

QUESTIONS

1. What are the messages contained in each of the four media frames the author identifies—*corruption*, *protection*, *danger to society*, and *not censorship*?
2. What are the messages contained in each of the five counterframes used by defenders of heavy metal and rap—*no harm*, *generation gap*, *threat to authorities*, *freedom of speech*, and *important message/art*?
3. Why were the *corruption* and *protection* frames used more to describe the harmfulness of heavy metal and the *danger to society* frame used more to describe the harmfulness of rap?
4. In portraying these two types of popular music as harmful to youth but for different reasons, what does this study suggest may be the racist undertones contained in the news media's framing of the dangers of rap music?

raged by the unprecedented explicitness of rap (arguing that rap lyrics would cause listeners to wreak havoc on police and women). Writers on the “not harmful” side, meanwhile, argued that the rebellion in heavy metal music was absurd, exaggerated, puerile fun, while the heightened anti-authoritarian rebellion and graphic sexual activity in rap music indicated a serious political stance and an artistic subversion of the stereotyped sexual images of black men.

Yet the discourse about these cultural objects reflected not only the symbolic meanings residing in the objects themselves, but also the social context in which the objects were produced and received. In applying such markedly different frames to heavy metal and rap, media writers were responding to the cultural and historical currents of the day. On the one hand, the media went out of their way to valorize “black” rap as art and, relative to heavy metal, avoided discussing its negative side (as indicated by the smaller number of “harmful” articles written about rap). Yet when they did address the negative aspects of rap, their framing selection revealed a subtle ideological shift: Mainstream writers were no longer concerned about the detrimental effects of the graphic music on teenaged listeners, as they had been for heavy metal, but were concerned about the dangers these black youths posed to the society at large. The societal belief that black kids pose more of a threat to society than “our kids” was reflected in the arguments about “black” teenagers’ cultural objects.

CONCLUSION

I argue that media writers use frames selectively to represent the stories they tell. They choose from a set of social-cultural images to make their accounts convincing, compelling, and familiar to themselves and to their audiences. Although there are many different icons and memories that could be used to catch readers’ imaginations, writers choose the same cultural images and memories over and over again to relate their concerns about an issue. This repeated use of certain images produces recognizable patterns of frames, which media writers use to comment on socially important issues.

In the discourse surrounding the harmfulness of music lyrics from 1985 to 1990, media writers in the mainstream press invoked different frames to address the “white” genre of heavy metal music than they used to discuss the “black” genre of rap music. They constructed images of race and adolescence to tell separate stories of the dangers lurking in the cultural expressions of the two distinct social groups. In doing so, they called upon memories of historical events and

sample ("We're Not Gonna Take It" by Twisted Sister and "School Daze" by W.A.S.P.) proclaim a strong aversion to and mistrust of the older generation, while no rap songs in the sample state these antipathies. Heavy metal music addresses the frustrations of the child against parental and teacher authority, as the following lyrics from "School Daze" suggest:

A blackboard jungle, I toed the line the rulers made.
A whole work hell house screams at me like the grave.
Tic toc 3 o'clock I'm sittin' here and countin' the days.
A 5-bell is ringin', hell, and I'd sure love to see it blaze.
Burn it down!

While heavy metal lyrics stake a claim for the autonomy of the young person against school and adult officials, anti-authoritarian rap asserts independence from the authority of the police and white power structures in general. Two rap songs in the sample by "gangster" rapper Ice Cube and his group at the time N.W.A (Niggers With Attitude) depict graphic scenes of anti-authoritarianism and violence against police. The following lyrics from N.W.A's "Fuck tha Police" pose a striking contrast to W.A.S.P.'s sentiments above:

Fucking with me 'cause I'm a teenager
With a little bit of gold and a pager.
Searchin' my car, looking for the product,
Thinking every nigger is selling narcota.
Ice Cube will swarm
On any mother fucker in a blue uniform.
Just 'cause I'm from the CPT
Punk police are afraid of me.
Young nigger on the warpath,
And when I'm finished, it's gonna be a bloodbath
Of cops, dying in LA.
Yo, Dre, I got something to say: Fuck the Police.

