

# How Russian Rap on YouTube Advances Alternative Political Deliberation: Hegemony, Counter-Hegemony, and Emerging Resistant Publics

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## Abstract

The late 2010s have seen the unprecedented rise of Russian rap culture on YouTube. This study delves into the unexplored area of the relationship between rap music, politics, and the Internet audience in Russia. It focuses on the analysis of the production of the most popular rap videos—their narratives, power relations, and socio-political themes, as well as the prevailing patterns in the discussion on socio-political issues by the YouTube audience. The study brings three contributions that identify the power relations in the Russian society that manifest in the field of rap music. First, the Russian-speaking users demonstrate a high level of criticality toward the pro-Kremlin rap music on YouTube and challenge the lies of propaganda rap. Second, pro-government rappers follow the Soviet authoritarian ethos and praise belonging to the collective of elites, while liberal ones adhere to the individual responsibility. Third, we demonstrate the prevalence of patriarchal gender values, including macho politics and unquestioned sexism, which are representative of gender politics in the country. This article proves the importance of socio-political commentary on YouTube and points to the rap videos as the popular hubs for the socio-political debates. Users flow to rap videos and utilize the comment section to have their say on the political context and power relations rather than the music, to engage with others, and to contribute to the emerging collective debate. The comment sections on these rap videos have a unique value for the Russian users who exploit them as the negotiation space in the void of other platforms for social dialogue in Russia.

## Keywords

YouTube, Russian politics, rap music, media, Russia, censorship, gender, racism, Pussy Riot

## Introduction

Rap battles, the public gigs where two rappers have to perform in front of each other, trying to offend the opponent, have become a viral hit in Russia in the late 2010s. In just 48 hr, 12 million people watched the YouTube recording of a rap battle between two popular artists in August 2017 (Denisova, 2017b). The Russian underground stars Oxxxymiron and Slava KPSS are not seen on the mainstream television. However, their videos can gain a few million views soon after being uploaded—the same pattern repeats for other rap artists who have grown to dominate digital space in the 2010s.

Rap culture in Russia picked from the tradition of “alternative” music, a range of genres that opposed the mainstream throughout the 20th and the early 21st centuries. Similar to the “ghetto” music of the Soviet Union (rock, punk), Russian

rap culture has become the mouthpiece of resistance to the artifice of hegemonic culture, to the hypocrite officials, to the social vices and political wrongdoings. This article seeks to establish whether, in the 2010s, young Russians look up to the rap artists in search of identities, values, and interpretations of the events and ideologies. The article analyzes the main socio-political themes that top rappers communicate to their followers; it also delves into the public perception of rap in the digital realm.

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This research conducts critical discourse analysis of the themes and power relations of the rap videos on YouTube from a diverse range of top artists: a pro-government, a critical of the government, and a more neutral rapper. It then analyzes the comment sections under their most watched videos on YouTube, thus answering the question of how the Russian-speaking users of YouTube interpret or “decode,” in Stuart Hall’s terms, their meaning. This research encourages new underpinning to the research on the political engagement of the audience—it shows that a media text does not have to be political to trigger a discussion on contentious issues in a censored political environment. The article also addresses an issue that has not been studied before—the unprecedented sexism of both the Russian rappers and their audience who endorse male gaze, macho politics, and even lyrics on violence against women without questioning them.

The 2010s are the times when the political debate in Russia is extremely limited due to the hegemony of the state-controlled media outlets (Denisova, 2017a). The Internet provides opportunities for open and inclusive communication (Papacharissi, Lashley, & Creech, 2017). Current scholarship on politics and popular culture in Russia focuses on the controlling practices by the state. This study advocates for the shift of perspective toward the creative producers of rap music (the medium that focuses on identity and a socio-political context), their audience, and the meanings they construct and de-construct through communication on music and politics. This article also establishes rap as a potent means of engaging with political issues—rap, as much as digital media and bloggers, has power to influence the political discourse.

### **Why Talk About Music and Politics? Alternative and Popular Music Genres in the Recent History of Russia**

The relationship between the state and popular music in Russia has been changing since the middle of the last century. The post-Stalinist society of the USSR of the 1960s was built around the extremely conservative cultural policy (Ramet, Zamascikov, & Bird, 1994). This policy was centralized by the authorities and supervised by the Soviet Ministry of Culture (Troitskij, 1987). It often used the police and the KGB to censor and suppress the spread of the nonconformist versions of culture (Ramet et al., 1994). Alternative music—anything that was not classical music, folk, military marches, or popular tunes—was seen as innately political and, as any subversion, harmful to the regime. The cultural repressions restricted the contacts of the publics and musicians with the outside world (Urban & Evdokimov, 2004). As a result, “all domestic sources of otherness had been scotched” (Clark, 1996, p. 294).

