Abstract

The presented report includes an overview of the political and social situation of post-Communist Romania from the viewpoint of establishing the emergence and development of hip-hop as a ‘taste’ subculture. As there were very few detectable traces of the specific literature we needed in Romanian, our pioneering work started with adapting foreign literature in the field to the Romanian realities we faced. The results of our research are quantified, discussed and concluded complete with references and the state-of-the-art.

Keywords: hip-hop, subculture, post-Communist Romania

Introduction

After 1989, in the post-Communist era, the academic research in Eastern Europe, Romania included, opened up to the new problems posed by the mechanisms of cultural change. Public recognition of decentering margins and of oppositional forces to mainstream culture gradually brought about an increased interest in subcultures (originated in terms of region, ethnicity, class, religion or ‘taste’). An analysis of such, it was felt, would contribute to a better understanding of the inner workings of the local and global state of affairs, despite the neuralgic points being tackled. ‘Taste’ subcultures were the last to gain visibility and to form a subject for scholarly investigation. This explains the scarcity of resources in the field and the necessity of giving more attention to this otherwise prominent phenomenon.

The particular case of Romanian hip-hop and its novel discourse was made the object of our research within the Sixth Framework Project, Society and Lifestyles. Towards Enhancing Social Harmonization through Knowledge of Subcultural Communities. The data collected and processed resumes its setting (the social, political and historical contexts), players (citizens questioning citizenship), plot (from the expository, through the climactic, to the open-endedness of its resolution), objective time (contemporary age), style (specificity of its language and structure) and narrative technique (involving artists as narrators, the average Romanian as narrator and hip-hop fans as active narrators).
The research was carried out by Daniela Şorcaru and Isabela Merilă (main researchers) and Michaela Praisler and Floriana Popescu (members of the research group and representatives in the SAL Steering Committee).

The focus groups under investigation were formed by hip-hoppers in Galati*, Romania (several groups and independent members of the community were contacted). There are approximately 150 group members.

* Galati is Romania's seventh largest city, with a population of approx. 300,000 people. Of these, at least 15% seem to be hip-hop fans (judging by participation in various hip-hop events).

**Methods**

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used: ethnographic fieldwork, 30 structured interviews, 40 questionnaires and content analyses of lyrics and media coverage.

The interdisciplinary approaches of cultural studies, discourse analysis and postmodernist theory provided the theoretical framework. The main authors/concepts employed were I. Hassan – postmodernism as an organised system or poetics; J. F. Lyotard – rejection of the hegemony of the canon or of the “grand” or “master” narratives; M. Featherstone – the beginning of a shift in the global balance of power away from the West; C. P. Kottak – postmodernist narratives show different degrees of destruction, domination, resistance, survival, adaptation and modification of cultures; A. Bennett – new conceptual models for youth culture: “neo-tribe” and “scene”; D. Muggleton – post-subculture has moved away from group identity to a more fragmented identity, from stylistic homogeneity to plural styles, from clear delineation to blurred boundaries, from a high to a low degree of commitment, from permanence to transience, from a static entity to one governed by intense mobility, from emphasising belief and values to expressing fascination with style and image, from political involvement to apolitical distance, from anti-media positions to active engagement with the media, from authenticity to celebrating the inauthentic and B. Longhurst – one possible position: retaining aspects of the subculture concept but considering the way in which subcultures have in some sense been “postmodernised”.

- Under focus are the following: the impact of American hip-hop on Romanian artists and public, the distinction between contaminated and

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1 At the current state of the art in the field of hip-hop research in Romania, the UGAL contribution to the SAL project comes as a ground-setting endeavour. Scholarly literature on the subject is virtually non-existent in our country, while the written self-expression of the hip-hop community proves, even today, to be perpetually in a planning stage rather than taking actual shape. Lyrics remain the only written testimony of Romanian hip-hop. Consequently our starting point meant translating and confronting the international literature on the subject with the reality of the Romanian context. Only then were we able to shift our attention towards field research and interpreting research results.
authentic Romanian hip-hoppers, the history of the manifestations of hip-hop elements in the Romanian culture, the attitudes of Romanians towards the hip-hop phenomenon, the emergence and crystallisation of the hip-hop subcultural community, features of the native hip-hop subculture, the icons of the Romanian hip-hop subcultural community and the present-day reception of hip-hop messages as a subculture.

