

Social Media Platform and Subculture of Chinese Adolescent Hip-Hop Lovers: A Case Study on Social Interactions of Net Ease Cloud Music Users

Haoxing Huang^{1, *}

¹ Guangdong Experimental High School, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, China

*Corresponding author. Email: dao.sprefe@natains.org

ABSTRACT

This paper gives a vision of the general history and influence of hip-hop music. It focuses on its impact on Chinese adolescent hip-hop lovers. Since there is little research that investigates the interactions of teenage hip-hop lovers online, let alone research about Chinese young hip-hop fans, this paper specifically analyzes teenagers' social interactions on a popular Chinese online music application, Net Ease Cloud Music. It introduces certain functions of this music application that assist with the development and localization of hip-hop music in China and then finds out about special interactions of adolescent hip-hop lovers on this music platform. By looking through the hip-hop sections and comments under rap songs on Net Ease Cloud Music, combining them with appropriate explanations in the field of Psychology, it was found that Net Ease Cloud Music provides ordinary people with opportunities to compose and post songs online, turning them into amateur or professional rappers. Under the function of the comment area below each rap song, it can be observed that Chinese teenage hip-hop fans have divided into different subcultures based on their favorite styles or rappers. Between subcultures, there may be "beef", a street language in hip-hop culture that stands for conflicts, or peaceful and objective conversations, both of which are for achieving a sense of individuality and belonging. The result of the current research can be generalized to other Chinese online music platforms that have similar environments compared to that of Net Ease Cloud Music. It offers an outlook on the social interactions of Generation Z on the Internet at present.

Keywords: Hip-hop, Social Media, Subcultures, Cloud Music

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most popular music genres, hip-hop music, created by African-Americans and Latin-Americans in Bronx, New York in the 1970s, its influence has expanded globally. It was not an overnight success, but rather decades of development which turned into the prosperity of this African-American culture, and at last became one of the best-known music genres at the end of the 2010s. It has gone through many different barriers, and one of them is the negative stereotypes toward hip-hop music as well as the black community. What's worse, the rap culture needed to face the criticism and denigration from both white and black communities due to its origin in poor neighbourhoods [1]. It slowly thrived, from inner communities in New York City to California on the west coast, as well as other major cities like Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, etc. Based on different regions, hip-hop music has evolved into different

branches, such as old school, new school, trap, emotional rap, and so on.

At the present, hip-hop has a strong effect on a global scale. It is suggested as a tool for people, especially adolescents, to explore their cultural identity. Since hip-hop music, as a product of the multicultural community, was created from the bottom of the society, it breaks the limits between different people's cultures and perspectives and connects different people around the world [2]. This impact applies to different racial groups and different countries. For Southeast Asian Americans, hip-hop can provide them with identity resistance and a sense of belonging. Hip-hop, as a "fluid, hybrid identity", enables them to fit better in the society [3]. For Nigerians, hip-hop music has been mixed with their local styles of music that attracted Nigerian youth. This type of influential music can be used by the government, NGOs (Non-Governmental Organization), and distinct

programs to reach out to teenagers for education and employment [4]. In the United Kingdom, the only style of music that clubs played in the 1980s was hip-hop, and it improved the solidarity not only of British Africans but also of British Asians, creating ways for them to focus on discovering racial identity [5]. In Hong Kong, China, adolescents, and young adults use rap to show their attitudes toward life, and a series of standards for evaluating the quality of a certain Cantonese rap song has been established, such as rhymes, contents, and authenticity [6].

There are also other special effects of hip-hop music on teenagers and young adults globally. Music videos of rap songs usually contain sexual or violent cues, which can misguide teenagers and affect their psychological development, such as developing negative stereotypes towards females [7]. In order not to let hip-hop music mislead adolescents that are not experienced, adults can help assess the lyrics, and children should have a critical pattern of thinking to set up an objective way to evaluate rap songs [8]. Because of its popularity, hip-hop is frequently utilized as a promotion tool to educate and inspire adolescents. For instance, many black female rappers use their rap songs to promote feminism, teaching young ladies to be confident, strong, and independent [9]. For high school students, hip-hop can even improve their communication ability and learning ability with the proper content of rap songs [10].