The cultural policy covered the non-Soviet artists as well—it prohibited the access to the Western music, such as

rock, jazz, or blues, although people smuggled them from abroad (Helbig, 2014; Ramet et al., 1994). Many music genres were relatively unknown in the Soviet Union until the Perestroika.

In general, the bands that were conformist and loyal to the government (and sometimes sponsored by it) were more commercially successful in the Soviet Union and Russia at any given time (Ramet et al., 1994). Non-official music genres like rock and jazz should have come a long way before becoming part of the mainstream in the Soviet Union. For instance, Troitskij (1987) argues that playing rock music before 1980 was deemed an act of resistance. Paradoxically, the “alternative” musicians in the USSR and Russia were most often not political per se—it was the state that politicized music and reacted to it as a threat.

To retain control of the discourse, the Soviet state invented “a tradition of the state-sponsored rock” (Cushman, 1995, p. xv). Twenty years later, rock became a favored genre of the elites in president Putin’s era (Kveberg, 2013). This approach to alternative music genres and releasing their toothless state-sponsored analog has revealed itself again in relation to the rap music of the 2010s.

Punk is the only case where state intervention did not bear fruit—It became perhaps the most important protest genre in Russia recently. The loudest manifestation of the protest potential of punk took place in February 2012. A few weeks before the presidential elections, a group of female art-campaigners called Pussy Riot performed a *Punk Prayer* in Moscow’s main cathedral. It was an appeal to the Russian Orthodox Church to rid itself of Putin to embrace feminism (Abebe, 2012). Pussy Riot recorded their performance, mixed with other footage, and released it on YouTube. That video, the subsequent arrest, and a 2-year prison sentence of the trio made the group globally famous for art resistance (Willems, 2014).

Pussy Riot was not a music band but a dissident group. They chose the form of a punk band because they considered punk to be an adequate medium for their message (Steinholt, 2013; Willems, 2014). Nonetheless, the exploitation of music as a backdoor to political activism has proven to be a potent way to connect with modern crowds.

### **The Contribution of Rap Music to Political Deliberation**

Rap culture has proliferated as a political genre in many countries. American rap has played a profound role in this expansion (Helbig, 2014; Street, 2013). The political meanings attached to original rap music relate to the struggles and poverty of American suburbs where the genre started in the 1970s (Chang, 2007). The language of rap and hip-hop was exploited by various movements, minorities, and other groups across the globe to bring attention to inequality and other types of social and political struggle (Helbig,

2014, p. 1). As a result, rap and hip-hop were “almost exclusively viewed as political” in many places, especially in its original contexts of the Afro-American and Latin communities of the 1970s and 1980s (Street, 2013, p. 43).

Nowadays, rap music spread out of the United States and musicians across the globe use it for advocacy, protest, and political commentary. For example, underground hip-hop musicians in Senegal act as the voices of anti-government resistance and “musical journalists” (Helbig, 2014, p. 3). Rap has become a medium through which certain segments of society negotiate their political statuses and power relations (Helbig, 2014). Thus, by studying rap music, we can learn about the social groups underrepresented in mainstream media, hear the voices of the underground through their own narratives, explore the meanings and structures of violence that permeate the societal relations, shed light on the power struggles, and investigate how the society encounters and arbitrates these expressions.

Rap music can transform a cultural product into a political manifesto. It is a “youth arts mass movement” (Keyes, 2004, p. 1) that cleverly combines speech and tune to disrupt the conventional and intervene in cultural politics with its struggle over meaning, context, and statuses (Rose, 1991). Rap is the ideological medium, which can advocate versatile political messages and, even in its lightest forms, negotiate the cultural politics of the country.

Russian rap has been politicized since 2009 when musicians questioned the Chechen wars, police brutality, ideology, and migration (Frolova, 2014). Having had overcome the initial bleakness, Russian rap music has grown into one of the most popular genres among the youth. Russian rappers exploited the themes that are traditional for the American rap—the rap community, tension with police, private life—but modified them to add criticism of the rules and governors (Gritsenko & Dunyasheva, 2013). For instance, a traditional American rap uses the theme of a community unified by shared struggles and neighborhood boundaries. In the Russian domain of politicized rap, a community is a whole country bonded by the struggles with inflation, corrupt police, and indoctrinated media (Frolova, 2014). The researchers of Russian rap culture (Ewell, 2017; Frolova, 2014) suggest that rap blossomed in response to the enhancement of the authoritarian rule in Russia after 2011.

Russian rap has contributed to the growing sense of collective identity among the listeners. The communities have discursively formed around a music product and particularly outspoken musicians who criticized the institutions (Kotarba, 2017). This political significance of rap music, according to Street (2013), is associated with the potential of music to “constitute identities and communities, [. . .] create organisation and institutions [. . .] embody ideals and values” (p. 173). In the fragmented Russian society, where people express their fatigue with the established political parties and lack of trust in collective values (Denisova, 2017), rap provides the experience of unity, the feel of a community. There

are rappers who utilize their music as an anti-propaganda exercise and tell the stories that are alternative to the official version of events. Others turn to satire and humor to challenge the authorities. More opportunistic figures reproduce the official narratives to show their support of the hegemony (Ewell, 2017, p. 58).

