

# What's the Rap About Ecstasy?

## Popular Music Lyrics and Drug Trends Among American Youth

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*Trends in ecstasy use in America during the past decade were reflected in mainstream, American rap-music lyrics between 1996 and 2003. Drawing on communication and cultural studies theory, this article provides a content analysis of 69 rap songs mentioning the club drug ecstasy. The songs are coded according to whether they contain positive, mixed or ambiguous, or negative messages about using or dealing ecstasy. Through an interpretive lens, the authors identify specific themes, messages, and behaviors pertaining to ecstasy use in the music lyrics and explore how these lyrics relate to shifting drug trends and to issues of race, class, and gender in American society.*

**Keywords:** media; ecstasy; popular music; drug trends; adolescence; youth culture

We weave threads in the social fabric. We may not change what people think, but we create a cultural vernacular for those thoughts. Specifically, our movies and TV shows and music do affect what is cool—and what isn't—whether it is clothing or dancing or language. And while...accountability will always lie with the individual, we as an industry must recognize the role we play in influencing context and environment. (Zelnick, 2000, n.p)

The proliferation of entertainment media in our society during the past several decades has led to rising interest in its impact on public health. One area of particular concern is the glorification of both licit and illicit drug use within the entertainment media (Haywood, 1996). Numerous studies have demonstrated that alcohol and cigarette advertising impact teenage drinking and smoking habits. With the growth in product placement advertising, new concerns arise regarding entertainment media's potential impact on both licit and illicit drug trends, particularly among youth. In the 1980s, at a time

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when adolescent drug use was on the rise, the government commissioned one of the first comprehensive surveys regarding the frequency and manner in which both licit and illicit drugs are depicted in music videos, songs, and movies. Although some groups have advocated for greater regulation of the entertainment industry, others groups, including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), are developing proactive strategies to collaborate with media executives and producers to help assure that drugs are represented and dealt with responsibly. However, there is still need for more research and for developing better theories and methodologies to investigate the relationship between entertainment media, drug consumption, and shifting drug trends in our society.

Popular music may be especially important for understanding adolescents' attitudes and behaviors toward illicit drugs as studies have found that listening to music is most youth's "number-1 non-school activity" (Roberts et al., 1999). However, music need not be a primary influence on adolescent substance use for its representations of drugs to be of interest to public health experts. Debates about entertainment media's role in society are generally polarized into two opposing camps: those who view it as a reflection of social reality versus those who believe that it shapes social reality. In this article, we adopt a middle position, arguing that the entertainment media can simultaneously reflect and promote shifting drug trends in American society.

This article focuses on depictions of the club drug ecstasy in American rap songs and their relation to changing trends in ecstasy use in the past several decades. Beginning in the mid-1980s, public health experts became particularly concerned about the rising rates of ecstasy use among youth in Europe, America, Australia, and elsewhere around the world. The U.S. government initiated several media campaigns to inform the public of the health hazards of using ecstasy. However, by the mid-1990s, ecstasy use had spread throughout mainstream American society, and depictions of the "love drug" had become commonplace in American popular culture, including rap music. Because of concern about popular culture's possible role in the marketing of ecstasy to American youth, we decided to analyze how the drug is portrayed in popular music. We chose to focus on rap rather than other music genres because our broader research concerned ecstasy use among urban youth, and a number of hit rap songs were released about ecstasy around the same time when ecstasy use began to spread into urban areas. Furthermore, we recognized that rap music had become one of the most heavily consumed forms of popular music in America and around the world. According to the latest Kaiser Family Foundation poll, rap/hip hop is the most popular genre

of music for youth across all ethnic groups; 65% of junior and senior high school kids said they had listened to rap/hip-hop music the previous day, which is more than twice the portion that reported listening to any other single music genre (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005).

Through use of music lyric Web sites and personal observations, we identified 69 rap songs released between 1996 and 2003 that mention the club drug ecstasy. Our approach to analyzing the lyrics of these songs is interdisciplinary, drawing on content analysis from communication studies as well as textual interpretation from cultural studies. First, we compare the number of songs released each year with national trends in ecstasy use. Next, we develop and implement a coding methodology for determining the frequency of positive, mixed/ambiguous, or negative messages about ecstasy in the lyrics. Cultural studies theory provides us with a critical framework for interpreting these depictions of ecstasy use within rap lyrics with reference to broader issues of gender, race, and class in our society. Although our research does not demonstrate media effects, the use of this interdisciplinary approach for analyzing music lyric content should enable more accurate predictions regarding media effects in future studies (Byrant & Thompson, 2002).

### ECSTASY TRENDS IN THE UNITED STATES

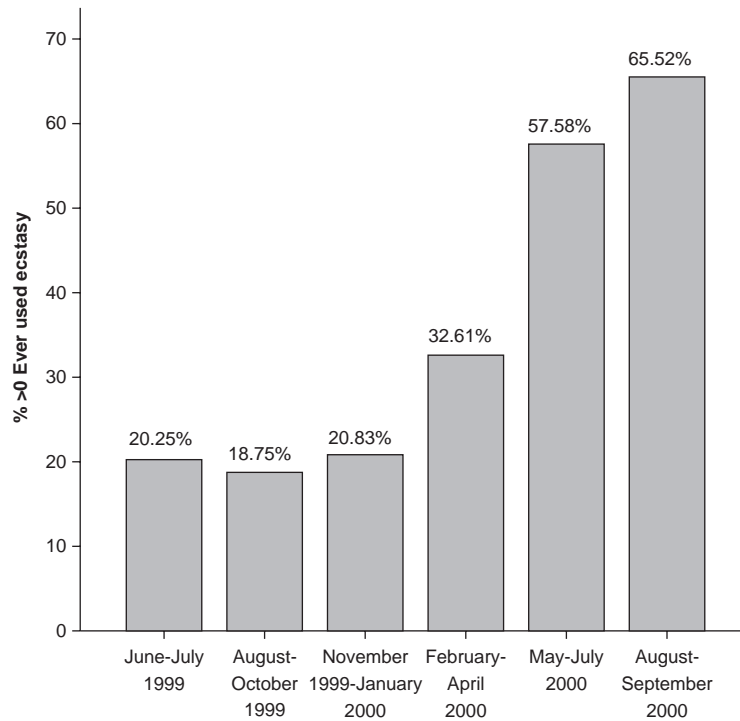
Also known as the "love drug," "hug drug," "X," "XTC," and "E," ecstasy is the street name for the chemical compound MDMA (3,4 methylenedioxymethamphetamine). MDMA is a stimulant with hallucinogenic properties that is typically ingested orally in pill or capsule form ("popped"). MDMA's popularity derives from the fact that it is said to produce feelings of happiness, euphoria, increased energy, heightened sensations, emotional openness, and enhanced sexual desire (Eiserman, Diamond, & Schensul, 2005; Holland, 2002; Pino, Burkholder, Schensul, & Eiserman, 2001; Schensul, 2001). Side effects include jaw clenching, sleeplessness, dehydration, and vomiting. In 1985, the U.S. government declared MDMA illegal, and in 1988, it was classed as a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substance Act.<sup>1</sup> Recent medical research has determined that MDMA causes serotonin depletion, depression, cognitive impairment, and an increased risk of hyperthermia (Freese, Miotto, & Reback, 2002; Maxwell, 2003). A small percentage of ecstasy pills or capsules may also contain other dangerous chemicals, including PMA, MDA, methamphetamine, and cocaine. Furthermore, MDMA use has been linked to risky sexual behavior among gay men (Breslau, 2002;

Colfax et al., 2001). Despite these potential health hazards, many youth continue to believe that it is a relatively harmless drug (Yacoubian, Boyle, Harding, & Loftus, 2003).

