

**Keepin' it Weal in "The 514":
Hip-Hop as a Tool to Promote Well-Being in Montreal's Marginalized Communities**

John Aaron Tyree

A Thesis
In the Department of
Geography, Planning & Environment

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science (Geography, Urban, and Environmental Studies) at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

January 2023

© John Aaron Tyree, 2023

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: John Aaron Tyree

Entitled: Keepin' it Weal in "The 514": Hip-Hop as a Tool to Promote Well-Being in
Montreal's Marginalized Communities

And submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science (Geography, Urban, and Environmental Studies)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Graduate Program Director
Dr. Damon Matthews

_____ Examiner
Dr. Emmanuel Tabi

_____ External Examiner
Dr. Janis Timm-Bottos

_____ Supervisor
Dr. Ted Rutland

Approved by

Dr. Craig Townsend
Chair (Department of Geography, Planning, and Environment)

Dr. Pascale Sicotte
Dean (Faculty of Arts & Science)

Date: _____ 2023

Abstract

Keepin' it Weal in "The 514":

Hip-Hop as a Tool to Promote Well-Being in Montreal's Marginalized Communities

John Aaron Tyree

Many people today associate hip-hop with only rap music and the other commercialized aspects of the culture. However, hip-hop is, and always has been, more than simply a way to turn a profit or pass the time. Since its inception, hip-hop has aided the survival and flourishing of its progenitors and pioneers, primarily Black and Latino youth occupying the margins of society. To date, numerous scholars have examined how marginalized and oppressed people have used hip-hop to promote various aspects of well-being. While there are several ways in which well-being is perceived and defined, an important approach examines *existential well-being*, a philosophical approach that considers how people function along the full spectrum of human existence—physical, social, personal/psychological, and spiritual. This thesis uses existential well-being as a framework to explore how practitioners in Montreal use hip-hop to promote well-being in marginalized communities. As a form of research-creation, the core of the thesis is a series of three podcast episodes, where I explore the use of hip-hop with specific Montreal practitioners. Overall, the thesis illuminates various ways hip-hop has been used to promote well-being in Montreal and beyond. A key contribution of the thesis is to show that, while it may be useful to conceive of well-being in terms of four distinct domains, practitioners in Montreal tend to promote well-being as an integrated existential whole.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	(1)
2. Literature Review	(4)
3. Research Outline	(18)
4. Discussion	(20)
5. Conclusion	(23)

1. *Introduction*

Hip-hop emerged in the mid-1970s from the post-industrial ruins and rubble of New York City's South Bronx neighborhood. And from these humble beginnings, it has morphed into the multi-billion-dollar industry it is today, some forty-plus years later. Many people associate hip-hop with only rap music and the other commercialized aspects of the culture. However, hip-hop is, and always has been, more than simply a way to turn a profit or pass the time. Hip-hop culture comprises the four elements of rapping, deejaying, b-boying (more commonly known as break dancing), and graffiti writing. And since its inception, hip-hop has aided the survival and flourishing of its progenitors and pioneers, primarily Black and Latino youth occupying the margins of society.

To date, numerous scholars have examined how marginalized and oppressed people have used hip-hop to promote various aspects of well-being. While there are several ways in which well-being is perceived and defined, I am particularly interested in existential well-being, a philosophical approach that considers how people function along the full spectrum of human existence—physical, social, personal/psychological, and spiritual. Using existential well-being as a framework, I endeavored to integrate these distinct aspects of well-being advanced by scholars in the literature. No scholar, to my knowledge, has done this previously. In that case, my research is the first to amalgamate these parts and illustrate how hip-hop relates to and addresses existential well-being, which I explored through primary research and a series of three podcast episodes examining these themes with hip-hop practitioners in Montreal.

This thesis examines how hip-hop is used to promote well-being. As a form of research-creation, it takes two forms: a written document and a creative product (the podcasts). In the

written document, I begin with a review of the significant literature, paying mind to how hip-hop promotes well-being in each of its four dimensions individually. After the literature review, I outline my research questions and methodology. These sections provide background for the creative product, the three podcast episodes. The remainder of the written document reflects on the podcast episodes, noting how the themes in the podcasts resonate with findings in the relevant literature, as well as a conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Over the past few decades, scholars have spilled much ink exploring hip-hop as a pop culture phenomenon. The literature runs the gamut from subjects such as sociology to gender studies. Looking across this broad spectrum of writing, this review will examine how hip-hop promotes well-being amongst marginalized individuals and communities, focusing on its use in the four dimensions of human existence, physical, social, personal/psychological, and spiritual. While the literature moves through a broad range of contexts, this paper aims to synthesize the findings and illustrate hip-hop's potential when used as a holistic approach to wellness promotion.

Physical Dimension

Scholars concerned with how hip-hop is used to promote physical well-being focus primarily on hip-hop dance as a physical-fitness modality that can motivate marginalized and underprivileged youths to incorporate movement into their lifestyles. While this literature focuses on the physical body, it also acknowledges the positive psycho-somatic effects of exercise and movement generally and hip-hop dance specifically. Much of this research follows

initiatives offered to adolescents as part of after-school programs held in schools or community recreation centers. Within this literature, some scholars (Bonny, Lindberg, and Pacampara, 2017) focus almost exclusively on the cognitive benefits of hip-hop dance, while others are concerned with how hip-hop dance can address deep-seated trauma and other psychological issues (Lapum et al., 2019). However, the majority (Harris, Wilks, and Stewart, 2012, Beaulac, Kristjansson, and Calhoun, 2011, Crouch, Robertson, and Fagan, 2011) adopt a more holistic approach and perspective regarding hip-hop dance's uses and benefits.