Framing Symbolic Expression

To some extent, then, media writers on both sides of the debate used frames based on the messages in the lyrics of the two genres. Writers on the "harmful" side frequently bemoaned the anti-authority themes in heavy metal music (saying that youths would become corrupted in their attitudes about school, parents, and sex from listening to these songs), and they were generally out-

TABLE 2. Content of Lyrics of a Representative Sample of Controversial Heavy Metal and Rap Songs, 1985–1990

Content of Lyrics	Type of Song	
	Heavy Metal	Rap
Hard swear words	2	
Sex, graphic	1	9
Violence or murder of police	0	7
Rebellion against teachers/parents	2	2
Degradation and violence to women	3	0
Sex, indirect references (innuendo, double entendre)	2	6 1
Grisly murder, violence, torture	1	
Sex, group	2	0
Drugs and/or alcohol	1	1
Incest	1	0
Prejudicial slurs	1	0
Suicide	1	1
Number of songs	10	0 10

Slip 'n' slide, push it in,
Bitch sure got the rhythm.
I'm holding back, yeah I got control,
Hooked into her system.
Don't draw the line.
Honey, I ain't through with you.

In comparison, 2 Live Crew's rap song, "The Fuck Shop" from *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, is more explicit:

Please come inside and make yourself at home.
I want to fuck 'cause my dick's on bone.
You little whore behind closed doors,
You would drink my cum and nothing more.
Now spread your wings open for the flight.
Let me fill you up with something milky and white.
'Cause I'm gonna slay you rough and painful.
You innocent bitch, don't be shameful.

As Table 2 shows, lyrics depicting rebellion against authority take crucially different forms in heavy metal and rap. Two of the heavy metal songs in the

Content of Lyrics

The content analysis of the lyrics of the 20 controversial songs sampled⁴ supports many media writers' claims that rap lyrics are more explicit than the lyrics in heavy metal. Although both genres contain potentially offensive elements, rap songs tend to have a higher frequency of offensive themes and to be more explicit than heavy metal songs. As shown in Table 2, two of the ten heavy metal songs and nine of the ten rap songs included hard swear words (e.g., "fuck," "shit," and "dick"), one heavy metal and seven rap songs depicted graphic sex, and no heavy metal songs and two rap songs portrayed violence against the police. While the lyrics of controversial heavy metal songs dealt primarily with anti-authority statements (against parents and teachers for the most part) and sometimes with violent metaphors for sex (such as "the rod of steel injects"), the majority of rap songs in the sample alluded to violent street scenes and graphic sexual behaviors. While heavy metal songs used double entendres and thinly-veiled symbolic allusions to refer to sexual acts and male domination of women, rap made these acts more graphic and explicit. An example of graphic sex in heavy metal lyrics occurs in the Van Halen song "Black and Blue" from the album *OU812*:

⁴The heavy metal song list included:

"One in a Million"	Guns'n'Roses
"Now It's Dark"	Anthrax
"Black and Blue"	Van Halen
"You're All I Need"	Motley Crue
"Let's Put the X in Sex"	KISS
"Suicide Solution"	Ozzy Osbourne
"We're Not Gonna Take It"	Twisted Sister
"Eat Me Alive"	Judas Priest
"School Daze"	W.A.S.P.
"Necrophobic"	Slayer

The rap song list included:

"Dick Almighty"	2 Live Crew
"Fuck tha Police"	N.W.A
"The Fuck Shop"	2 Live Crew
"Gangster of Love"	Geto Boys
"Girls L.G.B.N.A.F."	Ice-T
"The Iceburg"	Ice-T
"Me So Horny"	2 Live Crew
"Put Her in the Buck"	2 Live Crew
"Straight Outta Compton"	N.W.A
"Wild Thing"	Tone Loc

harmful” frames used for the “black” genre were the *important message/art* frame, compared to only 14 percent of the frames used for the “white” music form. Mainstream opinion writers described heavy metal music as exaggerated, cartoonish buffoonery that posed no danger to listeners (the *no harm* frame) while they legitimated rap as an authentic political and artistic communication from the streets (the *important message/art* frame). Various descriptions in the media as “folk art,” a “fresh musical structure,” a “cultural barometer,” and “a communiqué from the underclass,” rap was valorized as a serious cultural form by the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* (but not *U.S. News and World Report* or *Reader’s Digest*). As suggested by other authors, elites, such as writers and readers of the *New York Times*, seem to have exerted a pervasive effort to adopt rap as an “authentic” cultural form (just as jazz, country music, and comic books had been adopted previously), but to dismiss heavy metal as inconsequential—the politically empty macho posturing of white males.

