Macho performance. The Paradox of Vulnerability and Masculinity; mental healing through rap

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The Paradox of Vulnerability and Masculinity: mental healing through rap
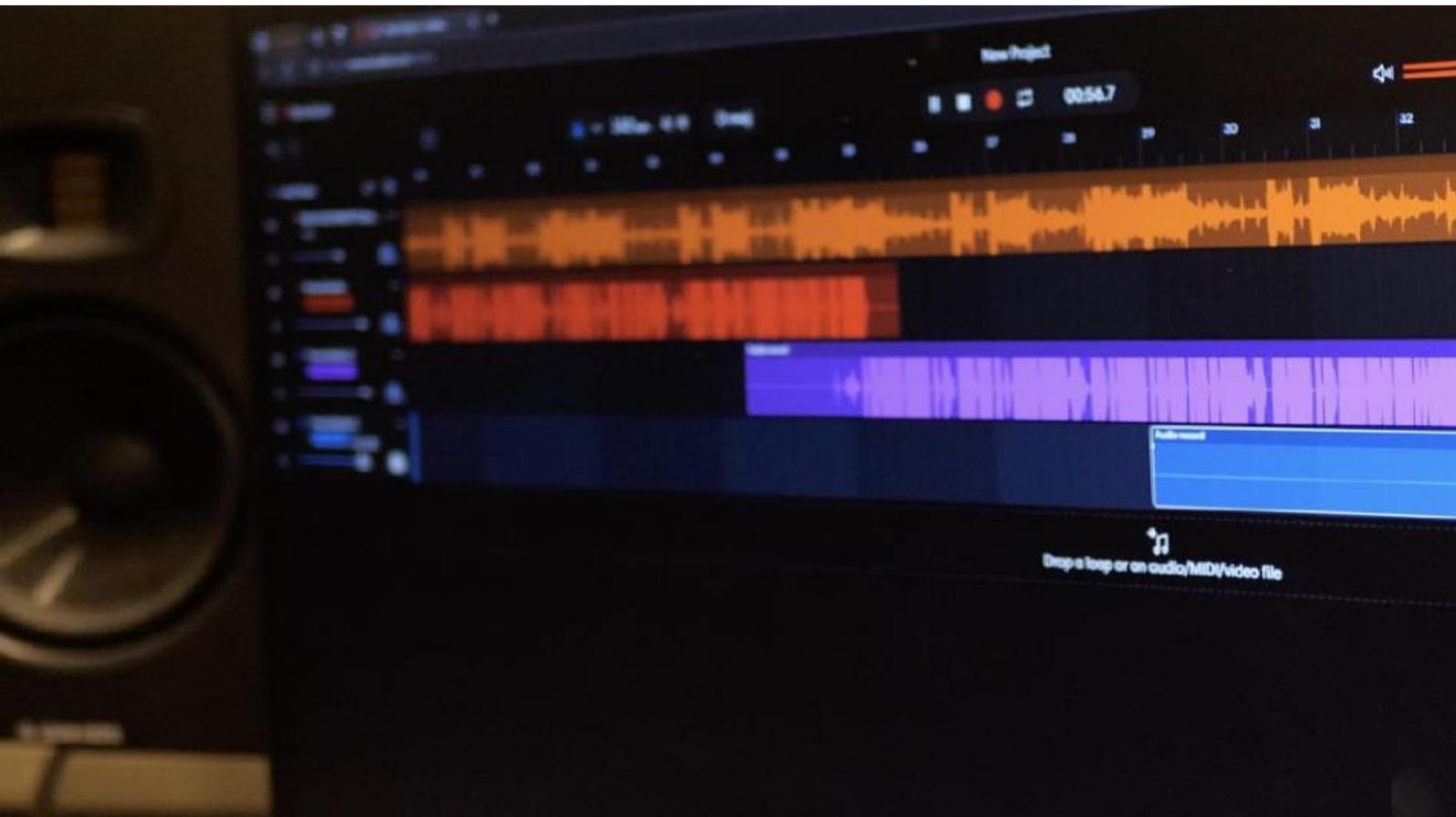
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Abstract

Research indicates that men are less inclined to seek help for mental health issues compared to women, often displaying lower therapy adherence and harbouring more negative perceptions about seeking assistance. Existing studies predominantly focus on white, heterosexual, and middle- to upper-class men, underscoring the necessity for an intersectional approach. As an alternative to traditional therapy, man may turn to other forms of mental healing, such as music. This thesis argues that rap and Hip Hop impact the mental healing of men. This thesis explores masculine identities within rap through Critical Realism and intersectional perspectives. It addresses the underexplored facets of Hip Hop and gender studies by examining the paradox of vulnerability in rap masculinity. Men experience a form of masculine identity through being though enough to be emotional vulnerable and open, finding a space for mental healing in rap, though they feel that they must adhere to prevailing masculine identities while doing so. The primary goal of this thesis is to investigate how young men navigate mental healing, vulnerability, and masculinity through the creative processes of writing and performing rap. Furthermore, it aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on implementing critical theory, reflexive methods, and intersectional lenses in gender studies. Combining written text with audio-visual ethnography enhances the thesis by synthesizing existing frameworks, highlighting fieldwork contributions, and capturing nuanced experiences that facilitate comparative analysis, thereby enriching overall comprehension.

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One late Sunday afternoon, I was sitting on the balcony with my partner, trying to catch the last rays of sunshine. We talked about the impact that music had on our lives when we were growing up, when he recalled dissecting a rap for a philosophy course at High School. For this project any piece of writing could be analysed. Whilst his classmates all choose a book to delve into, he choose a rap-song by Immortal Technique called ´ Dance with the Devil´. Whilst talking about this, he everted his eyes and his smile somewhat faded. About ten years later, the memory of this song seemed to move him still. He then said ´ I thought about those lyrics for weeks then and now I get that same intense feeling back, is that not strange? Though, I suppose that is what music should do. ´

Content

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible if SPOT and its staff did not open their doors for me. Both the people working there and those visiting SPOT were open and enthusiastic about working together on this project and I want to thank them for this. I also would like to thank my interlocutors for sharing their experiences and stories and allowing me to capture powerful and vulnerable moments on film. This research owes everything to the trust and openness of the people participating in it:

Fernando, Robin, Marco, Luciano, Michael, Fabian, Jan, Rachid, Ernest, Richie, Dennis, Garvey, Resa, André, Angelo, Barry, Damian, Delara, Dilla, Djante, Dylan, Glen, Jordan, Joel, Kjeld, Milan, Niels, Shelkinah, Owen, Jacob, Leroy, Daisy, Demy. [1]

In the process of finding a place to engage in fieldwork, I encountered some obstacles. I want to personally thank Veronique Aicha, who helped me in this time of need and provided me with contact details of places like SPOT. My supervisor, Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela helped me redirect my research and provided me with helpful tips and feedback. Next to this, he remained hopeful of a positive outcome of my research, even when original plans had to change. I would also like to express my gratitude to my soup-group of peers from the Visual Ethnography master. They provided me with extensive feedback, and I felt very supportive by our interactions. The rest of the class was also incredible in our collaboration, all students would go the extra mile for each other, brainstorming together how all of us could deliver the best version of our research. I am also grateful for my parents, friends and partner who provided me with plenty feedback on both my visual and textual thesis. Lastly, I would like to thank my friend Sara for lending me her laptop in times of need.