Digital platforms provide additional opportunities for the research of the political role of music by analyzing comment section and emerging communities. The research on the comments to the American political rap of the 1980s on YouTube has revealed that users utilized this area as “meeting spaces in which to check in and express the kinds of emotionally excessive reactions” to the repressive institutions (Edgar, 2016, p. 234). By contrast, Zou (2018) insists that rap music has the potential to empower state nationalism and authoritarianism. This further illuminates that rap music is not restricted to resistant ideologies but can be appropriated as the mouthpiece of hegemonic regimes. A comment section is a fruitful soil for the public deliberation on the issues that may not be fully explored in the mainstream media and public spaces, hence the value of comments as a meeting point of the publics (Miller, 2008). The existing studies agree that rap videos act as landmarks for performative political commentary and discussion, as well as a promising realm for community formation.

Rap is one of the globally recognized popular genres with a political undertone. However, much in line with the Russian academic tradition of literary studies, the majority of research papers focus on the lyrics and cultural context of rap. Most of the published works do not engage with people’s opinion, political hierarchies, and structures of power. This intriguing field of the relationship between Russian rap, politics, and society is addressed in this article.

### **Limitations of Rap in Public Deliberation—Computational Propaganda, Macho Politics, and Inherent Sexism**

Russia as many other non-democratic states lacks an alternative space where citizens can discuss politics freely. Social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook have provided these spaces where citizens exchange their opinions about the political momentum, to a certain extent. The users are still under risk of surveillance and potential legal charges, as Russian media and anti-extremism laws cast a wide net for what is considered “extremist” or “harmful” to the social well-being (Denisova, 2017a). In addition, the Russian-language political discussion in the digital space is becoming increasingly disturbed by pro-government computational propaganda that proliferates across social media (Filer & Fredheim, 2016). Numerous reports on the “troll” and “bot” activity funded by the Russian government (Dyer, 2108; Giles, 2016; O’Sullivan, 2018; Shevchenko, 2015;

Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodna, 2017) suggest that the virtual space has been distorted by the masked indoctrination, and many “average” users are in fact propaganda workers or automated bots. One of the outcomes of this computational propaganda is that YouTube users report self-censorship in their comments on Russia as they fear the online abuse (Aro, 2016). The awareness of computational propaganda and trolling threats resuscitates the fear of being watched, common to the Soviet citizens, but reproduced now in the digital realm.

Despite this novel hazard, digital space attracts activists and resistant users due to its DIY esthetics, guerrilla performance tactics, and rapid distribution algorithms (Abebe, 2012; Ryzik, 2012; Strukov, 2013). Many professional and amateur journalists relocate their efforts to digital platforms, including YouTube, and attract millions of views on their entertaining interviews, discussions on rap music, and opinions on politics (Amos, 2018).

The genre of rap is often accused of misogyny. This may seem as another limitation to the progressive message of rap music for the Russian audience. Rap culture encompasses offensive rap battles and gang culture that often promotes violence, conservative masculinity, and social unrest (Storrod & Densley, 2017). A British study reveals that gangs exploit rap videos to build the myth of the gang and recruit new members (Storrod & Densley, 2017). From the opposing perspective, the involved youngsters spend a lot of time talking, rapping, or filming about real or fictional violence, rather than engaging in actual crime activities (Lauger, 2014, as cited in Storrod & Densley, 2017, p. 679). The pronounced sexist undertone in the lyrics and videos remains similar across rap lyrics and videos in different national contexts. In most cases, a woman is objectified (Adams & Fuller, 2006); yet there is a growing number of accounts when feminism manifests in music videos, from country to rap, and a female singer appears strong and assertive; this tendency is especially apparent with Black female rappers (Roberts, 1996).

In the late 2010s, the representation of women in rap music is responding to the social debates on gender equality (Kubrin, 2005). It often closely relates to the gender politics of the country in a given moment in time. For example, young female voices in Russia try to challenge the male domination of rap music and openly confront established male rappers. Still, “sexist comments” dominate their feedback inboxes (Ofitserova, 2018); few messages of support are registered. The Russian regime is rooted in neo-conservatism (Turbine, 2017), with the elites endorsing the submissive femininity, praising the household roles and reproductive functions of women, as well as turning a blind eye to gender-based violence. The genre of rap in modern Russia is a controversial, yet influential medium for the formation and contestation of an identity of the young publics.

The study seeks to answer two research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are the narratives of power relations and socio-political themes presented in the lyrics and videos of the top rappers in Russia in the late 2010s?