As a country with the largest population by far, China has a large base of hip-hop fans. 2021 White Paper on the Development of Rap Music in China shows that 80.5% of hip-hop music listeners listen to hip-hop music on online music platforms. On a Chinese music application named Net Ease Cloud Music, there are 180.5 million monthly active users in 2020 [11]. However, there is little research about the interactions between adolescent hip-hop lovers on online music applications, especially those in China. This paper will look into some particular functions of Net Ease Cloud Music that boost the composition of Chinese hip-hop and the love of hip-hop fans for hip-hop, and the special interactions, like forming subcultures, that take place on this popular Chinese music platform.

2. INFLUENCE OF HIP-HOP MUSIC ON ADOLESCENTS

As one of the most popular music genres nowadays, the influence of hip-hop music is widespread. As the main listener of hip-hop music, adolescents are largely impacted by it psychologically.

In the past 10 years, modern teenagers' feelings connect strongly with hip-hop music. Teenagers are relatively more emotional than other generations; they are easy to have strong feelings that can be changed within seconds. This is attributed to adolescents' brain

development and life experience. Their prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for emotions and mood, develops rapidly during adolescence. They are more sensitive to different events and experiences, thereby having more intense feelings. This characteristic of adolescents fits well with the strong beats and flows of hip-hop music. Hip-hop has few limitations or rules for making rap songs, allowing teenagers to freely express feelings and release pressure through hip-hop music. Intense beats and rapid rapping may represent rappers' anger, slow tone may indicate rappers' grief, etc. A typical example may be one of the branches of hip-hop music --- emotional rap, as known as EMO rap. This sort of hip-hop music is extremely popular among adolescents since their sadness, which usually cannot be understood by adults, is shown in EMO songs. Their previously unnoticed feelings are expressed in grieving melodies, which stabilize their moods and remind them that many other people share the same feeling. This shows that hip-hop music can feed adolescents' emotional needs. On Net Ease Cloud Music, one of the most popular emotional rappers is Xxxtentacion. His most listened to song on this platform, *Everybody Dies In Their Nightmares*, has 70894 comments so far on Feb 14th, 2022. The NO.1 comment, which received 101494 likes, says that "Everyone dies and lives in endless self-inflicted bondage." The second highest comment, with a similar grieving style, says that "How to evaluate rapper Xxxtentacion's musical style? I once thought he was a lunatic, only to find out later that he is a mirror." There are plenty of comments like this on Net Ease Cloud Music that listeners show their moods of depression and sadness. Due to the vast number of this type of depressing comment, the Net Ease Cloud Music has a homophonic nickname in Chinese that means "depressing Net Ease Cloud Music."

Hip-hop music, as an influential music culture, provides adolescents with an opportunity to socialize. Through different lyrics and rhythms, adolescents can not only reduce stress but also find someone who has the same feelings and even make friends. This may explain why in general, there are more remix songs and collaborations in hip-hop music than in other music genres because once they have empathy on a certain subject, rappers are likely to work together on a song. As for teenagers, hip-hop lovers with the same musical taste can establish broader social circles. They have common topics and interests, beneficial to socialization. Even for those teenagers who are introverted, they can still find someone with the same mind as hip-hop culture is inclusive. Under Kanye West's song "Moon", the top comment says that "Let the moon replace the street lights I used to light up the road ahead for me" (Moon and Street Lights are both rappers Kanye West's songs). This pun reflects the optimism of this person and the positive impact of hip-hop music on him.