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[1] I have chosen to include first names only due to the open access to this article. Full names are known by the researcher.

To the reader

This multimodal ethnography contains two elements: a written thesis and an ethnographic film. The written text and audio-visual ethnography will be tightly integrated. The written component will provide theoretical grounding, synthesizing existing frameworks in anthropology and showcasing how my fieldwork contributes to ongoing debates. The audio-visual component will offer a dynamic portrayal of embodied experiences, capturing the nuances of my interlocutors' journeys through artistic practices. The audio-visual element will foster comparative analysis, presenting a case-study with diverse experiences to identify patterns and differences. This complements the written text, enriching the analysis and engaging audiences in innovative ways. This synthesis will communicate various types of knowledge: declarative theoretical analysis, reflexive fieldwork introspection, and embodied sensory experiences. Together, they pose the argument that engaging in writing, producing and performing rap-music helps young men with mental healing.

Introduction

On one of the coldest days of the year 2024, I arrived at SPOT, a vibrant youth hub located inside a mall in the centre of Lelystad. The chill from outside seeped through the windows, making the temperature inside nearly as frigid. In the living room, a group of young people huddled together, chatting enthusiastically whilst still wearing their jackets. I was here to meet Luciano, introduced to me by one of SPOT's co-founders as a rapper writing a song about his time in youth care. We sat down on the couches in the TV-nook, where his politeness immediately struck me. He consistently addressed me as ´miss´ and used the formal ´u´, a habit he attributed to his upbringing and institutional encounters. Luciano, at just sixteen, shared his dreams and past experiences with a maturity far beyond his years. He expressed a desire to help other young people overcoming struggles similar to his own and to help them reach their potential. His passion was palpable as we moved to the studio, where he enthusiastically explained his music-making process. Perhaps due to his eagerness in talking to me, he occasionally stumbled over his words. Our conversation was frequently interrupted by people dropping by and calling him, highlighting his central role in this community. As we talked further, Luciano reflected on his past mistakes and how he now viewed them. He revealed that writing and producing rap are his outlets for releasing frustration, allowing him to show his true self. Through music, he found a way to connect deeply with others, even strangers, by sharing his life and experiences. He concluded by emphasizing the universal power of music to forge connections and reveal genuine identities.

SPOT is an organization located in the city centre of Lelystad that aims to provide young people with a place where they are encouraged to engage in artistic expression. SPOT consist of multiple rooms including a gym, a recording studio with two booths, a creative space, an office and a living room. SPOT aims to be open daily for people that want to pass by and people who had made appointments, to chat or engage in artistic projects. These young people are expected to gather in the living room and choose a creative activity they want to participate in. The crew working at SPOT consist of two people, paid by the Red Cross Army, overseeing the living room. The director who manages the whole, caretakers of the building and artistic volunteers are present at other specific rooms at SPOT. Of the artistic volunteers, some have a degree in social work, some do not. The volunteers help the young people engage in artistic projects.

Jacob, one of the founders of SPOT, mentions to me that SPOT is meant to serve as a place where young people can talk about everything and where artistic practices can help them feel better. This need for improvement of the mental state of young people in Lelystad is echoed in the proportion of young people seek mental health assistance. Approximately 15% of young people in

Lelystad experience symptoms of anxiety or depression, and a similar percentage grappling with the effects of a traumatic event.

The seemingly decreasing state of mental health underlines the prevalence of discussions surrounding the psychological well-being of, specifically, men. Epidemiological data underlies the diminishing of psychosocial wellbeing and mental health amongst male population in western countries (Furedi, 2004). Some researchers have underlined the association between men's psychosocial health and their process of identity development and negotiation. Fischer, Rodriguez Mosquera, van Vianen, & Manstead (2004) have, for instance, stated that rigid societal expectations of male identity may contribute to emotional and relational challenges. This thesis will delve into the identity formation and gender performance of young men in the context of engaging in rap. I will first discuss research done on gender identity formation, in the form of Hegemonic Masculinity Theory, stating the need for an intersectional approach when it comes to studying men in Hip Hop culture. Then I will underline the impact of masculinity on of mental health, using an intersectional and Critical Realist approach to explore the ways in which men seek mental healing. Lastly, I will demonstrate why this thesis will be focussing on the artistic form of rap, giving a brief overview of research done on masculinity and mental healing in Hip Hop and rap culture.

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

Since its inception, Hegemonic Masculinity Theory, as coined by Connell (2000), has been the predominant framework for studying men and masculinities (Scheibling and Lafrance, 2019). This framework states that gender discourses are socially constructed, conveying meanings about manhood that shape and influence behaviour (Wetherell, 2007). HMT poses that within any social context, men navigate various masculinities, creating tensions and dilemmas in identity formation. Men negotiate their identities by either resisting or conforming to hegemonic masculinity (De Visser, Smith & McDonnel, 2009). Despite patriarchal structures where hegemonic masculinity prevails, not all boys and men benefit from existing gender hierarchies, for example when they do not conform to existing gender norms (Christensen & Jensen, 2014).

Critics of the appliance of Hegemonic Masculinity Framework to studying men, pose that it is white-centred and it does not take enough intersectional aspects in account. The 2005 reformulation of Hegemonic Masculinity Theory provides more agency to non-white men, arguing they do not merely strive for white (hyper-)masculine ideals but can actively discuss gender norms and rise socially. However, the frameworks focus on power analyses can lead scholars to essentialize men of colour as perpetually marginalized. The appliance of the Hegemonic Masculine Framework in gender studies, and other social sciences, has been widely discussed. However, it is not often examined through the lens of intersectionality (Beasley 2008). Categories of the Hegemonic Masculine

Framework, like ´hegemonic´, ´subordinated´ and ´marginalized´ masculinities, are often seen mutually exclusive. As a result, describing men with intersecting identities becomes difficult. For instance, a black gay sexist man would fall under ´marginalized and subordinated hegemonic masculinity´, which undermines the distinct categories intended to describe differences. Ultimately, while Connell's theory has brought attention to multiple power asymmetries among men, it struggles to effectively account for intersecting identities.

In this thesis, the appliance of masculine identities will therefore not be a copy of terms used in the Hegemonic Masculinity Theory. I will apply an intersectional approach in describing masculine identities and performances. I will combine this approach with Critical Realism, and will argue why this approach is relevant for gender studies, I will do so in my methodological section.

