No sell out: De popularisering van een subcultuur
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Summary

Background

Hiphop exists since the nineteen seventies as a new genre within the popular music canon, and is considered to be a youth subculture, because of the strong relationship between the music itself (rap and dj-ing), the spectacular B Boy style and the way the engaged youngsters participate as a homogenous community. Since its founding years in black New York neighbourhoods, the music and the style it is surrounded by became popular all around the world.

Nowadays hiphop is a music culture which still attracts a lot of youngsters, but certainly not all of them. Besides, there's a great variation in the level of commitment of those who love hiphop, and the genre is not exclusively appreciated by the young. Still the core participants, the fans and most of the artists, remain relatively young, therefore hiphop can easily be defined as a youth subculture.

This dissertation focuses on the popularisation of the hiphop subculture in Europe. In the empiric phase of my research, the material I collected gives an accurate idea as to the way hiphop has become popular since the nineteen seventies, the changes which have occurred during the process of popularisation, and how these changes have affected the hiphop music 'tout court' and hiphop as a subculture? The aim of my research is to be able to contribute to the development of a coherent theory of the way subcultures operate within youth cultures, pop music and more generally in the popular culture. Although the field of my research is restricted to hiphop and rap, the way the popularisation process develops, may also apply to other music related subcultures.

The main research question therefore is:

How does the process of the popularisation of a music related subculture develop from an underground subculture to the mainstream pop culture? This central issue has operationalized into the next four questions:

1. Who are the actors who participate in this process and how do they distinguish themselves?
2. Which factors contribute positively to the popularisation of hiphop and which seem to work against it?
3. How do the interactions between actors and factors look like and are some interactions more dominant than others?
4. What is the influence of this popularisation on hiphop as a subculture?
Audience-cum-content analysis

This field of research – youth subcultures – is based in the studies of subcultures, youth studies and popular music studies. Perspectives from youth studies, lifestyle research, popular music studies and most of all subculture theories of the CCCS have been used to develop a conceptual model (chapter 1). I have used this model as starting point for my empiric content-cum-audience analysis in Great Britain and the Netherlands. These countries have been chosen because hiphop is not only firmly rooted in Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean cultures in the United States, but also in the very same cultures in the above mentioned countries at the end of the nineteen seventies and the early nineteen eighties. Hiphop exists more than twenty years now, and I was curious to find out whether and how ethnicity still plays a major part in the formation of a European based subculture. Also, the two countries have a major (UK) and relatively major (Holland is a Top 15 market worldwide) market share in the popular music market. The content-cum-audience analysis consisted of interviews with 31 artists, 26 cultural intermediaries (people working in the music industry: media, clubs and record companies) and 32 fans, and three content analysis case studies.

The data of the interviews are analysed by using the grounded theory approach (chapter 2). After several stages of (re-) collecting and (re-) analysing the interview data, seven central themes emerged: style, quality, ethnicity, gender relations, deviant behaviour, national culture and popularity (chapter 3).

Style (dress, language, hairdo, musical and lyrical content, dance) and quality (professionalism, originality, authenticity, innovation) are concepts, which play an important role within subcultures at a micro level, and are thus bound to be important within the hiphop as well. Ethnicity, gender and deviant behaviour are both important within the subculture as in daily life for the social practices of the people involved, at a meso level, that is. But they are equally significant on a discursive level in violent gangster raps, Afro centrism and music video’s in which men and women are reduced are depicted in simple, but strong stereotypes (pimps, sluts). The popularity of hiphop outside the subcultural community, as well as the surrounding national culture, point at the interactions between the inner world of the subculture and the outer world (macro level).

The seven concepts form the leading thread of the dissertation and are used to describe the practices and the views of the main actors. The role of artists and their socio-aesthetic practices are treated in chapter 4. In chapter 5 I discuss the role of the intermediary and their views and behaviour relative to the seven central themes. Chapter 6 is a descriptive analysis of the consumptive practices of the hiphop fans.

The seven main concepts have also been used as input for the three case studies. The first case study (chapter 7) looks at the function of music media in the promotion of ‘home-grown’ hiphop. In the interviews the artists, the fans and the intermediaries all stress the importance of these ‘niche media’ for the discovery and the launching of local talent. I have therefore analysed hiphop articles in the New Musical Express (NME) and in OOR, both in a quantitative and qualitative way.
In the second case (chapter 8) I have researched if and how printed media pay attention to the relationship between certain types of deviant behaviour (mainly gangster crimes like drive by shootings and black militant nationalism) on the one hand and hip hop on the other. I did this by looking at the way the British and Dutch press media have treated the following subject: the case of the American rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg, who has been charged for murder in 1993 and has been released from those charges in 1996. Is this media attention really always negative, as much other subcultural research suggests, or do differences occur in the way the different print media (newspapers, mass audience magazines, general music media and hip hop fanzines) treat the subject?