- Aspects tackled include: gender, violence (linguistic and physical), glocalization or how the global meets the local and what comes out of this clash as a result (Eastern European, Romanian), resistance to established society (confronting the mainstream popular culture, confronting society and the political/economic system) and the perception of media coverage.
- Specificities researched are: community events, places of entertainment, Internet as a part of the subcultural scene and the means of expressing identity.

Results

American hip-hop was initially the norm within the Romanian context. Gradually, however, the mechanisms and marketing strategies of its importation became visible and undesirable. Consequently Romanian hip-hop emerged as a reaction against the cultural, economic and political mainstream. Historically four stages may be identified in the evolution of Romanian hip-hop: early 1990s, mid-1990, late 1990s and the present day.

Our research of community members and events, on the one hand, uncovered the gender issues (the obvious discrimination patterns) recurrent in hip-hop modes and manners and the linguistic and physical violence specific to the manifestations of the Romanian hip-hop subcultural identity.

Our analysis of the hip-hop media coverage, on the other hand, revealed the exaggerated censorship imposed on hip-hop image and lyrics.

Following our investigations, a number of social problems have been identified. The hip-hop subculture in Galati, and in Romania in general, faces serious social criticism from authorities and the society-at-large. Those who oppose hip-hop and impose censorship are governmental bodies (The National Council for the Audiovisual), school boards, employers and parents alike. As a result, hip-hop communities have become quite exclusivist because, on one hand, they are very much aware of the fact that they are being discriminated and, on the other, they have become prejudiced in turn as well. We are therefore making the following policy recommendations.
Policy recommendations

- granting community members the right to express their subcultural identity openly
- granting them proper visibility in terms of both society and authorities by displaying a just tolerance towards people who are differently-minded and who choose a type of identity that does not correspond to “unwritten” social patterns
- exerting the same degree or type of censorship as with other sections and layers of society and putting an end to discriminative policies that are enforced by national authorities in the field and society-at-large
- making sure that community members are no longer discriminated in institutions (e.g., schools, universities, mayor’s office, police and the like) when applying for a job and in other situations due to their appearance (clothing, jewellery, accessories) and behaviour (excepting violent acts, of course)
- allotting them an equal amount of broadcast time and newspaper space in all mass media environments, so they may finally exert their human and constitutional rights to embrace openly their social identity as a subcultural community distinct from the mainstream and to communicate directly via public channels to members of their own communities.

Discussion and conclusions

Hip-hop, which is a music genre and a cultural movement, has evolved from the strategically coherent modernist phase to a blurred, postmodernist one where frontiers are trespassed and identity is constantly in-the-making. Romanian hip-hop has emerged post its American model (recycling and easternising western patterns and attitudes). It took hip-hop, however, about two decades to reach Romania, after 1989, the year of the country’s entering its post-Communist era. During the 1990s, in the political, economic and cultural uncertainty and experimentation that followed the revolution, western models were readily adopted due to the growing need to efface a past in which international and intercultural dialogue had been reduced to a minimum. In the case of hip-hop, its outspoken message, its rhythms and the unconventionality of its artists were especially attractive to a still young generation which had been forbidden to express itself openly. As the context gradually changed, so did the imports from the west, which were slowly easternised. The cultural convergence meant that the initial accessing and imitation of American hip-hop lost ground in favour of adaptations to the Romanian situation at the turn of the century.

The constant rewriting of Romanian hip-hop in keeping with the broader contextual changes involves artists and audiences, places and spaces, subjects,
lifestyles, fandom, production and consumption. All these are pointing in the direction of appropriation, glocalization, contamination and fluidisation (symptoms of contemporary global culture – under the sign of postmodernist deconstruction and reconstruction).