Interaction masculinity and mental health

Gender disparities in mental health help-seeking behaviours, have been extensively studied. Research shows that men are less likely to seek help for mental health issues, compared to women (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Besides this, men report lower rates of therapy loyalty (continuation of treatment) and report more negative attitudes towards seeking help then women (Nam et al., 2010). The majority of research on men seeking help for mental issues has been on predominantly white, heterosexual, and middle- to upper-class men (Griffith, Ellis, & Ober Allen, 2012). This, once again, underlies the need for applying an intersectional lens, since other factors then gender influence how people handle mental health.

When I first looked at the link between masculinity and mental health (in terms of seeking help, expressing emotional vulnerability etc.), I focused on hegemonic masculinity. Research on this poses that conflicts concerning hegemonic masculinity can impact men's mental health (De Visser, Smith & McDonnel, 2009). Bonell et al. (2021) state that hegemonic masculine norms, such as strength and stoicism, can lead to negative health outcomes, as men may downplay health concerns to conform to societal expectation. Courtenay (2000) argues that men may successfully use unhealthy beliefs and behaviours to demonstrate idealized forms of masculinity which is appreciated within a patriarchal society. By dismissing their health needs, men legitimize themselves and in this way the use of unhealthy beliefs and behaviours helps to sustain and reproduce social inequality and the social structures that, in turn, reinforce and reward men's poor health habits.

Later on, I integrated more of an intersectional lens to approach the impact of masculine identities on (mental-) health. As stated by Gough & Robertson (2017), the evidence linking masculinity and health behaviours paints a complex picture. The assumed link between masculinity and a reluctance to seek help, is not always found (Gough & Robertson, 2017). Furthermore, research

shows a more nuanced picture of masculine identities. For example, a study done by Morrow et al., (2020), where masculinity clusters formed on the basis of intersectional aspects were analysed to investigate mental health seeking behaviour. Participants articulated connections between age, immigration and employment, suggesting that these factors should be considered in public health interventions. Results showed greater help-seeking among white, non- heterosexual, single, older, and more depressed men. However, the associations varied significantly across ethnic groups. These findings underscore the need for research and theory development that consider the intersection in understanding how men deal with their mental health.

Impact of artistic expression on mental health

As mentioned above, men often seek less professional help for mental issues, which brings up the question of how men deal with these mental issues. Some find mental healing in the form of music. Phalen (2013) writes in his auto-biographical ethnography about his own struggles with mental health and how music helped him and others within a Community Mental Health Drop-In Center. According to Phalen (2013) music serves as a crucial modality of expression, allowing people to voice and recognize the ineffable when words fail. Music, in his view, reflects one's embodied experience of self, fulfilling the body's need to express and to be acknowledged in lived experiences with others. Phalen references Michael Hyde (2006) by stating that acknowledgment is an act that grants attention to others, affirming their existence and making room for their expression. This acknowledgment can impact on those who are otherwise isolated or marginalized. Phalen (2013) adds that music can evoke states of awareness, embodying the ´life of feeling´. Music therefore fosters a mutual relationship between performer and audience, deeply intertwined with lived experience. It offers a medium for expressing emotions that might otherwise be inexpressible in words.

Hip Hop and mental healing

Several studies highlight mental healing through Hip Hop and rap (Crooke, Comte and Almeida, 2021). Emdin and Levy (2016;2021) pose that Hip Hop can offer an alternative therapeutic space that respects young people' identity and reality. For example, by acknowledging students' skills in Hip Hop, such as rapping, interventions can empower them and reposition them as experts in the therapeutic relationship (Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009). Hip Hop song lyrics can also reflect students' experiences and foster well-being by allowing them to connect with narratives (Hill, 2009). Using Hip Hop language instead of traditional psychotherapy language makes therapy more accessible to students (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012). The program used in the research of Olson-McBride and Page (2012), created an environment where adolescents felt comfortable enough to engage in self-disclosure. The program emphasized analysing and discussing popular rap songs to facilitate participants' reflection on significant or traumatic life events, fears, fantasies, and relationship issues.

Levy, Hess, Elber and Hayden (2021) describes another therapeutic program centred around Hip Hop, where young people engaged in practices such as DJ-ing, writing raps, making beats, and recording tracks. This program involved participants standing in a circle, giving everyone a chance to share, valuing all voices equally and providing support when needed. These sessions aimed to help students express and explore their emotional challenges while forming social support structures and a sense of community.

A history of Hip Hop masculinity

This thesis will look at mental healing through rap and Hip Hop and how masculine identities impact this process. Before doing so, I must discuss the history of masculinity within Hip Hop culture. By discussing this, I hope to make clarify the need of an intersectional approach for looking at masculine identities within Hip Hop culture.

Originating in the South Bronx in 1970, Hip Hop was created by black youth as a musical movement to voice the experiences of oppressed communities in response to political and economic crises (Tibbs and Chauncey, 2016; Lafrance, Burns and Woods, 2017). Gangsta rap later emerged as a distinct genre following the initial political rap (Belle, 2014). Hip Hop scholars argue that Gangsta rap's masculinity involves heteronormativity, hypersexuality, misogyny, and the objectification of women, reflecting male-dominated relationship dynamics (Avery, Ward, Moss and Üsküp, 2017; Tibbs and Chauncey, 2016). These elements are used to differentiate from the feminine, employing femininity to demean and masculinity to empower (Belle, 2014; Tibbs and Chauncey, 2016). Gangsta rappers celebrated their ability to embody hypermasculine ideals and achieve material success without conforming to societal norms (Belle, 2014; Tibbs and Chauncey, 2016). This led to a Gangsta persona,

that could be used by black men seeking to conform to hegemonic masculine standards to gain acceptance into the capitalist political economy through consumption (Malton, 2010). The white-dominated music industry commercialized the hypermasculine Gangsta persona on a global scale, further emphasizing the hypermasculine aspects of Gangsta rap by ignoring its political origins rooted in racial oppression and resistance (Tibbs and Chauncey, 2016). Consequently, mainstream Gangsta rap, predominantly consumed by 70-75% white fans, perpetuated the image of black men as aggressive, using perceived violent tendencies and sexual prowess to accumulate wealth (Hooks, 2004). This sexism is a technique to assert male dominance (Collins, 2004). Black feminists contend that such expressions stem from black men's misdirected anger toward black women, due to their inability to meet white patriarchal standards (Hooks, 2004).

In the 1980s, female rappers emerged as a form of black feminism in response to an era of women's liberation movements centred around white, middle-class women (Moody 2011). Their participation in Hip Hop was often criticized for being inauthentic and "soft" (Moody 2011), though it helped in destabilizing the hypermasculine tradition in Hip Hop. In 1997, Gangsta rap became overshadowed by a rap form called Playa rap (Randolph 2006). Playa rap remains hypermasculine, but it is a ´softer´ version, suggesting a movement towards more equal heterosexual relations and male expressivity.

Recent research poses that more and more black male rappers have used Hip Hop as a medium to express alternative, non-hypermasculine representations of themselves (Chaney and Mincey, 2014). For example, Kayne West, who's lyrics can be seen to reflect a more feminine viewpoint within Hip Hop (Lafrance et al. 2016). Through these acts of artistic creativity, masculine styles are complexifying (Lafrance et al., 2016).