The third case study, finally, is an analysis of the popularity of hip hop in the Dutch charts between 1979 and 1993 (chapter 9). The Top 40 is the ultimate reflection of the choices and practices of artists, cultural intermediaries and fans. In this case I have compared so called subcultural hip hop genres and the kind of hip hop, which makes into the charts, to detect if any differences between 'subcultural hip hop' and 'mainstream' hip hop exist, as most of the interviewed artists and fans suggest.

In chapter 10 the results of the previous chapters are being reviewed in order to be able to draw some final conclusions.

**Artists: socio-aesthetic production**

Studies of music subcultures treat the subcultural community as a collective in which no essential differences exist between the involved artists and the fans. However, the position subcultural artists occupy is much more complex than the position of fans. Subcultural artists continuously deal with the ambiguity of being part of a small ‘hardcore’ community on the one hand and their musical ambitions on the other. Their subcultural identity is mainly based on social practices, while their musician identity is constructed by cultural and material aesthetics. The musical ambitions make them longing for commercial success outside the subculture or for making hiphop which might no longer belong to the ‘hardcore’. As a result of this ambiguity, there's also a difference in professional status between them.

Amateur artists have other standards of style and quality than those who can be called professionals. The professionals really make a living out of their music; for the amateurs the making of hiphop is a leisure time activity. A large part of these so-called professionals don’t produce subcultural hip hop any longer, but ‘crossover’ (metal with rap, punk with rap, *et cetera*) or, what I have defined as, ‘rap mixed formats’ (hiphouse, Eurodance).

In Holland and the UK, due to the differences between musical and subcultural attitude, and the differences between amateurs and professionals, this has lead to a situation in which artists are very worried about the lines between the inner and outer world of the hip hop subculture: the fear of being excluded from a small elite. Only a few artists accept the fact that those lines are really very fine lines, and that being judged a good artist, is no longer linked to their subculturality. But all hiphop artists, from underground to mainstream — the few above mentioned included —, are most worried
about their being authentic. This well-known element of the rock discourse, dominant within the entire field of popular music, is exposed in many ways.

Gangster rap is often considered as the ultimate subcultural genre, although in daily life artists and fans do suffer from the negative associations of gangster rap. Explicit lyrics and macho attitudes belong to subcultural hiphop because it produces street credibility. Opinions about style and quality are also heavily guided by authenticity claims. The harder the sound, the more authentic it is according to subcultural artists. Style is, equally, important, but no longer to those artists, who are considered as the role models and innovators of the genre. For those ‘arrivés’ style does not have to be embodied and objectified anymore: ‘being in the know’ of the latest trends and brands will do.

In terms of gender and ethnicity the claims of authenticity resulted in a subcultural hierarchy among the artists, starting from black male artists in the top, followed by black females and on a short distance white males, and ending by white female artists. Black is ‘natural’ dominant in the hiphop subculture, as is masculinity. In the nineteen eighties and nineties black female hiphop artists were very successful with rap mixed formats (hiphop soul, R&B, hiphouse), and as a result of that, white male artists have, in a musical way, gained more respect than black females. On the social subcultural ladder however, white male artists suffer from the black dominance. For white female there is hardly any respect, which explains why this category is close to non-existent.

The strong authenticity claims and the negative image of the hiphop subculture in the outer world resulted in drawing very strict lines between the rock and pop idiom, between underground and mainstream. The internal cohesion is best kept by maintaining the boundaries between the inner world and outer world, although this dichotomy no longer exist on musical and professional grounds and has become a continuum of styles and attitudes. Only a few artists have found a way to deal with these changes. Some artists have succeeded in expanding their territory because the hiphop subculture itself is still growing (horizontal popularisation), others crossed over to other audiences (vertical popularisation).

Cultural intermediaries: material production

In my research the differences between people working within record companies, in the media or at clubs were not as big as the differences between amateurs and professionals; this is the very reason why I call all people working in the music culture industry cultural intermediaries. The differences between amateurs and professionals, however, make clear that a subculture not only consists of fans and artists, but also of people (the amateurs), who, as dedicated fans, decided to promote hiphop and have set up independent record labels, fan magazines, started working as journalists or went into club and live promotions. Amateur intermediaries act, like the amateur artists, more from a subcultural perspective. In their work street credibility, small-scale activities and limited target group perceptions prevail.

