

Amplifying the Voices of South Korean Youths as a Generational Minority Against Conventional Paths of Success Through Hip Hop Music: A Text Analysis of Lyrics

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Abstract

This study examines how young South Korean rappers challenge conventional, age-standardized pathways to success by crafting alternative narratives through their hip hop music. By utilizing quantitative text analysis of 3,600 popular South Korean hip-hop songs, this study draws on critical race theory to conceptualize South Korean youth as a generational minority and applies the framework of substantiated self-promotion to investigate why these alternative expressions of success are embraced among South Korean youth. The findings reveal that popular Korean hip hop songs articulate alternative expressions of success—characterized by overt boasts of material wealth and individuality—that diverge from traditional societal trajectories in South Korea. Moreover, these narratives gain legitimacy when coupled with evidence of effort, talent, or familial responsibility. These findings suggest that, just as hip hop has historically functioned as a tool for empowering racial minorities, hip hop can provide a platform for younger or less dominant generations to challenge and potentially redefine the conventional measures of success imposed by previous or more dominant generations in South Korea.

Keywords

generation, hip hop, popular music, South Korea, Youth

Introduction

Stop the bullshit, I make money like I've never been rich, hundreds thousand-dollar a month on average, it's been long since I broke the image of hip hop being poor, I've proudly become a millionaire, Lets go get the money, go get the money, nod my head nod my head—'Beverly 11ls', Dok2

Predominantly youth-driven, hip hop music and culture have gained popularity globally in recent years (Benvenaga, 2022; Morgan & Bennett, 2011). In the United States, hip hop music has played a significant role in contributing to the financial success and empowerment of African American youths, often against the historical and systemic racial oppression experienced in the United States (Anyiwo et al., 2022; Ginwright, 2010). This genre particularly serves as a platform for African American youths to authentically

express their journey from poverty to affluence and their desire to overcome systemic barriers and achieve financial success (Kuttner, 2016; Wallace, 2023). In this context, hip hop musicians often use their lyrics to explicitly boast about their experiences with wealth, luxury, and the pursuit of financial prosperity as a means of showcasing that success is attainable through hip hop irrespective of socio-economic or

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racial backgrounds (Evans & Baym, 2022; M. Hess, 2007). Moreover, from its very inception, boasting has been a foundational aspect of hip-hop culture, deeply ingrained in its ethos and artistic expression (Jenkins, 2021; Lazerine & Lazerine, 2008). The global popularity of hip hop music has led to the embrace and trend of showing off material success among youths worldwide (Baxter & Marina, 2008; Polfuß, 2022). In recent years, the popularity of hip-hop music and culture has surged among the MZ generation in South Korea, defined as, generational cohorts of Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012; hereafter, the MZ generation). While exact data on the total youth population engaging with hip-hop is limited, its widespread cultural influence of hip-hop is exemplified by the rap competition television series “Show Me the Money.” Throughout its 10-year run (2012–2022), the program consistently attracted viewership in the millions, predominantly from the MZ generation. Furthermore, hip-hop content dominates social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, which are actively used by this demographic (Sinsomboonthong, 2020). These indicators, while not representative of the entire youth population, underscore hip-hop’s significant influence on shaping cultural preferences and aspirations among Korean young people. Alongside this growing mainstream recognition of hip-hop in South Korea, an increasing number of young people aspire to achieve success as “rap stars” (H.-J. Kim & Sung, 2020). However, such aspirations are viewed as deviating significantly from the conventional pathways to success in South Korean society. Additionally, the act of openly boasting about individual material success is not widely accepted due to the prevailing ethics of humility and modesty embedded in East Asian culture, including South Korea (Ayyappaswamy, 2021; Cai et al., 2011). Therefore, this study aims to describe how young Korean rappers challenge the conventional pathways of success through hip hop music and examine how their alternative pathways to success are expressed in recent popular Korean hip hop music.

Conventional and Age-Standardized Pathways to Success in South Korea

In South Korea, the pathway to success is regarded as “age-standardized” as individuals are expected to reach certain goal posts by a certain age. It has therefore become increasingly difficult for Korean youths to achieve the “normative life course,” widely understood to consist of graduating university, gaining regular employment, marrying, giving birth, buying a house, and retiring by predetermined ages. In order to stay close to this normative life course, it is crucial for Korean young people to build “specs” and increase their marketability (Hae-Joang, 2015). “Spec,” short for the English word specification, refers to a collection of qualifications such as prestige of university attended, foreign

language test scores, and skill certifications that measure and compare an individual’s abilities against those of others in the job and marriage markets (Yoon, 2014). Those who are unable to build good “specs” and fulfill the normative life course by a certain age is regarded as unsuccessful by the society and in the media. Such high pressures to achieve manifest as high prevalence of suicidal ideation and depression among Korean youths (Im et al., 2017; K. M. Kim et al., 2020). Increasingly, the MZ generation in South Korea differentiate themselves from the earlier generations that conformed to the normative life course by adopting a dis-course of individuality (Song, 2019).

The Emergence of an Alternative Pathway to Success and the Embrace of “Flex” Among Young Korean Audience Through Hip Hop Music

It is argued that the MZ generation admires self-made success, and the recent commercialization of hip hop music in Korea has contributed to challenging the conventional pathways to success (Song, 2019). Hip hop culture began to gain popularity among Korean youths in the early 1990s (Um, 2013). The most frequently discussed themes in the lyrics of early Korean underground hip hop music were resistance, criticism (toward the older generation, society, and their values), and self-realization. However, since the early 2010s, hip hop in Korea has become mainstream particularly through commercialization of the culture, music, and lifestyle via mass media influence, especially “Show Me The Money,” a rap competition TV show. Notably, the commercial success of Illionaire Records, a Korean hip hop record label, signaled the emergence of an alternative pathway to success within the hip-hop community and among its fans. In particular, its founders, Dok2 and The Quiett, frequently defined the rap star as both a legitimate occupation and a viable pathway to success for their audience, as reflected in their lyrics (Song, 2019). Therefore, hip hop, as a mainstream music genre and cultural preference among Korean youths, now occupies a significant social space where the voices of the young generation echo passionately (H.-J. Kim & Sung, 2020).