Hip Hop studies in the Netherlands
Since this thesis will take a closer look at gender performances in Hip Hop and rap at SPOT, I will provide a brief overview of the literature on Dutch Hip Hop culture. Krims (2000) analysed rap/Hip Hop music in the Netherlands. Using case studies of Dutch Hip Hop groups and interviews with fans and artist, he argues that the United States' cultural and commercial dominance has significantly influenced the development of Dutch rap/Hip Hop and the identities it portrays. These articles highlight how Dutch youth use Hip Hop to discuss societal concerns, mirroring international Hip Hop traditions. For example, Gazzah´s (2008) research, which highlights the role of cultural stereotypes in the self-presentation of Dutch rap/ Hip Hop artists. Using an ethnographic and lyrics-centred approach, Gazzah argues that Dutch Moroccan artists use Hip Hop to challenge these stereotypes and

express frustrations with political issues, especially against the backdrop of negative portrayals in early 2000s Dutch political debates.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the somewhat neglected side of Hip Hop and gender studies, by focusing on the paradox of vulnerability within the expression of gender in rap. The aim of this thesis is to explore how young men navigate mental healing, vulnerability and masculinity within the artistic process of writing and performing rap. A further aim is to contribute to the ongoing debate on how critical theory, with reflexive methods, and the intersectional lens can be implemented in gender studies.

Research question and conceptual framework

This article underscores the significance of depicting authentic lived experiences by exploring the paradox of vulnerability and mental healing of man within rap. To investigate this issue, I spent two months conducting fieldwork in Lelystad. The people involved at the beginning were of all genders and between the ages of ten and sixty. With an open mind, I engaged with everyone at SPOT, asking about their favourite activities. This initial phase involved interviews, elicitation exercises, and participation in various artistic projects. Gradually, my research gravitated towards rapping and Hip Hop, where I noticed distinct gender patterns in engagement. Consequently, I decided to focus on how rapping as a form of artistic expression benefits young men, following several individuals on their artistic journeys. Guided by questions such as: ¨how does rap provide a place of emotional healing for young men´ ´how are gender identities performed and perceived at SPOT¨ and ´what gender performances and artistic endeavours are socially accepted at SPOT, and which are not? In order to answer these questions, my main statement for which I will argue in this thesis will be:

Engagement in rap and Hip Hop helps young men at SPOT in their mental healing, simultaneously engaging in non-dominant forms of gender identity (being emotionally vulnerable) whilst performing more dominant masculine traits.

In other words: Hip Hop and rap offers a paradoxical space where men have to be strong enough to be emotional vulnerable.
 The article is grounded in critical theory, applying an intersectional and reflective lens to ethnographic research. This thesis seeks to contribute to the somewhat neglected side of Hip Hop and gender studies, by focusing on the paradox of vulnerability within the expression of masculinity in rap that prevails whilst mental healing is taking place for these men. The aim of this thesis is to explore how young men navigate vulnerability and masculinity within the artistic process of writing and performing rap. A second aim is to underline the importance of Hip Hop and rap to engage men in mental healing. It does so by applying an intersectional lens to get to the core of issues around masculine identities and Hip Hop. A further aim is to contribute to the ongoing debate on how Critical Realism and the Intersectional approach can be implemented in Gender studies.

This study will answer the following research questions, in order to address the larger main research question, as mentioned above.

1. How does Hip Hop and rap offer a place for mental healing for men at SPOT?

2. What forms of artistic expression are considered socially accepted, and which are not?

3. How does the paradox of vulnerability play out in the engagement in rap by young men at SPOT?

Research description

Methodology

Shefer, Kruger and Schepers (2015) emphasize the importance of a methodological approach that frames men's vulnerability and identity formation by engaging in acts of empowerment. Within this approach men's creativity helps address their underlying gender identities, thereby creating spaces for critical reflection on the identities they construct. By engaging with these men in the process of making and performing rap, I attempted to get at core processes, engaging in an activity they felt comfortable with. I will firstly inform the reader on the details of the field site of this thesis. Then I will elaborate on the justification of applying critical realism and intersectionality to my research and how applying these lenses to studying gender performances within artistic processes adds to existing frameworks. Then I will delve into different used methodologies and reflect on the application of those.

Field site

For two months in 2024, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at SPOT in Lelystad, attending all opening hours and participating in various artistic projects. SPOT caters to young people aged ten to twenty-five, primarily high school students. My research included volunteers and workers at SPOT, ranging from fifteen to sixty years old. I assumed the role of a worker/volunteer, engaging in conversations and assisting with tasks, which sometimes blurred the distinction between myself and the other workers in the eyes of the participants. I will provide specific examples of this later. I participated in many projects and even led small art projects. My familiarity with physical fitness allowed me to take a more active role in the workout sessions. Although I am interested in Hip Hop music and its culture, the rap scene was entirely new to me. This led me to require support and advice from others in order to fully engage. This inexperience, I believe, helped balance some of the existing asymmetrical power relations between me and the rappers, flipping our positions.

Critical Realism

I have applied the lens of Critical Realism in my fieldwork. I will first delve into some literature on this theory and then I will provide some examples of how it, in combination with intersectionality, was employed in my fieldwork.

Critical Realism emerged as a critique of post-structuralist theories, which often prioritize the voices and agency of those studied, potentially overlooking structural dimensions (Layder, 1998). Critical realism challenges that the notion that the existence of entities like social structures are mere

constructs or just limited to observable realms (Brown, Fleetwood, Roberts and Roberts 2002). Bhaskar's critical realism divides reality into three domains: the real (underlying structures and mechanisms), the actual (events and behaviours produced by these mechanisms), and the empirical (our experiences of these events). This framework helps in understanding how different levels of reality interact and should be studied.

In writing a critical realist ethnography, a primary goal is providing a reflexive account of how observations and conclusions were made, particularly concerning the relationship between social structures and activities. Ethnographers do not have full access to the social contexts or inner lives of participants. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the methodological limits of ethnographic work. Applying thick description, as suggested by Geertz (1975; 2008), to this thesis, is done to bring the reader into the experience. Using thick description separately from the analysis also helps understand conclusions I made, which are inherently different from if another researcher engaged in the field site. Reflecting on how observations are made, how access to informants was gained, and the thought processes behind claims and conclusions is important. When reviewing ethnographic work, it's essential to consider both how researchers obtained access to participants' lives and the methodological perspectives used to analyse observations. This reflexivity will serve as a red threat through my research.