Hip-hop is exceedingly popular among youth around the globe, many of whom view it as being more than just entertainment, which is why hip-hop can be influential when used in wellness programs tailored to serve them. Harris, Wilks, and Stewart (2012) discuss, for example, how hip-hop dance programs that are used to engage youth are found to be invaluable not only as a means of engaging them in activities that promote better health but might also be able to advance positive social ties for youths whose community environments present them with adversity that they must overcome. Moreover, as Beaulac, Kristjansson, and Calhoun (2011) argue, disadvantaged youth from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds are seen to benefit from programs such as these, which could be more effective than traditional fitness activities in promoting physical movement, psychological and social well-being, and overall personal development among adolescent participants.

Other scholars look at hip-hop dance initiatives intended to promote physical and psychological well-being by encouraging youth to incorporate exercise or movement into their lifestyles. Crouch, Robertson, and Fagan (2011) argue that hip-hop dance, along with rap music, can be used, specifically, to address the deep-seated sexual health disadvantage that exists among

some marginalized youth, and has been seen to foster positive shifts in youths' awareness and attitudes regarding not only sexual health but both physical and emotional health as well.

Similarly, scholars such as Lapum et al. (2019) have witnessed the psycho-somatic benefits that hip-hop dance programs provide. They have come to acknowledge that more traditional healing modalities such as talk therapy which, while beneficial in many contexts, are not always ideal on their own. This was especially evident with sufferers of trauma stemming from abuse and violence because those traumas, more often than not, can be difficult to discuss. However, hip-hop dance's embodied nature may facilitate a cognitive shift that enables embodied emotional healing.

Aside from the research looking to hip-hop dance for remedies that address already-existing health issues, scholars such as Bonny, Lindberg, and Pacampara (2017) instead investigate the ways hip-hop can build and enhance mental competencies. Their research found that hip-hop dance, similar to activities such as chess and video games, taps into cognitive skills that encourage the development of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) proficiencies, providing therapists working with youths who are uninterested in other cognition and socio-cognitive skills promoting kinesthetic or gaming activities with another valuable and effective means of engagement.

Viewed in its entirety, the research involving hip-hop and well-being in the physical dimension aims to illustrate how hip-hop dance programs geared towards underprivileged and marginalized youths can benefit their overall health. Hip-hop dance, these scholars contend, has the potential to be, even more so than traditional forms of exercise and movement, effective in encouraging these youths to incorporate health-promoting activities into their lives.

Social Dimension

The literature concerning hip-hop's role in promoting well-being in the social dimension is perhaps the largest. In this dimension, scholars investigate several themes, including hip-hop's emergence in Black and Latino communities and its subsequent diffusion globally (Malone & Martinez, 2015; Wright, 2004; Perry, 2008); hip-hop's later emergence in Indigenous and aboriginal communities (Gooding et al., 2016; Warren & Evitt, 2010; Sheffield, 2011); and the spread and circulation of hip-hop in struggles for liberation in the Arab world and the Middle East (Golpushnezhad, 2018; Nooshin, 2011; Gana, 2012; Isherwood, 2014). To these studies, focused on regional and racial groups, can be added a smaller literature that focuses specifically on women in the Middle East and the United States who use hip-hop to battle intersecting forms of oppression (Isoke, 2013; Gupta-Carlson, 2010). Together, this literature points to how hip-hop infuses social movements and benefits these movements by providing an artistic venue to develop collective identities and forms of political analysis.

Malone and Martinez (2015) provide a broad view of hip-hop and social movements, tracing how hip-hop fits into different phases of social struggle and circulates in other parts of the world. To explain hip-hop's role in social movements, they identify three primary stages or forms of incorporation leading to the present moment: a cultural awareness and emergence phase, a social creation and institutionalization phase, and a political activism and participation phase. This analysis helps relate hip-hop to different forms or stages of social struggle. While descriptive, it could also be used as a proscriptive analysis that aids organizers, for example, in taking their struggle to another level. Like many scholars, the authors locate the earliest connection between hip-hop and social struggle in the United States. Still, their article shows

how hip-hop subsequently spread within movements in other countries, including Senegal, Bolivia, and China, most notably.

While Malone and Martinez broadly view hip hop over time and across space, most studies look at more specific groups or periods. The most extensive work, not surprisingly, has focused on hip-hop in disadvantaged Black and Latino communities in the United States. Wright (2004), for example, discusses hip-hop's journey from its inception in poor Black and Latino communities in the 1970s to the transcendent international youth culture it has become today. Hip-hop culture, she argues, transcends not only racial and ethnic lines but also the very commercialized creation sold to mainstream America. She contends that while hip-hop certainly holds massive commercial appeal, it is intrinsically linked to a discourse of Black resistance to anti-Black racism. Despite its legitimacy among corporate elites, it is more grounded in the quotidian experiences of countless disadvantaged young people. Similarly, Perry (2008) speaks of hip-hop's massive influence on African descendant youth in various locations across the globe. He contends that hip-hop's expanding global influence facilitates the creation and diffusion of black diasporic subjects who identify with the experience of blackness portrayed in hip-hop culture and draw inspiration from hip-hop to challenge injustice and racial oppression in their locales.