Professionals, who work from a more general perspective, have completely different views about the style and the quality of hiphop. In their opinion home-grown hiphop
artists often lack professionalism and hardcore hiphop has too little quality to appeal to both crossover and mass audiences. Black intermediaries are in both countries more to be found on the amateur side. Women working as cultural intermediaries are still a minority, but if they do, they can be found both in amateur and professional functions.

The way intermediaries do deal with national hiphop comes down to three strategies. The socio-cultural strategy treats hiphop as a social movement, rooted in black ghettos, which raises relevant social and political issues. The acknowledgement strategy gives space to both new and to subcultural (amateurish) acts, but does this by trial and error, hoping that one major success might emerge eventually. This strategy is very well known at major record labels, and can in my research also be found among club intermediaries and some journalists. The third strategy, the adaptation or adjustment strategy, is constantly trying to adjust hiphop within existing rock or pop frames. In micro media the social strategy is the most frequently used. Niche and mass media often use a combination of acknowledgement and socio-cultural strategy. Big commercial clubs prefer to deploy the strategy of acknowledgement and the socio-cultural one side by side. Big record labels usually start with trial and error and go for the adjustment strategy, once an artist has broken through.

So it seems these strategies are divided unequally among the three branches and none of them is exclusively used within one branch. This indicates two things. Firstly, those intermediaries, due to the fact that they all have to promote and sell cultural products, resemble each other very much in their work attitude. This becomes even clearer, when looking to the huge amount of intermediaries that work for two or sometimes even more cultural institutions at the same time. And secondly, that the perceived gap and misunderstanding between artists on the one hand and intermediaries on the other, can be solved, or at least diminished by the amateur intermediaries, who understand both subcultural values and the strategies of the music industry branch, they work in.

The relationships between the three branches are very tight, but the media are, in the end, the most essential part. Without any media buzz, clubs and record companies can’t contract hiphop acts without financial consequences. A huge buzz alone is no guarantee for success, but it can be a big help. The promotional function of the media is vital for the popularisation of hiphop, both inside and outside the subcultural community.

**Fans: consumptive practices**

There is not such a thing as ‘the’ hiphop fan. Differences in random I have found are related to their level of commitment, the subcultural capital they invest, but have also to do with social and economical backgrounds and – to a certain extent – with the kind of hiphop they like. I distinguish four hiphop fan types: subcultural members, generalist connoisseurs, specialist connoisseurs and incidental lovers. All subcultural members once started as a non-subcultural fan, mostly as specialist connoisseur.

In comparison to the other fans, the subcultural members invest more money, time and energy in hiphop and they share a strong feeling of belong to a community. Following Fiske’s and Willis’ theories of consumptive practices, they show a lot of symbolic
creativity, which goes beyond mere semiotic productivity. Their subcultural fandom is mainly expressed in enunciative and textual productivity: attending fan club days, participating in chat sessions, keeping diaries and scrap books. The enunciative productivity is most important in creating and maintaining the subcultural group identity.

Sometimes fans possess, in a certain manner, even more subcultural knowledge than the genuine subcultural members, yet they lack the necessary social capital to participate in the subculture. But they don’t care. They are, what I have called, generalist connoisseurs. They are aware they besides some subcultural capital; they are also the owners of cultural capital in a more general way. They love all kinds of music, though mainly within the rock canon. Style paraphernalia of hiphop don’t interest them much. The musical aesthetic authenticity of hiphop is the main focus in their fandom.

Another type of fandom can be found among mainly young fans, which I have called ‘specialist connoisseurs’. Unlike the generalists and the subcultural members, these fans only like one or two artists and do not embrace the complete genre. These fans are potential subcultural members if they invest more in enunciative productivity. Their fandom is an expression of a mix of rock and pop idiom, although the rock part is dominant. The specialist connoisseur is especially keen on adopting many elements of the subcultural look, in order to combine these with elements of other (often black) styles. A lot of these youngsters, who look subcultural, do not in a strict sense, belong to the subculture.

Finally, I have distinguished the incidental lovers, who once in a while buy a hiphop record or attend a concert. Their fandom is pop orientated and their fan practices are limited to semiotic productivity. Occasionally they wear a hiphop branded T-shirt, not longing for subcultural status, but because they want to be hip.

Besides differences in fandom there are also clear gender and ethnic differences, as I have already shown in the part I dedicated to the artists. The moral panic surrounding hiphop (violence and misogyny in gangster rap) is something they all find very offensive. This is not only the case for the subcultural members, but for all fans. In spite of, or maybe even thanks to all the controversy, hiphop fans in all their variety are extremely proud of their music preference.

**Niche media and the popularisation of national hiphop**

In the *OOR* and *NME* material I have researched, I have tried to establish how hiphop has been picked up in these magazines, and to what degree attention is paid to national hiphop between 1979 and 1994.