Starting in the mid-1980s, techno music and dance parties known as "raves" played a major role in the spread of ecstasy in America and elsewhere around the world (Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Collin & Godfrey, 1998; de Almeida & Silva, 2003; Gross, Barrett, Shestowsky, & Pihl, 2002; Hitzler, 2002). The majority of rave attendees in America were White, suburban youth. By the mid-1990s, rave culture had spread from underground venues to mainstream nightclubs, bars, and after-hour places (National Institute of Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2001; Office of National Drug Control Policy [ONDCP], 2001). Ecstasy use also began to spread to inner-city, minority communities. In 1998, the Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey reported that rates of ecstasy use among Hispanic American 12th-graders had more than doubled from 2.7% to 6.0%. However, rates among African American seniors remained much lower at only 0.5%. By 2000, the percentage of African Americans who had used ecstasy in the past year tripled to 1.3%, the percentage of Whites increased to 7.6%, and Hispanics jumped to 10.6%. Only 38% of the youth surveyed considered ecstasy to be a harmful drug. The percentages increased again in 2001 (see Table 1). The Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN), which monitors substance use among emergency department (ED) admittances, also indicated rising ecstasy use during this same period. In 1997, there were only 637 MDMA-related ED admittances, but by 2000 there were 4,511. By 2001, ecstasy was the second-most frequent club drug in ED visits (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2001). The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) also reported that ecstasy was readily available in many inner-city neighborhoods, and the price had dropped from \$40 to \$20 a pill (ONDCP, 2001).

We first became aware of ecstasy use among urban minority youth in 1999 while researching pathways to the use of hard drugs among inner-city youth living in Hartford, Connecticut. Our survey of 401 polydrug-using<sup>1</sup> youth (aged 16 to 24), conducted between June 1999 and September 2000, showed a dramatic increase in the number of youth who reported ever trying ecstasy (see Figure 1). Evidence suggested that ecstasy use had spread from suburban areas into Hartford mainly through Puerto Rican drug dealers with broad social networks among White, suburban youth and inner-city Puerto Rican and African American youth (Schensul, Diamond, Disch, Pino, & Bermudez, 2005). Because the drug was still relatively new within Hartford neighborhoods, we expected that these percentages would continue to increase in the next several years, following the pattern nationally.

Anyone paying close attention to rap music during the late 1990s might have suspected the broadening social spectrum of ecstasy use in this country.



**Figure 1.** Hartford youth aged 16 to 24 who reported having ever used ecstasy by month of the survey.

In 2000, rap artists began composing songs about ecstasy, and by 2001, hip-hop reporters started referring to ecstasy as the latest hip-hop drug of choice (Linden, 2002; Reynolds, 2001). For example, one music reporter stated, "The most dope of hip-hoppers have started poppin' those little White pills from Ja Rule to Dr. Dre they all seem to be at it" (<http://nme.com/features/20762.htm>). This led members of our research team to speculate that rap music lyrics may be inadvertently helping to market the drug to urban minority youth (Schensul, 2001). Several other drug researchers and music reporters have since made similar observations (Agar & Reisinger, 2004). *Honey Magazine* reporter Amy Linden (2002) stated,

What is new is that Ecstasy, once an almost exclusive plaything of White subcultures, is being increasingly embraced by young African Americans. And heading up the X appreciation society are chart-topping platinum artists who have found in the drug a new lyrical obsession and de facto status symbol.

Linden argued that “when rappers talk, fans listen—and emulate.” As she pointed out, when Snoop rapped about “Gin & Juice,” cocktail beverages became more popular in hip-hop party culture. Likewise, Cristal, Hennessy, and Courvoisier sales also shot up after rap artists P. Diddy, LL Cool Jay, and Busta Rhymes, respectively, praised these expensive alcoholic beverages in their music (Chery, 2003; MacLean, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

### **MEDIA EFFECTS THEORY AND POPULAR MUSIC RESEARCH**

A growing body of research in the fields of communications, cultural studies, social psychology, and anthropology examines mass media content and its impact on society and, more specifically, public health. As Kellner (1995) states, “The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy: They contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire—and what not to” (p. 1). Four main theories within communication studies explain how media content may influence drug use behavior at the societal and individual level: (a) agenda setting/framing theory, (b) cultivation theory, (c) cognitive social learning theory, and (d) diffusion of innovations theory. According to agenda setting/framing theory, the media influences public opinion and policy makers by its choice of issues and how they are framed. Cultivation theory argues that the media (specifically, television) is “the most powerful storyteller in the culture, one that continually repeats the myths, ideologies, the facts and patterns that define and legitimize the social order” (Brown, 2002, pp. 45-47). According to cognitive social learning theory, the media also provide scripts for human behavior. Modeling of behavior is most likely to occur when the model is perceived as attractive and similar and when the behavior is rewarded (Brown, 2002). Diffusion of innovations theory predicts that media and interpersonal contacts provide information and influence opinion and judgment (Rogers, 1995).

Regarding the media’s relationship to drug trends, research has shown that advertising exposure increases positive expectancies and the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes among children and young adolescents (Martin et al., 2002; Parry, 2002; Pechmann & Knight, 2002; Saffer & Dave, 2002; Wakefield, Flay, Nichter, & Giovino, 2003). Conversely, anti-drug messages

in the news media contributed to rising disapproval and lower rates of marijuana and cocaine use in American society in the 1980s (Fan & Holway, 1994; Siegel & Biener, 2000; Stryker, 2003). A more recent study found that young urban women who watched rap videos regularly were 1.5 times more likely than their peers to have used drugs and alcohol during a 12-month period (Wingood et al., 2003).

Other studies have investigated correlations between so-called defiant music—including heavy metal, rock, and rap—and “deviant” or “antisocial attitudes” and behaviors, particularly aggression and violence (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 1996). For example, Carpentier, Knobloch, and Zillman (2003) found that youth who chose to listen to rock and rap music with defiant messages were more likely to exhibit trait rebelliousness, disinhibition, and hostility using standard psychometric measures. Another recent study found differences within rap subgenres. Canadian youth who listened to French rap were more likely to engage in deviant behaviors, including hard drug use, when compared with those that preferred American rap and hip hop/soul (Miranda & Claes, 2004).

One limitation of these aforementioned studies is that they do not distinguish between types of illicit drugs. Another limitation is that most studies cannot determine whether the media shapes people’s attitudes or whether people’s attitudes shape their media consumption. These studies, however, lend support to the argument that media content and audiences’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors tend to be mutually reinforcing (Byrant & Thompson, 2002). More specifically, they show that there is a close, but not necessarily causal, link between popular music preferences and youth attitudes and behaviors around drugs. As social cognitive theory predicts that the impact of music is most likely greatest when the messages are reinforced by peers and are reflected in other media (Bandura, 1998, 2001).

