration’s response to this major public health crisis.29

Researching the lack of a cohesive, mobilized response to HIV/AIDS in black communities, political scientist Cathy Cohen concluded that the disease struck at “groups we are accustomed to ignoring.” As a result national black political organizations, black churches, the black press, and community organizers silently and morally refused to respond. When HIV/AIDS researcher Robert Fullilove approached the leaders of major black churches in the 1980s, he hoped these institutions had the unique ability to unite and galvanize an African-American response to the epidemic. He found instead that “the vast majority were either unaware or uninterested or worse, were extremely homophobic—saw this as a gay problem that had nothing to do with them and were much more likely to engage in the kind of preaching (that was harmful) than just about anything else.” A typical refrain was that while the churches had a “divine responsibility” to tend to those that were suffering, drug addiction and homosexuality were still “against the will of God.”30

These attitudes found a home in the uber-macho hip-hop subculture. Perhaps no act was more guilty of this than the Miami-based 2 Live Crew. Led by Luther Campbell, the music of 2 Live Crew was unparalleled in its celebration of risky, promiscuous sex, its lyrics earning it a place at the center of the debate over obscenity versus art in rap music. In the juvenile 1988 song “Do Wah Diddy,” the Crew attacked, with requisite disgust, the HIV-positive “fag tricking at the bus stop.” Promoting these kinds of cartoonish and/or deviant narratives surrounding HIV had real-world implications as noted above in the research of Maustaikas and Chin, who found that these negative public stigmas correlate strongly with the decisions of many black men to not seek HIV-testing at all.31

While a small, but notable, sample of queer voices have emerged in rap during the 21st-century, no artist, male or female, openly identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual during the time period under examination (Da Brat and Queen Latifah recently came out in 2020 and 2021 respectively). In fact, this study did not disclose a single song in which sexual acts or relationships that deviated from heterosexuality were presented in a positive manner, and rather most allusions to homosexuality were deployed by male artists as a dis to humiliate a rival rapper or crew, as with the disparate former members of N.W.A.


Convergent views on homosexuality notwithstanding, rap artists were clearly not in league with leading religious conservatives, both within and outside the black community, whose solution to reducing sexual health risks focused on limiting sexual encounters or abstaining from sex altogether. Digital Underground, far from promoting abstinence, were the rare rap artists in this sample to acknowledge that it was the only form of completely safe sex, but as Coolio noted, "everybody and they momma preachin’ abstinence, these kids ain't checkin’ for absti-shit. So put a condom in they hand and hope it don’t bust. Another victim of the lust, in God we trust."32

Normalization of Condom Use

It can be safely concluded from this sample that the most commercially successful rappers of the period portrayed both safe sex and high-risk sexual behavior in a positive light. Too Short’s boast in “Coming Up Short,” that he “fucks a different hoe a day and leaves rubbers in the pussy” is perhaps the sample’s most graphic illustration of this contradiction.33 Nonetheless, one of the important aspects of subcultures like hip-hop, and mass media messages like rap music, is that they help to define and shape communal norms.34 The rappers in this sample consistently referenced condom use in a manner that would seem to normalize it for the music’s black fans. While songs describing more risqué sexual behavior became more common by the early 1990s, standardizing safe sex through use of condoms was consistent throughout the entire period under study. By 1988 the members of Boogie Down Productions had declared “jimmy-hats are now in style.” Avid enough advocates of safe sex were they that they could have “opened a school for prophylactics.” And a couple years later Q-Tip likewise informed his crew in A Tribe Called Quest that “if you need ‘em, I got crazy prophylactics.” Although the Tribe framed the reference to safe sex in a positive, if boastful, manner, MTV refused to allow the lyric into the accompanying music video for “Bonita Applebaum.” Tricia Rose noted the hypocrisy of that standard when the channel regularly aired Wrecks-N-Effects' "Rumpshaker," whose concept is a series of closeup and sometimes magnified distortions of black women's gyrating bikini-clad bodies. Despite what Rose called “the power of cultural conservatives to ‘strike the fear of God,’ in music industry corporations,” rap artists in the early 1990s, from Snoop Dogg to the Notorious B.I.G., continued to celebrate condom use as means to brag about their prolific sexual conquests. After all, this study takes its title from Domino’s “Geto Jam,” which proclaimed “There’s nuthin’ wrong with being a Trojan Man, when ya ridin, so let’s kick the chorus please if ya like it.” Unlike their counterparts in A Tribe Called Quest four years earlier, Snoop, Biggie, and Domino’s popularity demanded


regular video rotation, now complete with clear and unaltered lyrical and visual references to condom use.\textsuperscript{35}