Other racialized groups also identify strongly with the experiences of hip-hop's Black and Latino American creators and pioneers. Some scholars highlight this, focusing on indigenous communities' relationship with hip-hop culture. They observe the parallels between these communities' struggles against injustice and the struggles experienced in Black and Latino communities in the United States. For example, Gooding et al. (2016) studied the relationship between Aboriginal Australian peoples and Hip-Hop culture. Similar to Malone and Martinez,

they discuss the similarities and differences between the historical, political, and cultural experiences of African-Americans and Aboriginal Australians, then illustrate, through their focus on four Aboriginal Hip-Hop artists, how hip-hop acts as an instrument for identity formation while also providing a means of celebrating and preserving Aboriginal culture. Warren and Evitt (2010) provide further examples of Aboriginal youths' embrace of hip-hop by underscoring the contemporary performances of two Aboriginal hip-hop artists in remote Australian regions. The authors highlight how unique forms of music making there have been aided by emerging technologies, online networking, festivals, and programs, and then they discuss how, through their creativity and hard work, these artists counter racist stereotypes that portray indigenous youth as indolent and aimless, perceptions that only serve to preserve the centuries-old traumas experienced by indigenous peoples globally. Sheffield (2011) asserts that these communities' embrace of hip-hop is chiefly due to the themes of resistance and self-determination that were foundational during its nascent years. Moreover, hip-hop's accessibility to native peoples via platforms like radio makes it more likely than scholarship to connect with those who need messages vital to their cultures' survival and the flourishing of their communities.

Further examples exist where hip-hop is employed to strengthen social movements within non-Black and Latino communities outside of the United States. Golpushnezhad (2018), for example, considers the relatively recent introduction of hip-hop culture into Iranian society. She argues that as hip-hop becomes increasingly accepted in Iran, its sanctioning and legitimization by the state and mainstream society only serves to strip hip-hop of its potency as a subversive and liberatory cultural practice. On the question of what led to hip-hop's emergence in Iran since the early 2000s, Nooshin (2011) examines some of the reasons as she investigates how hip-hop allows some Iranian citizens a means of self-expression like no other available to them in the

past. As hip-hop migrates to different locales around the globe, she also indicates, it acquires new meanings uniquely shaped by each distinct environment.

Beyond Iran, Gana (2012) discusses how hip-hop has also become a force for sociocultural and political dissent among youth in many Arab nations. Speaking specifically of Tunisian youth during the Arab Spring, a series of anti-government rebellions that swept across the Arab world in 2010 and led to significant reforms in several nations, he argues that hip-hop played a crucial role for youths looking for creative and constructive ways to counter injustice and oppression during this period. Isherwood (2014) offers a similar analysis, asserting that Arab hip-hop culture, in general, is viewed as “a highly transnational and collaborative endeavor” that has become an integral component of the culture of resistance for many Arab people. Hip-hop, she contends, also has a role in uniting members of the Arab diaspora who, despite needing to navigate sometimes contrasting political and ideological boundaries that exist, rely on hip-hop culture to promote a sense of community and collectivity, along with a shared ethnic identity and a commitment to fighting for oppressed peoples in Palestine, Syria, and throughout the Arab world.

Studies attentive to gender are rarer within this literature. While women presumably are included in many of the studies of hip-hop in the social domain, not many studies focus on issues, such as sexism, which affect women in particular. Within the literature examining women who use hip-hop to promote well-being in the social domain, much of the attention is focused on how women use hip-hop to resist either gender or racial inequality, or both issues as they intersect. Isoke (2013), for example, discusses Black-identified women living in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, who use hip-hop to resist oppression and negotiate trans-local connections undermined by the state. She asserts that hip-hop’s cultural subtext can produce opportunities for

examining blackness as both a cultural identity and a space fostering solidarity among African people globally. An articulation of blackness within the context of hip-hop aids these women in creating and nurturing relationships with one another while simultaneously expressing an anti-racist and feminist worldview. Gupta-Carlson (2010), on the other hand, examines female break-dancers, or “b-girls,” who harness hip-hop to empower themselves and stake a claim within hip-hop itself, a culture they feel has not given them their due respect. She argues that women are integral to the construction of the support networks upon which many hip-hop artists rely and points out that despite its tradition of opposing various forms of injustice, hip-hop culture largely excludes women.

Scholars researching how hip-hop promotes well-being in the social dimension recognize how effective it can be in building bridges across cultures while strengthening connections within them. This literature’s primary focus is on how hip-hop culture, once created to uplift Black and Latino communities in the United States, has subsequently spread across the globe, connecting and inspiring people to resist state oppression and foster solidarity among marginalized people globally.

Personal/Psychological Dimension

In the personal/psychological dimension, scholars consider how hip-hop, primarily through rap music, is used to facilitate personal development and create a sense of well-being among adolescents and adults. The literature can be divided into three categories, three different aspects of personal/psychological well-being: education, mental health, and empowerment. The literature suggests that hip-hop can benefit these three aspects of well-being in this dimension and perhaps be especially beneficial to populations ill-served by more mainstream forms of

education, mental health counseling, and empowerment practices. As Akom (2009) suggests in his study of hip-hop's use in education, "[T]ransformative education for the poor and disempowered begins with the creation of pedagogic spaces where marginalized youth are enabled to gain a consciousness of how their own experiences have been shaped by larger social institutions."

Using hip-hop in education has a long history, and much of the literature focuses on how it can be integrated into educational programming and the benefits that can be achieved by doing so. In this instance, hip-hop is approached as an alternative means of facilitating positive educational outcomes. Akom (2009) sees hip-hop as an alternative pedagogy, which he calls "critical hip-hop pedagogy." The focus here is less on hip-hop style or music, but on the pedagogy it entails. This approach to learning and knowledge acquisition starts with marginalized students' experiences rather than the knowledge of "experts." This Ball (2013) offers a similar perspective. While his hip-hop pedagogy involves bringing rap music into the classroom, the music primarily provides a context or forum to develop debating skills, a form of critical thinking and expression. Hip-hop, for Ball, offers a way of teaching students a debating method that combines elements of freestyle battling and street corner oration and then uses this method to grapple with contemporary issues in media studies and journalism. For Washington (2018), finally, hip-hop and rap music is a kind of curriculum. He argues that the themes and narratives of hip-hop are often connected to the lived experiences of Black males and provide a terrain of learning; therefore, it is more relevant to a student group (Black males) that can feel alienated and disengaged by more conventional education.