Contrary to popular perception, White youth constitute the majority of rap consumers (McLean, 1997; Recording Industry Association of America [RIAA], 2002). But most research on rap music has focused on consumption by minority youth because of the fact that the majority of artists are African American or Hispanic. According to a national survey of inner-city Black youth, 48% consider hip hop/rap to be their favorite style of music (Byrant & Thompson, 2002; Motivational Educational Entertainment [MEE] Productions, 2002). Rap music is reportedly more popular among minority males than females, who listen to a wider range of musical genres (Byrant & Thompson, 2002; McLean, 1997; MEE Productions, 2002). A survey conducted with male youth offenders (aged 17 to 21) of diverse ethnicities found that their musical preference was rap. The study also found that 72% of these youth believed that music influenced the way that

they feel at least some of the time; however, only 4% perceived a connection between music listening and their deviant behavior. Most of them believed that music mirrored their lives rather than viewing it as a causative factor in their behavior (Gardstrom, 1999).

Some skeptics of music's influence argue that most youth do not listen to music lyrics but instead enjoy the beat of the music. However, several studies have shown that many youth relate to the lyrical content (AAP, 1996; Dimitriadis, 2001; Lalander, 2002; McLean, 1997). Ethnographic research has demonstrated the importance of rap lyrics in the lives of urban minority youth (Dimitriadis, 2001; McLean, 1997). A study of inner-city minority youth in Colorado found that more than 62% of the 60 interviewed youth considered the lyrical content important to them (Lalander, 2002). Rap music lyrics tell stories and describe situations to which many youth feel they can relate. Another study also showed that youth responses to rap songs that contain violent and misogynist lyrics range from disgust and disapproval to excitement and acceptance (McLean, 1997). Qualitative research on the consumption of rap music among White audiences has focused primarily on issues of racial stereotypes (Sullivan, 2003; Watts 1997; Yousman, 2003).

The majority of the aforementioned studies presume that entire genres of popular music contain antisocial content, thereby discounting the possible impact of positive prosocial messages within these genres. Also, any kind of drug use is labeled as deviant despite certain drugs like alcohol and marijuana being relatively normalized within mainstream American culture. By contrast, cultural studies scholars tend to look at illicit drug use as a relatively normal part of youth culture despite being illegal. Many "alternative" youth subcultures quite rapidly become incorporated into the mainstream. Youth subcultures also often highlight contradictions between official anti-drug policies and unofficial social realities in which drug use is widespread even among adults. Shapiro's (1999) book *Waiting for the Man: The Story of Drugs and Popular Music* reveals how popular music reflected shifting drug trends in America and Britain from marijuana and heroin use in the jazz era, to amphetamine and LSD use in the hippie era in the late 1960s and 1970s, to contemporary trends of crack and ecstasy in the pop era of the 1980s and 1990s. Markert (2001) argues that "music is recursive: drug use, social context, and song lyrics are interconnected and each interacts with and influences the others." His content analysis of song lyrics found that popular music of the 1990s (including rap) was generally hostile toward heroin and cocaine and that younger listeners were being exposed to more negative images of marijuana and LSD than were older listeners (Markert, 2001).<sup>3</sup> Thus, we are reminded that rap music lyrics can also help prevent the use of drugs by providing anti-drug messages.



### Content Analyses and Textual Interpretation Methodologies

Content analysis identifies topics and themes in the media and uses a coding system and quantitative analysis to determine their frequency (Byrant & Thompson, 2002). This approach has been used in the past by communications researchers to examine illicit drug references in the entertainment media. In the late 1990s, The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) commissioned several studies to examine depictions of substance abuse in movies, popular music, and music videos (Roberts, Christenson, Henriksen, & Bandy, 2002; Roberts et al., 1999). The study of movies and popular music was completed in 1999 and was reportedly "the first national study of its kind to quantify the frequency and nature of substance use in entertainment media" (Roberts et al., 1999). According to this study, 98% of movies ( $N = 200$ ) and 27% of songs ( $N = 1,000$ ) released between 1996 and 1997 depicted illicit drugs, alcohol, or tobacco. Consequences of substance use were depicted in almost half of the movies and in one fifth of the songs. Black characters in film and television were depicted as using drugs at a disproportionately higher rate than were White characters (Roberts et al., 1999) even though national studies consistently find lower rates of drug use among African Americans compared with Whites and Hispanics (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Shulenburg, 2004). Music videos airing on MTV, BET, and VH-1 in 2000 ( $N = 258$ ) were found to contain 3% visual references to illicit drugs and 20% verbal references. Illicit substances were somewhat more likely to appear in mainstream rock and modern rock videos when compared with rap/hip-hop videos. These studies prove that movies, music, and music videos provide youth with a variety of messages concerning the use of illicit drugs as well as inaccurate and stereotyped portrayals.

The researchers for this series of reports were very careful to identify slang terms for drugs and to distinguish between direct and indirect allusions to drugs. However, the researchers did not distinguish between different types of illicit drugs in their published report; hence, it is hard to evaluate the relationship to specific illicit drug trends. Also, because examples of the actual textual content are not provided, it is not possible to assess the music's potential impact on drug beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors pertaining to different types of drugs. Finally, like other scholarship on media effects, these reports do not discuss the sociocultural context and cultural politics of the specific entertainment genres under investigation. Establishing this context is also important for understanding the music's potential impact on youth culture.

Building on these earlier studies, our analysis of rap lyrics combines methods of quantitative content analysis with qualitative textual interpretation to

illuminate the representation of ecstasy in rap music. We argue that textual interpretation can help us better understand how ecstasy is glamorized in the media as well as how anti-drug messages are conveyed. We use this combined methodology to (a) demonstrate how ecstasy depictions in rap music relate to societal trends in ecstasy use; (b) explore the range of messages about ecstasy in rap music, thereby challenging research designs presuming that rap music only has a negative impact on youth behavior; and (c) research songs that contain contradictory or ambiguous messages about ecstasy, thereby calling attention to the possibility of differing interpretations of a song's message. The implications of these findings for the design of future research on the relationship between popular music and youth drug trends will be addressed in our final discussion.

Before examining the lyrics, however, it is necessary to provide some social-historical background on rap music as a genre and the public controversies about its lyrical content.

### THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF RAP MUSIC

Rap music grew out of inner-city street culture and the "ghetto" experience. Rap music aesthetics have roots in earlier African American oral traditions such as "signifying" (oral rhetoric), "playing the dozens" (verbal jousting), and the West Indian tradition of "toasting" (emceeing [MCing] over records; Szwed, 1999). In the late 1970s, innovations in deejaying (DJing), which involved MCing over break beats, gave birth to rap music that was performed live at block parties in the New York City Bronx (Fernando, 1999; Perkins, 1996). With the deepening poverty in the inner city because of deindustrialization and Reaganomics in the 1980s, rap music became a vehicle for economically disenfranchised inner-city youth to tell their stories. In the words of Chuck D of Public Enemy, rap music was "Black America's CNN" (De Curtis, 1999). Many rap artists of this period had strong ties to the Black power movement and used the music to spread messages of political and social resistance against racial oppression. However, drug dealing and drug use also became a major theme in hardcore rap music, reflecting the growing crack-cocaine epidemic and dominance of drug gangs within parts of Los Angeles and other inner cities (George, 1998).

Like earlier African American musical forms such as jazz and soul, rap music also gained a large following among White audiences and was appropriated by the mainstream music industry. Major record companies like BMG, Sony, Universal/Polygram, and Warner signed distribution contracts with smaller rap labels such as Ruthless Records and Def Jam Records. By

1996, White suburban youth comprised more than 60% of the total rap music market (RIAA, 2002). In 2000, this number rose to 70%, and rap album sales overtook those of country music, accounting for 12.9% of the recording industry market (RIAA, 2002). Corporate financing not only sped up rap artists' entry into the mainstream, it also led to new definitions of production-worthy music (Watkins, 2001, p. 390). Rap music lyrics became more formulaic, and corporations began using rap lyrics and videos to market various brand-name products such as clothing, cell phones, and hard liquor.