Hip-hop in Romania, a subculture which, both in its opposition to the mainstream and in its self-generated or stereotypical public image, is as diverse as it may be. It does not exist in strict separation from other global or local subcultural modes of expression. Coming from across the Atlantic, this subculture has adopted and adapted all the main characteristic elements of hip-hop (DJing, MCing or rapping, breakdancing, beatboxing, fashion, slang, graffiti, street knowledge and entrepreneurship), with some players doing so more than others. Their media-borne images or texts have dispersed across all social strata and have been received differently (though not indifferently!) with the help of radio, television, magazines, films and, of course, the Internet. At home, this subculture shares a number of political strategies of rebellion and/or promotion of otherness with punk rockers, hippies and others – all of whom have gained visibility and become part of the Romanian scene following 1989. Our research has shown that one such common strategy is hip-hop’s countercultural resistance to specific centres that Romanian history has allowed and that have produced fissures in the society-at-large. It vehemently replaces the “wooden language” with a virulent argot that signals its rejection of the country’s Orwellian “newspeak”, “big brother” and communist past. Meanwhile, it mocks the “manele” subculture infesting the Romanian territory (mirroring the opposition to eastern/oriental influences) and, exacerbated, justifies racist and misogynist positions that were associated with hip-hop anyway.

Its dynamism is also obvious at the level of discourse where it is supported by irony, parody and pastiche. Within this fabric, the structure and conventional nature of auto and hetero images of Romanian hip-hop may be found at the crossroads between the linguistic (aesthetic/rhetorical) and historical (ideological/socio-cultural) aspects of discourse. The language of the hip-hop text was English at first, while minimal modifications of original lyrics were being made. When Romanian texts were produced, they retained a great deal of unprocessed western ingredients, with translators mainly producing word-for-word equivalent versions. In time, although the western “other” still breathes through, the wording seems to have been preserved intentionally for parodies with a critique of its own to be formulated.

This all points to the qualitative development of hip-hop in Romania from an almost plagiaristic enterprise to a self-reflexive, analytical community with pertinent judgements of the self and the other. Such texts, typical for the Romanian situation, are made possible by the fact that their readers are mostly upper middle class, educated youth who now see an opportunity for making their voices heard in ways
and by means which are apparently popular and entertaining but which are serious and thought-provoking in reality. Romanian hip-hop fans, as our investigations have pointed out, form exclusivist, prejudiced groups not only because they reject newcomers as potential contamination agents, but especially because of their social status and in response to the blind discrimination against them by society. Their resistance takes the form of imposed otherness in music, fashion, behaviour and language, and their narrations of the self marginalise authoritarian centres.

Conceived, it has been implied, at the expense of killing its American ancestor but born dead (in the sense attributed to the word by cultural theorists like W. Benjamin, R. Barthes and others), Romanian hip-hop has nonetheless travelled across space and developed in time to become an autonomous but flexible construct with a discernible inner dynamics that has propelled it away from the margin towards a cultural centre where, if it is not tolerated as such, it is contested, criticised, even feared as a serious threat and therefore acknowledged. Its text, middle ground in the communication between writer and reader, discloses viewpoints and represents group identity (its subject is generally Romanian, male, collective, upper middle-class, apolitical). It playfully rewrites other texts in an attempt at discouraging preconception and publicly denouncing the complacent acceptance of the ways of the world (its textuality reflects the new Romanian glocal disorder offered as food for thought). It adopts a language of its own for the narrative pattern that supports it (its discourse breaks with tradition and challenges the inert reader) and it explores the social aspects that usually go unnoticed or remain unsolved (Romanian society at its worst is placed under a lens – with its unemployment, poverty, poor living conditions and lack of education still waiting to be eradicated).

To sum up, what defines the approximately 16 year-old Romanian hip-hop is the fragmented nature of its inscriptions of identity, the plurality of its narrative styles, its elasticity and detachment, its constant state of becoming, its image-making and image-breaking endeavours, its celebration of media generated simulacra – all identifiable in its history, in its narrating the referent, in its outer and inner mobility and in the playfulness of its language. In short, it might be looked upon as a case of post-subculturalism.

**References**


Youth Lifestyle Subcultures


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Received 28 January 2009
Accepted 30 April 2009
Hiphopo kultūra Rumunijoje (1992–2008 m.)

Santrauka


Raktažodžiai: hiphopas, subkultūra, pokomunistinė Rumunija.