The actual effects of hip-hop pedagogy are difficult to assess. Neither Akom nor Ball compares the results of hip-hop pedagogy to other forms. They do, however, provide anecdotal

evidence that it helps to engage marginalized students while also arguing that it can provide the kind of critical education required to combat systems of oppression in the real world. Similarly, Washington (2015) backs up his analysis with case studies, particularly cases in which counselors used hip-hop in the school setting. He cites, for example, a successful intervention with a black man left feeling disempowered after a negative encounter with police. Hip-hop therapy, he contends, can provide an entry point to more meaningful engagement between counselors and their Black male clients. In another fascinating study, Low (2010) points out that many teachers and administrators are reluctant to integrate hip-hop into the curriculum, mainly due to perceived difficulties in the relationship between hip-hop and formal education. She notes, however, that it is precisely the controversies surrounding rap and hip-hop that lend to their pedagogic utility.

Washington's study provides a bridge to another way hip-hop can promote well-being in the personal/psychological dimension: therapy or counseling. While Washington examines how school counselors can use hip-hop, other scholars look to professional therapists and counselors beyond school walls. The literature suggests that hip-hop can be beneficial in therapeutic practice around a range of issues, including grief (Elligan, 2000), self-concept and self-esteem (Tyson, 2002; Levy, 2012), and interpersonal relations (Tyson, 2002; Kobin & Tyson, 2006). Hip hop, the literature also shows, can be integrated into therapy in various ways. Elligan (2000) and Tyson (2002) examine how rap music can be combined with other approaches, including bibliotherapy and music therapy.

Similarly, Levy (2012) explores how hip-hop can be merged with cognitive behavioral therapy, bibliotherapy, and person-centered therapy. For Levy, this means using rap music and lyrics in the therapy session to explore emotions with clients. As with using hip-hop in the

classroom, the main benefit here seems to be the use of culturally relevant material – relevant to marginalized and racialized clients.

The mental health benefits of hip-hop appear to be significant. As with the literature on hip-hop pedagogy, the benefits here are mainly demonstrated by anecdotes, which is common in the case-study methods used in psychological research. Elligan (2000) suggests that Hip-hop, when integrated into therapy with Black men familiar with the music, can be a powerful therapeutic tool, as evidenced by how it helped one client in particular to overcome the grief he experienced due to the death of his father, as well as the anger management issues that ensued following this traumatic event. Tyson (2002) and Kobin and Tyson (2006) emphasize the benefits of hip-hop in therapy sessions with low-income, ethnic, and cultural-minority clients. They argue that using rap lyrics in counseling sessions facilitates dialogue with such clients and, thus, improves therapeutic outcomes. Levy (2012), Levy and Keum (2014), and Levy, Emdin, and Adjapong (2018) point out that many vital emotions find expression in rap music. Bringing music into therapy, therefore, makes it easier to explore feelings with clients during sessions. They also point to the benefits of asking clients to write their lyrics to explore their emotions.

The literature offers differing answers to the question of who might benefit from hip-hop therapy. As noted above, Elligan (2000) believes the key issue is a group's familiarity with hip-hop versus other forms of knowledge; hip-hop therapy is beneficial, in other words, among groups who are familiar with it while generally unfamiliar with mainstream psychological theories (including concepts like self-esteem or authenticity). Levy and Keum (2014) focus on how different groups are socialized and how this makes it more or less possible to talk with other people about one's emotions. Men are often socialized to avoid discussing their feelings, and this can be particularly true among more marginalized or racially oppressed men. As Levy and Keum

(2014) conclude, this approach permits men to freely express their experiences without being perceived as vulnerable or weak, so it is beneficial when treating men who, due to social stigma surrounding mental health, often exhibit an aversion to traditional modes of therapy and therefore go untreated.

A smaller literature has examined the connection between hip-hop and empowerment, where the latter refers to people's ability to achieve their goals. Empowerment can be a crucial part of education and mental health counseling, but it also exceeds these domains. For example, Travis and Deepak (2011, 2018) argue that hip-hop can be used to achieve the goals of cultural competency, self-determination, and empowerment in research, practice, and teaching with individuals and communities. It has proven especially effective in encouraging youths' self-understanding and insights while promoting optimal development. This is at the core of their work with at-risk and delinquent youth, who all underscore the positive aspects of hip-hop culture and how it contributes to their growth, resilience, and community/group solidarity.

While hip-hop has proven effective in promoting empowerment in interventions targeting youth, its practical use is not reserved exclusively for those under 18. Travis, Rodwin, and Allcorn (2019), for example, have also used rap music and empowerment-based group work to engage and treat homeless adults living with severe mental illness in shelter settings. The results of this study were not dissimilar to what researchers have found in using hip-hop to promote empowerment among adolescent populations. They found that, along with many of the other previously noted benefits of employing hip-hop in therapy with marginalized individuals, Hip-Hop Therapy was also found to increase the levels of clients' engagement in therapeutic services by increasing self and social awareness, self-management, decision-making, and relational skills according to social-emotional learning indicators.

This literature shows the myriad ways hip-hop is being used to promote well-being in the personal domain. Scholars here demonstrate that, while further research into hip-hop's overall efficacy in its use in therapy is needed, it has nonetheless proven to be helpful, especially when working with vulnerable populations willing to embrace its potential to provide a framework for constructing better mental health and personal growth.