Since hip hop has become a mainstream music genre in South Korea, an increasing number of young Korean rappers are finding their success through hip hop music. Especially, the lyrics of Dok2 and The Quiett often flaunt their monetary success and material possession and emphasize that hard work overcomes limitations in “spec” (Song, 2019). In addition to the alternative pathway to success, “Flex” and “Swag” have emerged as major keywords for South Korean hip hop music since the 2010s, which aligned with the cultural preferences of today’s young audience (W.-S. Park, 2021). Although bragging has been an essential component of hip hop, bragging or self-promotional claims are often met with negative reactions from others as people who brag or

self-promote are perceived as arrogant or narcissistic (Leary et al., 1997; Vorobeve et al., 2025). This negative perception is particularly common in South Korean society, where the collectivist ethics of humility and modesty are preferred over flaunting material success and possession (Yoo, 2022). However, in the era of ubiquitous self-promotion via social media, young Korean hip hop musicians take to SNS to explicitly show off their material success and possession (J. Park & Chun, 2021; W.-S. Park, 2021). This form of “Flex” and “Swag” is increasingly accepted and admired among not only young people but also the general Korean population. Hence, two questions arise: first, how do young Korean rappers challenge the conventional and age-standardized pathways to success through the narratives expressed in their lyrics? and second, how is success expressed in Korean hip hop music? The second question is intended to understand why overtly boasting about success in hip hop music is embraced among Korean audiences.

Theoretical Framework

Hip Hop as Critical Race Counterstories of Minority Populations

In addressing the first question, we employ the critical race theory (CRT). The CRT tries to explain social structures and power distribution in the society, focusing on the experiences of racism (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This perspective suggests that members of racial minority groups possess a unique ability to challenge dominant narratives of those in power through sharing valuable first-hand accounts of their experiences (Yosso et al., 2022). The CRT can thus offer a research agenda that aims to empower subordinated minority groups and their counter-storytelling may be a useful mechanism to challenge and change racial dominance (Daftary, 2020; Tate et al., 2006). Moreover, a critical race methodology provides a tool to “counter” deficit storytelling. Specifically, a counter-storytelling can offer space to conduct and present research grounded in the experiences and knowledge of subordinated minorities, which have often been silenced and distorted, including people of color, women, gay, and the poor (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Authenticity occupies a unique place within the hip-hop genre, where the imperative to remain true to oneself is both a fundamental aspect and a defining criterion (Evans & Baym, 2022). In particular, authentic storytelling distinguishes rap from other forms of popular music, as the majority of rappers like to write from real-life experience, including autobiographical details about things they have actually experienced or lyrics at least generally inspired by situations they have encountered (Bradley, 2017; Edwards, 2009). Although CRT primarily concentrates on the social construction of race and racism, its fundamental principles are closely linked to hip hop music and culture (Smith & Hattery, 2020). For example,

both CRT and hip hop culture emphasize the importance of counter-storytelling in recognizing the experiential knowledge of marginalized communities (J. Hess, 2019; Hill, 2009). In doing so, both CRT and hip hop culture provide a platform for individuals to express their own experiences (Cummings, 2009). In the hip hop genre, success stories often start from humble beginnings, with many African American youths rising from disadvantaged backgrounds to attain fame and fortune through their talent and hard work and overcoming racial oppression (Shabazz, 2021; Watkins, 2005). Therefore, counter-storytelling in CRT presents a unique and compelling framework that connects hip hop and the prevailing issues of racism and race (Love, 2016). From this perspective, hip hop music has historically functioned as a form of counter-storytelling, with rappers defying societal norms by telling their stories on their own terms and in their own words as a counterstory to majoritarian narratives (Baszile, 2009; J. Hess, 2019; Kumasi, 2018).

In South Korean society, Confucian values stress the importance of respecting elders. While the MZ generation demonstrate more willingness to self-promote and self-express irrespective of the age hierarchy, there is still a societal tendency to prioritize the opinions of older individuals over those of the young. Culturally, this can lead to undermining the voices of young people, giving them less weight. In addition, demographically, the proportion of the youth population (aged 15–24) has also markedly declined from 23% of the total population in 1990 to 13% in 2020 and it is expected to further diminish to 6% by 2050 due to South Korea’s low fertility rates (Statistics Korea, 2023). We, therefore, contend that South Korean youths can be viewed as, what we call, a *generational minority*, with little social space for their voice. In this context, the likelihood of youths, a generational minority, defying a predetermined life trajectory set by the older generation is challenging. To capture this phenomenon, we adapted CRT, originally developed to explain experiences of racial minorities, to understand the perspective of Korean youths as a distinct generational minority. Specifically, we explore how alternative pathways to success are articulated in hip-hop lyrics, thereby highlighting a divergence from the traditional narratives espoused by the previous generation.

