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**In every generation**, a subversive youth culture on the fringes of the mainstream exists to provide access to a rebellious ethos. It happened in punk music in the 1970s and 1980s, grunge and industrial music in the 1990s, emo, pop-punk and hardcore in the 2000s, and now has taken shape into SoundCloud rap for 2019.

What sets the genre of SoundCloud rap, a term coined by Jon Caramanica in *The New York Times* (2017a), apart from previous generations is the sheer size of its popularity. SoundCloud rap has moved from its early home on the namesake streaming site to the top of the Billboard charts and radio airwaves everywhere. Artists such as Post Malone, Juice WRLD, XXXTentacion, and 6ix9ine have all achieved multi-platinum success since their origins on the SoundCloud rap scene, and not without a great deal of controversy over their public image. Rapping about excess,

drug abuse, toxic behaviour, and acting abusively and carelessly towards others in public settings such as concerts has raised many red flags onto the influence of SoundCloud rappers on young and impressionable audiences of today.

Do teenagers have the skills to separate the art from the artist, as both performers and listeners? This article aims to examine the genre-at-large and provide access to librarians, professionals and parents with the tools to discuss the behaviours and themes presented by many of the SoundCloud rappers who are speaking to millions of listeners today. As generations of past teen rebellion demonstrates, it can be difficult to provide prohibitions on outrageous behaviours without creating further appeal, so my focus will be upon real, honest and open communication on topics that can be heavy and difficult to

address, so advice offered should be tailored to each teen individually.

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**Among popular music critics**, the discourse surrounding SoundCloud rap has both celebrated its punk ethos and drawn spotlight to the reckless behaviour presented by its young stars. To better understand what may be in the ears of a listener in your library or community space, it's best to look at the genre as a whole before turning attention to any of the major players.

Caramanica (2017b) defines SoundCloud rap as a “swelling subgenre that takes its name from its creators’ preferred streaming service” that has become home to “rebellious music, volcanic energy, and occasional acts of malevolence” in the hip-hop world. Rappers adorn themselves in a particular identity, as “the aesthetic is high-end streetwear meets high fashion, with face tattoos, hair dyed in wild colors, and a prescription-drug ooze.” Caramanica (2017b) continues to elaborate upon the sonic palate of the scene, as “the music is low-fidelity and insistent, throbbing with distorted bass, like trap music reduced over a hot fire to its rawest component parts.”

Elsewhere, Carrie Battan (2019) cites the genre as one that is “bolstered by ravenous fans, artists with preposterous images and lyrics about recreational prescription-drug habits.” Battan also draws attention to the youthfulness of the stars themselves, as many were in their teenage years when they shot to superstardom on singing about death, drug abuse, substance excess and the like. “As [the SoundCloud rappers] overtook rap, and rap overtook the industry writ large, these guffawing, sometimes Xanax-loving teens suddenly seemed less like a

passing threat to mainstream norms and... well, more like the mainstream” (Battan, 2019).

In short, it has become the music of the next generation, and highlights many of the disillusionments that permeate throughout teenage fears in an extremely modern context. Rappers sing about concerns of relationships, mental health, and a yearning for the next steps of their lives, but the music is similarly perturbed by overmedication and drug abuse, depression, toxic thoughts and behaviours towards loved ones. Due to this context, it provides both an escape and an encapsulation of the teenage struggle in 2019, most likely due to the teenage lives of the genre’s stars.

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**Likely the most polarizing figure** in the genre is Jahseh Dwayne Ricardo Onfroy, better known as XXXTentacion. Onfroy is one of the few Soundcloud rappers to achieve a number one single on the Billboard Hot 100. The track is called “SAD!” and is built on a simple refrain that is haunting in its lyrical gravity: “Who am I? Someone that's afraid to let go, uh / You decide, if you're ever gonna let me know, yeah / Suicide, if you ever try to let go, uh / I'm sad and low, yeah, I'm sad I know, yeah.”

Onfroy was a popular figure in the rap music scene since his breakout hit “Look at Me!” rose to popularity in 2016. At this time, he was incarcerated on charges of aggravated battery against a pregnant woman. Other reports say that his live shows were often “marred” and “bolstered” by chaos that edged into violent territory, and a confessional tape where he discussed committing brutal acts of assault also leaked

to the public (Battan, 2019). With his controversial and infamous celebrity on the rise, Onfroy was shot and killed in an apparent robbery at the age of 20 in June 2018 (Vera, 2018).

What Onfroy was able to communicate to the world was a figure who was dark, angry and moody, and in his short time as a popular figure, he also conveyed a public persona that amplified these themes. It has been noted by reporters that Onfroy used to “say that he would start trouble as a kid to get the attention of his mother” (Battan, 2019). As a young musician, it can be inferred by his music and lyrics that he sought attention in a similar manner to a larger purpose - for attention to the concerns he was rapping about that so many listeners found relatable. The danger that lies in conveying these ideas is that they will ultimately be influential on the listeners who hear those words.

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**To list each of the indiscretions** inflicted by SoundCloud rappers would be a needless and dismissive practice in examining the genre. It is evident that the music is being made by the youth for the youth, so our jobs as educators, teachers, and adults is to provide the necessary discourse to ensure that teenagers understand the ideas being discussed in these songs. Further, we need to be having the difficult conversations of acknowledging the public behaviours of these figures and how harmful, dangerous and reckless they can be in damaging others in our lives.

Teenagers need to engage with difficult topics in order to build upon the developmental assets necessary to make them into healthy adults. It is useless to ban

these artists or songs for the misbehaviours that they promote in their music and lifestyle, simply due to the unfettered access to their music and social media on many digital platforms shared among teenagers. Instead, conversations and programming can be tailored to address issues discussed in these songs and news stories so that teenagers in your community do not make the same mistakes.

On topics such as drug and substance abuse, sexual health and assault, and mental health states, prevalent in the trendy references to the misuse of Xanax and other benzodiazepine medicines in popular songs, better education resources need to be presented to youth. In libraries, direct resources to assistance for mental health services and sexual health clinics needs to be available, and libraries could host workshops or events surrounding healthy relationships and support. These workshops could be directed in a weekly seminar in conjunction with local community organizations directed at addressing issues of sexual health, mental health, homelessness, and more so that direct staff with training are present.

Employees working with youth directly should attempt to keep up with the latest musicians, pop culture figures, and celebrities as best as they can so that they can be discussed in-depth with teenagers in a meaningful way. Imagine the potential impact you may have on a teenager by being able to identify a photo of Lil Pump? Relating to teenagers' interests is an access point to building meaningful and influential conversations with them, and through the discourse of SoundCloud rap, many of these conversations will be able to be had.

## Who are the major players in SoundCloud rap today in the spring of 2019?

The following is a list of musicians that are topping the Billboard charts and are likely in the Spotify queues of the teenagers in your local library or school.

- XXXTentacion
- Juice WRLD
- Travis Scott
- Lil Uzi Vert
- Post Malone
- 21 Savage
- Kodak Black
- Lil Baby
- Lil Xan
- 6ix9ine

### Further readings on the topic:

Breihan, T. (2018, June 13). Juice WRLD turns SoundCloud rap into toxic emo-pop. *Stereogum*. Retrieved from <https://www.stereogum.com/2001216/juice-wrld-toxic-masculinity/franchises/status-aint-hood/>

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