Different subcultures diverge due to different branches of hip-hop music, like old-school, new-school, trap, etc. Despite the general love for hip-hop music, hip-hop lovers that love different rap styles prefer to stay in various social circles, forming different subcultures. They tend to share the same views in their subcultures while arguing against others. This can be one of the reasons why there is plenty of "beef" --- a slang standing for conflicts in hip-hop culture --- in hip-hop, especially in a scenario where rappers dissing each other leads to their fans fighting against each other. In general, there is a chain of contempt among different varieties of hip-hop music. Old-school music tends to be at the top of the chain since it is the original type of hip-hop music. New-school would also be respectful, as it needs certain techniques to compose new-school rap, such as rich vocabulary and catchy flows. On the contrary, trap music, despite its highest popularity, is considered inferior for its poor vocabulary and meaningless topics. A comment under Eminem's song Rap God states that Eminem is "the most successful male singer in the 21st century, the first white rapper to explode, more than 172 million album sales and 15 Grammy Awards. Rolling Stone praised him as the king of hip-hop and even included him in the list of One of the 100 Greatest Entertainers of all Time. (He is) the well-deserved king of hip-hop, the belief of countless rap fans." This comment received 124973 likes up until Feb 15th, 2022, mostly from Eminem's fans. As expected, there are disagreements on this comment, one of which says that "I don't know what your qualification is to belittle Kris Wu (a Chinese-Canadian rapper). Are you taller and handsome than him, or richer and more talented than him?"

The differences between subcultures bring conflicts between each other, resulting in fights and diss songs, which mean songs that attack a certain rapper. Due to the freedom of topics and speakers, straightforward attacks are common in hip-hop music. In diss songs, rappers usually use strong language and aggressive tone to shame/her opponents. As their loyal fans, teenagers, who are generally more likely to follow and support their favorite rappers than people in other age groups, would also follow their acts and humiliate others. This aggressive interaction between hip-hop lovers can also be seen as socialization. Eminem's song Not Alike fires on the trap rappers that have weak flows, noisy beats, and mumble rapping style, and the song is supported by his fans. There is one comment under this diss track saying that "The styles of the two (Eminem and Drake, another very famous rapper and R&B singer) are different, I like them but I have to admit that Drake's songs are indeed more musical." And soon there is a comment below this, saying in an aggressive tone, "How do YOU define musical?" This typical comment supports that the disagreements between hip-hop audiences do not necessarily lead to irrationalness towards each other. Some listeners admit the differences between hip-hop

subcultures and try to be inclusive in order not to offend others when they state their personal opinions. This sort of social interaction is based on respect for each other's likes. It is not irrational assault or disavowal, but a friendly-talking environment.

This back-and-forth argument caused by disses between rappers shows the unique social interactions in hip-hop music. Hip-hop music tends to raise more perspectives and disagreements between listeners than other music genres. This can be attributed to the fewer limits on composing hip-hop songs as hip-hop culture was founded in poor neighbourhoods. People may find it easier to understand hip-hop music, and since there isn't a criterion to rate hip-hop music, the evaluation of a certain rap song usually varies among hip-hop listeners. This contributes to the distinct subcultures of hip-hop music, and the interactions, such as disses, between them.

Hip-hop music can provide teenagers with a wider horizon of the world. As previously mentioned, there is no limit to subjects in hip-hop music, meaning that topics of hip-hop music are various, such as money, gangster, family, loyalty, patriotism, etc. Adolescents, through hip-hop music, can learn about others' experiences and different values. There are positive impacts of hip-hop music on adolescents --- sometimes rappers praise good human values like friendliness and kindness, while there are also negative impacts, like topics of sex, money, and drugs.

3. NET EASE CLOUD MUSIC AMONG TEENAGERS

Net Ease Cloud Music is one of the most well-known music applications in China. It is not among the earliest music applications in China (got into the market in 2013), but it has quickly attracted plenty of music lovers, especially teenagers and young adults. In 2020, Over 90% of Net Ease Cloud Music's active users were under the age of 29; 60% of new users were born after 2000. Certain features of this Chinese music application continuously attract adolescents.

3.1. Self-motivated Content Producers

The most special characteristic of Net Ease Cloud Music is that it provides a platform for musicians, whether they are popular or not. For unpopular musicians, they can sign with Net Ease Cloud Music and post their songs on this music application. With enough money, they can even ask it to help advertise their songs. There is no barrier for people to post music on this platform, whether you are a professional or amateur. This promotes the creativity and enthusiasm of adolescents. Teenage music lovers usually have no chance to create, post, and promote their songs due to study. With easy procedure and free access to listening to others' music,

Net Ease Cloud Music fits well with teenagers' needs for music composition.