The performance of masculinity within creative processes lends itself well to be studied from a critical realist perspective for multiple reasons. First of all, the different domains of reality can exist at the same time, and be studied as such. Applying the critical realist perspective on the performance of masculinity implies looking at its structures. It entails both the normative social expectations about being a man (Manninen, Huuki and Sunnari 2011) and the link between masculine styles and identity (Lalander, 2017). A critical realist perspective recognizes that some parts of a person's identity are influenced by external factors (Edwards, O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). At the same time, how people perform and construct their gender identities involves choices. Gender identities, in particular, are shaped by either following or resisting dominant norms (De Visser, Smith & McDonnel 2009). Vulnerability within masculinity performance is intertwined with social structures and individual agency, and both aspects must be recognized. Social structures influence social categories, and all individuals or groups can become vulnerable under certain circumstances. However, acknowledging human agency means everyone is responsible for how they treat and interact with others. Supporting vulnerable masculinities requires intersectional recognition, which sometimes involves sensitive confrontation to address harmful behaviours.

Intersectionality

Approaches to studying intersectionality share a common focus on understanding how forms of discrimination based on social categories like race, class, and gender interact. However, they diverge in their ontological and epistemological perspectives. Earlier intersectional research primarily examined social groups based at neglected points of intersection (Martinez, Martin & Marlow, 2018), yet struggled to capture the complexity of lived experiences. While interpretative insights are crucial, there's a pressing need to deeply engage with the social and material realities that shape identity construction and meaning-making. This requires understanding oppression and privilege without essentializing or assuming fixed characteristics of groups, highlighting the relevance of Critical Realism in exploring causal relationships in these contexts.

This article fills a gap by conducting an intersectional discourse analysis grounded in Critical Realism. It proposes that degrees of intersectionality provide a nuanced approach to studying men, addressing limitations in current notions of "masculinities" and suggesting a more complex understanding of identity formation. This article contributes by illustrating how class, race, and gender discourses intersect within Hip Hop, challenging simplistic views of "masculinities" and advocating for a deeper integration of intersectionality. It draws on Staunæs and Søndergaard's (2012) perspective on intersectionality as a space for new identities and agency, highlighting its emancipatory potential.

Reflexive account of fieldwork

In line with the Critical Realist approach, I will reflect on my positionality and choices made in my fieldwork. I delve into this by exploring how my interlocutors perceived me during the research. To build rapport, I chose not to bring my camera to the initial meetings, aiming to be present without the distraction of filming. However, I didn't anticipate the assumptions my name would provoke. When I first met Joel, a frequent visitor and newly appointed volunteer at SPOT, he openly shared his impression of me. Upon introducing myself, Joel asked if I played field hockey, associating my ´fancy double name´ with upscale hobbies. Learning that I was from Utrecht further cemented his view of me as ´fancy´. I found myself trying to disprove this perception by sharing more about my personality, mentioning that I play basketball and listen to Hip Hop. Reflecting on this, I realize I wanted to bridge any gaps between us regarding hobbies or education. Although I now understand I can't fully control others' perceptions of me, it was insightful to recognize these dynamics. With Joel, I noticed he treated me similarly to others, often joking around. However, after I warned him, several times about crossing boundaries—such as flirting without permission and insulting strangers—he mentioned seeing me as a nice teacher. While he found me kind, Joel also perceived me as stricter than the other adults present. This perception influenced my research; although Joel shared his experiences and

thoughts, he regarded me more a teacher than a peer. Throughout my fieldwork, I navigated these roles, shifting from a more equal and peer-like stance with older volunteers and employees at SPOT to a more authoritative, teacher-like role with some of the young people. I did have a more peer-like relationship with some of the young people, notably with most of the girls, feeling less need to be in an adult role with them. My intention was not to be authoritarian, but I needed to protect my own and others' boundaries at times. For instance, Joel and Owen frequently made references to sex and sexual intimacy, which made some participants uncomfortable, as they expressed to me. To maintain a safe environment for everyone and feeling the pressure to speak up as both a woman in a male-dominated space and an adult in an adolescent space, I informed the boys that some of their comments were inappropriate. These instances further solidified my role as a teacher.

Participant observation

Before moving into to the field, I pictured directing my methodological practices to include the co-production of knowledge alongside young people involved. I was flexible with regards to which modes of communication (writing, painting, talking, filming, etc.) would be most fitting for my interlocutors to express themselves in. I imagined that the themes discussed in our talks, would help re-formulate the research direction as we went. Popoviciu, Haywood, Mac and Ghaill (2006) reflect on the changing of the original theoretical starting point of their ethnographic fieldwork. They argue that critical participant observation, with meaning as its central concern, challenged this theoretical starting point. They underline the importance of focusing upon the perspectives of meaning of the participants to understand the research problem. In this view, shared knowledge is a result of shared social situations as historical conditions generate patterns of thought. It often relinquishes academic authority over the research as a means to avoid reproducing the conventional power relations. An example of how critical participation challenged my original standpoint can be found in the inclusion of the concept of gender. Since I was unaware of the kind of artistic endeavours I would encounter at SPOT, I did not predict that intersectionality would play a crucial role in my research. Through conversations and observations, masculine identities and performances in relation to rap became apparent, now forming the base of my thesis.

(Photo-) elicitation

During my fieldwork, I employed the photo-elicitation method, focusing on both participant-driven and researcher-driven approaches (Samuels, 2004). In the researcher-driven approach, I showed participants photos of SPOT and its surroundings, asked them to rank these according to significance, and engaged in open conversations about their meanings. For the participant-driven approach, I

asked Daisy, an avid photographer, to take pictures of things she found relevant in SPOT. We later discussed her choices and their relevance to her. This co-productive method aimed to reduce the power imbalance between researcher and participants, as Lapenta (2011) suggests, participant-driven photo-elicitation can reduce researcher biases.

Additionally, I used mapping to understand participants' perceptions of space. For example, I asked Fabian, a volunteer at the creative space, to map SPOT. We compared his map to mine, and I noticed he omitted the gym. When asked, he admitted it was because he dislikes exercising. However, he meticulously detailed the artistic space, reflecting the time he spends there and the numerous items it contains. This led us to discuss his perception of the creative space's potential, as he detailed items like guitars, emphasizing his care and enthusiasm for them. He noted his surprise that fewer young people visit the creative space, given its endless possibilities for creativity.

Visual Ethnography and Cinematic Style
With regard to the visual aspect of this thesis, I will first underline the importance of applying visual methods to my research topic, then I will reflect on the cinematic style I engaged in during this research.

As Postma (2021) suggests, audio-visual ethnography uniquely captures and conveys ethnographic knowledge through filmmaking, translating the researcher's observations into visual records that convey presence, emotions, and relationships, termed "affective knowledge" by MacDougall (2006). This sensory knowledge complements traditional descriptive and explanatory knowledge found in text-based research.

Given this study's focus on mental healing and emotional vulnerability, a visual methodology is particularly appropriate. Many participants emphasized the emotional impact of music in their lives, and reducing these experiences to text alone would not capture their full depth. The film aims to create affective knowledge, allowing viewers to experience the emotions and connections observed in the field.