This normalization was found frequently among male and female artists alike. In the chorus of the unambiguous “Coochie Bang,” Queen Latifah decreed “Brothers better strap they thang-thang, Ladies, don’t let them in if they don’t have a condom.” And in “Cleopatra,” Yo-Yo applied similar ground rules, “cause it’s cool to be in love with a brother, but nigga, make sure you wear a glove when you love her.” It is the assertion of Griffin and Fournet, that female artists conceptualized condom use, “as a tension between female safety and male pleasure,” but notable in the work of these two leading female MCs was a shared responsibility for safe-sex practices.\textsuperscript{36}

By 1993 the message, delivered by Erick Sermon’s “Safe Sex” was clear and direct, the use of condoms saved lives:

\begin{quote}
But for real, when you’re havin’ sex
No matter what type, make sure you wear the latex
To all the cons out there sexin’
Stop and look, boy, you’re stressed out protection
Cause AIDS is real and something to believe\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

Sermon’s message was buttressed by the announcement, made two years earlier, by N.B.A. basketball player Magic Johnson, that he was HIV-positive. Not only did Johnson’s announcement help dispel the last remnants of the stereotype that HIV/AIDS was a “gay disease,” but as an athletic superstar and African-American icon, his subsequent role in promoting safe sex helped eliminate, also, the concept of condom use as unmanly. And while Cathy Cohen has noted that news coverage of Johnson’s diagnosis was driven by his celebrity status and did not discuss the HIV/AIDS crisis in the wider black community, the impact of his announcement in hip-hop culture cannot be overstated. Sermon’s directive that “if you don’t believe me then ask Magic Johnson” was seconded by Sermon’s contemporaries ranging from Pete Rock & CL Smooth to Jeru the Damaja, and why more than a quarter-century later rap artists continue to regularly drop Johnson’s name.\textsuperscript{38}

In a medium that long portrayed, and more than occasionally celebrated, violence as a routine element of the rapper’s world, it is not surprising that condoms would eventually assume a place, beside the gun, as an essential tool of urban survival. Parrish Smith never left home without either, keeping a condom in his “bat utility belt.” At the climax of “Jane III,” where he is the victim of physical assault, he laments that he “left his nine in the car, right next to the jim hat, it’s my ass, I better think fast.” Parrish clearly didn’t heed the advice in Heavy-D’s “Flexin” to “never leave


without your raincoat, could get dangerous.” LL Cool J even linked these survival tools through lyrical metaphor on “Big Ole Butt,” describing a safe sexual episode where he “grabbed a pack of bullets and pulled out the steel.” The Notorious B.I.G., on the other hand, described his condoms as “shields,” yet another instrument of protection. And in “Just Another Day,” Queen Latifah demonstrates that this need wasn’t gender specific, stepping out with her “Glock, TECs, jimmy hats, in case I need protection.” Cultural anthropologists studying manuscripts derived from this era will conclude that each instrument—condoms and guns—were imperative for the safe navigation through the concrete jungles of New York, Atlanta, Houston, Los Angeles, and elsewhere that the artists proudly represented.\(^{39}\)

The enduring message, as in “Grave Digga” from Lords of the Underground, was that you could not get caught naked out there, and that you better be safe than sorry:

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You’re ready to hit the skinz and everything is getting hectic
So you start your tactic without a prophylactic
It’s too late to cry now
She was livin’ foul, you can kiss your ass goodbye now
She had AIDS you really made a blunder
Down with O.P.P.
Now you’re sex feet under\(^{40}\)
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We can surmise that Ice Cube was being only semi-satirical in “Friday” when, in the fear that his condom would burst, he wore two to keep himself protected. Fortunately, Cube had gotten twenty free Jim-hats at the clinic, good news for Domino who lambasted the “homies out there” that were “too damned cheap to buy the rubber…with the Trojan man sittin’ on the box.” Ignorance and irresponsibility, as regards safe sex, it seemed, had become inexcusable.\(^{41}\)

Domino’s concern was two-fold, as he also criticized the women who trapped men with unplanned pregnancies, and in his view of things, turned their wallets into vending machines. This dual fear was at the heart of Redman’s “So Ruff”:

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To all my brothers, wear your hats, wear your hats
You can either get with this or you can either catch the claps
And to my sisters, make ‘em wear they prophylastic
‘Cause it’s drastic, havin’ another ghetto bastard\(^{42}\)
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Here again, however, this normalization too often involved framing women as dangerous threats and most responsible for the spread of STDs through the black community. This sentiment was clearly shared by Bone Thugs-n-Harmony member Krayzie Bone when, just months after the passing of their mentor Eazy-E, he defended his honor in “Tha Crossroads,” claiming it was “Ms. Sleazy” that set-up Eazy. Their mentor, for his part, was excused of any role he had in contracting the disease.43