**Research Question 2:** Do Russian-speaking YouTube crowds relate to the lyrics and videos of the top rappers, and if yes, what prevailing themes, interpretations, and discussion patterns do the crowds display in the comments?

## Methodology

To explore narratives on politics, we selected three popular rappers who, we suggest, represented three discourses on politics revealed in the literature review: pro-government rapper Timati, anti-establishment oppositional Noize MC, and Oxxxymiron, whose position could lie in-between the former two political poles. These three rappers were selected based on the analysis of recent publications in the Russian press as well as the authors’ knowledge of the Russian rap scene.

Timati emerged as the star of one of the first talent reality shows in Russia. Since then, his career as an entrepreneur reached as many heights as that of a singer (Afisha, 2017; Wmj, 2017). Timati filmed an election commercial for Putin’s 2012 presidential campaign, which affirmed his loyalty to the Kremlin (Ewell, 2017).

The second rapper in this sample is the Western-educated Oxxxymiron. His family moved to the United Kingdom when he was a teenager. He studied English literature and returned back to Russia to become a star of rap battles (Davydova, 2016).

The third rapper is Noize MC, whose career was at a peak in 2004–2010. He is known for his strong critical stance against the establishment, as one of his first hit songs was called “Suck My Dick, First Channel” (Noize MC, 2016), thus being a criticism to the propaganda of the state-owned broadcasting company. He has been vocal about corruption cases.

To build the sample of music videos by these three rappers and analyze their comment sections, we identified five most viewed videos published on the rappers’ official YouTube channels within the period of May 2012 to April 2017. The April of 2012 was chosen as a starting point to focus on the period that followed the largely failed (Gabowitsch, 2017) pro-democracy protest movement of 2011–2012; the mobilization had been inspired and organized mainly through social media (Balmforth, 2011; Bodrunova & Litvinenko, 2016). This period is often associated with growing authoritarian trends in Russia (Toepfl, 2017).

We watched five videos and selected three for each rapper that reflected their diverse political stance (Table 1). This insured that the sample included only the most popular videos. Popularity is important because users appreciate the

**Table 1.** Analyzed Videos.

Rapper	Title	YouTube handler	Published	Views <sup>a</sup>
Oxxxymiron	Oxxxymiron—Gorod pod podoshvoy (City Under the Sole)	XBleNfmkScA	September 21, 2015	25,544,551
Oxxxymiron	LSP & Oxxxymiron—Bezumiye (Madness)	GRvRIS—Jro	July 16, 2015	7,680,857
Oxxxymiron	Rigos feat. Oxxxymiron—Dezhavyu (Déjà vu)	CJvPdj3dFv4	April 29, 2015	6,277,963
Noize MC	Noize MC feat. Atlantida Project—Iordan (Jordan)	AOrH0sq-tKY	September 9, 2015	4,260,020
Noize MC	Noize MC—Grabli (Rake)	UKxfpyYbh_4	January 13, 2017	2,172,924
Noize MC	Noize MC—Make Some Noize (official video)	yfsfDP0svf8	April 11, 2016	1,984,269
Timati	Timati—Maga	bfcQg-befiw	April 25, 2016	41,256,521
Timati	Timati feat. Grigoriy Leps—London (official video)	djlAgcCnFmE	November 13, 2012	58,065,883
Timati	Sasha Chest feat. Timati—Luchshiy drug (Best Friend)	jp9pfvneKf4	October 6, 2015	12,074,229

<sup>a</sup>As of April 19, 2017.

quality of the songs differently according to the information about their popularity (Salganik & Watts, 2009). In addition, YouTube algorithms push the popular videos to become even more visible to the viewers. Hence, it is safe to analyze popular rap videos as they are the most likely to be shown to the browsing fans of the Russian rap.

We collected metadata about each video as well as all the comments that followed them in the YouTube comment section. To collect the comments, we used YouTube APIs (Application Programming Interface), the YouTube Data Tool.

The article exploited critical discourse analysis (CDA), textual analysis, and content analysis. CDA was performed on the music videos to uncover the themes in the lyrics, their correlation with hegemony, gender relations, social issues, and political agenda. It comprised textual analysis of the videos—the lyrics, the visuals, and the relation between the two.

This research followed the tradition of Foucault (1982) and Fairclough (1997, 2003); to study a discursive text beyond the mere sense-making of the text and moving image, but for the disclosure of the power relations that determine its main actors, storylines, depictions, and conflicts. Rap videos create a version of reality that often relies on violence, sexism, and references to social issues. Therefore, this research identifies the hierarchy of actors mentioned in these videos, the praised social and gender relations; distinguishes the valued and condemned acts and traits; and, most importantly, explains how the suggested discourses add to the political environment in Russia.