Unlike other famous music platforms like Apple Music or Spotify, in addition to a music application, Net Ease Cloud Music is also a social medium. Despite traditional social interactions on music applications like commenting on a song, there is also an interacting system on Net Ease Cloud Music where there are different fans and bloggers. Bloggers can post content about certain singers, news, or even their daily life, and people can follow them freely. This feature attracts plenty of teenagers because it acts as a virtual community. Net Ease Cloud Music users call this application "Cloud Village," showing a sense of intimacy. As this is an online platform, adolescents tend to be more willing to socialize, especially with those who have the same musical taste by commenting on similar songs.

Net Ease Cloud Music keeps pace with fashion trends, a key to let adolescents feel understandable. One of the reasons why plenty of people think adolescents are hard to understand maybe that they don't know what they like. On the other hand, Net Ease Cloud Music precisely catches teenagers' favorite topics and bridges the gap between them. For instance, On November 18, 2021, Net Ease Cloud Music followed the trend and launched the "Moyu Calculator" in the App ("Moyu" is a network buzzword, meaning slacking off), which can calculate the flow of listening to songs during working hours. This makes the distance between this application and teenage users closer, as teenagers might find this function interesting.

3.2. How does hip-hop music present on Net Ease Cloud Music?

Why can Net Ease Cloud Music attract so many teenage hip-hop lovers? Teenagers often feel a sense of individuality and belongings on Net Ease Cloud Music. According to Erik Erikson's social development theory, people during different periods of life experience different stages of development. During the period of adolescence (13-17 years old), there is a stage of Identity vs. Confusion. They try to find their distinct role in society at this age; if fail, teenagers may be confused about the meaning of life and the world. They want to show their special characteristics, but at the same time want to fit into the community and share the similarities with their peers.

Like other types of music on this application, there are several presenting ways of hip-hop music on Net Ease Cloud Music. Users can listen to different versions of hip-hop songs (explicit or clean), as well as their music videos. Besides an app for listening to music, Net Ease Cloud Music is also a social medium for hip-hop lovers to freely communicate. There are even verified rappers on Net Ease Cloud Music to interact with their fans.

There is an area for people to comment on every song, and there is also a big forum where people can state their opinions. Users can also create and follow hashtags so that they can see various hip-hop news and comments. Net Ease Cloud Music provides every hip-hop lover with a chance to compose and release their songs. This further promotes the hip-hop atmosphere on this platform and makes them achieve a sense of individuality. Meanwhile, users of this platform usually call themselves people from Cloud Village, which is a cute nickname for Net Ease Cloud Music. Due to the convenient functions of the app, like searching songs, comments, and bloggers, teenagers can quickly find users whom they share common with, getting into the subcultures that they feel they belong to.

In contrast with some other popular music applications, like Apple Music, Net Ease Cloud Music has more space for social interactions. On the other hand, songs on Net Ease Cloud Music are less classified than on Apple Music. There are the basic arrangement of different genres of songs, like rock and roll, pop, R&B, etc., but there lacks more particular classification of the hip-hop subcultures. This stimulates the users' creativity to make song lists themselves and share them with others. This function of song-list creation promotes users' interest by using this application, while a sense of belonging and boundary arose in the mind of hip-hop lovers. Users can define themselves through their interest and their love of different subcultures, attracting more users with the same interests.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper talks about the influence of hip-hop music on adolescents on the Chinese online music application Net Ease Cloud Music. The characteristics of this application, such as enabling users to make their playlists, providing a platform for them to compose hip-hop music, and building comment areas for different songs, allow teenagers to interact with each other uniquely in hip-hop, as they tend to form subcultures for their need of belongings. Disagreements usually happen between subcultures, and teenagers can achieve a sense of individuality by making subjective comments on other subcultures' favorite music. The discrete comments are analyzed with the knowledge in the field of psychology and sociology that leads to a more precise interpretation of the interactions of teenage hip-hop lovers in response to different subcultures. This essay provides a foundation for the future investigation of the effects of hip-hop on Chinese teenagers since hip-hop music has become one of the mainstream in China in only a decade. The essay suggests that the numerous comments and interactions can be indicators of social phenomena that appear in Chinese music applications. With the rising trend of hip-hop music in China and worldwide, the psychological impacts of hip-hop music on the younger generation will

become an increasingly meaningful topic, to which further adolescent research may pay attention.

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