Spiritual Dimension

The final strand in the literature focuses on hip-hop and well-being in the spiritual dimension. This is the smallest literature, comprising just seven studies, but it helpfully provides a sketch of how hip hop relates, and could relate, to spiritual flourishing. About half of the studies examine how rappers explore spiritual themes in their lyrics. McMurray (2008), for example, focuses on spiritual themes in the work of Black Muslim members of the hip-hop community, such as Eve, Erykah Badu, and herself. This work is essential, the author argues, since women tend to be marginalized both within hip-hop and many religious communities. Likewise, their work then allows the artists to explore spiritual themes while challenging three obstacles facing Black Muslim women: prevalent images of Muslim women in hip-hop that often stereotype rather than provide an accurate depiction of them, Christian hegemony, and the repression of non-Christian perspectives within black history and mass media, and the limited range of expected (and acceptable) gender roles of artists within the hip-hop industry.

Three studies examine how rappers explore spiritual themes outside or between different religious traditions. Carter (2013) explores how spiritual themes are discussed in the work of rappers in the United States, North Africa, and the Middle East. The lyrics, she demonstrates, highlight themes across religious traditions, including acceptance, hope, meaning, and purpose –

spiritual themes especially relevant to marginalized people. Aplin (2012), meanwhile, focuses on three Indigenous rappers: Quese, RedCloud, and Emcee One. Their lyrics, the author exhibits, show how the artists navigate the dissonance they experience while attempting to reconcile their converging ethnicities, Christian identities, and their music.

The second strand of work within this domain focuses not on rappers but on how hip-hop can be used with diverse communities to explore spirituality. Norton (2014), for example, observes the ways Black and Latino school children express their spiritualities through hip-hop. Her study relied on focus groups where these children listened to popular rap songs, as well as created and performed their original works as a means of engaging hip-hop literacies practices. Children were also interviewed to ascertain how they defined themselves regarding race, class, spirituality, sexuality, and literacy. After conducting this quantitative study, Norton concludes that educators must understand children's spiritual knowledge and practices to counter existing inequities within our society and educational system.

Similarly, Abdul Khabeer (2018) examines pious Muslim placemaking in the US, connecting her study of pious Muslim space with broader discussions about race and hip-hop. She argues that the convergence of anti-blackness ideologies with Muslim space and placemaking practices leads to a "moralized division of space for many Chicago Muslims." She explains how children of immigrants used hip-hop to "mark" the city differently than their parents had done. Her ethnographic research focused explicitly on the non-black participants of her study to highlight these youths' embrace of "the hood" and their attempts to challenge anti-black attitudes and practices in their communities. Perhaps it is possible to reconcile the tensions between hip-hop as a spiritual practice and the more orthodox religious beliefs that seem to dominate many communities. Pinn (2003) attempts to bridge this divide, noting how Hip hop

provides marginalized and oppressed people with a means to grapple with life's existential givens. This grappling, he asserts, is in and of itself a spiritual practice.

As these scholars illustrate, hip-hop is infused with spiritual or religious significance by practitioners of various belief systems. Though there is often considerable tension experienced by the hip-hop community when attempting to reconcile beliefs considered by many sacred with a culture that others view as profane, the examples provided here indicate how valuable hip-hop can be in this context.

Discussion

This literature shows how hip-hop has been an effective tool when used to promote well-being, specifically among marginalized and oppressed people. Most of this research focuses on efforts to use hip-hop to address challenges experienced within the personal and social dimensions of human existence. However, while not as heavily researched, hip-hop's ability to affect aspects of well-being in the physical and spiritual dimensions also is proven vitally important. Hip-hop can positively impact the lives of individuals and communities who embrace the culture. Further research, nevertheless, is needed to fully understand the effects hip-hop can have throughout diverse locations across the globe, and in particular, how it can affect the lives of vulnerable people for whom access to critical support systems is not always available.

As stated previously, my focus is on hip-hop within the context of existential well-being, which consists of the four dimensions of the human experience—physical, social, personal, and spiritual. Practitioners of existential well-being counseling and psychotherapy believe that people simultaneously function within these dimensions. Using it as a framework for my study will allow me to integrate these aspects, as opposed to considering each discretely, as scholars have

done previously. Additionally, as my focus will be on Montréal specifically and how marginalized citizens in this city use hip-hop as a well-being-promoting modality, I will no doubt build on the already-existing body of literature.

3. Research Outline

This thesis examines the lived experiences of marginalized and oppressed people in Montréal who use hip-hop to promote well-being amongst themselves and their communities. My project centers on hip-hop and how it corresponds with the four dimensions of existential well-being, physical, social, personal/psychological, and spiritual. Practitioners of existential well-being counseling and psychotherapy believe that people simultaneously function within these dimensions, so using it as a framework for my analysis allowed me to integrate these aspects. In contrast, scholars previously have only considered each individually. My research seeks to contribute to the literature by examining how multiple aspects of well-being interact in the work of practitioners in Montreal. The research also brings attention to the Montreal context and how marginalized people in Montréal, specifically, use hip-hop to promote well-being.,

Research Questions

The research questions that I explore in this thesis are twofold:

- (1) How do marginalized and oppressed people in Montréal use hip-hop to promote well-being in their personal lives and communities? How do they define the communities they engage? How does their work engage and empower people in a way that more conventional interventions do not?

(2) How do they describe the benefits of hip-hop programming on people's well-being?

Do the benefits fit into one of the four categories outlined above (e.g., the physical or spiritual dimensions)? Do they cut across multiple categories? Do they identify altogether different categories?