Debates in visual ethnography highlight the importance of making the implicit knowledge in filmmaking explicit, with Postma (2021) advocating for clarity in the methodological process and the affective knowledge generated. Pink (2007) emphasizes introspection and awareness of power dynamics, while Blum-Ross (2012) suggests involving young people in their representation. Buckingham (2011) warns that observational cinema might impose limiting roles on adolescents, thus genuine empowerment in research is crucial.

To address this, participatory methodologies were used to engage participants as co-researchers. For example, Angelo vlogged his experiences at SPOT, and other participants contributed

material using their own devices, by for example sending me their artwork through WhatsApp. However, challenges included concerns about lending expensive equipment and limited participant interest in filming. Consequently, the project was adjusted to focus on activities participants were interested in. This shift facilitated deeper understanding and transformed casual interactions into shared experiences at the record studio, allowing participants to open up about their lives.

Ethical consideration

An ethical consideration comes into mind focussing on the power-relations between myself and the people working on the project with me. Wickett (2007) states that accessibility of the proper equipment is often afforded to that different social class, but this equipment can also help produce compelling images, thereby aiding communities who are partners in the research process. Earlier I mentioned the struggles of making this research fully co-constructed, hindered some co-constructing of knowledge. I tried to balance this process a little by asking for a lot of feedback from my interlocutors on their representation in the film and article. I also engaged in every step of the rap process, aiming to co-produce knowledge that way.

A second ethical consideration was caused by my own emotions. The presence of the ethnographer in the field provides transformative insights, but narrative ethnographies often omit negative emotional experiences, despite fieldwork involving a wide range of emotions (Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009). This omission is puzzling, as fieldwork ethics and emotions are interconnected, especially in violent contexts (Nordstrom and Robben, 1996). Negative emotions may be excluded due to concerns about the ethnographer's reliability. Reflecting on both positive and negative emotions enhances the narrative's reliability, as emotions influence reactions and decisions.

For instance, I documented a young man involved in music-making, conducting multiple interviews with him. However, when he was accused of inappropriate behaviour and subsequently banned from SPOT, I faced ethical dilemmas about including him in my research. Despite the lack of formal charges, the accusation affected me, leading to my decision to exclude him from the study. I rationalized this by the fact that my research shifted its focus to rap, and as he is not a rapper, he did not fit. In hindsight, my decision was influenced by my emotional response to the accusation. This reflection underscores the importance of acknowledging emotions in ethnographic research.

Research limitations

This article, as with any ethnographic research, relies on situated knowledge. As Barbosa (2010) states, both visual and textual ethnography rely on a knowledge construction which is situated as a process influencing the understanding of someone´s identity. With any other person going in my

place, the experiences and observations would probably differ. During my time at SPOT, I was often the only adult female present. Sometimes people visiting were adult and female, but the staff was made up by men. I can imagine that the masculine aspect might have not been so prevalent for a male ethnographer. Therefore, this article should be seen within the context of an ethnographic case study and not as research that aims to represent the themes of masculinity, mental healing and vulnerability as a social fixed reality.

Key findings and themes

One day in April, I was with Robin, a producer, and Dennis, a DJ and volunteer at the SPOT office. I showed them my film and asked for their feedback. During our conversation, I mentioned that many young men at SPOT spent their time writing rap songs. That day, a group of newcomers visited SPOT. I met them outside as they were smoking, and they allowed me to film them from behind as they chatted about their lives. One of them was a rapper, and after some encouragement from his friends, he shared parts of two songs with me. I suggested he record at SPOT, but the group soon left because one of them broke the house rules. This encounter highlighted the number of men visiting SPOT who choose to express themselves through rap. While many women also wrote and shared their work with me, they tended to write poems or lyrics to sing rather than rap. Dennis and Robin confirmed that most people recording in the booths were men performing raps. Robin explained his reluctance to help women record alone to avoid making them uncomfortable or being accused of misconduct. Dennis noted that Hip Hop is still male dominated, with women gravitating towards R&B or pop songs. They observed that female rappers often sexualize their appearance and lyrics, which Robin said he wasn't interested in producing. When I pointed out the unfairness of not giving women a chance to rap on their own terms, they agreed but added that they also disliked how many male rappers glorify violence. Robin mentioned that sometimes women do come to perform raps but prefer to be alone in the studio for privacy. Nonetheless, the majority of rapping at SPOT is done by men.

What forms of engagement in artistic expression to promote mental healing, are considered socially accepted at SPOT, and which are not?

Artistic expression and mental healing

Many individuals I spoke with at SPOT expressed reluctance in seeking mental health support. Notably, all the rappers I followed had experiences with institutionalization and exhibited ambivalence toward mental health and social services. For instance, Luciano explained that while others might find support from seeing a psychologist, he finds his mental healing through music *[00:57 – 01:10][2].* When I showed the film to Fernando, he mentioned that he felt the same way about rap, calling it a strong beginning to the film. Although Fernando had undergone mental counselling, he felt a lack of genuine connection with his therapist, leading him to say and do what he thought was expected just to complete the process. In rap, he found an authentic way to connect and express his emotions, aiding in his mental healing.

However, rap is not the only way to engage in artistic expression in order to achieve mental healing at SPOT. For example, Daisy often talks about expressing her emotions through writing and drawing. She mentions that when she's very sad, writing helps her get out of her head. Once she's more detached from those intense emotions, she transforms her poems into drawings. One afternoon, Daisy shows me a picture of a clown she made the day before. She tells me it was based on a poem she had given me earlier. She explains that the person in the picture is wearing a clown mask, symbolizing the need to hide true feelings by pretending to be happy. The clown figure resonates with Daisy because of its paradoxical nature: clowns cheer up sick children in hospitals but also evoke fear in many others. Daisy used to be afraid of clowns too, but now she appreciates the performative aspect of them. She concludes that drawing and writing about emotional experiences helps her process them, little by little. Additionally, she transforms some of her drawings into tattoos, both for herself and others. For Daisy, this feels like the final step in experiencing emotions—having processed them enough to find meaning that she wants to carry with her forever.

Acceptable forms of artistic expression

Within the sphere of SPOT, there were certain kinds of artistic expression that appeared more socially accepted then others. Fabian told me one late afternoon that a lot of young people who frequented the artistic space often, had left SPOT. Fabians recalls that a lot of them mentioned feeling unsafe in the space because of the conflicts occurring. He then recalls a girl pointing out to him that some of the bullying happening at school, would continue at SPOT. Others described feeling unsafe due to

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[2] The time stamps refer back to the film 'Macho Performance: Strength in Vulnerability'

other visitors of SPOT having conflict with each other or creating other unsafe situations (like bringing in drugs or partaking in criminal activities). Fabian took this leave pretty hard he recalls to me, saying that SPOT was meant to help those kids that wanted to be creative and that he now feels like it is now serving more as a place to hang out. The young people that still come to SPOT are in moderated levels motivated to engage in activities performed at the creative space.