Previous studies on the discursive nature and perception of rap videos (Balandina, 2017; Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013; Salganik & Watts, 2009) demonstrated that the method of discourse analysis of comments is growing in popularity among social scientists who are interested in the political

role of music. This research strengthens this approach by adding textual analysis of the videos and lyrics as a secondary method.

Textual analysis (McKee, 2003) of the lyrics and the visual component of the videos focused on the mentions of the government and the leaders, the issues of hard or soft power, gender equality or discrimination, the role of rapper and rap music in the society, as well as references to events, people, and phenomena.

The third approach of the research was the content analysis of the most frequent words in the comments. They were analyzed in the word clouds, which facilitated visualization of findings (McNaught & Lam, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2013). The lemmatised dataset was run based on the stop list on Word Frequency Counter (UIIP NAS Belarus). Based on the 40 frequent words, we performed content analysis to unveil the recurring themes (Riff, Lacy, & Fico, 2014). Triangulation of methods enabled this research to juxtapose the results, subside the risk of biased evaluation, and bring the balanced findings.

The discussion around the impact of Russian trolls (i.e., paid commentators) and bots (automated accounts) on social media platforms (e.g., Volchek & Sindelar, 2015; Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodna, 2017) may question the authenticity of YouTube users. Taking into account the politically sensitive nature of some of the analyzed videos, we ran the script *MetaBot for YouTube*<sup>1</sup> on all the comments in the final sample. This script allows identifying comments coming from users that might be related to computational propaganda units that work in the interest of the Russian government. The script did not flag any comment from our sample as one that might be produced by any of such units. Still, MetaBot, as well as other tools for identifying computation propaganda on social media, contains its limitations because

the developers constantly improve the quality of bots and trolls to avoid identification.

## Findings and Discussion: How Rap Videos Interpret Political Hegemony in Russia

The sampled videos touch upon a range of themes, including wealth and success, racial relationship, gender roles, artistic career, war and peace, migration, and urban lifestyle.

Four out of nine of the popular videos studied (up to 36 million views on the most popular) discuss politics. They do so in various ways, with a wide gap between hegemonic pro-Kremlin Timati and two other rappers. Timati (in collaboration with Sasha Chest) released a video named *Best Friend*. It is devoted to Putin entirely. It identifies the Russian leader as “my white master” and “a single man” who drives girls “crazy.” The notion of friendship is an awkward one as Putin strikes as the powerful big brother who dominates and controls the relationship. The image of Putin is ubiquitously presented in most of the frames in Timati and Sasha Chest’s video. Ordinary people wear Putin’s masks; dancing youngsters gather around the DJ who has the face of Putin. By portraying the young urbanites as active devotees of Putin’s cult, Timati and Chest propagate him as the leader of the youth. The narrative of the video resembles the promotional efforts of the Stalin propaganda: as in the personality cult of the late Soviet leader, Putin is also presented in a God-like manner. One man in charge personifies undisputable power, wisdom, and care for his people.

Two other Timati’s videos portray the stories of the successful Russian businessmen. One of them depicts such attributes of success as luxurious parties, a multitude of half-naked blonde women, and bribed loyal police. The other video discusses the temptation of the elites to move to London but then concludes with the reasons to stay in the homeland (“Who needs me there?”). The three videos of the pro-Kremlin rapper—and this is important—never feature him alone; Timati is always surrounded by his “gang,” whether it is rich friends in expensive clothes and cars, or seductive women, or even the company of the man in the mask of Putin.

This depiction uncovers the ideological message familiar from the Soviet times—to succeed, one has to be part of the elite group. One must have the right “friends” and circles, which means becoming part of the political and financial establishment (modern Russia often mingles the two). The other rule for success, underpinned by Timati’s rap, is enthusiastic loyalty, that is, constant and vocal praise of the powerful “friends”; this protects from falling out of grace.

Two independent rappers, Oxxxymiron and Noize MC, present a dramatically different picture of success. Five out of six videos point to the individual as the source of his or her own development, achievement, harm, or benefit to the others. Noize MC’s *Rake* is a lyrical and nostalgic piece, a

journey into the past with the main hero gradually becoming younger and ending up as a little boy. However, the interior of an average Russian flat where the dinner is happening does not change; neither do people around the table. This reflexive way of creating songs is not common in Russian rap and fits into the tradition of Russian philosophical rock. The main political message of *Rake* is not escapism, but personal growth and personal responsibility—something that the group-bound mentality of the pro-government rapper Timati does not reflect.