Like heavy metal music, rap music—and, more specifically, gangsta rap—has been the target of considerable public approbation over the years. Condemnations of gangsta rap lyrics have been issued by a number of prominent political figures including Tipper Gore and Minister Louis Farrakhan. In 1990, the 2 Live Crew album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* was judged to be obscene in a Florida District Court, leading to arrests of a record store owner and members of the 2 Live Crew band for performing its songs (Binder, 1993). Public pressure about controversial violent lyrics also forced Columbia Records to drop rapper Ice T from its label (Perkins, 1996). Criticism has not been limited to public officials; behavioral scientists like Krohn and Suazo (1995) have accused rap music of demeaning women and promoting drug use and violence. However, many hip-hop artists, scholars, and fans argue that rap music has been unfairly scapegoated: Lyrics have been taken out of context, the use of parody misinterpreted, and the prosocial and critical social commentary ignored (Kelly, 1996; Perkins, 1996; Rose, 1994).<sup>4</sup> Rose (1994) referred to the condemnation of gangsta rap as “empty moral grandstanding by politicians” and asserted that “most attacks on rap music offer profoundly shallow readings of its use of violent and sexist imagery and rely on a handful of provocative and troubling songs or lyrics” (p. 35). Rose and others also accuse the mainstream music/entertainment industry of mainly promoting gangsta rap songs, which reinforce racist and sexist stereotypes (Wahl, 1999; Watts, 1997).

Today, rap music encompasses a range of styles including old school, consciousness or message, hardcore, church, pop, and gangsta rap, and each of these styles is put forth by artists whose songs reflect a range of different views and perspectives on American life and the inner-city experience. Despite, or perhaps because of, the attacks from the mainstream, gangsta rap music has actually grown in popularity, and audiences continue to view it as an expression of the real-life experiences of artists who grew up in urban ghettos (Clay, 1993; McLeod, 1999). Although many commercial gangsta rap songs appear to glorify promiscuous sex, gang violence, and drug use, many other, often lesser-known rap songs and artists present positive messages as well as insightful critiques of American society (Binder, 1993; George, 1998;

hooks, 1992; Kitwana, 2002; Rose, 1994; Watkins, 2001). Rap music is also one of the few avenues for urban minority youth without formal higher education to have a public voice in our society (Rose, 1994). Furthermore, the rap culture industry (including rap, break dance, graffiti, DJing, and fashion) is an avenue of economic advancement for many young, urban minority artists and entrepreneurs.

Although cultural studies scholars have closely examined textual representations of race, violence, gender, and sexuality in rap lyrics, surprisingly few have examined representations of drugs. As a result, the general public may falsely assume that most rap musicians promote the use of drugs, irrespective of the type of drug (cf. Krohn & Suazo, 1995). In fact, historically, rap artists have taken a range of different stances toward different drugs. "Old-school" rap artists—such as Run DMC, LL Cool J, Eric B. Rakim, and Melle Mel—explicitly denounced the use of drugs in their music. For example, in 1983, Melle Mel's song "White Lines (Don't Do It)," had a clear anti-cocaine message. N.W.A.'s song "Express Yourself" (1989) spoke out against marijuana use in the following lines: "I don't smoke weed or sens/'cause its known to give a brother brain damage"—although other songs by artists from this band contradicted this message. Numerous rap songs by artists such as KRS1, Brand Nubian, and Ice T vividly described the hazards of dealing crack and the problems of crack addiction in the inner city.

Representations of drugs shifted in the 1990s as rap music became more commercial and gangsta rap took center stage. Gangsta rap artists began to celebrate the use of exotic marijuana, blunts, and hard liquor to chill out, party, and feel good. For example, Dr. Dre was accused of promoting marijuana use on his album *The Chronic* (December 15, 1992), using the marijuana leaf icon in his music videos. Redman released a song with the self-explanatory title, "How to Roll a Blunt," and Cypress Hill sided with legalizing marijuana in the songs "Legalize it" and "I Wanna Get High." Rap artists also became paid endorsers of hard liquors like Cristal and Hennessy in their music during this period. With the exception of marijuana, however, many rap artists continued to share certain anti-drug norms of the official culture, mostly portraying the use of harder "street" drugs such as crack and heroin negatively (Markert, 2001; Shapiro, 1999).

Aware of the contested history of rap music, our research attempts to be as objective as possible in our analysis of its musical content. By examining a broad spectrum of rap music songs from different rap subgenres and artists, we hope to avoid biasing our analyses. However, rap music lyrics—like other texts—are always open to competing interpretations. Because of the commercialization and appropriation of rap music by corporate America, we also question the extent to which rap music reflects distinct African American

street life and values. As many rap artists and scholars have pointed out, rap music also reflects mainstream American cultural behaviors and values (Wahl, 1999; Watts, 1997). Rap music lyrics are a complex dialogue between predominately inner-city African American and Hispanic rappers and producers and White American corporations and consumers who now dominate the rap music market.

### RESEARCH METHOD

Our selection of rap lyrics made use of an online music lyric database titled lyricmania.com, which enabled us to conduct keyword searches of more than 32,735 lyrics from 1,589 different musical artists representing a variety of popular genres. This Web site allows users to enter the lyrics of their favorite songs. Site users monitor the lyrics for accuracy, sending corrections to the site manager. In the past year, approximately 93,652 members submitted lyrics, and more than 4.5 million visited the Web site. We entered the following keyword terms and phrases to identify lyrics about ecstasy: "ecstasy," "on E," "on X," "XTC," "X pills," "rolling," "X," "poppin' X," "poppin' E." Our search of the term "ecstasy" alone generated a list of 147 songs. We eliminated many songs that did not explicitly refer to the drug and a few other songs that were not classified as rap or hip hop. We found some additional rap songs about ecstasy via word of mouth and Google searches. This left us with a total of 69 rap songs, released between 1996 and 2003, which unambiguously refer to the drug ecstasy. Of the 69 songs we identified, 6 contain a reference to ecstasy in the title, although the majority of songs only mention the drug between one and three times in the lyrics.

We classified the songs into three main categories: positive ecstasy songs, mixed or ambiguous songs, and negative ecstasy songs. Positive ecstasy songs depict desirable effects of using ecstasy, and/or depict the artists' own use of ecstasy without mentioning any negative consequences. This category also includes songs that mention dealing or providing ecstasy to others for self-gain. Mixed or ambiguous songs are those in which the artist mentions the drug but does not encourage its use or those songs that contain both positive and negative descriptions of the drugs' effects and consequences. Negative ecstasy songs are those in which the lyrics mention achieving ecstasy without using a pill, explicitly warn people not to use it, or emphasize negative effects and consequences from its use. Using grounded theory, we also identified major themes (i.e., drug dealing, sex, party setting, drug binging, and taking the pill with alcohol) that emerged in these songs in association with ecstasy. We used Microsoft Excel to code our data. Two of

us independently coded the songs and we discussed any discrepancies that came up. We reached approximately 90% agreement in the coding after establishing clear definitions for each category.