I noticed a preference for a type of masculinity in patterns of activities appreciated at SPOT. Many men would busy themselves with boxing, weightlifting in the gym, rapping, gaming and chilling and smoking a cigarette. When I would ask if they liked to partake in activities like drawing one of them recalled ´no, that is not for me, I am not gay´, underlining the perceived interlinkage of sexuality and masculinity that I will elaborate on in the next section.

How does the paradox of vulnerability play out in the engagement in rap by young men at SPOT?

Performance of Masculinity

Robin highlighted a fascinating paradox in Hip Hop culture: being a rapper requires one to be vulnerable and authentic while also being tough enough to handle ridicule and self-deprecation on stage. He mentioned that you have to be macho to perform *[08:23-08:29].* This section explores various aspects of masculinity identity and performance and the contradictions of vulnerability through emotional expression of young men within the Hip Hop scene. The persona adopted by Hip Hop musicians can be understood as a form of gender performance, as explained by Judith Butler (1997). Butler argues that "the body is a historical idea that gains its meaning through a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world."

A central framework for understanding black masculinity in Hip Hop is the concept of "authenticity." Debates about authenticity and "keeping it real" often surface, with some artists praised for their authenticity and others criticized for selling out. "Realness" is a crucial marker for black youth who adopt a Hip Hop aesthetic, akin to how Africanness signifies black authenticity. Hip Hop's authenticity is often represented by the young black male, which typically involves perpetuating stereotypes linked to hypermasculinity. To maintain this "authentic" persona, rappers' lyrics frequently include misogyny and violence.

Hip Hop artists create personas that align with historically and socially accepted expressions of masculinity, rooted in the African American communities in the U.S. These communities, long victims of systemic racism and oppression, adopted patriarchal ideas to maintain dignity under degrading circumstances. Consequently, Hip Hop and rap reflect these pressures, with masculinity models in these genres mirroring the struggles of black Americans. Kweli (2019) describes the conflict between rapper identity and personal growth, likening the rapper's persona to "armor" that becomes stifling. This struggle highlights the paradox within Hip Hop, where hypermasculine culture limits opportunities for genuine emotional expression.

Oware (2016) adds to this with his ethnographic analysis comparing lyrics of white rappers and rappers of colour. He states that white rappers often avoid racially political and social themes, emphasizing hypermasculine tropes like violence, misogyny, and homophobia to achieve 'Hip Hop authenticity.' This approach demonstrates how white male privilege operates through deracialization, highlighting debates of authenticity in Hip Hop. Female rappers challenge the genre's masculinity but still navigate conventions like dissing and battling, which are imbued with traditionally masculine traits such as aggression and competitiveness. This links back to what Robin told me, you have to be

macho enough to perform on a stage, being able to handle radicalization. As a rapper, you have to be genuine and real (for example through expressing one's true emotions and being vulnerable), but still ´men´ enough to take critique. All of the men I followed, were open about what they have been through, but talked about these events with some distance, with stoic body language, this exemplified this paradox for me. It is tough to be open and vulnerable, but one must accompany this vulnerability with stern body language and facial expression. Within this frame, certain masculine identities are more socially accepted, Marco told me ones that rappers don´t have to use violence in their lyrics but they do have to appear rough, underlying the need for an impressive beat and a certain though words to ´be able to relate to young people´.

Vulnerability and rap

Vulnerability within the context of gender performance and artistic expression in rap is crucial. Luciano, despite being open about his experiences with the criminal justice system, maintained a consistent appearance that never faltered. He often talked openly about his violent past. Stating that he learned from it, but it seemed as though talking about this gained him some sort of social currency of his peers. The content of his raps contrasted somewhat with our talks, with him telling me that he wants to help other young people stay of the path of violence whilst rapping about performing violent acts. I asked him about this contradiction once. He stated that his lyrics should not be taken literally, that somewhere inspired by his past and his experiences then. Other lyrics are a way of expressing emotions, like anger, in a safe and productive way.

Showing emotional vulnerably and thus performing masculinity in a non-dominant fashion can lead to 'otherness,' sometimes resulting in bullying or social exclusion (Huuki & Sunnari, 2015). This interplay between vulnerability and toughness was most notable in the studio, the place of rap. For example, Marco is a rapper with many tattoos, a stern paste in his walk, a somewhat monotone voice. To me he came across somewhat intimating, looking like he could not easily be startled. However, ones he started rapping, his face softened and the lyrics revealed true emotional expression. This vulnerability was prevalent with all the interviews I did with the rappers. All of them revealed their past and their experiences within the first month knowing each other. However, whilst discussing these events, many did not show direct emotional impact in their appearance. It struck me as a disbalance in the way they would describe quite impactful life events with a somewhat stoic demeanour. An example of this can be found in the film. When Fernando is introduced to us by his talking head interview, he appears in a dominant position, spreading out his arms a sitting back on the cough [03:35]. Later on in the film when he is getting ready to perform, we see honest and present emotions, in the form of his nervousness *[24:31].* He is happy and authentic while surrounded by friends and peers, which I contrasted with the beginning of the film, where he is alone, being honest

about his past, but his stance and appearance were somewhat performative, presenting a though exterior. I asked him about this observation later, when he mentioned that he was nervous about sharing his story. Even though he was familiar with being on camera, he was preparing to share a lot of his personal life. Performing a sort of toughness, allowed him to feel more balanced and therefore it provided him with more space to express himself honestly.

Social Structures and Identity

Understanding gender performances from a critical realist perspective involves recognizing their structural aspects, as these performances are often connected to global styles and identities (Lalander, 2017). Normative social expectations and constraints regarding "doing boyhood" (Manninen et al., 2011) also shape these performances. Labels like nerd or fag highlight how identities are influenced by societal pressures and hostility (Quail, 2011). A critical realist view acknowledges that some aspects of a person's identity are rooted in ontological generative mechanisms beyond individual control (Brown, Fleetwood, Roberts and Roberts 2002). At the same time, social performances and identity constructions involve complex aspects of human agency, with gender identities being subjectively constructed through the repetition of or resistance to dominant norms (Cook & Hasmath, 2014). In the following section, I will discuss what it meant for men to not fit in what they feel society expects from them.

Gender Identity and performance in Hip Hop

Rap and Hip Hop cultures are also criticized for its focus on heteronormativity and existing levels of homophobia. Nayo Sasaki-Picou points out that when males do not display traditionally heterosexual behaviour, their authenticity as Hip Hop artists is questioned. In Hip Hop and rap, being gay is often equated with being feminine and lacking dominance. Arthur (2006) states that in the context of Hip Hop in Australia, gender identity is extremely salient. They attribute this to the experienced lack of opportunities to perform masculine identities in workplaces and schools and the fact that Hip Hop culture predominantly appeals to (male) teenagers. During fieldwork Arthur (2006) noted that successfully performing masculinity, and masking and repressing signs of femininity, helps individuals rise within the subcultural hierarchy. Damien describes that these methods for young men included shaving their heads, referring to (the threat of) violence and adopting African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in speech. Bucholtz (1999) adds to this notion stating that using AAVE can convey impressions of physical strength, violence, and hyper-heterosexuality.