. . . [T]he *important message/art* frame also received considerable play in the two African-American magazines, *Ebony* and *Jet*. Of the 10 articles published about music lyrics in these magazines from 1985 to 1990, all were about rap (presumably the “white” genre was not of concern to black readers’ children), and all argued that music was not harmful to children or society. Eight of the ten articles contained the *important message/art* frame.

Articles in *Ebony* and *Jet* consistently valorized rap music, assessing its lyrics as harmless and containing only positive and important messages from and for black youths. The African-American magazines also argued that the older black generation could learn something from rap: By listening to the lyrics of the music, black adults could comprehend the daily lives of their own children.

FRAMES SUGGESTED BY AND IMPOSED ON THE CULTURAL OBJECT

What accounts for the shifts in rhetoric about these two music genres, both of which present ostensibly “harmful” messages to listeners? If they are both so explicit, why did the mainstream media frame the two genres differently and use such divergent images to make their claims? One plausible explanation is that the lyrics in heavy metal are radically different from those in rap, and media writers merely reflected those differences. To examine this hypothesis, I looked at the lyrics that writers were responding to.

the Manhattan district attorney's office. In the lockup they were nonchalantly whistling at a policewoman and singing a high-on-the-charts rap song about casual sex: "Wild Thing."

In this passage, the teenagers—who from media accounts were known to be black and Hispanic—"nonchalantly" whistle and sing rap lyrics following their alleged crime spree. The image of listeners here (minority, urban youths) differs dramatically from the listeners portrayed in articles about heavy metal (white, middle-class teenagers). Furthermore, the referent images of the threats posed by these two groups of youths also changed. Whereas "our kids" listening to heavy metal lyrics might stray off their expected social tracks because of their incited disrespect for authority or early interest in sex,³ listeners to rap music were lamented not because their self-destructive activities were of great importance or concern, but because they would probably travel in packs, rape women, and terrorize society.

"Music Is Not Harmful" Counterframes

The arguments proclaiming that music was not harmful also shifted as the discussion turned from heavy metal to rap. While the *freedom of speech* and *threat to authorities* frame were used about equally for heavy metal and rap, the mainstream press used the three remaining frames (*generation gap*, *no harm*, and *important message/art*) differently for the two genres. The *generation gap* frame, which derided parents for following the age-old tradition of disliking their children's music, made up 25 percent of the "not harmful" frames applied in the discourse about heavy metal, but only 3 percent of the frames used in the discourse about rap. Thus, writers on the "not harmful" side of the debate also detected the *parental* concerns that infused the debate about heavy metal—concerns that were largely absent in the debate about rap. That mainstream writers on the "not harmful" side rarely used the *generation gap* frame to defend rap against parental assaults is another indication of the invisibility of "parents" and "our kids" in the discourse about rap music.

Just as the *generation gap* frame was used disproportionately to defend heavy metal, so the *important message/art* frame was used asymmetrically by the mainstream press to defend rap. Led by the *New York Times*, 60 percent of the "not

³This rhetoric is similar to that used to describe the danger obscenity posed to wealthy children in the late nineteenth century.

stemming from lyrics endangered society as a whole (i.e., listening to lyrics that extol violence and the brutalization of women and police would lead to rape and murder). Nearly two-thirds of the “harmful” frames applied to rap music were the *danger to society* frame, compared to about one-tenth of the frames applied to heavy metal music.

It might be expected that in turning their attention from heavy metal to rap, media writers would have continued using the *corruption* frame and would have argued that rap lyrics harmed young black listeners by spreading messages that would lead to self-destructive behaviors. Because most writers considered rap lyrics to be even more explicit than the heavy metal messages, rap lyrics should have been framed as even more harmful to their young audience. Yet, rather than warning the American public that a generation of young black children was endangered by musical messages, the writers argued that the American public at large would suffer at the hands of these listeners as a result of rap music. Clearly, the listener’s welfare was no longer the focus of concern.

Unlike the referent images of “my daughter” and “our own kids” that appeared in articles about heavy metal, the prominent rap frames referred to a very different young listener: a young, urban, black male, or more often a group of urban, black male youths. George Will, drawing on the same images, invoked in the Summer 1990 trial of the alleged Central Park rapists, wrote:

Fact: some members of a particular age and social cohort—the one making 2 Live Crew rich—stomped and raped [a] jogger to the razor edge of death, for the fun of it. Certainty: the coarsening of a community, the desensitizing of a society will have behavioral consequences.