Noize MC’s colleague Oxxxymiron took another turn at success in his extremely well-received *City Under My Sole*. It is a song about the artist’s pride, aspiration, and experience. There are gloomy yet realistic depictions of the Russian periphery, which the musician does not criticize, but accepts in discreet patriotism. While Timati revels in glossy interiors uncommon to the majority of Russians, Oxxxymiron embraces the Russia he sees on tour—with dreary residential blocks, dim silhouettes of power stations, and suffocating underground clubs. Oxxxymiron’s narrative of power and success lies in his artistic challenge, hard work on tour, and capturing the audience with sweat and passion. The recurring feature of Oxxxymiron’s, as much as Noize MC’s rap is the commitment to self-improvement and effort; no “shortcut” to success as the vicinity to the Kremlin might have provided.

The other blazing political discourse in the Russian rap concerns race. Despite the fact that Russia has 160 ethnicities living on its territory, the videos in the sample overwhelmingly feature White men in their early 30s who chase White women. The only way for a non-White individual to appear in a rap video in Russia is being the singer. Timati is coming from a predominantly Muslim region of the country and has darker skin. His collaborator on the *London* video is the Georgia-born Gregory Leps. However, Timati has long tried to establish his image as “Black Star.” He defines himself as Afro-American. This signals the shaky condition of race equality in the modern-day Russia, which makes Timati conceal his true identity and imitate a member of a successful group, for example, Afro-American rappers.

There is a peculiar video in the sample, Timati’s *Maga*, which talks about the people from the Caucasus mountains, for example, from the republics of Chechnya or Dagestan. These regions were the target of racial hatred in the late 1990s and the early-2000s when the wars took place in Chechnya, and then terrorist attacks followed in major Russian cities (Chechen terrorists were blamed for them). However, the tension has significantly diminished in the late 2010s, as Chechnya’s president Ramzan Kadyrov is the immensely powerful and much-feared figure in Russian politics (Sokirianskaia, 2017).

Timati’s video shows the entrepreneurial Mid-Eastern looking protagonist who fools a rich White man into spending a lot of money on a poorly organized wedding. On one hand, this character fits in what Hall (1995, cited in Helbig,

2014) called the inferential racism when a Black character is depicted either as an uncivilized savage, a clown, or a canny individual. On the other hand, the video praises the character who gets away with money and success. This double-edged interpretation of the racial stereotype mirrors the Russian complex racial issues and ultimately confirms the White hegemony.

The third political theme in five out of nine videos is the position of women. One of the earliest countries to give voting rights to women (Britannica, n.d.), Russia, nonetheless remains in the patriarchal, conservative gender paradigm. Timati's three videos portray women as slim, blonde, heel-wearing, joyfully laughing, easily tempted by expensive gifts and powerful men. Oxxxymiron's videos also present women as the artist's and man's trophies, as well as the discourse takes a particularly ugly turn in the video *Madness*.

*Madness*, the collaboration between Oxxxymiron and LSP, is a sexist track that features in its lyrics a "bitch who does not know what is there in her Sprite." LSP sings that he will rip the dress off the woman and they will "go mad." There are further references to the sexual pleasures that a man is seeking to receive from a woman's body. A woman is called by the biological terms "jenny" or "doe," which further objectify her and denigrate her to an animal. Oxxxymiron's rap adds to the alarming idea that a woman does not have to display consent, as she by default desperately desires for a man to have sex with her. He raps

You look like you want to do all the forbidden things, those that your ex-boyfriend has not dared to try and your ex-ex- called tacky and harmful. [I will have sex with you] until the shivering in the knees and locking your loud mouth with the sticky tape. You are bluffing.

There are no other political references in this song, yet this statement about the role of women in the society confirms the primacy of macho politics and toxic masculinity in the country. There is no doubt that the global genre of rap has sexist undertones in it, yet the recent developments in the Western rap scene show that a rapper can succeed without ubiquitous misogyny.

The fourth political narrative in rap videos refers to the "anti-propaganda exercise" (Ewell, 2017, p. 49), which allows musicians to de-construct the lies of the mainstream media and engage in "rap journalism." While in Senegal oppositional rap artists often become "music journalists" when they expose the wrongdoings of politicians (Helbig, 2014), the Russian rap follows the same pattern. The prime example is the popular track *Jordan* by Noize MC and Atlantida Project. The music video depicts a post-apocalypse. We see the ruins of a declined, deserted civilization with artifacts of its former technical advance. However, the release date and the lyrics leave no doubt that the song is a commentary to Russian media propaganda and the Orwellian search for the enemies of the state. The Kremlin severely

restricted freedom of speech and freedom of assembly in 2014-2017 following the annexation of Crimea. Russia took part in the conflict in the neighboring state, while the national television praised the Kremlin and promised victory to the Russians. *Jordan* slates the politicians and the media workers who justify the war despite its devastating consequences.

Overall, the videos and lyrics of the leading rap artists suggest strong discrepancies between the interpretations of success, money, and power. The pro-Kremlin and independent rappers take two different directions when it takes to swearing allegiance to the collective, the "state machine," and "the cult of the leader." The critically minded artists appeal to the values of an individual, strong personality and responsibility, hard work to achieve goals and build following, and often find themselves in more philosophical discourse on life, loneliness, and longing for peace in the times of wars. Political commentary appears every now and then, mostly through implicit means—through the plots, characters, and conflicts that rappers touch upon in their work.