As I engaged with these articles, I observed how masculinity manifested within the space of SPOT. Although I did not hear African American Vernacular English (AAVE) spoken, a particular form of

masculine performance was notably accepted: that of strong, heterosexual men. Traits associated with hypermasculine behaviour—such as aggression, emotional stoicism, and objectifying women—were prevalent at SPOT, where I often found myself as the only woman. While the young visitors generally treated me respectfully, albeit somewhat formal, they frequently made sexist remarks towards their peers. Additionally, adult men working at SPOT often made inappropriate comments about my appearance. For instance, on one occasion, a man repeatedly commented on my attire, suggesting I must have a date later that evening. When I didn't respond as expected, he insinuated that my silence stemmed from potentially having a date with a woman, implying I might be afraid to disclose this information.

During a lunch discussion at SPOT, the topic of LGBTI+ arose, revealing significant disapproval among the men present towards the "gay lifestyle." Some expressed beliefs that bisexuality was merely a phase popular among young women. Overall, they seemed more tolerant of women's non-straight orientations than men's. They emphasized the norm for men to conform to a "normal" heterosexual performance, suggesting that feminine traits or signs of non-heterosexuality were incompatible with this standard. When questioned about this gender double standard, they attributed it to societal sexualization of non-straight women. This disapproval of male non-straight identities was also evident in the feedback received by a male visitor regarding his clothing choices. Despite being told his attire appeared "too feminine" or "gay," he expressed resilience, noting, "You stand out pretty easily here in Lelystad."

What I also noticed was the usage of gendered language by most attendees. For example, amongst others, Robin and Marco always addressed me as ´Miss´ (Dame in Dutch). They would address the visitors of SPOT too by their perceived gender. Marco told me one day that this got him into trouble once. He greeted somebody with ´Miss´ and she told him that this is not the way she liked to be addressed. Robin told me that he would always shake the hand of a lady and give a guy a box. He continued that he was sometimes surprised when others would give a box to a woman, since that was not proper in his opinion.

How does Hip Hop and rap offer a place for mental healing for men at SPOT?

In engaging in Hip Hop and rap, the young men participating in this research, found a way of mental healing. As mentioned above, these men expressed some ambivalence towards therapy, looking for other ways of mental healing. As Luciano mentions in the beginning of the film *[00:57 – 01:10]*, he does not feel comfortable talking to a psychologist or sometimes even with friends or family, he feels comfortable sharing emotions through his songs, thereby promoting mental healing.

Luciano mentioned rap serves as a way of getting to know others, through their lyrics, as well as a form of expressing himself, letting other people know the ´real him´. This sentiment is shared by Fernando, who mentioned in the movie [03:45-04:07] that writing helps him bring his emotions down, that the practice of going inside the head to think reflect and write, offers him a new perspective and release from emotional burden. He feels better after writing. Next to this, he mentions that having to perform live brings him out of his comfort zone, which he mentions promotes mental growth.

Marco also talked about the process of mental healing through rap. He experiences multiple struggles in his life, which he could reflect on better through his writing. In reflecting on these life events, Marco found God. He is motivated to, in line with his beliefs, to help everybody in their lives. This motivates him in working with young people, urging them to choose the path of nonviolence. In rap he found a method of spreading this hope for young people *[05:42-05:55]*. He mentioned one day that a couple of young men were listening to his song when he was walking by, this led to a conversation. Marco said that rap often helped make him more approachable for these young people, enabling him to help them, and therefore fulfilling his purpose (as he described it).

Conclusion

In this thesis, the Critical Realist and intersectional lens was applied to explore masculinity within the artistic process of rap, portraying the balance between individual agency and structural influences. Using thick description provided a detailed account of how social expectations and underlying structures shape masculinity. This perspective acknowledges both uncontrollable identity aspects and individual choices in gender identity construction. Intersectionality highlights the interplay between gender, race, and power, crucial for understanding masculinities' vulnerabilities. I reflected on the impact of my personality on my research and the adjustments made to methodologies to co-produce knowledge and diminish power imbalances in this thesis. By adopting participatory methods such as participant-driven photo-elicitation and mapping, I encouraged authentic self-expression and reflection on my own assumptions. Critical participant observation highlighted the importance of focusing on participants' perspectives, leading to the unexpected yet crucial inclusion of gender in my research on rap and Hip Hop. Embracing reflexivity, I remained mindful of power dynamics and adjusted my approach to build rapport and bridge gaps, ensuring the research was driven by the participants' experiences and insights.

Artistic expression influenced mental healing of young people by providing a means of emotional expression and processing. At SPOT, various artistic endeavours, such as writing and drawing help participants articulate and work through their emotions. In particular, spoken word art forms like rap and Hip Hop offer a unique healing experience for young men by providing a space to perform and negotiate their masculinity.

This article demonstrated the impact of rap on mental healing. Luciano shared that he prefers expressing his emotions through songs rather than talking to psychologists or even friends and family. Rap allows him to reveal his true self and connect with others. Similarly, Fernando mentioned that writing rap helps him process his emotions, offering a new perspective and emotional release. Performing live also promotes his mental growth. Marco discussed how rap aids his reflection on personal struggles and has helped him find God. This reflection motivates him to encourage young people to choose nonviolence, using rap to spread hope and make him more approachable, thus fulfilling his purpose of helping others.

Masculinity is performed and experienced at SPOT through a combination of vulnerability and hypermasculine expression. The young men frequently engage in writing and performing rap songs, which serve as a medium for articulating their personal experiences and emotions. The male-dominated Hip Hop culture at SPOT reflects broader societal norms where rap is seen as a means to

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assert masculine identity, often through themes of aggression and toughness. However, this hypermasculine performance coexists with a need for authenticity and vulnerability, creating a complex dynamic where rappers must balance being ´real´ while maintaining a tough exterior. Additionally, gender biases within the studio environment affect the opportunities for women to engage equally in rap, as they face both sexualization and exclusion based on stereotypes. This highlights the paradox within Hip Hop culture, where expressions of masculinity are both restrictive and enabling, providing a unique space for self-expression while reinforcing traditional gender roles. Future research could built on the intersectional approach in studying mental healing and emotional vulnerability in rap. In my research, most men were white. Though people came from various social classes, there was less variability in ethnicities. Next to this, it would be fruitful to explore the experiences of non-male identifying people in similar research. As mentioned in this thesis, the introduction of women (of color mostly) in rap influenced the Hip Hop masculinities and what is considered socially acceptable within this sphere. How non-male identifying people inhabit the space of Hip Hop, would contribute to discussions of gendered identity within Hip Hop and rap. Another aspect that could be built upon is the role of mentorship and social support in shaping masculinity and vulnerability in rap communities. I noticed that this played a part in the experience of some of my interlocutors, but choose to focus on other aspects in order not to make this research to complex. Focusing on how mentorship could contribute to mental healing for people could have therapeutic value.

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