Methodology

I created a non-fiction narrated podcast with interviews. I created three episodes for this thesis through interviews with four practitioners. Each episode ran from 35 to 60 minutes long and was structured in the following way:

- Introduction (monologue, theme music, announcements)
- Main Content (narrated with interviews)
- Closing (final remarks, salutations, theme music)

Montreal has a rich and longstanding hip-hop community, with many community organizations and individuals using hip-hop to achieve social objectives. I cast a wide net to identify individuals to interview for this project. I began by discussing the project with many people involved in the hip-hop community. From these discussions, I developed a short-list of people to interview. For this thesis, I interviewed four individuals: community and health worker Stephen Hennessy, who himself is part of Montréal's hip-hop community; Lynn Worrell and Juliana Riverin of Project W.O.R.D.; and finally, Marcelle Partouche Gutierrez, an artist, researcher, youth advocate, and a core organizer with Rap Battles for Social Justice.

I used a variety of equipment and services to produce the podcasts. First, all interviews were recorded remotely using Ringr to take advantage of the service's multi-track recording capabilities. To ensure professional-quality vocal recording, I used a Blue Yeti microphone. Finally, I used Adobe Audition to record additional material (such as monologues and narrations) and for all audio editing.

I am trained and have over two decades of experience working, either professionally or personally, with most of the equipment and services I used during production. For example, I received training and certification in Graphic Applications for Desktop Publishing from Concordia's School of Continuing Education in 2001. I have used those skills in subsequent years working in the publishing industry, as a freelance designer, and as a student. Additionally, I have been an amateur recording artist for about as long, and I have experience using several digital audio workstations, such as Apple's GarageBand and Logic, Motu's Digital Performer, and Adobe's Audition, to name a few.

Moving forward, I will publish these podcast episodes and create new ones. Until I secure funding for this project, SoundCloud and YouTube will be the primary means of publishing the podcast, as there is no cost to publishing on these platforms.

One way I hope to gain publicity for this project is by entering it into We Challenge MS, a nationwide program instituted by the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society of Canada, which seeks to acknowledge as extraordinary feats, the ordinary hobbies and passions of people, such as myself, who live with this incurable disease. Moreover, since increasing the podcast's accessibility among people living with disabilities is of utmost importance to me, I will use Rev.com to create transcripts of all audio to accommodate those who are hearing impaired.

Lastly, I will produce graphics and artwork for the podcast using Adobe Express and Photoshop.

4. Discussion

For this project, I interviewed four guests for three episodes of my podcast, *Hip-Hop Holistic*, with each guest approaching well-being from different perspectives. All interviewees expressed a profound belief in hip-hop's ability to promote well-being and positively affect individuals and communities. This belief was similar to what was reported in the literature I reviewed. The main difference is that while the literature tackled the various aspects of well-being discretely, these guests all adopt more integrative approaches.

My first guest, Stephen Hennessey, an artist, healthcare, and community worker, spoke about developing a passion for hip-hop as a youth and establishing deep connections with Montreal's burgeoning hip-hop community in the 1980s and 1990s. He described his experiences with youth in healthcare and community work over the past two decades and how he uses hip-hop to foster deep connections with them, emphasizing the importance of meeting people where their passions lie.

The next episode featured Lynn Worrell and Juliana Riverin of Project W.O.R.D., who discussed the association's origins as Literacy Through Hip-Hop, a youth-led organization established in Toronto, Canada, and its current iteration working from several sites—both public schools and community centers—within Montreal. They described how Project W.O.R.D.'s approach relies on volunteers from the hip-hop community who work collaboratively with students and teachers, thus creating a link between grassroots and formal educational practices.

Finally, I spoke with Marcelle Partouche Guttierrez, an artist, researcher, youth advocate, and community worker, about her work as a core organizer with Rap Battles for Social Justice. This Montreal-based collective uses hip-hop to confront and address issues negatively affecting many communities today. She described how Rap Battles for Social Justice uses a grassroots, popular education approach with hip-hop at its core to engage and educate communities about critical social issues affecting them, such as racial profiling, climate justice, and indigenous sovereignty.

There are many similarities between what each guest reported. Montreal's hip-hop community is tightly knit, especially those within the community who use hip-hop specifically to affect positive change in our world. Each guest touted hip-hop as an effective tool when used to promote well-being and expressed how integral it has been to the work each of them does. While all the interviews expressly concerned the personal/psychological and social dimensions of the human experience, every interviewee appeared aware of the interconnectedness of these dimensions and how working to promote well-being in one dimension also affects well-being in other dimensions. Although differences between what the guests conveyed are not ostensible, I imagine that if one drilled down considerably, perhaps some may become apparent; however, it does not appear that any would be considered fundamental.

My interviews confirmed many aspects of the research within the literature. There are numerous similarities between what the interviewees reported and the studies on hip-hop and well-being I reviewed. Several from the personal/psychological dimension and one from the social dimension stood out most notably, however, such as Levy (2012), Levy and Keum (2014),

Tyson (2002), Kobin and Tyson (2006), Washington (2018), Akom (2009), Lowe (2010), and Malone and Martinez (2015).

For example, in my first interview, Steven Hennessey spoke about how he finds it helpful to bring hip-hop into therapy sessions and the success he has had doing so, echoing the sentiments of Levy (2012) and Levy and Keum (2014), who argue that doing so can facilitate dialogue with some clients, leading to improved therapeutic outcomes. Using as an example Tupac's song, *Dear Mama*, where the tough-skinned rapper openly expresses love for his mother, Mr. Hennessey also notes, similar to Tyson (2002) and Kobin and Tyson (2006), that this approach is especially beneficial when working with men, many of whom can more freely express their emotions in rap lyrics as opposed to a conventional talk therapy session where they may fear being perceived as vulnerable or weak. Furthermore, bringing hip-hop into therapy, he argues, similar to Washington (2018), can provide an entry point to more meaningful dialogue between counselors and their Black male clients in particular.