### ECSTASY TRENDS AND RAP MUSIC LYRICS

Most rap artists claim to draw inspiration for their music from their personal experience living in inner-city ghettos; hence, it is not surprising that the emergence of rap songs about ecstasy coincided with the spread of ecstasy into the inner city. However, we also know that the lyrics contain fabricated fantasies about urban street life, thus reflecting American cultural drug lore. Increasing references to ecstasy in rap music also occurred at the same time period when rap was becoming integrated into American pop culture and gangsta rap came to dominate. The first semi-hip-hop group we identified to mention ecstasy was the Beastie Boys, a White punk band formed in 1981 that later adopted the style of rap. Their song titled "Car Thief" from *Paul's Boutique* album (6/25/1989) mentions a broad range of different drugs from "cheeba" (weed) to "caine" and "elephant tranquilizer." The line about ecstasy highlights the social bonding or empathic effects of the drug: "People always trying to get next to me. I had a beautiful experience on ecstasy."

According to our research, the first African American rap groups or artists to mention ecstasy were The Roots, E40, Notorious BIG, and Jay Z. The Roots's song "No Great Pretender" on their album *Illadelph Halflife* (9/24/1996) has a short line about the stimulating effects of ecstasy: "Stimulate more than ecstasy." E40 refers to "poppin' ecstasy like Skittles" ("Circumstances," *The Hall of Game*, 10/29/1996). Like the Beastie Boys's line, these references appeared to be rooted in rave culture. Notorious BIG, however, went outside traditional rave culture when he rapped about the use of ecstasy as a sexual enhancer in the following line, "Some say the X, make the sex spectacular." ("F\*\*\* Me Tonight," *Life After Death*, 3/25/1997). Jay Z depicts the stimulating effects of ecstasy negatively in the line "Yeah I did it like them sick White boys the court committed. To the death of me, I'm spaz like I'm on Ecstasy." ("Reservoir Dogs," *Vol. 2...Hard Knock Life*, 9/29/1998). Ecstasy is only briefly mentioned in a line or two of these songs, suggesting that it was just beginning to be incorporated into urban pop culture at this time.

Between 2000 and 2002, five hit rap songs were named after the drug ecstasy. The first was Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's song "Ecstasy," which was released in February 2000 on the *BTNHResurrection* album. This album

was hugely successful, turning platinum only 2 weeks after its release.<sup>5</sup> Ja Rule's song "Xtasy" was released in October 2000 on his hit album *Rule 3:36*. Big Tymers's song "Hennessy & XTC" was released as a single in November 2000. Missy Elliot's album *Miss E...So Addictive*, released in May 2001, contained a song titled "X-Tasy." The album cover design pictured Missy Elliot with a White pill in her mouth and the songs on the album blended techno and R&B beats, alluding to rave culture. Her co-option of rave elements most likely contributed to her album's huge success, reaching number 2 on the Billboard charts shortly after its release. A lesser-known song was released by Tech N9ne in September 2002 titled "T9X" on his album *Absolute Power*. Eminem and Big Tymers also composed songs primarily about the use of ecstasy on their hit albums, *The Marshall Mathers LP* (5/23/2000) and *Hood Rich* (4/30/2002), respectively.

Overall, the number of rap songs mentioning ecstasy increased each year from 1996 to 2001, paralleling the general increase in ecstasy use among high school youth reported in the Monitoring the Future survey (Johnston et al. 2004).

Next, we will examine the full range of rap music lyrics about ecstasy to see how this former rave drug was adapted to fit with the particular style and themes of rap music.

### Positive Ecstasy Songs

We identified a total of 35 positive ecstasy songs that could be construed as glamorizing ecstasy use or dealing by describing desirable contexts and outcomes. Of these songs, 18 portray the rap artists' own use of ecstasy and 18 also describe men and women using ecstasy for sex. The women in these songs are generally referred to as "hoes," "freaks," or "bitches." Graphic and crude sexual lyrics are a feature of "booty rap" songs, having roots in earlier "pimp" stories and stereotypes of Black masculinity (Kelly, 1996). In booty rap songs, which celebrate male machismo and hedonistic party culture, ecstasy use is frequently associated with kinky and promiscuous sex and money. In 1998, Memphis rap artist Eightball had a line, "You could sex on X in the Lex with me" ("Bounce Wit Me," *Lost*, 5/19/1998). Ecstasy is used metaphorically in Nas's music to describe how desirable he is to women, "I am like ecstasy for the ladies" ("Nas Is Like," *I Am*, 4/6/1999). Dr. Dre raps about using ecstasy for sex in the lines: "I just took some ecstasy/ Ain't no telling what the side effects will be/ All these fine bitches equal sex to me/ ("Let's Get High," *Dr. Dre 2001*, 11/16/1999).

Ja Rule (the flagship artist for producer Irv Gotti's Murder Inc. label<sup>6</sup>) frequently raps about using ecstasy for sex on his albums, reinforcing his

**TABLE 1: Rap Songs Mentioning Ecstasy Released in the Past Year Compared With Percentage of High School Seniors Nationally Who Reported Using Ecstasy in the Past Year**

Year	Rap Songs <sup>a</sup>	Positive/Mixed/Negative <sup>a</sup>	% of Seniors	% of Whites <sup>b</sup>	% of Hispanics <sup>b</sup>	% of Blacks <sup>b</sup>
1996	2	1/1/0	4.6	NA	NA	NA
1997	1	1/0/0	4.0	5.2	2.8	0.4
1998	0	0/0/0	3.6	4.7	2.7	0.4
1999	3	1/0/2	5.6	5.1	6.0	0.5
2000	6	2/4/1	8.2	7.6	10.6	1.3
2001	15	10/5/0	9.2	9.6	10.2	2.4
2002	21	10/6/5	7.4	8.5	7.0	1.7
2003	13	7/2/3	4.5	7.4	8.5	1.4
2004	8	3/1/4	4.0	NA	NA	NA

NOTE: Table based on release date of rap songs, coding of messages, and annual prevalence of ecstasy use among 12th graders as reported in the Monitoring the Future Survey (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2004). NA = not available.

a. Refers to the number of rap songs released between May of the prior year and May of the stated year to correspond approximately with the MTF Survey annual prevalence data, which is gathered in the spring each year.

b. Date for the specified year and previous year have been combined to increase subgroup sample sizes.

thug lover image. One of the most salacious hip-hop songs written about ecstasy appeared on his hit album *Rule 3:36* in October 2000, with the title "Ecstasy." Ecstasy is described as enhancing the sexual desire of "hoes" with whom he is partying. Ja Rule sings,

We got the murder man that's the spot to chill  
 Got bitches pop the pill feelin' hot for real  
 Take that shirt off take that skirt off  
 Cuz my dick is hard and your ass is soft.

Another line implies that ecstasy makes women more willing to engage in kinky sex, "When she pop a pill/Wanna do it in the high heels/On top of a high hill." In "Livin it Up" on his *Pain is Love* album (9/1/2001), Ja Rule likens being high on ecstasy with being sexy and desirable in the following lines: "Love you so sexy, I just want you next to me/Your whole vibe, like you high on ecstasy/'Cause ain't nothin' but an 'e' thang baby."<sup>7</sup>

The most common setting for the use of ecstasy in these rap songs is a club or party. Frequently, ecstasy is swallowed with expensive liquor. For example,



Ja Rule's song titled "Extasy" begins with him singing about swallowing half an ecstasy pill with vodka. The next lines of the song place him in a club, "flying high," and rolling with some "hoes." References to Evian water and OJ in the lyrics refer to other drinks associated with ecstasy.<sup>8</sup> Descriptions of people at a club sweating, with bloodshot eyes and large pupils, also help to create a more vivid image of people high on ecstasy. Missy Elliot's song "4 My people" (*Miss E...So Addictive*, 5/15/2001) portrays ecstasy as a fun party drug in the following lines: "Here's a glass of orange juice, let's go X it out/This is for my people, my party people/This is for my people, my ecstasy people." 50 Cent's popular song "In Da Club..." (*Life After Death*, 2/6/2003) describes using ecstasy to loosen women up within a club setting.