Favorable Bragging Through Substantiated Self-Promotion

For the second question, we draw upon findings from Schlenker and Leary’s study investigating the role of substantiation in reactions to self-promotional claims (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). This framework is particularly relevant in hip-hop, where the “real self” is often quantified through financial metrics. In this context, the accumulation of material wealth—manifested in assets such as cars, jewelry, and cash—serves as an indicator of authenticity, encapsulated by

the assertion that “the real self is still partially figured mathematically, through assessments of financial gain. The more cars and jewelry and cash one has, the more real one can purport to be” (Jackson, 2005). However, in general, the act of self-bragging commonly results in unfavorable responses, as individuals who engage in such behavior are often perceived as arrogant or narcissistic by others and are generally evaluated negatively (Hoorens et al., 2012; Vorobeva et al., 2025). On the other hand, self-promotion does not always lead to unfavorable interpersonal impressions (Schlenker & Leary, 1982; VanEpps et al., 2024). Self-promotion claims are evaluated more favorably when the quality of performance is consistent with their self-claims than when their self-claims and performance outcomes were mismatched or when evidence of task performance outcome was absent (O’Mara et al., 2019). Additionally, verifiable support for self-promotional claims can also contribute to the positive perception of those who self-promote (Nault & Yap, 2023). Moreover, with external substantiation, the audience is able to discriminate between accurate and inaccurate claims, with accuracy being preferred (O’Mara et al., 2019). These evidence may support the popularity of hip hop music, as rappers “flex” while also prioritizing “keepin’ it real” or maintaining authenticity (Sköld & Rehn, 2007). Rappers explicitly brag about how much money they make from their music, providing external substantiation and aligning with hip hop’s original aesthetics of authenticity (Harrison et al., 2024; Ozelkan, 2024). Narratives of financial success from rappers therefore gain substantiation through their authentic storytelling in their lyrics, which results in widespread appreciation and recognition from diverse young audiences. In line with the cultural trend in hip hop, bragging in Korean hip hop music can be appreciated by the hip hop community in South Korea. However, it is unclear why it is recently more accepted and embraced by broader youth audiences in Korea where modesty and humility are highly and conventionally valued. Therefore, we aim to explore the role of accuracy and substantiation in popular Korean hip hop lyrics to gain a better understanding of why explicit bragging about success resonates with the young audience in Korea.

Study Rationale and Aims

Previous research has explored the commercial success of hip hop in South Korea and emphasized the prevailing theme of success within South Korean hip hop music (Hare & Baker, 2017; H.-J. Kim & Sung, 2020; Lee, 2010; Song, 2019; Um, 2013). Notably, the recent achievements of rappers and hip hop labels have transformed Korean hip hop music, potentially establishing it as a viable option for success in the South Korean society (Song, 2019). Nevertheless, these studies primarily relied on qualitative methodologies, such as participant observation, interviews, or the analysis of selected musicians and songs. With hip hop music having

achieved mainstream popularity in South Korea, we hypothesize that the pathway to success portrayed in hip hop music is now embraced and valued not only within the hip hop community, but also by the broader youth audience. Consequently, this study uses a quantitative approach and a large dataset, analyzing the lyrics of the monthly top 50 hip hop songs in Korea from 2017 to 2022, which is the main novelty of this study. The second novelty of this study is our perspective on South Korean youth as *generational minority* in Korean society to better understand their narratives to create alternative pathways of success against conventional ones structured by the previous generations in South Korea. Through a counter-storytelling lens, we examine narratives expressed in hip hop music to comprehend how they both change and challenge the conventional pathways to success predetermined by the older generation. Specifically, we employ a text analysis of South Korean hip hop music lyrics to address two questions. The first question, how South Korean young rappers challenge the conventional pathways to success through their music, is analyzed through the lens of counter-storytelling within critical race theory (CRT). The second question, how alternative pathways to success are expressed in recent popular Korean hip hop, is examined through the role of substantiation for self-promotion claims. Subsequently, we discuss the role of hip hop music in amplifying the voice of the youths, a generational minority, in South Korea.

Methods

Analytical Framework

This study employed a multi-step text analysis methodology to explore how young South Korean rappers challenge conventional pathways to success and how success is expressed in their lyrics. The analysis was conducted on lyrics from the monthly top 50 Korean Rap/Hip hop chart on Melon Music (www.melon.com) spanning from January 2017 to December 2022 ($n=3,600$). The lyrics were preprocessed by removing stop words, stemming, lemmatizing, and tokenizing to create a cleaned dataset. The cleaned dataset was analyzed using topic modeling with latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) and associative network analysis, utilizing the phi coefficient to investigate word associations. These methods were chosen to uncover underlying themes and relationships in the lyrics. The overall analytical framework is summarized in Figure 1.

Data Collection

The dataset consisted of the full lyrics of 3,600 songs from the monthly top 50 Korean Rap/Hip hop chart on Melon Music from January 2017 to December 2022. Melon Music is South Korea’s leading music streaming platform, with 32.8% of those who use a music streaming and download service choosing Melon Music as their main platform in