Next, Lynn Worrell and Juliana Riverin of Project W.O.R.D. emphasized their commitment to moving beyond the hierarchical structures or traditional approaches to knowledge dissemination, where the teachers' knowledge is valued over all else, including students' knowledge and lived experiences, as well as the cultural experiences within their communities. This is similar to Akom (2009), who argues that creating pedagogic spaces where marginalized youth can develop an awareness of how larger social institutions have shaped their own experiences is precisely where transformative education for the poor and disempowered begins. They also spoke about confronting many of the negative aspects of hip-hop, which, as they contend, are negative aspects of society and do not belong to hip-hop exclusively. What they expressed connects with the assertion of Lowe (2010), who believes that hip-hop's

usefulness as pedagogy comes precisely from grappling with controversies surrounding rap music specifically and hip-hop culture more broadly. Perhaps it is no coincidence that they share this belief with Lowe since she worked alongside Project W.O.R.D. to expand their program at Montreal's James Lyng High School.

Lastly, as Marcelle Partouche Guttierrez explained, Rap Battles for Social Justice's mission and her work with the collective are intended explicitly to engage the public using hip-hop to affect substantial change on the streets of their neighborhoods and on a policy level. A clear connection can be made between what she describes and what Malone and Martinez (2015) state in their article. In it, they mention, as the last of three stages in hip-hop's evolution, a political activism and participation phase, which, thanks to the work of collectives such as Rap Battles for Social Justice, appears to be precisely where Montreal's hip-hop community is situated presently.

5. Conclusion

Marginalized and oppressed people are well-served when using culturally relevant material to promote well-being in their personal lives and communities. The positive results reported indicate that this is particularly true when using hip-hop toward these ends. Hip-hop's continued popularity and global expansion show that constructively harnessing its power and influence could lead to positive outcomes. More research would be helpful to discover how existential well-being is affected when addressing issues in all its dimensions, including the physical and spiritual dimensions, which I have so far yet to cover. To paint a complete picture, I intend to continue producing *Hip-Hop Holistic* and plan to feature guests doing this.

Additionally, the hip-hop community, specifically, and communities more generally, would benefit from further investment in already-existing hip-hop programs that work to promote well-being. Further, due to their popularity, particularly among marginalized people, more hip-hop programs should be implemented to meet the needs of segments of the population who could use more support. This, it appears, would yield overwhelmingly positive results.

References

- Abdul Khabeer, S. (2018). Hip hop matters: Race, space, and Islam in Chicago. *City & Society*, 30(2), 141-164. doi:10.1111/ciso.12144
- Akom, A. A. (2009). Critical hip hop pedagogy as a form of liberatory praxis. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 42(1), 52-66. doi:10.1080/10665680802612519
- Aplin, T. C. (2012). Expectation, Christianity, and ownership in indigenous hip-hop: Religion in rhyme with Emcee One, RedCloud, and Quese, inc. *Musicultures*, 39, 42. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edo&AN=85496173&site=eds-live>
- Ball, J. A. (2013). Hip-hop fight club: Radical theory, education, and practice in and beyond the classroom. *Radical Teacher*, (97), 50-59. doi:10.5195/rt.2013.44
- Beaulac, J., Kristjansson, E., & Calhoun, M. (2011). 'Bigger than hip-hop?' impact of a community-based physical activity program on youth living in a disadvantaged neighborhood in Canada. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14(8), 961-974. doi:10.1080/13676261.2011.616488

- Bonny, J. W., Lindberg, J. C., & Pacampara, M. C. (2017). Hip hop dance experience linked to sociocognitive ability. *Plos One*, *12*(2), 1-26. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0169947
- Brooks, S., & Conroy, T. (2011). Hip-hop culture in a global context: Interdisciplinary and cross-categorical investigation. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *55*(1), 3-8.
doi:10.1177/0002764210381723
- Corbett Carter, J. (2013). Hip hop spirituality: Spirit, meaning, and purpose. *International Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Society*, *3*(1), 11-16. Retrieved from
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=95942029&site=eds-live>
- Crouch, A., Robertson, H., & Fagan, P. (2011). Hip hopping the gap - performing arts approaches to sexual health disadvantage in young people in remote settings. *Australasian Psychiatry*, *19*, S34-S37. doi:10.3109/10398562.2011.583046
- DeHanas, D. N. (2013). Keepin' it real: London youth hip hop as an authentic performance of belief. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *28*(2), 295-308.
doi:10.1080/13537903.2013.783340
- Dickens, L., & Lonie, D. (2013). *Rap, rhythm, and recognition: Lyrical practices and the politics of voice on a community music project for young people experiencing challenging circumstances* doi:<https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1016/j.emospa.2012.11.003>
- Elligan, D. (2000). Rap therapy: A culturally sensitive approach to psychotherapy with young African-American men. *Journal of African American Men*, *5*(3), 27. doi:10.1007/s12111-000-1002-y
- Gana, N. (2012). Rap and revolt in the Arab world. *Social Text*, *30*(4), 25-53.
doi:10.1215/01642472-1725784