**Critique of Government Response**

STDs, whether deadly or merely disabling, and children growing up in dysfunctional, often impoverished, homes were just two of the tragedies that many artists perceived as ravaging black communities across the country. Redman’s piece, for example, made clear references to the drugs and gun violence seemingly omnipresent in both these communities, and in the rap music that sought to chronicle them. The sentiment that these unchecked twin epidemics evinced a politics of abandonment on the part of the Reagan and Bush administrations extended to a third epidemic, that of HIV/AIDS. While not a dominant theme in this sample (4.62% of total references), several artists offered a severe critique of what they perceived as an inadequate federal response to the HIV/AIDS crisis within black America. This connection is most explicitly made by the cover art of Digital Underground’s album *The Body Hat Syndrome*, which equated the spread of AIDS through black communities with the urban blight hastened by crack-cocaine and police violence. The album’s cartoon cover depicts front-man Shock G and the other members of Digital Underground seeking protection within a giant condom as various dangers such as the Los Angeles Police Department, the Ku Klux Klan, and Crack Zombies seek to breach the defenses. America’s public education system and the media weren’t off the hook when Shock G was self-diagnosed with FADES; the Falsely Acquired Diluted Education Syndrome delivered by the system.44

These findings are not surprising given the results of the 2005 study by Bogart and Thorburn which reported that, in a survey of 500 African-American men, 26% believed that “AIDS is a man-made disease created in a U.S. government lab.” This belief is reflected in the 1994 Public Enemy song “Race Against Time,” which found a white-coated government doctor cooking up the germ warfare that had “One hundred five million goin’ down to the ground.” Public Enemy had long prided themselves on offering an alternative take on the news offered by mainstream media—the black news network promised by Chuck D- and in “Meet the G that Killed Me” they sampled the controversial Afro-centrist psychiatrist Dr. Frances Cress Welsing, who gained notoriety in the early 1990s for attributing the dual epidemics of crack and AIDS to chemical and biological warfare waged by white supremacists. Again, such beliefs are reflected in rap, as in the aptly titled 1992 song “Conspiracy,” in which Gang Starr posited, “That’s why corrupt governments kill innocent people, with chemical warfare they created crack and AIDS, got the public thinking these were things that black folks made.”45

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While the Melanin Theory espoused by Welsing has long been debunked as a pseudoscience, survey results demonstrated that her views were not some crazed outlier; even thirteen years later, 56% of the black men surveyed in Bogart and Thorburn’s study believed that the government had a cure for AIDS that was being withheld from the poor. Sometimes, prominent African-American cultural institutions themselves propagated these beliefs. In the early 1990s, the Nation of Islam became heavily involved in the fight over Kemron, a treatment for AIDS allegedly discovered by researchers in Kenya, an announcement that was greeted with an appropriate guardedness by mainstream health organizations. The Nation of Islam framed the debate over Kemron in terms of race pride and economic self-sufficiency, arguing that white American and European pharmaceutical corporations wanted to keep Kemron off of the market because it would undercut the price of more expensive drugs, and that Western governments blocked Kemron because it would interfere with their plan to use AIDS to wipe out people of African decent around the world. Once they acquired the stateside distribution rights to Kemron, the Nation of Islam began to advocate for a National Institutes of Health-backed clinical trial to prove the drug’s effectiveness. Large-scale studies proved the matter moot in 1993 when Kemron was found to be totally ineffective.\footnote{46 Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, “Melanin, Afrocentricity, and Pseudoscience,” American Journal of Physical Anthropology 36, no.17 (1992): 33-58; Bogart and Thorburn, “Are HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs a Barrier to HIV prevention among African-Americans?” 213-218; Royles, To Make the Wounded Whole, 104-105.}

The artists, critics, and public surveyed here can hardly be blamed for retaining a mistrust of public health authorities. The historical mistreatment of African American populations by the federal government, most notoriously the Tuskegee Syphilis Study conducted under the auspices of the U.S. Public Health Service, has contributed to their shared belief that genocide is possible and that public health authorities cannot be trusted. As of 2022 the CDC continued to identify mistrust in the health-care system as one of the three primary challenges for HIV/AIDS prevention among African-Americans.\footnote{47 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “HIV and African American People.” February 4, 2022. https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/racialethnic/africanamericans/index.html}