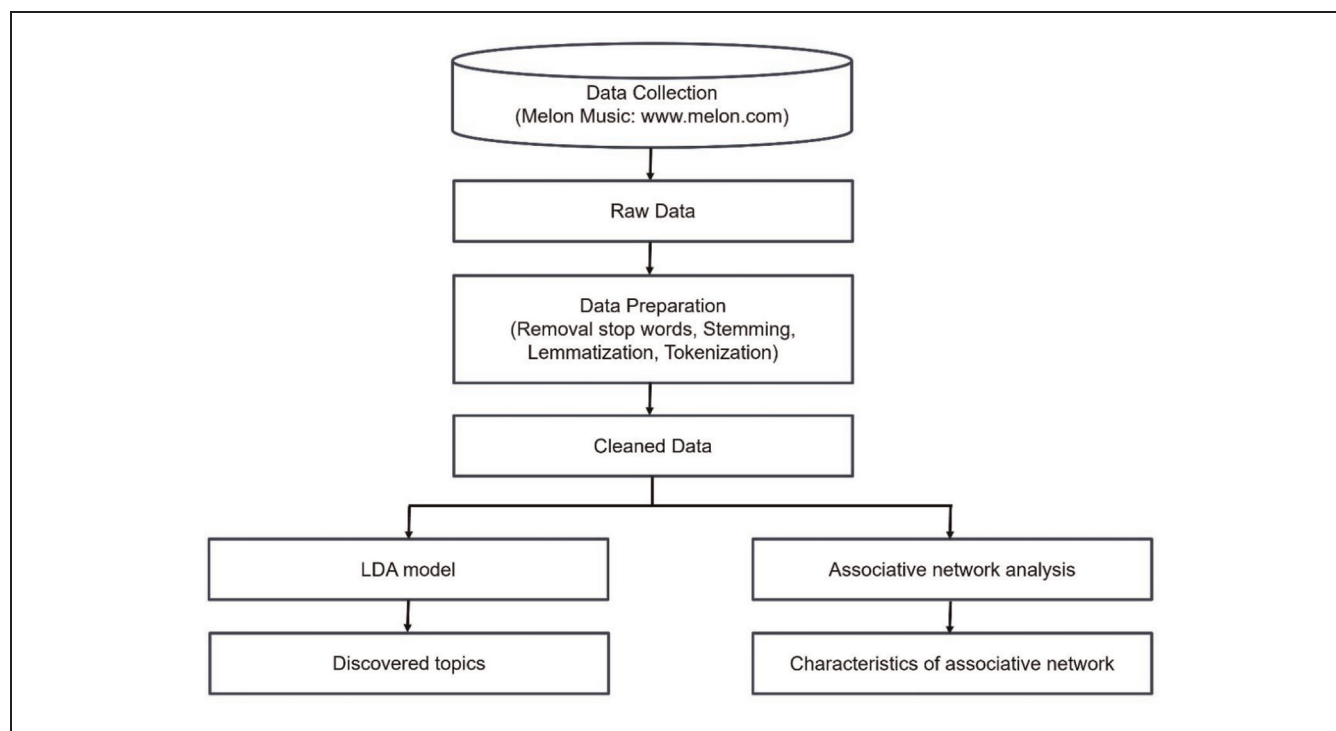


Figure 1. Analytical framework of the proposed research.

2022 (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2022). The platform started to categorize Korean Rap/Hip hop in 2017, which provided a natural starting point for this study. In Melon Music, the ranking of the songs is determined by a combination of streaming (40%) and download (60%) volumes each month. The dataset included the full lyrics, along with meta-data such as rank position, title, singer, album name, and like count. However, for this analysis, only the full lyrics were used to address the study's research questions.

Data Preparation

Data preparation and analyses were performed using the R statistic software. We built a custom text cleaning function using “textclean” (Rinker, 2018) and “tidytext” (Queiroz et al., 2023), and “KoNLP” (Jeon & Kim, 2016) R packages to analyze the lyrics in Korean language. First, we removed stop words (e.g., postposition in Korean) from the data set. We further removed “meaningless” words such as “나(I),” and “너 (you)”. Then the corpus was stemmed, lemmatized, and tokenized. Stemming refers to pruning words to avoid multiple counts of the same words with additional suffixes or prefixes. For example, words such as “슬프게 (sadly),” “슬픈 (sad)” were stemmed to “슬픔 (sadness)” in the dataset to ensure consistency and accuracy. Lemmatization

identifies the basic form of the words used in the corpus and relates them to their dictionary form (Schütze et al., 2008). For example, words such as “어머니 (mother)” and “엄마 (mom)” were grouped to “엄마 (mom)” in the dataset. Tokenization is the process of splitting a piece of text into meaningful units of text. A token is usually a single word. The raw data were tokenized and transformed into a tidy text format (one-token-per-row). In this study, a token is a single word that appears in the lyrics. After data cleaning, the data contained a total of 130,589 words.

Data Analysis

The resulting corpus was analyzed to describe (1) how young Korean rappers challenge the conventional pathways to success through hip hop music and (2) how success is expressed by rappers using their own narratives. To address the first question, we used topic modeling using the latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA), which can extract a given number of topics from a corpus that contains a set of source documents and provide a logical explanation on the similarity of single parts of the documents (Ramage et al., 2009). After the optimal model is determined, R package was used to visualize the topic extraction results, with a coordinate graph to show the distribution of topics that lists