### Analysis of YouTube Comments: The Power of "Dislike" and Copycat Comment

The analysis of the comments demonstrates public perceptions and interpretations of the popular music videos and underlying discourses. Before examining the comments in-depth, a note has to be made on the disproportion of "likes" and "dislikes" under certain videos from the sample. Timati's video on average received an extraordinary amount of *dislikes*, with the main tension surrounding *Best Friend* about Putin (136,000 likes against 143,000 dislikes). The prevalence of dislikes over likes is an unusual phenomenon for YouTube music videos with high numbers of views (Khan & Vong, 2014).

The "likes" measurement is not a fully reliable, though, given the ubiquity of the Russian state-funded computational propaganda online (Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodą, 2017). Yet, in this environment where "likes" to the pro-government rapper are of little value, the dislikes may signify the resistance of genuine users. While we still lack definite tools to distinguish bots and users on pay check from the unpaid members of public, we highlight the high resistance of YouTubers to the propagandist rap video of Timati.

The analysis of the comments to the videos of pro-Putin rapper Timati reveals that the audience responds with a great deal of criticism. The highest rated comments under the video are negative—the users angrily call the song opportunistic. As each user can give only one dislike, some of them have applied the creative graphic techniques to express the aggravated disapproval. For instance, the second most liked comment features a smart combination of symbols that resemble a truck: "the lorry with dislikes has arrived, fresh from the factory" (see Figure 1). This example reminds us



**Figure 1.** “Where can I unload this lorry? The lorry with dislikes has arrived || Fresh dislikes from the factory.”

that the DIY affordances of social networks encourage creativity. Moreover, an emotional reaction drives people toward ingenious decisions (Khan & Vong, 2014). This a humorous resistance to propaganda, which allows the user to conceal their oppositional stance behind a joke. We do not know whether they disliked the style of music or the political hypocrisy in it.

The possibility of “disliking” anything that concerns the Russian leader surprises few users. One of them asks, “*Are you mad to dislike Putin?*” This points to the almost sacral status of the current Russian leader. It is unthinkable for the Kremlin-operated media to criticize him. However, the democratic interface of the digital platform highlights the prevailing comments without censoring them. Instead of glorifying the Russian leader, the video becomes a target for the giggles of the platform users. This analysis demonstrates that a video on YouTube should be discussed in connection to its like/dislike rating and comments—it shows how the affordances of the platform allow users to interpret and respond to the themes; do it in individual and collective modes.

The content analysis highlighted another important trait of the politicized YouTube comments to the Russian rap. Even when a video does not mention politically sensitive cases, users exploit the comments section as the public stage for a debate. For instance, the substantial conversation thread that occurred under Timati’s pro-Putin video was devoted to the conflict in Ukraine. The audience were triggered by the nationalistic wording used by Timati—and then turned the review of the song into a political discussion about Russia’s involvement in a foreign conflict. This is also a reminder that digital platforms have the air of rhetorical freedom—the artifacts posted online can easily become a site of contestation, which makes the media product posted there a potent trigger for a public discussion. The consequences are unpredictable.

The next feature of user comments that stood out is the copycat behavior. Users tend to repeat the same content in their commentaries—despite this obvious similarity, each of them receives a considerable number of likes and separate sub-comments. An example of this is the thread under *City*

by Oxxxymiron with the less-known rapper Rigos. Many top comments suggest skipping the young rapper’s part altogether and fast forward to the time-code when Oxxxymiron starts rapping. Dozens of lookalike comments provide the exact timing. Users imitate a popular act to gain recognition. A social interaction here is indirect, yet reciprocal: people endorse comments, say something similar, receive another round of approval for their ideas—it is a circle-shaped communication.

Furthermore, many users reveal how they found this video—often, as a suggestion from another video or through network recommendations. Rappers with higher followers have power over their audience. Many users confess that an appraisal from another YouTube star brought them to the current rap video to watch it. The Internet operates its own viral hierarchy—the power of networking advice from those high in the YouTube ranks boosts the number of views.

This rotation of inter-recommendation, likes, and comments has a low content value in terms of socio-political debates, but nonetheless keeps people on the platform—they follow the discussion to see the new likes and sub-comments that emerge. They stay in the same field, which sets ground to form a quasi-community.

Another tendency that strikes in the comments to rap videos is that users actively respond to (and challenge) the lyrics and videos on conformism, the cult of personality, race issues, personal responsibility, and pacifism, but completely tolerate the misogynistic view of gender roles. This signifies the approval of neo-conservatism and patriarchal gender politics of the government. Rap music and comments on YouTube are a space of contestation, and the lack of contestation of misogyny is an alarming finding.