You can find me at the club, bottle full of bub  
 Look mami, I got the X if you into taking drugs  
 I'm into having sex, I ain't into making love

Like many other songs we have seen, the club setting is portrayed as an environment in which men pick up women and offer them ecstasy with the intent of getting them in the mood for sex.<sup>9</sup>

Many other rap songs portray men supplying ecstasy pills to women. Big Tymers describe a guy giving ecstasy to a girl to get her to perform oral sex with someone: "That boy next to me, he pushing XTC, Got ya girl sucking dick in a Lexus jeep." In "Holla" (11/27/2001), Busta Rhymes similarly raps, "Niggaz in they trucks creepin'/With a fresh box of ecstasy pills for these bitches." Ja Rule raps about members of his record company supplying women with ecstasy in another popular song: "Bitch you know better, we live M-O-B/Money Over Bitches, Murder, I-N-C/I got two or three hoes for every V/And I keep 'em drugged up off that ecstasy" ("Always on Time," *Pain is Love*, 10/2/2001). In "The Last Temptation" song, from his album with the same title (11/2/2002), Ja Rule actually refers to himself as "the President of the united ghettos of Emerica."

Female rap artists such as Missy Elliot and Charlene Keys (Tweet) also sing about using ecstasy to enhance sex in their songs. In the song "X" with Ja Rule and Tweet, Missy Elliot raps about wanting her lover to take ecstasy (or possibly some other drug) so as to prolong his erection: "And I, want a big 'Don John'/To pop a few woodies/And make the john last long" (*Ex or X, Violator 2.0*, 6/21/2001). In her song "X-Tasy" (*Miss E...So Addictive*, 5/15/2001), Missy Elliot raps about ecstasy helping her to "become more freaky" and to unleash her romantic fantasies. The chorus of the song is, "Ecstaaccy, I'm waiting, to do the things I said I want to do/On ecstaaccy,

the feeling makes me feel like I'm in love with you." She also says that it makes her feel ways she never imagined in the following lines: possible, implying she is less inhibited to try something new.

Although women's sexuality is flaunted in these rap songs, the lyrics generally reinforce conventional gender norms pertaining to sex. The underlying assumption is that men always desire sex and are willing to experiment, but ecstasy may help them get women in the mood for sex or to better satisfy their female partners. Women, on the other hand, are portrayed as taking ecstasy to feel horny, to loosen their inhibitions, and also to feel more emotionally and physically satisfied. (It is interesting to note that ecstasy became known as a sexual enhancer drug for men around the same time as Viagra was introduced and male erectile dysfunction was defined as a much more widespread problem than people had previously realized.)

Although many rap songs describe dealing weed and crack, we only identified 3 rap songs that specifically mention dealing ecstasy. Fat Joe raps, "I'm on E feeling ready and hot/ I give 'em 20 a pop, leave the panties and tops" ("We Thuggin," *Jealous Ones Still Envy*, 12/4/2001). More recently, 50 Cent plays up his image as a big-time hustler making money off of dealing ecstasy and other drugs in the following lines: "Now I'm choppin' big birds and them bundles too/For that Master P money/That shoppin' spree money/That coke, that dope and that ecstasy money/I'm tryin' to build empires across the state line" ("Soldier," *No Mercy No Fear*, 8/1/2002). Big Brovaz describes a dealer giving customers a bonus when they buy ecstasy: "You can find ecstasy next to me/Randy gives you 20% extra free" ("Don't Matter," *Nu Flow*, 4/22/2003).

### **Songs With Mixed or Ambiguous Messages About Ecstasy**

A total of 19 rap songs contain mixed or ambiguous messages about using and dealing ecstasy. Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's song "Ecstasy" (*BTNHResurrection*, 2/29/2000) contains a range of both positive and negative ecstasy messages. Each artist in the band depicts a different context for using ecstasy and describes different effects and consequences. The first verse depicts a weed dealer encouraging his client (Krayzie Bone) to try ecstasy for the first time.

*Dealer:* Aw, hell naw, man, I got this new shit

Man, this shit called ecstasy, man

*Krayzie:* Ecstasy, what?

*Dealer:* Nigga this tha shit, man

Nigga this shit will have you on the level wit ya female and everythang,

Look I'm a give you one of these muthafuckas let you try this muthafucka out...

The weed dealer convinces him to try it by giving him a free sample and telling him that it will help him sexually gratify his female partner. Krayzie Bone then raps about his first experience using ecstasy at his home, which he pops with a shot of liquor.

The refrain then follows, "I feel so realish realish realish, 'cause we floatin' in ecstasy." The soft, lilting sound of the chorus mimics a more pleasant, soothing, arousing high associated with rolling on ecstasy.<sup>10</sup>

In this same song, Flesh Bone raps about taking ecstasy at a house party and experiencing a somewhat negative high: "I'm feelin' way high, but I'm also feelin' way low. But damn I'm stuck in between/Tellin' my niggaz that I love 'em now but ain't nobody listenin'." From these lines, one can infer that ecstasy can elevate as well as depress a person's mood. One might also infer that the empathic effects of the drug are undesirable in all-male settings. The initial trip causes him to move very slowly. This is the opposite effect of the amphetamine-type high described by most ravers. Flesh Bone and Bizzy Bone also provide blatant descriptions of the sexual effects of ecstasy from the standpoint of their macho personas. Bizzy Bone describes someone "going down on" someone while driving in a car and rolling on "e."

Wish Bone is the most skeptical about using ecstasy. He questions whether or not it is preferable to weed and expresses concern about long-term health risks saying, "that ecstasy shit fucks up ya brain." Despite this warning, he decides to try ecstasy. However, it does not produce the effects he expects:

I thought the shit will have a nigga high an' horny  
 I'm high, but I'm too high  
 Wanna hurt somebody  
 Nigga you trippin', get ahold of that shit, and ride that high  
 But I'm trippin', body moves, won't nobody get hurt (hurt).

Instead of feeling horny, Wish Bone describes feeling angry and violent.<sup>11</sup> He suggests that ecstasy is not only dangerous, it also may not live up to its reputation as a sexual enhancer.

On the single "Hennessy and XTC" released in November 21, 2000, Big Tymers's rappers Mannie, Byron (Baby) Williams, and B.G. rap about consuming ecstasy with hard liquor. The chorus—"I've been poppin' XTC/Drinkin' Hennessy/Is a naked chick next to me?"—pokes fun at the person who is high. The song describes the dissociative effects of mixing these two drugs, such as hallucinating, tripping, freaking out, passing out on the floor,

and staggering. The song also describes feeling physically hot and being willing to pay for sex while high.

The White rapper Eminem mostly portrays the negative aspects of ecstasy use in his music, albeit with an ironic twist saying that he plans to use it anyway. The *Marshall Mathers LP*, which was released May 23, 2000, contains two songs that mention ecstasy. "Drug Ballad" describes the negative consequences of various drugs ranging from alcohol, to glue sniffing, to weed use. Eminem raps about spending the night with somebody whom he just met as a consequence of feeling more emotionally open while on ecstasy. Afterward, he regrets having "spilled his guts" and spending the night with her. Despite the problems associated with using ecstasy, Eminem says he still plans to use it in the line: "So let's enjoy, let the X destroy your spinal cord." This line perpetuates an urban myth about ecstasy's dangers (erowid.org). The song suggests that some people will choose short-term gratification over protecting themselves against less-apparent health risks.