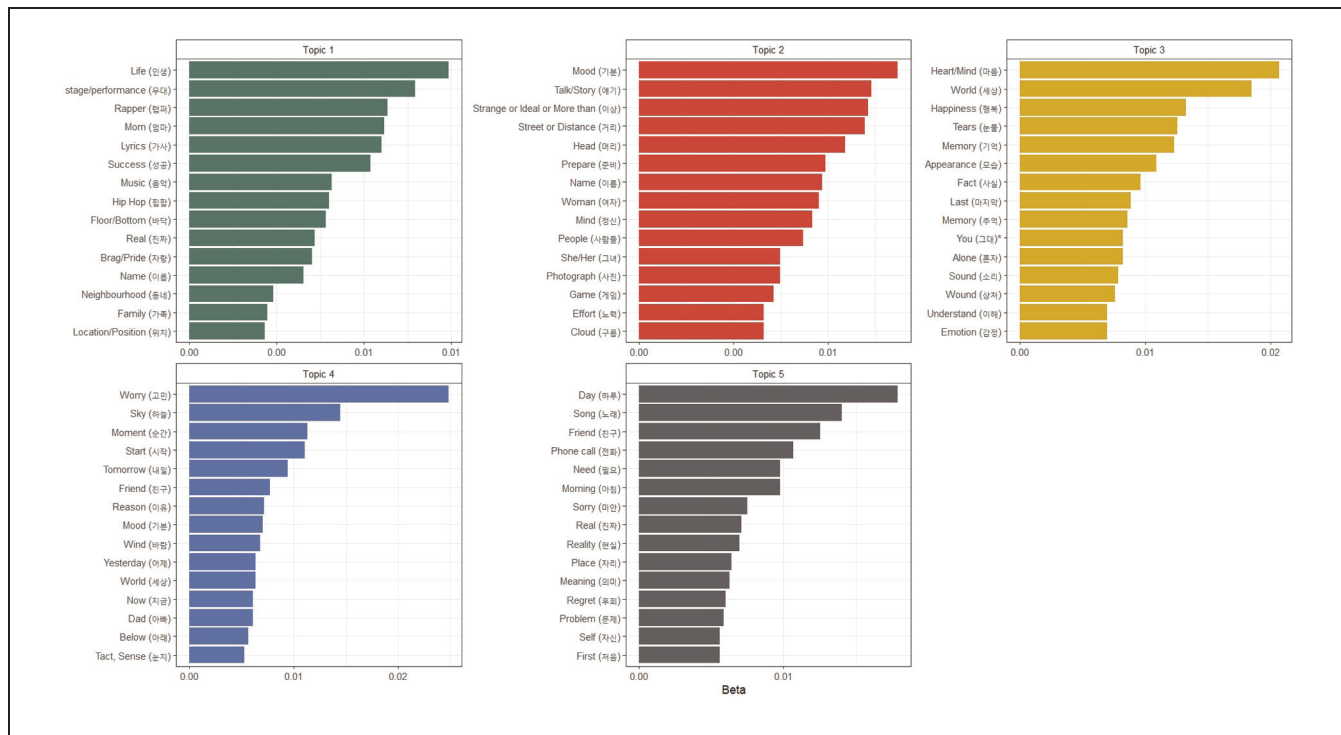


Figure 2. Top 15 most salient terms of each topic.

Note. Multiple words with “/” indicate synonyms to clarify the translation and the original meaning, whereas words with “,” indicate separate, multiple meanings from the original Korean words.

the top 15 most salient words in each topic. To address the second question, we then used the phi coefficient to measure the association between words with its interpretation being akin to that of the Pearson correlation coefficient. More precisely, the phi coefficient scores were used to assess the strength of the connection between associations. The phi coefficient score reflects how much more likely it is that either both word X and Y appear, or neither do, in the same lyrics than one appears without another. The phi coefficient scores that were greater than 0.18 were included in the visual to reflect the salient associations and their interconnections. The analysis was conducted in the Korean language, and the final result, including words grouped by LDA and included in the network, was translated to the English language.

Results

How Korean Young Rappers Challenge the Conventional Pathways to Success

Figure 2 presents a visualization of 5 topics along with the 15 most salient words extracted from the selected LDA model. The results indicate a wide range of topics from the lyrics, and the word “success (성공)” was only identified within Topic 1. Specifically, “success (성공)” was

categorized together with to *terms related to hip hop music* [“hip hop (힙합),” “rapper (래퍼),” “stage (무대),” “music (음악),” “lyrics (가사),” “real (진짜),” “boast (자랑)], family-related terms [“mom (엄마)” and “family (가족)"] and *terms related to personal narrative* [“life (인생),” “name (이름),” “bottom (바닥),” “position (위치),” “neighborhood (동네)"].

How Success Is Expressed by Rappers Using Their Own Narratives

Figure 3 illustrates the visualization of associative networks of the 15 most significant terms observed in Topic 1 of the LDA model. The links connecting nodes or words were established using phi coefficient values. Links with phi coefficient values exceeding .18 were selected to represent prominent associations and their interconnections. Using this criteria, four words in Topic 1, “lyrics (가사),” “real (진짜),” “music (음악),” and “name (이름),” were dropped. Darker links indicate more robust connections, signifying higher phi coefficient values, between words. The network graph depicts the correlations involving the term “success” alongside *terms related to hip hop music, personal narratives, and family-related terms* observed in topic modeling in Figure 2.