None of them have discovered hiphop in an early stage. Hiphop was already mainstream (charts success for Sugar Hill Gang) when they started to publish about the hiphop in the United States. Neither *OOR* nor *NME* have had a part in the discovery of hiphop as a new interesting genre. So it was no surprise to see that it took a while before they started to cover national hiphop acts, but both magazines have been essential for the popularisation of national hiphop. As a matter of fact a lot of artists have been covered years before they had actually reached the charts. Yet *OOR* has had far more difficulty as compared to *NME*, to evaluate national (Dutch) hiphop as a genre with its own particular qualities.
The over all conclusion is that *OOR* and *NME* were not trend setting in discovering hiphop as music, but they really played a significant role in putting hiphop on the agenda as a social movement. When hiphop was no longer considered as a gimmick, but as a firmly rooted subculture, both magazines took up their pioneer role and paid more attention to upcoming hiphop talent and crossovers between hiphop and other rock-orientated genres.

**The representation of deviant behaviour: Snoop Doggy Dogg**

The way Snoop is represented in the print media has two preferred readings. The first one concern musical qualities, the other reflects the promotional function of the media.

Snoop's music, is almost without exception, evaluated very positively. Reviews of Snoop’s debut are not only positive, but also perfectly fit in the dominant rock idiom of pop journalism. His hiphop is promoted as an interesting art form, both in micro, niche, and mass media. This cultural promotion function of the media is very much neglected in subculture studies, which pay far more attention to the commercial and ideological incorporation of subcultures.

The other preferred reading is very complex. In their presumed watchdog function the analysed media pay attention to gangster rap and Snoop’s murder charge. The articles reflect a major concern with degrading values and the threat of gangster mentality being embraced by large (white) hiphop audiences. Like earlier representations of subcultures, the issue of ‘youth as problem’ is far more dominant than ‘youth as fun’. The moral panic each subculture seems to produce, has also been found in the media coverage of Snoop.

There are some striking similarities in this media coverage: the use of inadequate sources, the use of photo’s and illustrations, and, apart from the subcultural micro media, the initial irrelevance of Snoop to mass audiences. Snoop was completely unknown at the time of the excessive media coverage. When Snoop finally was released from the murder charge in 1996, hardly any of the media I have analysed have paid attention to this release, although by that time Snoop had become very popular. The moral panic surrounding Snoop is *de facto* not about Snoop himself, and not even about gangster rap, but about the influence of black culture as a whole, therefore exceeding the traditional subcultural fuss.

But all this attention, prompted by watchdog motives, only had one, probably opposite effect: Snoop became extremely popular. The watchdog motives of titles like *The Times* and *Het Parool*, turned into ordinary promotion for an artist.

**Charts success**

Between 1979 and 1993 hiphop has become more popular, both in the number of hits and their weight. Three processes characterize the popularisation of hiphop.

Firstly, hiphop has been picked up as a gimmick, a funny side effect of disco music. Secondly, only the most danceable and melodic elements of subcultural hiphop have
been adapted into the mainstream. So only two elements of subcultural hiphop have been taken over: repetition (danceable) and 'flow' (melodic). Other characteristics, like the way mix, rupture and layering are used in hiphop, have become less popular.

And finally, as with other genres, political lyrics (message raps) are less popular than sex and entertainment raps.

The popularisation of hiphop was not an example of step by step progress, in which the subcultural members act as the avant-garde opinion leaders who's taste preferences are adopted by mass audiences. So called mainstream audiences and subcultural audiences co-exist, and both prefer other types of hiphop. If, occasionally, large non-subcultural audiences buy 'real' subcultural hiphop, they prefer the most melodic and danceable sub genres, so can be concluded from the charts analysis.

Conclusions

The conducted research offers a new, a more detailed starting point for other subcultural studies. The way the seven central concepts have been filled in, is very topic (i.e. hiphop) specific. The conceptual model in itself can easily be used for future research, although it is probably less suitable for non-music subcultures.

The most obvious conclusion of my dissertation is the need to differentiate. In contrast to lots of other subculture studies my research shows that a subculture consists of people playing different roles (artist, fan, intermediary) and showing different levels of commitment. Another would be that when researching a music genre, which originated as a subculture, it is necessary to look at non-subcultural (f)actors as well, because both inner and outer world construct the idea of a subculture.

The popularisation of hiphop occurred on two levels: horizontal and vertical, and by becoming part of the mainstream pop culture, the subculture has not died out. The two co-exist, though not always in peaceful harmony. The moral panic surrounding hiphop, has a negative impact on the self-image of the involved fans and artists, male and female, black and white. And the arrival of hiphop in the arena of the mainstream makes them anxious, but proud.