Eminem's lesser-known song, titled "The Kids," describes other hazards of using ecstasy, with a similar ironic twist at the end. This song was released on the clean version of the *Marshall Mathers LP* (5/23/2000). In this song, Eminem parodies the anti-drug messages kids are taught in school. The song's characters are based on the animated television series *South Park*. Slim Shady (Eminem's alter ego) acts as a substitute teacher for Mr. Mackey, the guidance counselor from South Park. The song begins with Mr. Mackey introducing him to the class. Slim Shady then tells the class that ecstasy is "the worst drug in the world" and "If someone offers it to you, don't do it." The song again perpetuates urban myths associated with using ecstasy. For example, he raps, "Kids, two hits'll probably drain all your spinal fluid and spinal fluid is final, you won't get it back. So don't get attached, it'll attack every bone in your back." He illustrates other extreme dangers of using ecstasy through a fictional story of a kid named Zack, as follows: Zack is pressured by friends at a party to try five pills, leading him to die from an ecstasy overdose. But the song ends with an ironic twist: Slim Shady says, "Don't do drugs, so there will be more left for me." Hence, this song mocks government efforts to warn the public of the dangers of ecstasy, tapping into youth skepticism toward anti-drug campaigns. Some medical scientists as well have accused the government of exaggerating ecstasy's health risks and of using "scare tactics" to justify prevailing drug policies (Doblin, 2004).

Several other rap artists have composed songs about drug bingeing on ecstasy in combination with other drugs. Drug bingeing is a common theme in heavy metal, hardcore, and other angst-ridden popular music genres. It is often associated with negative feelings of alienation, despair, pain, suicidal thoughts, and mental illness, and hence the messages about drugs are often ambiguous.

We identified six rap songs about drug binging with references to ecstasy. Tech N9ne's album *Absolute Power* (9/24/2002) contains two such dark-minded songs. "Trapped in a Psycho's Body" describes "inner voices" warning Tech N9ne of the dangers of his drug-binging episode on ecstasy: "I am a nightmare walkin', psychopath talking/Brain deteriorating cuz I'm ex pill poppin'."

In "T9X," Tech N9ne depicts another evening of drug binging while out partying. He takes ecstasy repeatedly throughout the night, mixing it with every other sort of drug imaginable. The song begins with a female introducing him to ecstasy to boost his mood. The first verses are as follows:

This Motorola I'm giving you will suit you real well  
 10 minutes, 20 minutes, 30 minutes feelin' funny butterflies  
 My eyes dilate another size overwhelming sense of love

(Motorola refers to one of the many logos that are used to market ecstasy pills.) Other lines of the song describe him popping more pills with Caribou liquor and then later taking G.H.B. with Mountain Dew. In the chorus he says, "Yeah, XTC (I love you very much)" and then proceeds to list several other drugs, including "shrooms," weed, acid, and PCP. In the second verse, he talks about going to "the X house" where several girls "got everybody X'ed out." He describes a party of 30 people in a house with "rave bitches" massaging glow sticks in the mouth, and where the women all want to have sex with him. He then smokes a blunt with a friend, along with taking a couple hits of acid. He continues taking more drugs such as "shrooms" and Robitussin combined with ecstasy. He then reports having sex, although his erection is both "hard and soft," and after about 20 minutes he nearly faints. He ends with the satirical comment "Don't try to do this at home."

His song ends with mixed messages about drugs; he says they almost killed him, but he still celebrates his drug experiences.

### Negative Ecstasy Songs

We identified 15 rap songs that contain messages either directly or indirectly discouraging people from using ecstasy. Three of these rap songs contain lines similar to the following by the Wu Tang Clan: "Providin' you pure ecstasy without pills" ("Rules," *Iron Flag*, 3/5/2002). We classified these as negative because they indicate that you can achieve the same desired effects without using drugs.

Several major rap artists have explicitly spoken out against the use of ecstasy in their music. In August 2000, Wyclef Jean released a song in which he extols the qualities of marijuana in contrast to more dangerous drugs such as ecstasy,

cocaine, and LSD. In the opening lyrics, he describes a girl offering him a bag of drugs just before he was to go on stage at Woodstock '99. He explains to her, "I don't sniff cocaine, 'cause it mess up my brain. For sexual stimulation I never did no ecstasy. I don't pop pills, I never did no LSD, but I wouldn't mind a kiss from Ms. Mary 'cause..." (*The Eclectic*, 8/22/2000). In 2001, Nas refers to ecstasy as a poison like cocaine.

Big Tymers portray ecstasy as comparable to other hard drugs in three different songs. We already described the mixed messages in their song "Hennessy and XTC." Big Tymers's album *Hood Rich* (4/30/2002) more emphatically discourages the use of ecstasy. The song "Get High" states "Now tell the truth, Absolute make ya wanna have sex/But Bacardi. Make you naughty/You don't have to use X." The song "Lil' Mama" advises young females to postpone sex till they are older and not to use ecstasy. Manny Fresh raps about a 16-year-old "shorty" (girl) who meets up with a 26-year-old man, Pa, at a club. He arranges for her to enter the VIP room of the club and then tries to take sexual advantage of her. Mannie Fresh remarks,

You gone sex off the X and your homies cheering  
What's even sadder you don't even know what you're doing  
Hey young world your whole life's ruined

The song's last verse again warns the girl against taking ecstasy and having sex, saying, "Slow it down, hold it up, get back to your class/Act your age lil' mamma stop shaking your ass/Big wheels, X pills, whatcha know bout that?" Throughout this song, rolling on ecstasy is associated with engaging in risky sex. Negative consequences of being gang raped, having children with four different fathers, and contracting an STD (implied in the lyric) are indirectly associated with ecstasy use.

More recently, Ms. Dynamite's song "Natural High" (*Little Deeper*, 3/11/2003) encourages a drug-free lifestyle. She raps,

Fuck coke fuck ecstasy  
I seen that shit take over too many...

50 Cent (Eminem's rap prodigy) and Eminem attracted attention by attacking Ja Rule for his use of ecstasy on 50 Cent's "Hail Mary" (Ja Rule diss) song released on April 22, 2003. Eminem taunts Ja Rule in the following lines:

You ain't no killa, you a pussy  
That ecstasy done got you all emotional and mushy....

This song portrays ecstasy as a drug that can lead to emotional vulnerability, false feelings of invincibility, crazy behavior, brain damage, and addiction. In this same song, 50 Cent pushes the envelope still further in suggesting that Ja Rule had a homosexual encounter while on ecstasy. They also attack Ja Rule's producer Irv Gotti, accusing him of drinking too much Bacardi and mouthing off. This song may provide a strong incentive against using ecstasy, because its use is associated with being insulted and humiliated by one's rivals. On another recent album, the rap group Westside Connection similarly says, "Get off drugs, xtasy is turning niggas into soft thugs" ("So Many Rappers in Love," *Terrorist Threats*, 12/9/2003).