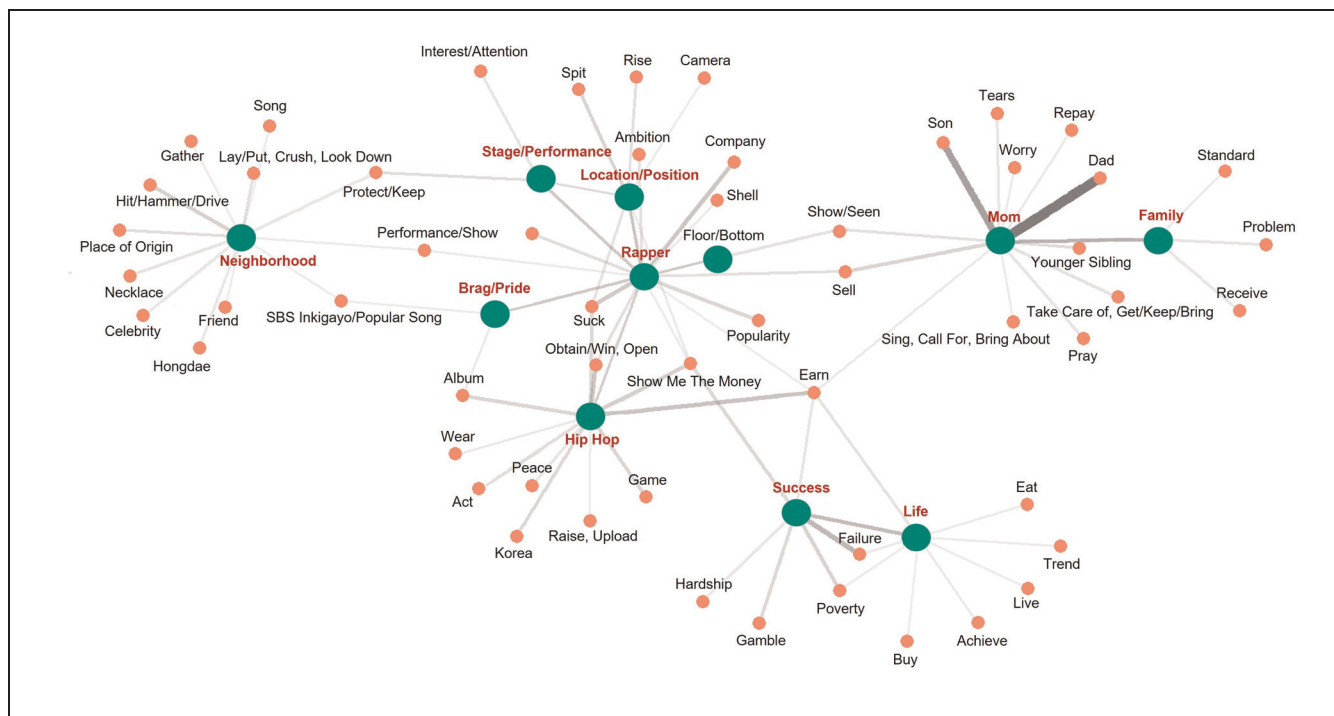


Figure 3. Associative network based on the 15 words from the topic model.

Firstly, “success” was intricately linked with “hip hop” and “rapper.” These connections were established through “SMTM” (Show Me The Money) and “earn (벌다).” SMTM is an influential TV audition program in South Korea that provides opportunities for both amateur and professional rappers to achieve fame and financial rewards.

[Lyric 1] All White G- Wagon riding around my city this is a boss' life Yng & Rich we get it, Show Me The Money SUPERBEE WHY people still ask me through DM about the reason we lost—'I'm Lonely'. Mushvenom

[Lyric 2] They told me to rap well first, so I showed them and proved it now, they tell me make money whoa! so I came on Show Me The Money—‘The Roots’, Khundi Panda

[Lyric 3] It was the rebellion of a little kid who closed his books. Originally the Show Me The Money necklace was my number 1 dream. I searched for my dream and now I've made it all the way here—'1/N', Nuksal

Secondly, the network reveals three words—“earn (벌다),” “sell (팔다),” and “show/seen (보이다)” —distinctly forging connections between success and family-related terms (“mom [엄마]” and “family [가족]”), as well as hip hop music-related terms (“hip hop [힙합]” and “rapper [래퍼]”).

[Lyric 4] I wiped my mom's tears with Goyard—'MBTI', Be'O

[Lyric 5] Because my mom trusts me, I gotta earn more, I gotta go faster, until my mom and dad smile—‘Problems’, BIG Naughty

[Lyric 6] I'm rich but I'm still young. I got a shine (necklace) around my mom's neck. Only family, friends and money on my mind—'Pour soju on my grave when I die', Homies

Thirdly, the analysis demonstrates a direct association between success and the personal term “life (인생),” whereas the term “neighborhood (동네)” was linked to success through “hip hop (힙합)” and “rapper (래퍼).” Additionally, the term “earn (벌다)” also established a link between “success (성공)” and “life (인생).”

[Lyric 7] Came from the same street same neighborhood. Now it's my turn to make this happen. Move forward! I remember every day the kids that looked down on me. I go past them. I'm ready Or die. I told you I'd come back with a necklace on my neck. Mom, you can rest you'll hear my song soon. Don't worry —'Achoo'. Miranni

[Lyric 8] That's right! I'm the guy that made the dope song. Hmm ah finally I shine so bright with designer clothes hang in there bro. Life can change in one shot. I can't believe it. This is our real life. Now I take care of my mom and dad's birthdays —'Told You So', Homies

[Lyric 9] Our life is wow and makes you go wow. Yeah I bought a Porsche at 25. Of course paid upfront. My friend's car is a

Maserati. If it's fast I wanna buy a plane too—'Selfmade Orange', Changmo

Discussion

In South Korean society, conventional pathways to success are largely determined by age, and overt self-promotion is generally discouraged. Nevertheless, the growing popularity and commercial success of hip hop culture in South Korea has led young Korean rappers to express and embody alternative pathways to success through hip hop music. Furthermore, young Koreans have embraced the explicit boasting about material wealth as expressed by hip-hop artists, reflecting a broader shift in societal values and aspirations. By analyzing the lyrics of popular South Korean hip hop music from 2017 to 2022, we have identified the emergence of an alternative expression of or pathway to success that diverges from the conventional societal trajectories in South Korea. Moreover, we found that the term “earn” serves as a common link between success and hip hop-related terms, while also connecting to terms related to family and life. The following discussion explores these alternative pathways to success articulated in Korean hip hop music through the lenses of counter-storytelling and substantiated self-promotion. These frameworks provide a new perspective on how conventional pathways to success is challenged in recent Korean hip hop music and appreciated by Korean youths through the lenses of generational and self-promotional perspectives.