The comment thread to the notorious video *Madness*, where Oxxxymiron and LSP praise the use of sex drug against women, reveals an absence of criticism. Users focus on the philosophical reading of the song, which is evident through the main words they use: “necessary,” “know,” “man,” “why,” and “norm.” None of the trending words and top comments questions the toxic sexism of the lyrics. The overall review of Oxxxymiron’s commentators reveals that they are approving of the patriarchal gender roles



and objectification of women, which reflects the prevailing narratives in the country. Even the users with female-sounding nicknames have not objected to the misogyny.

A recent case of multiple sexual harassment accusations against Leonid Slutsky, the high-level MP, ended in him being cleared by the parliament committee, despite mounting evidence (Spring, 2018). Putin's spokesman suggested that women rose these cases because such complaints were "fashionable" (Spring, 2018), and a female MP suggested that women should blame themselves for immodest clothing. The agreement of the YouTube crowds with this hegemonic discourse proves that gender equality is a topic of low concern in the country. Both resistant and loyal users do not see gender relations as a political issue, which differs from most Western countries.

## Conclusion

This study assessed the popular discussion on politics and society through the lens of Russian-language rap culture. It looked at the creative producers as well as the receivers of the message to decode the narratives, power relations, and socio-political themes in the lyrics and videos of the top rappers in Russia in the late 2010s. The second leg of the study was the content analysis of audience comments. This analysis permitted to unveil the prevailing themes, interpretations, and discussion patterns on the politics of the Russian-speaking YouTube crowds.

This article revealed that the Russian-speaking audience demonstrates a high level of criticality toward the pro-Kremlin rap music. People find the YouTube space safe enough to criticize the elites with no risk of punishment. Users approach the process of criticism creatively, overcoming the platform constraints to express themselves. YouTube has proven to be a rare space where opposition to the ruling class in Russia is expressed fearlessly and evidently. The rappers who look more critical of the government, on the opposite, present themselves as lone riders, as philosophers and poets who reject the mainstream and hegemony. The power relations identified in the research on both videos and comments reveal the dominance of the elites, including those rich, White men, holding political or financial power.

Endorsing the power of groups against the power of an individual is an ongoing watershed between the conformist and critical rappers. The rhetoric of pro-Kremlin rap thrives on the Soviet-style cult of the leader's personality and full loyalty to the ruler. Close-knit conformism to the state and power structures dominates as the only steady condition for success in contemporary Russia. This mirrors the lack of established opposition in Russia, where the ideology of the critics to Kremlin is so vague that resistant citizens prefer not to associate themselves with any political party.

The YouTube audience eagerly responds to the debates on hard and soft power, nationalism and racism. They are widely reluctant to promote openly racist discourses, which is a

significant change from the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, the racist attitudes prevail on the symbolic, hegemonic level. The predominance of White men in the discourse coincided with continuous belittling or stereotyping of the ethnic minorities. Yet perhaps the most alarming issue that came out of this research was the dismissal of gender equality in both videos and comments. The genre of rap has been known for decades for its sexist undertones, yet it has experienced the surge of pro-feminist voices in recent years, especially in the Western democracies. Yet the Russian rappers, disregard of their ideological stance, overwhelmingly objectify women, hence conforming to the Kremlin's toleration of sexual harassment and patriarchal gender roles. This is clearly a reason for a social warning, which the audience did not react to at all.

The responses of Russian YouTube users are not a monolith. This affirms them as alive, developing phenomenon. The visible patterns of socio-political discussion involve the debates that are not present in the mainstream media. They voice the criticism to the elites that cannot be voiced elsewhere; they exploit the comment section as the public forum to test and challenge the ideas. This makes YouTube communication around popular culture—including rap videos—a vital and fruitful soil for the uninhibited socio-political debate. People with similar political views identify each other through the comments under these videos—the likes and sub-comments to these contributions assure them that they are not alone.

YouTube users persistently engage in reading (listening) and talking with each other in a non-dialogical manner; this communication paradigm is important for the emerging public debate in the Russian YouTube-scape. Users do not form dialogues in the conventional sense—as the YouTube architecture does not permit that—but acknowledge each other, read each other's thoughts, and then raise their own voice. This article establishes the role of rap videos as connecting hubs for politically opinionated publics; the comment sections on YouTube serve as the stepping stone for the digital publics to acknowledge and respond to each other. For the Russian case, it is a living proof that a healthy communication sphere is emerging in social networks; on the foundation of a small talk, a big talk is slowly growing.

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## Note

1. The script can be accessed via GitHub, it is specifically crafted to monitor the social media accounts in Russian, Ukrainian,

Belarusian, Bulgarian, and English: <https://github.com/asrdri/yt-metabot-user-js>

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