## DISCUSSION

Our analysis of 69 rap songs has shown how ecstasy's reputation as a rave drug was adapted to fit with rap artists' images and the various messages and moods of their songs. Our content and textual analysis demonstrates that some rap music lyrics may have contributed to ecstasy being perceived as a trendy, high-status party drug among rap audiences, whereas others contributed to the growing perception that ecstasy was a hard drug more similar to cocaine than marijuana. Many gangsta rap songs tend to perpetuate racist stereotypes toward African American youth by depicting young Black men and women as heavy drug users, criminals, and sexual predators. We know from national studies that actual rates of ecstasy use (and most other drugs) have remained significantly lower among African Americans when compared with Whites and Hispanics (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2003). However, this research should not be used to further scapegoat rap music as a genre, as the genre contains a range of perspectives on the role of ecstasy in American culture. Also, the excesses of sexual pursuit, alcohol, and drug use depicted in gangsta rap music are a long-standing feature of American popular culture and can be seen reflected in rock and country music genres as well (Rose, 1994; Shapiro, 1999).

Beginning in 1996, rap songs began to inform their listeners that ecstasy was available in urban settings and was being used outside of the context of raves. In many hit rap songs from the late 1990s and early 2000, ecstasy is associated with wealth and celebrity lifestyles of gangsta rap artists, which one might expect because it is considered an expensive "designer" or "club" drug. Nightclubs, house parties, or luxury cars are the most commonly depicted environments for its use. Ravers reportedly used ecstasy to enhance the experience of dancing, emotional bonding, and sensuality as opposed to sexuality (Reynolds, 1999). Many rap songs, on the other hand, describe

the use of ecstasy to enhance sexual desire, pleasure, and performance. As in rave culture, ecstasy is mostly equated with loving; however, in keeping with the hypermasculine gangsta stereotype, the meaning of "loving" is largely reduced to sexual pleasure devoid of romance or emotional attachment. Rappers giving "hoes" ecstasy to make them horny and less inhibited is a common theme. Female rap artists also sing about the use of ecstasy to enhance their sexual experiences. Rap music depicts other risky behaviors in association with using ecstasy, such as engaging in casual or paid sex, swallowing ecstasy pills with hard liquor, and drug bingeing. Those prominent rap celebrities who rapped positively about the use of ecstasy may well have contributed to its desirability and its normalization within both urban hip-hop and mainstream hip-hop club and party culture settings. These songs may also have increased audiences' expectancies about ecstasy as a sexual enhancer drug.

However, we argue that rap music also may have increased audiences' concern about adverse effects and consequences from using ecstasy, contributing to the increasing perception that many American youth now have of ecstasy as a dangerous drug (Johnston et al., 2003). Many rap songs describe undesirable effects and consequences of using ecstasy, and several artists provide explicit advice to their audiences not to use it. Negative effects and consequences depicted in rap songs include depression, losing control of one's emotions, brain damage, being sexually taken advantage of, overdosing, and even death. Within the context of rave culture, feeling more emotional is considered a positive part of the ecstasy experience, but in at least three different rap songs feeling sentimental or emotional from ecstasy is equated with weakness and, in one instance, with homosexuality. Enough ambiguity can be found in *many* rap songs to allow youth to interpret the messages about ecstasy in a variety of ways. The association of ecstasy with promiscuous sex, street life, and drug bingeing in rap music may actually have increased youths' perception of ecstasy as a dangerous drug, contributing to the recent decline in its use. The nihilistic attitude expressed in Eminem and Tech N9ne lyrics may appeal to some disaffected youth who feel despairing about their future. But these same lyrics may dissuade more cautious, health-conscious youth from ever trying ecstasy. Other rap songs explicitly advise audiences that they can have sexual pleasure without popping ecstasy pills, and several rap artists advocate the use of weed instead of ecstasy.

Modeling theory raises the question of how the music may have impacted patterns of behavior around ecstasy use. Based on modeling theory, one might expect youth who strongly identify with particular artists to imitate some of their behaviors depicted in the music, including using ecstasy at clubs, using



it to get in the mood for sex, men giving it to women, combining ecstasy with alcohol and other drugs, or conversely choosing not to use ecstasy at all. Although many rap celebrities claim to depict their own use of ecstasy in their music, we still do not know if youths' desire to emulate celebrity lifestyles can influence them to engage in more risky behaviors than they would otherwise. In defense of their music, rap artists present another side of this debate regarding their influence on youth. In response to the question, "Do you think society and fans are taking rap too seriously?" Eminem replies, "That's the truest statement in the world. Take this music for what it is...Half of the shit I say and other rappers say, they might have done it, but they're not telling you to go out and do it" ("Eminem: The Rolling Stone Interview," 2002).

Further research on youth exposure to different rap songs about ecstasy (and other drugs) and their response to these songs' messages is needed to assess music's impact on youth expectancies, decisions, and behaviors regarding the use of ecstasy and other associated risky behaviors. Given the range of different messages toward ecstasy within rap music (and other genres of popular music), media effects researchers are advised to compare youths' exposure to specific songs that glamorize ecstasy compared with those songs that advise against its use. Researchers should also consider youth preferences for specific artists and albums. Finally, researchers are advised to consider youths' own interpretations of the song lyrics, especially for those songs that contain ambiguous or mixed messages.

## NOTES

1. To be eligible for this study, participants had to have used alcohol *or* any form of marijuana and one other drug; and they could not be habitual (more than 15 days a month) users of injected or noninjected cocaine or heroin in any form.

2. Recently rap artists have also begun to promote energy drinks such as Nelly's "Pimp Juice," Lil John's "Crunk Juice," and Mogul Russel Simmons's "Def Con 3." These drinks are promoted as part of the hip-hop lifestyle and instructed to be mixed with some of the before-mentioned liquors.

3. These findings are consistent with statistical analyses that demonstrate that negative news media coverage contributed to declining rates of both marijuana and cocaine use since the 1970s (Fan & Holway, 1994; Stryker, 2003).

4. A classic example is Ice T's song "I'm Your Pusher," which is actually an anti-drug song that uses puns like "dope beats" to celebrate musical skill as opposed to dealing drugs (Kelly, 1996).

5. Bone Thugs-N-Harmony is a group of rappers that originated in Cleveland, Ohio, and later moved to California to work with Easy E and N.W.A. of Ruthless Records (known for their West Coast hardcore lyrics). They were one of the most successful rap groups of the mid-1990s, known for their blend of vocal harmonies and rough street raps (VH1.com).

6. Murder Inc. is an offshoot of Def Jam Records.

7. Many songs on Ja Rule's other albums contain references to ecstasy (cf. "Livin it Up," "Lost Little Girl," and "The Inc."). Unlike other rap artists, Ja Rule does not mention any of the health hazards or risks associated with ecstasy. In speaking about his third album, *Pain is Love*, Ja Rule explains the general sentiment he wishes to capture in his music. He states, "Pain is love, baby. The world needs more love; that's why I named my album Pain is Love—I came up with the title when I got it tattooed across my chest."

8. By this time, media reports had publicized the dangers of dehydration while on ecstasy, and water sales became more frequent at clubs and bars. Orange juice is said to quicken the absorption of ecstasy and thus enhance the high.

9. Another setting that is mentioned less frequently is inside a person's car.

10. The softer, more melodic sound of this song also indicates the merging of hip-hop and pop musical styles.

11. This mention of violence in association with ecstasy is unusual. However, the fact that MDMA can cause hallucinations and that ecstasy pills may contain other substances besides MDMA makes this experience quite possible in reality. Another explanation for this effect is that MDMA may serve to enhance whatever mood a person is already in.

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