Hip Hop Music as Counterstories of a Generational Minority

We observed that the concept of the “pathway to success” in Korean popular hip hop songs is portrayed differently from what is conventionally understood in South Korea. Our results indicate that the term “success” was predominantly associated with hip hop music-related terms rather than terms related to conventional paths such as education or employment. In our attempt to explain why rappers challenge the conventional paths of success in popular hip hop music, we apply a counter-storytelling approach rooted in critical race theory (CRT) as outlined earlier in this article. The voices of the South Korean young generation tend to become marginalized within South Korean society due to prevailing values of Confucianism. Furthermore, it can be anticipated that their voices will continue to be neglected due to the rapid decline in the size of the young population in South Korea. Therefore, youths in South Korea can be defined as a generational minority group that produces counterstories according to CRT, similar to how young African American rappers in the United States are perceived to write

lyrics that challenge the dominant supremacy of white hegemony (Baldwin, 2004). Based on the results of our text analysis, the lyrics of young South Korean rappers can be interpreted as a challenge to the dominant supremacy of the older generation in South Korea. Examining South Korean hip hop lyrics as a form of counter-storytelling, we explore two reasons why South Korean youths choose hip hop music to express alternative narratives of success, a phenomenon closely linked to the genre's growing influence in mainstream culture.

Firstly, our analysis reveals that hip hop lyrics construct counter-storytelling narratives of attaining material success through the pursuit of hip hop music. Although young rappers in the underground Korean hip hop scene in the 1990s and 2000s occasionally expressed aspirations for alternative paths to success in their lyrics, this study revealed that these aspirations have evolved into tangible reality for young rappers through hip hop becoming mainstream. Popular hip hop songs in the Melon Chart Top 50 contained detailed counter-storytelling narratives of the material success achieved by young Korean rappers through hip hop music, signaling hip hop as a viable option for success to youths [Lyric 1, 6, 8, 9]. This implies that, while the desire of young Korean rappers to break away from conventional paths has been present for some time, the realization of this desire has become possible in recent years.

Secondly, as hip hop became more mainstream in Korea, the contents of counter-narratives among young rappers have become more diverse, giving youths more space to express and share their narratives with a wider youth audience in Korea. It should be noted that while the main themes of Korean hip hop music lyrics were once characterized by explicit social criticism in the late 1990s, the focus has shifted to personal storytelling (T.-R. Kim & Kim, 2015). The diversification of the counter-narratives in South Korean hip hop music is closely linked to the mainstreaming process of hip hop culture, particularly aided by the success of show me the money (SMTM). SMTM has had a significant reach not only among hip hop fans but also the general youths in South Korea, as evidenced by a 25-fold increase in contestants from around 1,200 in SMTM Season 1 in 2012 to about 30,000 in SMTM Season 11 in 2022. Following its success, various hip hop audition programs have ensued. Particularly noteworthy are programs such as “High School Rapper” and “Unpretty Rapstar,” now serving as a space for voices from a broader spectrum of individuals including high school students and young female rappers. The diverse narratives from young rappers may resonate with and foster a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding among a broader demographic of Korean young people. As evidenced by contestants in “High School Rapper,” younger rappers are increasingly choosing to forgo conventional education and pursue professional careers in hip hop. Our results suggest

that Korean hip hop can play a crucial role in providing a space for the younger generation, fostering deeper connections, and offering an alternative avenue for those who find conventional paths difficult to navigate.

Role of External and Socially Valued Substantiation in Self-Promotional Claims

Schlenker and Leary demonstrated that bragging about success can attain positive reception if verifiable support substantiates the self-claims (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). O'Mara et al. (2019) further argued that combining self-assertions of superiority with external validation makes for a more positive impression. Alongside authentic narratives about material success obtained through South Korean hip hop music explicitly referenced in their lyrics, being ranked on the Melon Top 50 chart itself provides external substantiation about both financial achievement and fame. In terms of financial achievement, the Melon Top 50 chart can result in monetary gains through downloads and streaming profit. Since the lyrics are mostly written by the rappers themselves, they earn royalties for their lyrics. Under the current profit distribution structure of copyright royalties in the online music market in South Korea, 60% of the profit goes to music creators, with approximately 44% to the music label, 10% to composers and writers, and 6% to singers and instrumentalists (Jung, 2015). The remaining 40% is allocated to music distribution companies such as Melon. Hip hop musicians who frequently write and perform their songs and appear on the Melon Top 50 chart can generate substantial profits. Therefore, given that Melon is the most widely used music streaming and download service in South Korea, being featured on its top 50 chart holds significant financial potential for young rappers in the hip hop genre. In terms of fame, songs on the Melon Top 50 chart are popular not only among the hip hop community, but also among the general audience. Attaining this fame can open doors for young rappers to opportunities to be featured in music festivals and TV shows and even sign contracts with large entertainment companies. Therefore, their authentic narratives of boasting about success is substantiated by external validation in the form of their rankings in the top 50 chart and appearances on TV and social media.

In addition, our analysis showed that Korean rappers expressed their success through appealing their monetary contribution to their family. Success was connected to hip hop music-related terms and family-related terms through words such as “earn,” “sell,” and “show/seen.” Supporting family members, especially parents and grandparents, after becoming self-made is socially highly valued based on the Confucian tenets underlying South Korean society (Song, 2019). Therefore, contribution to family members may also function as a socially valued validation for young Korean rappers openly boasting about their success to gain acceptance from the broader audience. Although the paths to

success achieved through hip-hop music deviate from conventional routes in South Korea, our findings indicate that boasting about success—or “flexing”—in contemporary South Korean hip-hop culture may be more widely accepted because these narratives are grounded in authenticity, supported by external validations, and infused with family-oriented values. The findings further emphasize a critical interplay between global hip-hop influences and localized cultural values in South Korea. While material success and self-promotion are central themes of hip-hop, their societal acceptance appears to depend on references to traditional South Korean values, particularly the importance of family. This interplay suggests that hip-hop's narratives of success are more readily embraced by South Korean audiences when they align with deeply ingrained cultural norms, such as filial piety and collective well-being. These insights, combined with the conceptualization of South Korean youth as a generational minority, suggest that, just as hip hop has historically empowered racial minorities, it can also provide a platform for younger or less dominant generations to challenge and potentially redefine the conventional measures of success imposed by preceding or more dominant groups.