Education

This bleak outlook, notwithstanding, many rap artists worked earnestly to combat the kind of aforementioned nihilism cited above, with 19.75% of the references classified as educational. As far back as Kool Moe Dee’s 1986 debut, MC’s had in their work, an element meant to educate their listeners about the realities of unprotected sex. That effort reached its peak in 1992 and 1993 when several artists unleashed a large-scale effort to once again inform their listeners, but in an especially positive and progressive manner. It was Kid Capri who, appearing on KRS-One’s “Brown Skin Woman,” criticized too many artists who “talk about sex but then not talk about the next day.” There was simply “too much ignorance, not enough intelligence.” As early as 1990 the female rap trio Salt-N-Pepa was making inroads with their hit single “Let’s Talk About Sex,” where they openly and frankly discussed the three-letter word that was “subject to controversy,” laying bare the facts of HIV/AIDS free of the misconceptions about the illness still too common in public perception. It didn’t matter, Salt-N-Pepa, reminded their listeners if the relationship was monogamous, or if the woman was on the pill, the disease did not discriminate. Two years later, the trio upped their efforts with the release of a public service announcement in song form, “Let’s
Talk About AIDS.” Remarkably, the piece came about at the request of ABC newscaster Peter Jennings, who was set to host a special, Growing Up in the Age of AIDS, and asked Salt-N-Pepa to create the modified work for inclusion to reach the program’s younger viewers. The recording took the prior single and altered the lyrics to more directly educate the listener. It’s a progressive song dismissing misconceptions about how AIDS is spread (i.e., mosquitoes, public toilet seats), about who can get it (everyone), and about what to do if you fear you contracted it (seek professional consultation and treatment). “Let’s Talk About AIDS,” was released as a single with proceeds benefitting the TJ Martell Foundation, the music industry’s largest non-profit for cancer, leukemia and AIDS research, but to further ensure that their fan base heard the message they released the song as a B-side to another hit single, the uber-sexual female-empowerment rap “Shoop.”

A second Salt-N-Pepa public service announcement, bluntly titled “I’ve Got AIDS,” was included on the 5-times platinum 1993 album Very Necessary. The spoken-word piece—featuring performances from members of WEATOC, a Boston-based multi-cultural peer education and youth development nonprofit—dramatizes the panic and fear of a 16-year old girl and her boyfriend upon learning she (and presumably he) has AIDS. How did this happen? She is an intelligent, ambitious young lady, and things like this don’t happen to people like her! The boyfriend is, at first, hesitant to assume responsibility. After all, he is straight! Their illusion of safety is stripped away. The piece concludes with their lament of having not used protection.

Aside from the sound information dispensed in these songs, they and other works by Salt-N-Pepa, are distinguished by portraying the HIV/AIDS crisis within the framework of a healthy, respectful relationship (the young man’s initial denialship notwithstanding). The dialogue is critical of stigmatization and victim-blaming, and presents the young man and women as fully-actualized sexual peers. Griffin and Fournet’s study posited that whereas the promotion of safe-sex practices in the work of most male artists did not parallel a respectful attitude towards women as sexual partners—a claim supported by the lyrics of Too Short, Ice Cube, and others noted earlier—those of women in rap, “exhibit no overt misandrist attitudes.”

Salt-N-Pepa’s mantle of being the most ardent, and positive, advocates of safe-sex in the game was matched only by another wildly successful female trio. From the release of their debut album, TLC was a breath of fresh air into the R&B scene of the early-1990s. Consisting of vocalists Tionne “T-Boz” Watkins and Rozonda “Chilli” Thomas, and rapper Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes, the group’s music was, at the same time, socio-political and irreverent, with content that was as unapologetically sexual as that of their male counterparts. As noteworthy as their music, however, was their appearance on stage and in music videos. In the music video for their first hit single, “Ain’t 2 Proud 2 Beg,” the group festooned their clothing with overstated accessories, including condoms of seemingly every color. Most famous, perhaps, was the condom worn across the (left) lenses of Left Eye’s glasses. As Left Eye remarked on TLC’s own public service announcement, “words cannot express to you how important safe-sex is to us,” a message their inimitable style

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50 Griffin and Fournet, “F**k Bitches Raw on the Kitchen Floor,” 301.
did not leave to question.\textsuperscript{51} A subsequent VH1 dramatization of the group’s rise to fame posited that Lopes was inspired to wear the condoms by an unplanned pregnancy of bandmate Thomas. Of her decision Lopes remarked:

By making it a fashion statement we’re doing something more important—making a social statement...Kids listen to performers and we have a duty to give them certain critical information...So when kids see the condoms, they ask why do we wear condoms? That brings up the issue of safe sex. The point is to make condoms something kids aren’t afraid of or ashamed.\textsuperscript{52}

Lopes added that when the group agreed to perform on \textit{The Arsenio Hall Show} they were asked to eliminate the condoms from their get-ups altogether as a condition of their appearance. The group opted to drop the appearance. This created concern that tour sponsors may be similarly scared off. Lopes noted, “We might do something like having a table to pass out condoms to the kids. But regarding the safe sex issue, we’ll do \textit{something}.”\textsuperscript{53} Their message certainly had an audience, as their first two albums have, to date, sold over 20 million copies worldwide.