An article called “Some Reasonings for Wilding,” which appeared approximately one year before Will’s, used the same referent image of the Central Park rape. In this article, Tipper Gore and Susan Baker stated:

“Wilding.” It’s a new word in the vocabulary of teenage violence. The crime that made it the stuff of headlines is so heinous, the details so lurid as to make them almost beyond the understanding of any sane human being. When it was over, a 28-year old woman, an investment banker out for a jog, was left brutally beaten, knifed, and raped by teenagers. . . . “It was fun,” one of her suspected teenage attackers told

Articles in which the *corruption* frame appeared often referred to the writers' own children (or children like theirs) being exposed to this dangerous material and the potential suffering because of it. Writer Kathy Stroud reported:

My 15-year-old daughter unwittingly alerted me to the increasingly explicit nature of rock music. "You've got to hear this, Mom!" she insisted one afternoon . . . , "but don't listen to the words," she added, an instant tip-off to pay attention. The beat was hard and pulsating, the music burlesque in feeling. . . . Unabashedly sexual lyrics like these, augmented by orgasmic moans and howls, compose the musical diet millions of children are now being fed at concerts, on albums, on radio and MTV.

And in another article titled "What Entertainers Are Doing to Your Kids," the following passage was one of many that charged that decent children were being exposed to obscene lyrics so that the music industry could profit:

President Reagan stepped into the fray in mid-October, venting outrage over music's messages. "I don't believe our Founding Fathers ever intended to create a nation where the rights of pornographers would take precedence over the rights of parents, and the violent and malevolent would be given free rein to prey upon our children," the President told a Republican political meeting. According to growing numbers of critics, irresponsible adults in the entertainment business are bedazzling the vulnerable young with a siren song of the darker sides of life. Violence, the occult, sadomasochism, rebellion, drug abuse, promiscuity, and homosexuality are constant themes.

The frame's implicit message to the reader was that even privileged children from good homes were at risk from the lyrical content of heavy metal music. These arguments contended that *our own kids* were endangered by this music, a message that was absent from the frames used to discuss rap.

While the *corruption* and *protection* frames clearly emphasized the music's harmful effects on individual listeners, writers using these frames expressed little concern that the lyrics would have an unfortunate effect on other members of society. Except for a few references to satanic murders and abusiveness to women, articles using these two frames rarely mentioned the possibility that young listeners might violently direct their new-found rebellion, anti-authority sentiment, and heightened sexuality on the society at large.

The *danger to society* frame argued that changes in attitudes and behaviors

With the injection of new concerns in the *danger to society* frame and the emergence of the *important message/art* counterframe largely for rap, the set of frames used to analyze the discourse surrounding these two genres of music in the years 1985 through 1990 is complete.

RACIAL RHETORIC: MAPPING THE SHIFT IN FRAMES

. . . Mainstream media writers used certain frames about equally in their discussions of heavy metal and rap, suggesting that some frames were applicable to both genres. The *freedom of speech* and *not censorship* frames, for example, were about equally frequent in the discourse about both music forms. Both frames were used in 1985 in reference to heavy metal and continued to characterize the discourse about rap. Other frames, however, were applied primarily to one genre and not the other.

“Music Is Harmful” Frames

A pronounced shift occurred in the frames used to construct the “harmful” discourse in the mainstream media: Frames that were used most frequently to describe the dangers of heavy metal—*corruption* and *protection*—were rarely used to describe the harmfulness of rap music; conversely, the *danger to society* frame was prominent for rap music but not for heavy metal music. Thus, the frames used most often to decry heavy metal music were less salient for rap music, while the frames used most often to condemn rap music were less relevant for heavy metal music. The arguments represented by these frames may have been based on different referent images, given their disparate concerns.

The *corruption* frame, which accounted for more than one-third of all frames supporting the harmfulness of heavy metal music, concerned the music’s effects on young listeners’ values and behavior (e.g., the lyrics may lead some listeners to indulge in “self-destructive” activities). A corollary to this frame, the *protection* frame, urged parents and other adults to care enough about society’s youth to get involved in activities that would guarantee their children’s welfare. The *corruption* and *protection* frames together accounted for two-thirds of all “music-is-harmful” frames used in the mainstream press’ discussion of heavy metal music.

The power of these frames derived from the referent images they evoked.