Implications

Overall, this study examined the lyrics of South Korean hip hop artists and found that their lyrics expressed alternative paths to success, which is supported by external validations and socially valued substantiation. This finding aligns with Song's (2019) assertion that hip hop music challenges the conventional notion of success in South Korean society and offers a viable option for success by becoming a rapstar. Our findings have implications for amplifying the voices of the younger generation through hip hop music in South Korea and other Asian countries. Hip hop music is gaining popularity in Asian countries, evident in the export of TV hip hop shows like SMTM to places such as Thailand and Vietnam (“Vietnam's attention toward ‘Show Me The Money,’” 2020; Yeon, 2018). Many Asian countries share a similar culture as South Korea which is based on Confucian tenets, and the social burden of expectations from older generations felt by the youth is increasing (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019). Additionally, a number of Asian countries are experiencing a decline in fertility rates, reducing the number of young people (Sobotka, 2017). Therefore, many youths in other Asian countries can potentially be understood as generational minorities as well.

In pedagogy, previous research on critical race theory have suggested that hip hop-based education creates a space within the educational system to address concerns about the lack of racially and culturally responsive approaches to teaching and learning (Adjapong & Levy, 2021; Akom, 2016). Such an approach can be employed in schools in South Korea and other Asian countries to create space for

youths and teachers to discuss, express, and understand not only racial and cultural differences but also generational gaps. Our study implies that counter-storytelling narratives expressed by youths in hip hop music, while often overlooked, can shed light on the challenges and experiences of this demographic of generational minority in South Korea. Moreover, in the age of ubiquitous self-promotion via social media, some scholars have argued that today's youths just may be more tolerant of and have more positive reactions to self-promotion claims, as narcissism and self-positivity have increased steadily with the pervasiveness of social networking services (Ruan et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Our result implies that hip hop, as a platform for overtly boasting about achievements, could be well-received by broad audiences when authentic narratives about these achievements are combined with external and socially valued substantiation. While self-promotion and narcissism may be on the rise globally, hip hop may play a role for youths in discerning between accurate and inaccurate self-promotion claims. In countries characterized by a shrinking youth population and the emergence of a generational minority, young people can find greater connection through social media networks (SNS) and youth-driven hip hop music across generational and cultural borders, both within and between countries. This can thus amplify their voices, fostering a platform for sharing motivation and encouragement among those seeking alternative life paths.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this study is the use of a large dataset of top 50 rap/hip hop songs in Korea. This strength distinguishes this study from previous studies on the topic which relied on qualitative interviews and selected case studies of artists and songs. By systematically collecting the dataset from the most popular music streaming service, Melon Music, we used a quantitative approach to analyze lyrics of hip hop music that are most widely listened to in Korea in the studied years. However, this study also has several limitations. Firstly, using a mainstream streaming service as the data source led to an emphasis on songs with broader public appeal, including tracks by K-pop idols such as BTS and Blackpink, while under-representing songs by underground hip-hop musicians. It could be argued that songs by underground musicians reflect their authentic stories more as their music is not produced by large music labels, but their perspectives are missing from this study. However, the study team could not identify a cataloged database of Korean hip hop songs that include songs by underground musicians. Secondly, this study relied on a Korean language dictionary to process the lyrics, resulting in the removal of most English words during data cleaning. English is commonly used in Korean hip hop lyrics, influenced by American hip hop (T.-R. Kim, 2019). Future studies could address this by employing

methodologies capable of processing multilingual texts, thereby providing a more comprehensive analysis of Korean hip-hop lyrics. Lastly, this study focuses exclusively on lyrical content, capturing only one dimension of hip-hop's cultural impact. The genre's broader influence also stems from visual representations, social media dynamics, and audience interactions, which were beyond the scope of this research. Additionally, while this study highlights the mainstreaming of hip-hop in South Korea and the cultural acceptance of its lyrical themes, such as overtly boasting about success, it does not empirically prove that Korean youths broadly desire to reject traditional pathways to success. Historically, hip-hop had been an underground genre in Korea until it became mainstream in the early 2010s, and it wasn't until 2017 that Melon Music began ranking songs in the hip-hop genre. This shift reflects an increasing embrace of hip-hop culture by Korean youth. The analysis further reveals that successful lyrics often tie themes of bragging to family—a traditional value in Korea—indicating that the acceptance of hip-hop narratives may be mediated by cultural values. However, this study does not directly measure Korean youth's aspirations or attitudes toward tradition. Future research could explore these aspects through empirical methods, such as surveys or interviews, to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Conclusion

Through the lens of South Korean hip-hop, this study demonstrates that young South Korean rappers are not only challenging conventional, age-standardized pathways to success but are also crafting alternative narratives that resonate with Korean youth. Our findings indicate that hip hop music serves as a powerful platform for youth self-expression, offering a counter-narrative to the rigid, traditional expectations prevalent in South Korean society. Notably, the tendency to overtly boast about material success and individuality—a core theme of hip hop culture—is increasingly embraced among South Korean youth when substantiated by tangible evidence of effort, talent, or external validation. These results underscore a broader cultural shift toward the acceptance of individuality, self-promotion, and non-traditional success metrics in South Korea. Moreover, by framing South Korean youth as a generational minority, this study suggests that, just as hip hop has historically empowered racial minorities, it can also provide a platform for younger or less dominant generations in South Korea to challenge and potentially redefine the conventional success standards imposed by preceding or more dominant generations.

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Ethical Considerations

This study uses secondary publicly available data. Therefore, no ethics approval was needed.

Consent to Participate

The consent to participants is not applicable for the same reason.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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