That the most progressive attempts to educate listeners came from women in rap is notable. Of the 238 references to safe-sex reviewed in this study, 25 of them (10.50\%) were from female artists, outperforming their representation in the sample as a whole, and a striking number of those presented safe-sex narratives that were constructive and informative. While making allowances for a much smaller sample size, 40.00\% of the references by women in rap sought to educate or promote safe-sex practices among their listeners, compared to 19.75\% among the study as a whole. And while the acts here were never coy when it came to their own sexual pursuits, Griffin and Fournet noted the importance of these narratives to rap’s female audience as an alternative to the single-minded sexual aggressiveness, focused on male pleasure, that the genre seemingly demanded of its male artists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Reference</th>
<th>Number of References (and % of total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lyrics that stigmatize persons with STDs</td>
<td>2 (08.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyrics that normalize condom use</td>
<td>11 (44.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyrics that educate or promote safe-sex practices</td>
<td>10 (40.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyrics that critique government response to HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>1 (04.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (04.00%)</td>
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Among male artists the most explicit overture towards education was featured on A Tribe Called Quest’s 1993 song “Midnight” that concludes with the album’s narrator interceding, “Did you

\textsuperscript{51} TLC, \textit{Oooooooohhh...On the TLC Tip}, LaFace Records, 1992.


\textsuperscript{53} ibid.
know that the rate of AIDS in the Black and Hispanic community is rising at an alarming rate? Education is proper means for slowing it down.”

A particularly critical examination of rap’s impact on sexual health practices, meanwhile, could ask whether these artists delivered critical information in the tradition of Chuck D’s news network, or if there was anything offered here that the black audience, alongside an increasingly large white listenership, could not have received from mainstream media. Salt-N-Pepa’s involvement with the ABC special, and a subsequent appearance on Charlie Rose alongside activists from the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, suggested that rap had fully entered the mainstream media’s discourse on safe-sex, but their partnership with WEATOC was made with the hope that it would provide an opportunity for “young people schoolin’ other young people,” an element of the public that Jennings, in his best efforts, was far less likely to reach. And as the efforts of TLC made clear in their lyrics, music videos, concerts, and television appearances driving home safe-sex messages to the younger members of their audience was an especially pressing need that was close to their heart.

Conclusion
This study explored whether there a discernible increase in the number of rap songs that referenced safe-sex between 1985 and 1995, as well as the nature and tone that these references took. An increase in quantitative references was undeniable, and rap music unquestionably started or stoked important discussions on safe-sex and sexual health, especially among its core audience. This was no doubt encouraging in terms of combating the disproportionate spread of HIV/AIDS across the black community where, as the scholarship of Cathy Cohen demonstrated, there was a delayed and/or stilted consensus message or mobilization. The songs that helped to normalize condom use are particularly pertinent in this area. While self-report surveys indicate that condom use rose among all demographics throughout the 1990s, that increase was most marked and sustained among black youth. According to Child Trends Data Bank, reported condom usage among all teens rose from 46% to 63% by 2003, but that same data set showed that condom use among black youth rose from 57% to 81% during that same period. Even as this spike began to go in the other direction, nationally, with just 56% of all teens using condoms by 2014, the level of use among blacks teenagers never fell below 70%. Black males, specifically, were most likely to use a condom. It is difficult to imagine that the kind of messages on display in this sample did not have an influence on a generation that grew up listening to the persistent, normalizing, and educational messages dispersed through rap music. That by 1992 mainstream media outlets were utilizing rap artists to reach and educate a younger, more extensive audience supports the conclusion that this type of messaging was understood as effective. In short, the authors contend that during the time period under examination, rap music was an invaluable source of information about safe-sex and sexual health practices for a segment of the population that traditional educational forums had trouble reaching or establishing credibility among. And in the years since an extensive list of R&B and rap artists, from Missy Elliott and Eminem to Lil’ Wayne and

Ludacris (as a paid spokesman for the Magnum line of condoms) continue the now time-honored tradition of normalizing and promoting safe-sex through their music.

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