- Golpushnezhad, E. (2018). Untold stories of DIY/Underground Iranian rap culture: The legitimization of Iranian hip-hop and the loss of radical potential. *Cultural Sociology*, 12(2), 260. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=130000113&site=eds-live>
- Gooding, J., Frederick W., Brandel, M., Jountti, C., Shadwick, A., & Williams-Bailey, B. (2016). Think global, act local. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 12(5), 466-479. doi:10.20507/AlterNative.2016.12.5.3
- Gupta-Carlson, H. (2010). Planet B-girl: Community building and feminism in hip-hop. *New Political Science*, 32(4), 515-529. doi:10.1080/07393148.2010.520438
- Harris, N., Wilks, L., & Stewart, D. (2012). HYPed-up: Youth dance culture and health. *Arts & Health: International Journal for Research, Policy & Practice*, 4(3), 239-248. doi:10.1080/17533015.2012.677849
- Isherwood, G. (2014). The hip-hop resistance: Forging unity in the Arab diaspora. *Review of Middle East Studies*, 48(1), 24-33. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/stable/24331327>
- Isoke, Z. (2013). Women, hip hop, and cultural resistance in Dubai. *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture & Society*, 15(4), 316. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=95211286&site=eds-live>
- Kobin, C., & Tyson, E. (2006). *Thematic analysis of hip-hop music: Can hip-hop in therapy facilitate empathic connections when working with clients in urban settings?* doi:<https://doi.org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1016/j.aip.2006.05.001>

- Lapum, J. L., Martin, J., Kennedy, K., Turcotte, C., & Gregory, H. (2019). Sole expression: A trauma-informed dance intervention. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 28(5), 566-580. doi:10.1080/10926771.2018.1544182
- Levy, I. (2012). Hip hop and spoken word therapy with urban youth. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 25(4), 219-224. doi:10.1080/08893675.2012.736182
- Levy, I., Emdin, C., and Adjapong, E. S. (2018). Hip-hop cypher in group work. *Social Work with Groups*, 41(1-2), 103-110. doi:10.1080/01609513.2016.1275265
- Levy, I., & Keum, B. T. (2014). Hip-hop emotional exploration in men. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 27(4), 217-223. doi:10.1080/08893675.2014.949528
- Low, B. E. (2010). The tale of the talent night rap: Hip-hop culture in schools and the challenge of interpretation. *Urban Education*, 45(2), 194-220. doi:10.1177/0042085908322713
- Malone, C. and Martinez, G. (2015). The Organic Globalizer. In C. Malone and G. Martinez (Eds.), *The Organic Globalizer: Hip Hop, Political Development, and Movement Culture*. (pp. 1-17). New York: Bloomsbury.
- McMurray, A. (2008). Hotep and hip-hop: Can black Muslim women be down with hip-hop? *Meridians*, 8(1), 74-92. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/stable/40338912>
- Motley, C. M., & Henderson, G. R. (2008). *The global hip-hop diaspora: Understanding the culture* doi:<https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1016/j.jbusres.2007.06.020>
- Nooshin, L. (2011). Hip-hop Tehran: Migrating Styles, Musical Meanings, Marginalised Voices. In: Toynebee, J. and Dueck, B. (Eds.), *Migrating Music*. (pp. 92-111). Routledge. ISBN 0415594480

- Norton, N. E. L. (2014). Young children manifest spiritualities in their hip-hop writing. *Education and Urban Society*, 46(3), 329-351. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1023073&site=eds-live>: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013124512446216>
- Pennycook, A. (2007). Language, localization, and the real: Hip-hop and the global spread of authenticity. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 6(2), 101-115.
doi:10.1080/15348450701341246
- Peoples, W. A. (2008). "Under construction": Identifying foundations of hip-hop feminism and exploring bridges between black second-wave and hip-hop feminisms. *Meridians*, 8(1), 19-52. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/stable/40338910>
- Perry, M. D. (2008). Global black self-fashionings: Hip hop as diasporic space. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture & Power*, 15(6), 635-664. Retrieved from <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.mercury.concordia.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fmh&AN=MFS-35275696&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: Rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Sheffield, C. L. (2011). Native American hip-hop and historical trauma: Surviving and healing trauma on the "Rez." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 23(3), 94-110.
doi:10.5250/studamerindilite.23.3.0094
- Taylor, C., & Taylor, V. (2007). Hip hop is now: An evolving youth culture. *Reclaiming Children & Youth*, 15(4), 210-213. Retrieved from [28](http://0-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

search.ebscohost.com/mercury.concordia.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=24163355&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Travis, R., & Deepak, A. (2011). Empowerment in context: Lessons from hip-hop culture for social work practice. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 20*(3), 203-222. doi:10.1080/15313204.2011.594993

Travis, R., Rodwin, A. H., & Allcorn, A. (2019). Hip hop, empowerment, and clinical practice for homeless adults with severe mental illness. *Social Work with Groups, 42*(2), 83-100. doi:10.1080/01609513.2018.1486776

Tyson, E. H. (2002). Hip hop therapy: An exploratory study of a rap music intervention with at-risk and delinquent youth. *Journal of Poetry Therapy, 15*(3), 131-144. doi:10.1023/A:1019795911358

Warren, A., & Evitt, R. (2010). Indigenous hip-hop: Overcoming marginality, encountering constraints. *Australian Geographer, 41*(1), 141-158. doi:10.1080/00049180903535659

Washington, A. R. (2015). Addressing social injustice with urban African American young men through hip-hop: Suggestions for school counselors. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology, 7*(1), 101-121. Retrieved from <https://lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=113858534&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Washington, A. R. (2018). Integrating hip-hop culture and rap music into social justice counseling with black males. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 96*(1), 97-105. doi:10.1002/jcad.12181

Wright, K. (2004). Rise up hip hop nation: From deconstructing racial politics to building positive solutions. *Socialism & Democracy*, 18(2), 9-20. doi:10.1080/08854300408428395