

Analysis of the Reclamation and Spread of the N-word in Pop Culture

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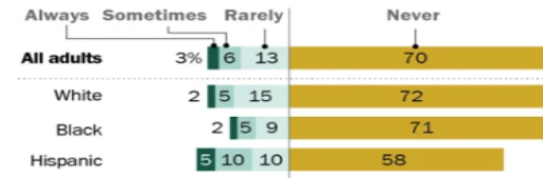
Background & Significance

- The N-word is the only racial slur that has a significant amount of people outside of the specified group who desire to use it
- This reclamation (reappropriation) of this word became popular in the late 70s and early 80s with the introduction of hip hop/rap music which led to an exponential spread in the 90s (Sheinen 2014)
- The rise of hip-hop/rap brought the use of the word into the mainstream in a new context which is the most popular genre of music in the U.S.
- This word that was once used for the oppression of millions still is used that way at times but has now become a modern colloquialism
- A word that is used 500,000 times a day on Twitter

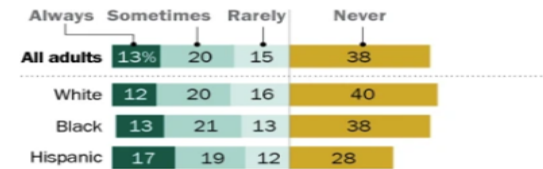
Black and white adults have similar views on use of the N-word

% saying they, personally, think each is ___ acceptable

A WHITE person using the N-word



A BLACK person using the N-word



Note: Share of respondents who say they're not sure or didn't offer an answer not shown. Whites and blacks include those who report being only one race and are non-Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. This question was asked of a random half of the sample; estimates for Asians are included in the total but not shown separately due to small sample size.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 22-Feb. 5, 2019. "Race in America 2019"

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Research Questions

- When did the reclamation of n-word occur?
- How did the n-word become a controversial phenomenon in American pop culture?
- Are there moments and people who personified the reclamation of the n-word?



Methodology

- I used the methods of historical analysis and literature review to gain a historically grounded understanding of the n-word's usage in pop culture
- Historical analysis- a method of the examination of evidence in coming to an understanding of the past
- Literature review- A literature review summarizes and synthesizes the existing scholarly research on a particular topic



Findings

- The Reclamation of the n-word became significant due to popular figures and moments
 - Richard Pryor
 - N.W.A.
- The word was reclaimed to take the power and redefine it based on the will of the formerly oppressed
- As hip-hop/rap became commercially viable for white youth in the 90s it spread exponentially
- Younger generations of all ethnicities are using the word more often as they are further detached from the original context



Major Lesson

- This n-word is slowly losing the historical context that it once had even for black people
 - “Let evolution happen. Let pop culture take that word away to the ocean, and let anyone use it. . . . That word’s not meant for us anymore. ‘Nigga’ is a part of pop culture. It’s just a word, but it shouldn’t be chained to us, for lack of a better word. It shouldn’t be a part of who we are.”
- Class and capitalism play a unique role in the story of the n-word
- This reclamation was not a consensus in the black community and causes pain for many older generations
 - “When I see a bottle — [and] it says ‘P-O-I-S-O-N,’ then I know [what it is]. The bottle is nothing, but the content is poison. If I pour that content into Bavarian crystal, it is still poison.”-poet Maya Angelou



Future Research

- In the future I plan to continue this research by looking at the psychology of word
- Why do some white people want to use the word though they know it is socially unacceptable?
- What does being able to use the n-word signify in our society?
- I want to do interviews with white people who use the word
- Searching for the psychological and sociological underpinnings of the word in pop culture



References

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